
Array Wars: Episode 3.0

Attack of the Stiff

Peter Jones

Also by Peter Jones:

Array Wars Episode 1.0: The New Hope Strikes Back

Array Wars Episode 2.0: Return of the Phantom Menace

ARRAY WARS EPISODE 3.0

ATTACK OF
THE STIFF



An electronic copy of this book is online at
http://www.petesplace.id.au/array_wars/

This is the first edition,
prepared for POD publication in August 2012.

Array Wars Episode 3.0: Attack of the Stiff

Copyright © 2012 by Peter Jones. All rights reserved.
Printed On Demand in a galaxy far, far away. No part of this book
may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without
written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied
in critical articles and reviews. (Who am I kidding?) For
information, or to comment, contact the author/publisher
at **pete@petesplace.id.au**

This is a work of parody. Any similarities, without satirical intent,
to copyrighted characters/materials, or individuals living or dead,
are purely coincidental. This book has not been endorsed by
George Lucas, the Wachowski Brothers, Gene Roddenberry, or
any of the other entities holding copyright or license to the books
or films parodied herein. No connection is implied or should be
inferred. No zombies were harmed in the making of this novel.

This book was begun for the 2007 National Novel Writing Month.
However, no liability on their part is suggested or implied.
Besides, it took me so long to finish it that it can barely be
considered a NaNo Novel at all...

The final word count is **XXXXXX**.

For Everyone who believed in me:

*Thank you all for standing with me in my efforts to
finish this novel—and for not rolling your eyes too
much when you heard me say “this time for sure”
for the thousandth time.*

Took me a while, but I got there!

Attack of the Stiff

Author's Notes

Greetings, gentle reader. Welcome to the third and probably final instalment in my *Array Wars* trilogy.

As with *Array Wars Episode 1.0: The New Hope Strikes Back* and *Array Wars Episode 2.0: Return of the Phantom Menace*, this novel borrows from a wide range of sources. The obvious three are *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, and *Star Trek*, but there have been other influences too.

Of course, this story would not exist without the work of George Lucas, the Wachowski Brothers, and Gene Roddenberry. Without the universes they created—and that so many other people worked to flesh out—I would have nothing to parody. (I might even be forced to think up my own stories—although, that said, this one did start to stray significantly from the source materials!) My novel is, of course, intended as a parody of said works, and of the characters and situations created and owned by Lucas and Wachowski and Roddenberry. It is certainly not intended for any commercial use, nor is it intended to in anyway 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.

Any resemblance between any characters in this story and any people or zombies, 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 aspersions 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.

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, of course, began as my effort for **NaNoWriMo 2007!**

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 (many, many) occasions when it seemed like I might not finish. Thanks, guys and gals.

Once again, I'd like to thank Julie Keightley of *HotGraphix*, who provided Boadicea's latest wardrobe. Thanks, Julie!

As you may have noticed, it took me a long time to finish this—and for that, I apologise. Still, it's here now.

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

Warning: Parental Guidance and Spoilers

If you've read the first two novels in the *Array Wars* trilogy, you might think you know what to expect with this one—and you'd be right, to a degree. If anything, this novel acquired even more of an adult tone and is probably unsuitable for anybody under the age of 15. Or 21. Or 75. Parents, be warned, and don't go handing it to your children just because it has a friendly pink teddewok on the cover.

Friendly pink teddewoks can be deceptive.

Of course, it doesn't actually contain anything I wouldn't want my mother to read because, well, I want my mother to read it. But there are times that it skirts very close to crossing that line...

So, y'know: enjoy!

Attack of the Stiff

Contents

Author's Notes	vii
Contents	xi
Introduction: A Long Thyme Ago.....	1
1: Escape From Elimb.....	3
2: Bramble Patch Blues.....	31
3: Splitwhisker and the Butt.....	49
4: Rise of the Devastator.....	73
5: The Fall and Rise of Lurk Splitwhisker	83
6: The Teddewoks' Picnic.....	121
7: Tangling With Tessa.....	143
8: Mal Content	173
9: Beginning of the End	185
10: The Thing From Another Plerd.....	209
11: Something	213
12: Something	221
13: Daggyboil	229
14: Suicide Mission	245
15: Ender's Moon	253
16: Frigate.....	263
17: Convergence	277
18: Something	287
19: Mission Impossible	295
20: Invasion of Death Tube.....	305
21: Insertion	319
22: Awake?	339
23: (High) Resolution	355
Epilogue: The End?.....	371

Introduction

A Long Thyme Ago...

Once upon a time, in a magical kingdom rife with sorcerers, soldiers and seers, there lived a beautiful princess. An evil warlord had invaded her kingdom and enslaved her people. Imprisoned in a dread fortress built upon a floating island, the princess scribed a plea for help upon a scrap of parchment. Sealing her missive in a bottle, she threw it from the window of her high tower, and it splashed into the ocean upon which the island sailed.

Eventually, the bottle washed up on a distant, sun-kissed shore where it was found by a lowly farm hand. He examined the message excitedly, but much of it was illegible to him. In the few fragments he could discern, he made out the name of an old hermit who lived in the wilderness. In due course, the farm boy came to visit the hermit, only to discover that the old man was a retired knight, once the hero of the kingdom. Together, the two set out to rescue the princess and free the land.

As is the way with such tales, our unlikely pair of heroes recruited the assistance—and the ship—of a roguish pirate and his crew. After a long and perilous voyage, they reached the floating fortress, only to be captured by the warlord's forces. Being cut from heroic cloth, they managed to escape, rescue the princess, and

ultimately destroy the fortress itself—but only at the cost of the knight's life.

Fleeing the wrath of the warlord, they took refuge in an arctic wasteland, but were soon driven out by the relentless armies of their foe. As the farm boy followed his destiny into the stench-laden swamplands, seeking the advice of a mysterious wizard, the princess and the pirate were pursued through the badlands, a barren rocky region inhabited by dragons and other dangers. Narrowly escaping the jaws of one such beast, they managed to elude their pursuers, but were forced to set sail for a distant harbour to make repairs to their ship. However, an old friend of the pirate betrayed them to the warlord, and they were captured by the forces of darkness.

Hearing of their imprisonment, and the indignities and torments inflicted upon them by their captors, the farm boy cut short his training and set out to rescue his friends. Ultimately he freed the princess, and together with the pirate crew they sailed away in their liberated ship. Of the pirate captain, however, there was no sign. He had softly and suddenly vanished away, and his friends determined that they would not rest until they had tracked him down and won his freedom.

This is where our story begins. More or less.

Chapter 1

Escape From Elimb

The planet Elimb was little more than a barren, lifeless rock spinning through space, its thin atmosphere a miasma of toxic fumes: potassium cyanide, chlorine, and dihydrogen monoxide being the most prevalent. During its four hours of daylight, the surface baked beneath the blaze of the too-close sun which, despite its proximity, remained mostly hidden behind the green veil of the atmosphere, blasted but never torn by the ceaseless gale which howled across the surface. By night, as temperatures plummeted, the impurities in the air condensed, fell in a brief but ferocious hiss of precipitation before freezing into a slushy, yellow snow which was whipped by the savage winds into an all-obscuring blizzard. As the sun rose after the all-too-brief night, the snow boiled away into fog once more.

Twice a year, during the equinox, the gale died, allowing the snow to blanket everything and revealing the glorious night skies: beyond the ever-shifting curtains of light, purple and blue and green, which billowed and danced as the solar winds caressed the planet's strong, fluctuating magnetic field, the distant gas giant of Tibrogar hung serenely against the black. Very few people had ever witnessed this magnificent sight.

The horrendous atmospheric conditions and chaotic fluctuations of the magnetic field which rendered the planet so uninviting to potential visitors also made it an ideal place to hide. Nestled in a slight hollow in the middle of a featureless plain of undulating grey rock, the *Serendipity Sparrow* huddled unhappily as the relentless wind whistled across its rounded hull. Beside it, the smaller shape of a Rebel cross-wing fighter shuddered and rattled as the wind gusted around it, swirling fingers of fog plucking at the broad surfaces of the wings which gave it its name and supported its weapons.

Perched atop the neck of the ungainly freighter, the flight bridge of the *Serendipity Sparrow* was the highest thing around. It would have offered quite a vantage point, had there been anything to see, or any way of seeing it. Seated in the oversized co-pilot's chair, Shaggus paid no attention to the view, or lack thereof. The eight foot tall Woonky was studying the array of instruments before him with a worried expression on his broad green face. He tapped one several times with a large woolly finger, but the readout did not change. His frown deepened.

Mal would know what to do, he thought, and sighed. He and Mal had been together for, what, almost twelve years now? With his friend missing, Shaggus felt an aching hollowness in his heart and an alarming sense of insecurity which plagued his mind.

With a sudden snarl he pounded his fist against the bulkhead beside him, the sturdy metal plate already dented and buckled from numerous other such blows over the years. *Damn it*, he chided himself, *sitting here whining like a hungry cub won't get the job done! Shagpyle H Duphus, pull yourself together!* Shaggus had spent most of those twelve years on this very ship,

maintaining and repairing and rebuilding her numerous systems. He knew her capabilities better than anybody except Mal; he knew his way around the engine room even better than Mal.

I don't need Mal; I can fix this! he told himself sternly, doing his best to ignore the twinge of guilt this thought evoked. He stood, ducked through the cockpit doorway, and strode towards the engine room at the rear of the ship.

Seepy Weepy turned to watch as the Woonky stomped past. The humanoid 'bot's metallic skin gleamed beneath the overhead lighting panel of the small galley. Seepy turned back to his companion, an expression of perpetual surprise fixed upon his smooth face plate, thanks to the round latex-lined hole of his mouth.

"Oh my," he said, his prissy voice at odds with his primary function. CP-*Oui-P* had been built as a "fully functional" sex 'bot. "This doesn't look good, Arty. What do you suppose has gone wrong this time?"

Arty Farty trilled electronically, a rapid crescendo of varying tones which ended in a high-pitched whistle. RT-4RT was a stubby cylindrical astrobot, and her blue dome rotated back and forth as she made her point.

"That's easy for you to say," said Seepy with a tone of annoyance creeping into his artificially synthesised voice. "'Misalignment in the exotic energy coil indeed!' How would *you* know what is going on?"

Arty whistled mournfully, and Seepy leaned forward to peer past the end of the table at which he sat. A cable ran from a port in Arty's side to a matching plug in the wall.

"Oh dear," said Seepy. "How many times do I have to warn you about talking to strange..."

Arty chirped and beeped.

“Well okay,” said Seepy, “perhaps the *Sparrow* is no longer a stranger, but she can be really quite rude. You just be careful while you’re...”

Arty cheeped once.

“Oh my,” said Seepy. He sat back in his seat as a tone of distress crept into his voice. “Exactly my point! You certainly didn’t pick up such language from me!”

Arty whistle-beeped a short melody.

“Strange bedfellows indeed,” agreed Seepy. “Now, uh, where were we?”

Arty chirped a short response.

“My turn? Are you sure?” Seepy turned his head back and forth, scanning the room. “Well, in that case: *I spy, with my little video input device*, uh, *something beginning with*, uh...” Seepy tilted his head back slightly. “Oh, with ‘C’.”

Arty trilled briefly.

“What?” snapped Seepy. “Yes. How did you guess so quickly? How are you doing that?”

Arty whistled innocently.

Libby—Labia Orgasma Splitwhisker, princess of a planet which no longer existed—sat for almost five minutes in contemplative silence, listening to the faint bickering of the ‘bots in the galley overhead and the low but constant howl of the wind against the hull. Finally she stood, and the auto-flush hissed briefly behind her as she hitched her trousers around her waist and tied a quick bow in the cord which held them up. Her shirt, untucked, fell to mid-thigh, and the sleeves were rolled up to her elbows to prevent them from swallowing her hands. She studied herself in the small mirror above the sink. She wore Mal’s clothing, and in the too-large outfit she felt vaguely

ludicrous, like a six-year-old caught playing dress-up in front of her parents' wardrobe. In the shapeless clothes, only the tightness around her chest, where the material of the shirt struggled to contain her ample bosom, revealed that she was no longer a child.

That, and the dark shadows around her eyes.

Libby blinked and looked away from the mirror. She placed her hands into the sink, and warm water played across her skin. Too warm. During the daylight hours on this cursed rock, the whole damn ship was too warm! She nudged the temperature control until the water was almost chilled, and thrust her hands deeper into the bowl, allowing the cooling fluid to run across her forearms. Leaning forward, she splashed a double handful up onto her face, washing away the saltiness of dried perspiration. A second handful soothed the dryness of her lips, and she savoured the cool, clean taste of pure water on her tongue.

She dribbled more water onto the back of her head, and the chill trickle which ran down her neck chased away the tightness of an impending headache. The cold seeped into her skin, and she felt a patch grow cool against her breast as her shirt drank the water before it could escape. Despite the tiredness which still burned in her eyes, she felt better, and she removed her hands from the sensor field. The flow of water ceased.

She raised her eyes to the mirror on the wall above the bowl. She stared into it, and the face which stared back was barely recognisable as her own. The high cheekbones, the slender mouth, the narrow chin, all certainly belonged to Princess Labia Orgasma—*Splitwhisker*, now, she reminded herself absently—but the eyes which peered out of that face had changed.

She blinked, and her reflection blinked back. A droplet of water hung, trembling, from the tip of her nose and she wiped it away.

Perhaps it's the mind behind the eyes which has changed, she told herself. She felt suddenly fragmented, cut off from the person she thought she knew. *As though I'm inside my head, peering out through the windows of my eyes*. Everything was slipping away from her: the heat, the cold, the noise of the wind. Only numbness remained, and the eyes which stared back from the mirror were those of a stranger. She felt the sudden urge to smash the mirror, to shatter it into a thousand jagged shards, to see if she recognised herself in *that* splintered reflection.

What are you looking at? hissed a voice inside her head—or did it come from just beside her ear?

She closed her eyes. For a second she had the distinct feeling that her reflection was still staring balefully at her from beneath shadowed, tired eyelids. Eyes still closed—refusing to give into the whimsical notions of her mind—she leaned forward, dipped her hands back into the bowl, and caught another double handful up to splash across her face, and drip down onto her chest where it was absorbed by the thin shirt.

She turned away from the mirror before opening her eyes, and again she had the impression that behind her, that face which men described as beautiful was still peering out of the mirror at her.

Logically, she knew that she was experiencing trauma-induced neuroses, brought on by her torture at the hands of a sadistic Imperial Muff barely a week ago. From her training in such matters, she was fairly sure that this attack would pass soon, and that the sense of fragmentation was her mind's way of processing and

compartmentalising what had happened to her. She knew this—and yet, she dared not turn back towards the mirror in case her reflection really *was* peering out at her.

She took a deep breath, and stepped out of the small washroom. The common room beyond was empty, and she strode through it and out into the spacious cargo bay.

The belly of the *Serendipity Sparrow* was mostly empty, a cargo bay with no cargo; the *Sparrow* a freighter with no freight. Even in her soft-soled boots—all that survived of the outfit she had worn during their escape from Hoff, a lifetime ago—her footsteps echoed hollowly back at her from the curved steel walls. A couple of low crates rested against one wall, and Libby hoisted herself up onto one of them. Her eyes gazed across the empty space at the far wall, but her focus soon shifted past the hull and further, to a planet far, far away. Halfway across the galaxy. Ratatouille.

Mal was on Ratatouille. Snatched by a bounty hunter, taken to face the anger of crime queen Flabby the Butt, enduring Gods knew what while they sat here, helpless, on Elimb. The repairs which should have taken a day had stretched into several: adapting the exotic energy focuser from Lurk's fighter to suit the *Sparrow's* hyperdrive had been a long process. Shaggus had worked on it for a couple of days before Libby herself had forced him to take a break, to get some sleep. Not that she herself had managed to sleep more than a few minutes at a time.

Now, she felt her eyelids drifting closed, and she was too tired to fight the sensation.

"Mal," she murmured as she slid into sleep, "hang on, Mal, I'm coming."

"I'm here, Princess," a voice replied. Mal's voice. She opened her eyes, and there he was, standing on the

deck just a few feet away. He grinned that easy, devilish grin, and her heart melted.

“Mal?” she said. “Mal, is it really you?”

“None other,” he said. “Did ya miss me?”

“Oh Mal,” she cried. Leaping down off the crate she took two quick steps towards him. He met her half way, and she sighed as his arms closed tightly, protectively around her. She gripped his body fiercely, her arms inside his open coat, her hands pressed hard against his back. She felt his firm muscles sliding beneath his skin, beneath her fingers, as he tenderly stroked the back of her head.

His hand was on the bare skin of her neck, and she gasped at the touch. She pulled back from him, just enough that she could press her lips to the side of his throat. She tasted his saltiness as she kissed her way up his neck, along his jaw, to his chin. Their lips met, and he thrust his tongue into her mouth. It was their first real kiss, and it lasted long minutes as they each fed on the other's passion. Finally, reluctantly, she pulled away from him so she could breath.

“I love you, Mal,” she whispered against his cheek.

“I love you too,” he replied, his voice soft and throaty.

“I want you,” she said.

In reply, he pressed his lips lightly, oh so lightly, to hers.

“Put your hands on me,” she sighed.

He did. They felt strong and sure as they slid down her back to cup her buttocks, and then he was lifting her. She clung to him as he carried her back to the crates. She felt the rounded metal edge hit the back of her thighs. She lifted her legs, stretching them out across the top of the containers, laying back as his hand slid up the front of

her shirt. He traced teasing fingertips across the taut material.

“This shirt looks good on you,” he said. His fingers found the top button. “Let’s see how it looks *off* you!”

“Mmm, please,” was all she could manage to say. Her mouth was suddenly dry with anticipation.

One button popped open. Two buttons. Three, and the front of the shirt gaped open. Mal’s hand slipped inside, and his fingers were hot against her bare skin. Her breast tingled at his touch. She gazed up at him, and he smiled down at her as his other hand plucked at the cord which held her trousers. There was a moment’s resistance, a brief tug, and then the bow she had tied hissed open. Rather than waste any time in pulling the trousers down past her hips, he simply slid his hand down the smooth skin of her lower belly, past the loose waistband.

“Ohh Maaalll...” she breathed, tossing her head back and closing her eyes.

Then his hand was gone from between her legs, and she sighed. The hand on her breast squeezed sharply, almost cruelly, and she gasped in surprise.

“I’ve been looking forward to this,” he said ... except it was not Mal’s voice. Libby opened her eyes to find another face hovering over her. The face was familiar, but far from welcome. It was Imperial Muff Aleeto Farquhar, and Libby’s moan became a strangled whimper.

He squeezed her breast again, his short stubby fingers digging painfully into her soft flesh.

“No,” she said in horror. “No, not you, it can’t be!”

“Oh but it is,” he sneered. “Did ya miss me?”

“No,” she said again, “no, no, no!” With each repetition, the word grew louder, more desperate. Libby

struggled to sit up, to get free, but her body was held tight in the grip of an invisible restraining field. “Nooo!” she screamed.

“Oh yes,” said the Muff. He clambered up onto the crates, and with one swift jerk he pulled her trousers away, leaving her naked from the waist down.

“No,” Libby screamed again. “Mal, help me! Mal...” She tried to kick, but could not move her legs.

“Oh,” said the Muff softly, “are you thinking of your friend?”

Libby sobbed as she squirmed helplessly atop the crate. “Mal, where are you? Lurk? Shaggus?”

The Muff laughed as he stood between her legs, towering over her. From this angle, even his diminutive stature was threatening.

“I assure you,” he told her, “we are quite safe from your friends here.” With slow, deliberate movements he unfastened the severe grey pants of his uniform, and pushed them down around his knees. He grinned at the look of horror on her face: the penis which sprang forth from his groin was huge, especially for a man as short as the Muff.

“You want this, don’t you?” he sneered. She shook her head wordlessly. He laughed.

“Nevertheless,” he told her, “it is unavoidable. It is your destiny. You are now mine!”

She shook her head again. “No,” she managed to say, but it came out barely more than a whisper.

“Libby.” A familiar voice, a thousand light years away. Too far to help her, as the Muff knelt between her thighs.

“Now,” the Muff purred in satisfaction as he leaned closer, “prepare to feel the power of this fully armed and operational...”

“Libby!”

With a cry, Libby opened her eyes and looked around wildly. No Muff. No Mal either. Just the empty cargo bay of the *Serendipity Sparrow*, and Lurk standing beside the crate on which she sat, an expression of concern on his face.

“Are you okay?” he asked softly. “I heard you yelling, and...”

Libby leaned forward and hugged him awkwardly for a few seconds. “And you came running,” she said. She released him and sat back. “Thank you, Lurk. Thank you for saving me again.” She attempted a smile, but it felt too much like a grimace so she stopped.

He smiled back as his eyes flickered across her face, as though searching for something. She felt flushed, and her forehead was beaded with sweat. She hoped the sweat would disguise the salty tracks which ran down her cheeks, and after a moment she wiped her face roughly against her sleeve.

“You were just having a...”

Libby snorted. “Just a bad dream?” she asked. She heard the sudden anger in her voice, and she forced herself to take a deep breath. She shook her head. “It’s just...” She sighed. “It’s just, I haven’t had more than a few minutes sleep since... Well, you know.”

Lurk nodded.

“I’m feeling increasingly distanced from...” She shrugged, and stared at her hands. “From myself, from you, from everything. I know it’s...” Her throat locked up, and her shoulders trembled as more tears leaked from her burning eyes and ran unhindered down her cheeks.

Without a word, Lurk hoisted himself up onto the crate beside her. He sat close, not quite touching, and stared out across the cargo bay at the far wall. For a

minute they simply sat in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. Then, almost gingerly, Libby leaned against Lurk's side, resting her head against his chest as he placed his arm around her shoulders. He was tense, but she supposed she was too. It was not easy for either of them.

She knew Lurk had fallen for her the first time he had seen her image, before they had ever met. She had certainly fallen for him, too, when he had rescued her from an Imperial cell—but before either of them could pursue their feelings, he had flown off to do battle with the approaching Death Tube, and he had come back changed. Since that moment, he had maintained his distance from her and she, hurt and confused, had retreated into the shell that her command position provided. Then he had rescued her a second time, crossing half the galaxy to free her from her tormentor—only to reveal that he, Lurk Splitwhisker, was her brother. Now she knew why he had distanced himself, but her feelings had not yet caught up with that knowledge. Being this close to him confused her.

And somewhere in the midst of all that, she had fallen for Mal too!

Libby sighed.

"Tell me," said Lurk simply.

She shook her head, not sure where to begin. *How did I screw up my life so badly?* The question rose inside her, but she pushed it away before it could escape from her mouth. Instead she reached out and took his left hand in her own. She touched her thumb lightly to the single joint that was all that remained of his little finger.

"Does this bother you?" she asked in a low voice.

“No,” he said. “Well, sometimes it itches. But I don’t use that hand for much, so it’s not much of an inconvenience.” She felt him shrug.

“I dream about it,” she said quickly, before she could lose her nerve. “I dream about what he ... what he did to me, and what he would have done if you hadn’t...”

He squeezed her shoulder lightly. “He can’t hurt you now,” he told her.

“You killed him, didn’t you?” she asked. She wanted to look at him, but dared not. “You killed him for me?”

She thought he might have nodded, although she could not see it. “For you,” he said at last. “And for me. And because the galaxy is a slightly better place without an evil bastard like that drawing breath.”

She squeezed his hand briefly, and he squeezed back.

A loud clang from overhead made them both jump, startled, and as it echoed around the cargo bay they stared up at the ceiling. Somewhere above them was the engine room.

“Do you suppose that means repairs are finished?” asked Lurk, and Libby had to clamp her hand over her mouth to suppress a hysterical giggle. When she finally dared to release herself, she was smiling.

“I hope so,” she said. “I’ve had about as much of this planet as I can stand.”

“It *has* been a long week,” said Lurk.

Libby’s smile faded. “A week in which we’ve come up with nothing,” she said. “How are we going to get Mal back?”

“I *have* had some thoughts about that,” said Lurk. “Come on, I’ll buy you a drink!”

The small lounge area at the rear of the cargo bay held three battered old couches, a low table, and a hyperchess

board. Against one wall, a small shelf held the ship's library of holo-novels, and three antique—and hence valuable—paper books. In a previous life, Libby had enjoyed reading them as a means of whiling away the hours; now she had no interest in such idle pursuits.

She cupped the mug of dark, steaming liquid in her hands and took a cautious sip as she waited for Lurk to finish making his own drink. She grimaced.

“What is this stuff?” she asked. “It’s rather bitter.”

“Uh...” Lurk lifted the container and examined it. “I’m not entirely sure,” he said. “Some sort of dried, crushed berry called, uh, Hrabí’Qa—or maybe that’s the planet it’s from. Who knows?” He shrugged. “There’s some sweetener here if you’d like.”

“No,” said Libby. She sipped again, and held the beverage on her tongue for a couple of seconds before she swallowed. “Thanks, but this suits my mood.”

Lurk nodded as he returned the container to the cupboard in which he’d found it. He took a sip from his mug and pulled a face.

“It *is* bitter, isn’t it?” he said. “I wonder if I made it right. You sure you don’t want something else?”

“This is fine,” said Libby. “Really.” She followed him with her eyes as he skirted the central table and eased into the couch opposite her. “So, what’s the plan?”

Lurk stared across the table at her for a few seconds. Finally he sighed. “There’s really no easy way to say this,” he said, “so I’ll just say it. I had a dream.”

“A dream?” asked Libby flatly.

“Well, it was more of a vision,” he said. “From the Source.”

Libby nodded, although she didn’t entirely understand. She knew of the belief that the entire galaxy, and everyone in it, were virtual constructs generated in

the memory array of a master computer by a complex program known only as The Source. She knew that the adherents of this belief had, a long time ago, split into two competing sects. The Jubbly followed the Soft side of the Source, and the Stiff, their mortal enemies, followed the Hard side.

Legend said that the Jubbly had once acted as the protectors of the Old Republic, but by the time of Libby's birth they had all but disappeared. She had thought of them as little more than a myth to frighten children—be good, or the Jubbly will get you—until her adoptive father had sent her to Ratatouille to seek out the sole surviving Jubbly knight, Obeah Bum K'Nobby, and ask for his aid in the Rebellion against the Imperium. She had never met the old man, but Lurk had been his apprentice and she had seen *him* perform seemingly impossible feats on more than one occasion.

Libby wasn't sure if she believed in the Source, but she *did* believe in Lurk.

"What does that mean?" she asked now. "A vision of what?"

"Of us," he said, "rescuing Mal. Or rather, of how the rescue is supposed to happen."

Libby raised an eyebrow. "Go on," she said cautiously.

"You know about the Source?" he asked. She nodded for him to continue. "Some Jubbly scholars believe that the simulation being run—this galaxy—is based on some work of fiction, an entertainment for the masses, rather than any sort of reality. And that we are all living our lives according to that script. I think the Source showed me the bit of the original holo-vid where we rescue Mal—although some of the details were, uh, different."

“Um,” said Libby. She took a longer sip from her mug, and swallowed the bitter liquid. “So, uh, what you’re saying is that somebody else wrote the story of our lives, the holo-vid, and that we are now living the lives set down for us by this outside influence?”

“Something like that, yeah,” said Lurk. He sounded mildly apologetic.

“Right...” said Libby, drawing the word out into a drawl. She believed in *Lurk*, but damned if he didn’t believe some crazy shit! “So I guess, while all this is going on, some other, uh, *outside influence* is sitting there, writing down everything we say and do? Producing the novel of the story of the holo-vid of the story of our lives? For others to read.”

“What?” said Lurk. “No. That level of recursion would just be silly!”

“Right...” said Libby again. “But even so, if we’re stuck in this script, doesn’t that mean we have no choice?” Lurk opened his mouth to answer, but she cut him off. “And if that’s the case, what about half an hour ago? I had a cramp in my gut, so I went to the toilet. I peed, and I farted a few times, that was it. But what sort of holo-vid goes to that sort of detail? What sort of pervert writes this stuff?”

“I think that was more than I wanted to know,” said Lurk in a meek tone.

Libby opened her mouth to reply, then hesitated. She realised her voice had been growing louder and more strident, and she forced herself to swallow her anger.

“Sorry,” she said. “It’s just, I’m ... I haven’t been sleeping, and I’m worried for Mal, and...”

Lurk reached across the table and touched the back of her hand lightly with his fingers. “It’s okay,” he said.

“Really, I do understand. And, farts aside, they’re valid questions.”

“I can’t believe I said that!” Libby felt her cheeks flushing with blood, and she raised her mug to her mouth so she had something to hide behind. She studied her brother. Lurk seemed to be groping for some way to respond to her questions.

“I’m sorry, Lurk,” she said again. “I have been... I just seem to be angry all the time, recently.” She closed her eyes briefly, and took another sip from her mug. She looked up, meeting his gaze. “Please, tell me your plan.”

He stared back at her for several long moments. Finally, he nodded.

“So,” he began. “First, we send in the ‘bots, to carry a message to Flabby that we want to buy Mal’s freedom—and as a gift for her.”

“Wait, what?” Libby interrupted. “You’re saying that you want to give Arty and Seepy to Flabby the Hutt?”

“It’s the only way I can smuggle my light rapier into Flabby’s palace; hidden inside Arty.”

“But...”

“Anyway,” said Lurk, “once they’re in place, you go in, disguised as a Hundaran bounty hunter, complete with face-covering helmet and voice distortion module. You tell Flabby that you’ve come for the bounty on Shaggus. Once they ... what?”

Libby shook her head. Where to begin? Never mind the obvious question of where they were supposed to get their hands on Hundaran combat gear.

“Why would they pay me the bounty on Shaggus?” she asked after a moment’s thought. “Is there even a bounty on Shaggus? Neither he nor Mal ever mentioned it.”

“They pay the bounty,” said Lurk slowly, “because you take Shaggus in as your prisoner.”

“Right,” she said. “Of course. And does Shaggus know this?”

“Anyway,” Lurk said, stressing the word slightly, “once they have accepted your presence, all you have to do is wait until nightfall. When they’re all asleep, you simply find Mal, and free him from his imprisonment.”

“Oh, is that all?” said Libby. “I just free him and we walk out together, past all the guards who won’t be asleep because they’re, y’know, guards. And what about Shaggus and the ‘bots? How do we...”

Lurk was holding up his hand. “There’s more,” he said.

“Go on,” she sighed.

“Your attempt to rescue Mal will fail,” he said softly.

“What?” she shouted. Her anger was back in force.

“That is when I come in,” Lurk continued quickly, “to bargain for Mal’s release.”

“For Mal’s release?” said Libby. “And what about me, and Shaggus, and the ‘bots who are now also prisoners? What if we’re not prisoners? What if we’ve been summarily executed on the spot? How do you get us all out of there then, once Flabby has all the bargaining chips?”

“I, uh, I don’t,” said Lurk. “Not right away. First I get dropped into a pit, where I have to fight a giant carnivorous monster. Then we are all taken out into the desert, where Flabby intends to feed us to one of the more unfriendly creatures of the deep sands. Then...”

“Stop,” said Libby. “Just stop.” She realised she was clutching the mug so tightly that her hand was trembling, and the heat from her drink was burning her fingers. She forced herself to relax, to take a deep breath.

“But I haven’t even got to...”

“Stop,” she said again. Carefully she put her mug down on the table. “This has to be one of the most convoluted plans I’ve ever heard. Not only that, but it is the only rescue plan I’ve heard in which the rescuing party voluntarily hand themselves over to their captors.”

“But ultimately it will work,” said Lurk.

“Perhaps in your dreams,” she said. “If everything went exactly as you saw it. But you said yourself that there were differences, so we have no way of knowing that any of it would work out as you saw it. What if they, I dunno, scanned Arty and found your light rapier? What if they executed Shaggus on the spot, or shot me or Mal for trying to escape? What if...”

“What if I get eaten by the monster in the basement?” Lurk supplied.

“Exactly!”

Lurk sighed. “You’re right, of course,” he said. “What was I thinking? Damn dreams, make so much sense when you first wake up, but then they turn out to be nonsense.”

Libby nodded tiredly. “I dreamed the answer to galactic peace once,” she said. “It made sense for at least five minutes, until I started to write it down. Then it all just fell apart.”

Lurk lifted his mug to his mouth and took several swallows. He grimaced. “So,” he said, “what’s Plan B?”

Shaggus stood in the shadows on the gantry which ran along one side of the cargo bay, head tilted to avoid bumping the hatch frame. From here he could see his two human companions talking in the common room. He could hear their voices as a distant murmur, but their words were swallowed by the huge room.

He thought they were probably discussing strategy. Shaggus had his own ideas about freeing Mal, but since they all basically boiled down to charging into the enemy stronghold and blasting or dismembering anything which wasn't Mal, he had already excluded himself from the planning phase of the mission ahead. Satisfying as his plan might be, he knew it stood very little chance of success. Much better, he had decided, to focus on getting the *Sparrow* off this rock.

As far as he could tell, the repairs were now—finally—complete!

Shaggus whuffed softly to himself. For a moment he considered activating the comm panel mounted in the wall beside him; the fact that neither Lurk nor Libby would understand him changed his mind. He sighed. While he understood human speech well enough, his complex arrangement of vocal organs—three vocal flaps in the back of his throat, and a secondary tongue—were not well suited to replicating the sounds. The Woonky language consisted of a series of yowls, growls, and howls which most other species in the galaxy found unintelligible.

Mal had been one of the few non-Woonkies ever to make the effort to learn the language. In his absence, Shaggus had to resort to the translation services of Seepy Weepy.

He sighed. Despite his facility with machines, humanoid 'bots just plain creeped him out.

Ducking back through the hatch, Shaggus returned to the galley. The 'bots were still bickering. They were worse than an old married couple. Shaggus blinked as a stray memory surfaced: Flabby the Butt had once made that very same observation about himself and Mal.

Takeoff in three minutes, Shaggus growled at the 'bots. He waved a large woolly arm at the kitchen's comm panel. *Lurk and Libby are in the common room. Tell them we are leaving.*

"I shall be glad to do so, Master Shaggus," said Seepy Weepy cheerfully. "Did you hear that, Arty? We are finally leaving this dreadful place."

Arty warbled a reply.

"True," said Seepy as he stood up from the table and marched stiffly across the floor to the comm panel. "But this place is even *more* dreadful than Ratatouille."

Arty twittered again.

"No," said Seepy. "I'm not looking forward to *that*! You're right, it *is* a nasty, gritty place. Do you think, Master Shaggus, that..."

Shaggus howled his impatience and indicated the panel. Damned 'bot could talk the ears off a gundark, given half the chance.

"Oh yes, of course," said Seepy. He turned towards the comm panel.

Shaggus waited until he heard Lurk's tinny reply to the 'bot's hail, then turned and stomped towards the flight deck.

The co-pilot's chair creaked as he settled his weight into it. He swivelled to face forward, and flipped a few switches. The main panel hummed softly into flickering, blinking life. Shaggus ran his gaze quickly across the instrument panel, pausing to inspect the one which had blinked red the last time he had started the pre-flight checklist. Everything looked good.

Almost everything. Shaggus stared at the weather radar. A large amorphous blob of dark colour filled the lower third of the display. Even as he watched, the blob

drew closer to the small icon in the centre which marked the location of the *Serendipity Sparrow*.

The Woonky growled low in his throat, a wordless sound of distress. He switched one of the larger displays to the rear camera view. Lurk's cross-wing fighter sat there, enwrapped in ribbons of green as the winds howled across its hull. Beyond the fighter, a green mass loomed, and Shaggus had to switch to a wide-angle lens to see it properly. It was a swirling mass of clouds and fog, and as he watched, lightning flickered and danced within it. It was a storm, and it was heading straight for them.

On a planet where standard weather patterns included gale-force winds, Shaggus had no wish to experience *bad* weather.

He flipped a couple more switches, and felt the comforting hum as systems began to come online around him.

"Need a hand?" asked Lurk as he appeared in the cockpit hatchway, his sister close behind him.

Take the pilot's seat, whuffed Shaggus, waving his arm at the seat in question. Lurk didn't know the *Sparrow* like Mal did, but Shaggus had seen him flying smaller craft and knew the farmboy was a capable pilot. *I may need you!*

As Lurk settled into the pilot's seat, Libby took the third seat. While the position of navigator had been rendered obsolete by technological advances, many older ships retained the seat. She glanced at the weather display, then gasped and looked again.

"There's a storm coming," she said.

I know, growled Shaggus. Working methodically, he started on the final pre-takeoff checklist.

All hatches closed? He snorted to himself; if the ship had not been airtight, they would have known about it

long before now, thanks to the toxic brew which swirled outside. Nonetheless, he tapped the array of green lights to be sure.

Lurk nodded, picking up where they were in the sequence.

“Cargo bay secure,” he said. Shaggus snorted again.

“Fuel,” said Lurk. He flipped a couple of switches, and the fuel gauges came alive. “Uh, Shaggus, we’ve got an orange light on the...”

That’s for sub-light flight, whuffed Shaggus, raising his hand to indicate it would be okay. The fuel for the VTOL engines was almost full, and for now, that was all that mattered.

“Okay,” said Lurk, “uh, rotate for take-off.”

Shaggus gripped a lever, turned it, and pulled it down. They all heard the familiar hiss of hydraulics as the engine pods rotated from their standby positions. *Green for go*, whuffed Shaggus.

“Uh, guys,” said Libby. She pointed at the display showing the rear camera feed. Shaggus glanced at it, in time to see the cross-wing fighter wobble uncertainly and slide a couple of feet across the rocky plain towards them. “We really need to go now,” she continued, “before Lurk’s fighter ends up in the cargo bay.”

“Activating fuel pumps,” said Lurk. He pressed a button on the centre console, and they all watched as the two pump status lights flickered from red to orange to ... one turned green, the second hesitated on orange before darkening once more to red.

With a snarl which revealed several wickedly pointed teeth, Shaggus balled one large, woolly fist and thumped the bulkhead above the indicators. The recalcitrant light flickered a couple of times, before settling on green. The Woonky’s terrifying snarl turned into an even more

terrifying grin. *Hah!* he snarled. *Fuel pumps check! Just like Mal would have...*

His sigh as the grin fell from his large green face was all too human.

“That’ll do it,” said Lurk. “Now, uh...”

Ignition! growled Shaggus. *In three, two...* The fuel intermix light flickered to green, and beneath it a large round button also turned green. Almost gently, Shaggus slapped it with his large palm.

With a roar, the VTOL engines surged to full acceleration and Shaggus heard the sturdy chair beneath him creak as his body trebled, quadrupled in weight. The *Serendipity Sparrow* lifted off the ground, and immediately slewed forward as the wind caught it. Shaggus wrestled with the controls, trying to correct their orientation. Even against his considerable strength, the control stick fought to twist free. Voicing his own roar of frustration, the Woonky placed his other hand over the first and threw all his weight into bringing the ship around.

“Look out,” shouted Libby.

“Oh crap,” muttered Lurk as they watched the leading edge of the storm pluck his fighter from the ground and hurl it towards them. He slammed the throttle forward, and the *Sparrow* reacted as though goosed. A hideous shudder shook the freighter, and the screech of metal on metal echoed through the ship as the fighter scraped one wingtip along her belly. Something snagged, and the impact pushed the nose of the freighter into the air. For a moment, they all felt the drag on the ship that would bring them back down to become permanent inhabitants of the planet; then, with a tearing of metal, they broke free. The *Serendipity Sparrow* leaped skyward, leaving the planet of Elimb and its poisonous atmosphere behind.

As they climbed out of the gravity well, Shaggus felt a vibration rise from somewhere deep in the bowels of the ship to shake his bones; something was misaligned. The vibration eased, however, as the terrible weight which gripped their limbs fell away, and the roar of the engines faded to silence. For a few seconds Shaggus held his breath, and the silence was complete. He realised he had been living with the whine of Elimb's ceaseless wind against the *Sparrow's* hull for so long it had become part of his world; now that it was gone, the silence pressed heavily against his sensitive ears.

Lurk filled the silence with a wordless yell of triumph. "We made it," he added excitedly.

Listening to the celebratory exclamations of the humans, Shaggus exhaled noisily, the air hissing between his teeth, and he allowed himself a slight grin. If he ever saw that vile pustule of a planet again, it would be too soon. Quickly he ran his gaze over the sensors, toggling through several different passive scans before running an active radar sweep. Nothing. Evidently the *Imperial Star Destroyer* which had dogged their trail for so long had found better prey to pursue.

A new red light on the console caught his eye, and he frowned. The front port landing strut had not folded itself away; the impact with the fighter must have damaged it. Still—he surveyed the rest of the panel—they had been lucky. There were no signs of an atmospheric leak. Whatever damage that awful scraping had done, they were still airtight.

His long green fingers ran lightly over the controls as he programmed the jump to hyperspace. Destination: Ratatouille. As the lights on the nav computer flickered, Shaggus found his mind returning to the vibration he had felt during take-off. It wasn't just the damaged landing

strut, he decided; one of the valves on the inverter manifold must be sticking. He could see it in his mind; the second valve, or possibly the third, not opening fully under the demands of full acceleration. Despite coming from a low-tech planet, despite being of a species which the Imperials dismissed with a sneer as “ignorant savages”, the Woonky had discovered a natural aptitude for repairing machines after falling in with Mal.

The navigation computer beeped. The course was calculated.

Shaggus tapped a few final instructions into the computer, and then paused. He had pulled the exotic energy focuser lens from the cross-wing fighter himself, and made the necessary adjustments to fit it in place of the *Sparrow*’s own lens. He knew it would work—it *had* to work—but still, the *Serendipity Sparrow* had been without a functional hyperdrive for too long. What if something else failed? What if...?

May the spirits of the tree-mother watch over me, he growled softly, the Woonky equivalent of a whisper. Shaggus was a long way from the homeworld, and had seen so much of the galaxy that he was no longer sure if he even believed in the spirits of his ancestral home, but it didn’t hurt to ask. After a moment’s thought he added in the same growling whisper: *I’m coming, Mal*.

He punched the ENGAGE button. The computer beeped again, and beyond the plasteel, the stars stretched into streaks of light as the *Sparrow* tunnelled into the unreality of hyperspace.

Thankyou, he whispered. Had anyone asked, he would have been unable to say whether he was thanking his gods, the ship, or the universe at large.

“Sir!”

Captain Kaybe Gold raised his attention from the screen he had been studying and directed his piercing gaze across the bridge of the *Imperial Planetary Dominator Bermuda*.

“What is it, Corporal?” he demanded.

“I’ve just received a coded ping, sir,” said the corporal. “It appears to be from the probe ‘bot that was attached to that rebel freighter a month ago.”

“Appears to be?” Captain Gold straightened, the tedium of preparing the monthly crew roster forgotten. The corporal swallowed nervously as the Captain strode across the deck towards his station. “Explain yourself, Corporal.”

“Yes sir. Uh, sir, the ID codes match the ‘bot in question.” The corporal turned back to the console before him and tapped his finger against a series of digits in the top right corner. He was pleased to note that he was barely trembling at all. “But the signal is distorted, as though the transmitter has sustained damage, or...”

“Or what, Corporal?”

“Well, this distortion pattern *could* indicate the ‘bot has been tampered with. Sir.” The corporal glanced back up at Captain Gold’s face. “And it has been almost a week, I believe, since the last contact with...”

“Is the distortion pattern consistent with polaric ionisation?” the Captain asked.

“Uh...” The corporal blinked. After a moment he turned back to his console and typed in a brief query. He was all too aware of the Captain’s presence over his shoulder, studying the results. “Yes, sir,” he said. “Probability of polaric ionisation damage to transmitter is...”

“Eighty-three percent,” the Captain read the figure from the screen. “About what you’d expect from a five day stopover in the toxic, ionised atmosphere of Elimb, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Well, I ... Elimb? Sir, that would explain why we haven’t heard... Sir? We, uh, we knew where they were?”

“Don’t worry, Corporal,” said the Captain as a magnanimous smile bared his gleaming teeth. “You didn’t miss a briefing.” His eyes narrowed as he studied the data displayed on the corporal’s screen. “And they jumped into hyperspace as soon as they cleared the gravity well. I guess they completed all their repairs.”

The corporal nodded carefully.

“Excellent, Corporal,” said the Captain. “Can you determine a destination from this data?”

“Not yet, sir,” said the corporal. “We have last known position and a rough heading, but it will take another two or three data pings to narrow down a likely trajectory.” The Captain was nodding impatiently—*of course he knows all that*, the corporal chided himself. “All I can say with this data is that they are heading for the outer rim. Uh, sir?”

“Corporal?”

“Shall I inform Admiral Muzzel?”

Captain Gold shook his head. “No, Corporal,” he said, “I think we can let the Admiral sleep.” He smiled again. “He said they’d head for Ratatouille, and on the data you have, it looks like he was right.”

Chapter 2

Bramble Patch Blues

Far from the standard shipping lanes, the Bramble Patch was a dark and lonely region of space. There were no stars here. The very fabric of space-time was twisted, knotted, tangled. Gravitational anomalies rippled randomly into existence, and just as randomly winked out again. Hyperspace—that higher-dimensional extension of realspace that made it possible to travel between star systems without being held to the light-speed limit imposed by relativity—did not exist here.

There were several conflicting hypotheses surrounding the existence of the Bramble Patch—and it was generally accepted, by those who cared to ponder the subject, that *something* cataclysmic had taken place here—but given the vastness of the region, the lack of perceived economic worth, and the dangers inherent in travelling through it, there was little public interest in resolving the puzzle.

Few people came here. Of those few, even fewer returned—and nobody ever cared enough to mount a rescue mission into the Bramble Patch. The stories were enough to keep people away. Stories of ships in open space suddenly crushed to the size of a pea by a gravitational vortex. Stories of ships torn apart, or even turned inside out. Stories of ships reappearing, drifting

out of the region decades after they disappeared, their crews vanished but the food in the galley still warm, as though they had only been gone for five minutes.

All Imperial charts showed the region—Zone 51 was its official title—as an empty void, for it remained mostly uncharted. Fifteen light years across, it was far too large to explore at sub-light speeds. Some charts labelled it the Dead Zone, and some even warned “Here Be Dragons” in cursive script. Almost everybody who ever took to space, however, knew what you meant if you spoke of the Bramble Patch.

If you wanted to hide a really big secret, the Bramble Patch was the place to do it.

The boundaries of the Bramble Patch were not as clearly defined as most charts showed them to be. In fact, its borders were as fractally twisted as the space within those borders; cartographers of the region generally preferred to err on the side of caution. Several corridors of stable space existed—although their existence was kept a jealously, and aggressively, guarded secret by those who knew. At least three of these twisting, shifting corridors of safe passage led to whole stable pockets of realspace, bubbles of normality within the chaos of the zone.

In one of these secret pockets, six days’ travel from the edge of the Bramble Patch at maximum sub-light speed, *Imperial Research Station S-3* was home to a small cadre of scientists and technicians, and an army of construction ‘bots. The station was an old one, its triple-torus design archaic—gravity generators eliminated the need to spin the station—but functional.

Two *Frigate*-class warships patrolled the pocket of space, insurance against accidental discovery—although, given the security measures which existed within the

approach corridor, unwelcome visitors were considered extremely unlikely. Several smaller *Imperial Science Vessels* were docked at the toroidal station.

A huge cylindrical object, obviously still under construction, floated in space behind the research station. So large was it that the station itself seemed to be little more than a toy in comparison.

This was the second *Devastator*-class station, and was thirty percent longer than the one which had been destroyed by the Rebel forces in the Battle of Yawn. Its diameter—limited, as it was, by the size of the realspace corridor to the outside galaxy—remained the same as that of its predecessor.

The construction crews jokingly referred to the super-weapon as “Death Tube Two: The Imperium Strikes Back”—although they were careful to keep such comments from the ears of Imperial Intelligence. The “Double-I’s”, the “Eyes of the Imperium”, had no sense of humour, and nasty ways of expressing their displeasure.

Aboard *Imperial Frigate Anaconda*, Comms Officer Lieutenant First Class Samantha Schmitt frowned, and lifted her finger to press the earpiece more tightly into her ear. After a moment she looked up anxiously.

“Captain Kobayashi,” she said, “I think you need to hear this.”

Captain Kobayashi Hiroto was a slender man of average height. Beneath the severe officer’s cap, his hair was cropped short.

He had been standing in the centre of the bridge, hands clasped behind his back, gazing out the front viewports at the starfield vista beyond. Viewed through the boiling space-time of the Bramble Patch, the distant constellations rippled and shimmered disconcertingly.

Many people found it disturbing, even nauseating, but Captain Kobayashi often found beauty where others saw only ugliness.

His dark eyes missed nothing.

Now, he turned his head towards his comms officer. His rigid stance did not change.

“What do you have, Lieutenant?”

“It’s garbled, sir,” she said, “but it appears to be a distress call.”

“Time stamp?”

“Incomplete, sir, but apparently recent. Within the last thirty minutes.”

The Captain nodded, and strode over to her station.

“Let’s hear it,” he said.

“Aye sir.” She tapped a couple of buttons on her console, and a squeaky, popping hiss filled the bridge. Over the hiss a voice spoke, fading in and out of audibility.

... at Lady, reque ... istance. Under atta ... ied forces. I re ... ondaromba ... ee, requesting imme ... by unidenti ... come from? All han ...

“That’s it, sir,” she said. “It seems to have been cut off abruptly.”

The Captain nodded curtly. “Play it again,” he said.

She did so, and both of them listened intently to the fragmented message.

“What are your thoughts?” the Captain asked the Lieutenant.

“I think it’s the *ISV Fat Lady*, sir,” she said. “The ship ident contained in the signal is too distorted to make a positive ID, but it is definitely an Imperial code.” She did not bother to add that the quality of the signal hinted at a point of origin within the anomalous space of the Dead Zone; everybody present knew what the tangled

space around them did to broadcast messages. Without access to hyperspace, transmissions could only travel at the speed of light. Of course, that fixed upper speed limit imposed by the universe tended to be more variable than it should have been where the Bramble Patch was involved. “They would appear to be under attack.”

“The *Fat Lady* is two days out, isn’t she?” said the Captain.

“Yes sir,” said Schmitt. “Just over two days at maximum speed. Which would equate to a transmission delay of...” Her eyes lost focus briefly as she ran the calculations through her head. “About twenty-eight minutes.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” said the Captain. “Reply to the *Fat Lady*, acknowledging partial receipt of their transmission and asking for clarification. Listen for anything more from them—and do what you can to clean up that fragment, see if you can pull more information out of it.”

“Aye, sir,” said the Lieutenant.

The Captain turned on his heel. “Tactical, go to Alert Level Two, all ships. There’s nothing we can do for the *Fat Lady*, but if the potential exists for hostile forces approaching from within the Patch, we need to be ready to respond.”

“Aye, sir,” said the Tactical Officer. Moments later, a quiet female voice sounded throughout the ship: “Alert level two. Be advised. Possibility of hostile activity, no immediate threat. Alert level two.”

“Lieutenant Schmitt,” the Captain continued in a quiet voice. “Give my personal regards to Captain Lorrigan on the *Cobra*, and inform her of our status.”

“Aye, sir.”

As the communications officer turned back to her console, Captain Kobayashi returned to his favourite vantage point in the centre of the bridge. From here he could keep an eye on his crew, and watch a wide sweep of space through the several rectangular plasteel windows arrayed around the front of the frigate's bridge. He could see the research station off to one side, with the massive black hulk of the new *Devastator* station blotting out the shifting blur of stars behind it. He could see the *Imperial Frigate Cobra* in the distance, moving in a slow patrol sweep around the far boundary of their pocket of realspace. And he could see the distant stars, flickering and dancing, popping in and out of view, distorted by the shifting anomalies of the Patch.

When the impossible happened, moments later, he was staring right at it.

A point of space suddenly flared brightly, and then *flexed*. It grew rapidly, a shimmering bubble of flickering light, swelling to an impossibly enormous size. When the bubble popped, a vessel sat in the once-empty space between the two frigates. It was huge, larger than the research station—larger, even, than the massive hull of an *Imperial Planetary Dominator*, if Kobayashi Hiroto was any judge. Only the *Devastator* was larger. It was a very regular geometric shape, and a sickly green light flickered and played across the huge pentagonal surfaces.

“What...” began Captain Kobayashi. His blink was the only visual display of the surprise he felt. Everyone agreed that travel through hyperspace was impossible here—quite simply because *hyperspace* was impossible here—but *that* had not been a typical hyperspace exit event. His eyes narrowed minutely. The *how* of this impossible appearance did not matter—yet. What

mattered now was that it was here; an unauthorised intruder in restricted Imperial space.

“Alert Level Six,” he said calmly, although he felt his palms prickling. The intruder easily outmassed both Imperial frigates together.

The alarm klaxon began to sound softly but persistently throughout the ship, and the lighting flickered to red.

“Bring us around to maximise our firing solution,” he ordered, “and launch all THIGH squadrons immediately. Lieutenant Schmitt, contact that ... that vessel and demand their immediate surrender.”

A harsh, grating voice cut across the orderly commotion on the bridge of the *IF Anaconda*. “We are Droid,” it droned. “You will be integrated. Your biological and technological distinctiveness will be added to our own. Resistance is futile.”

“As much fun as that all sounds,” said Captain Kobayashi quietly, “I do believe we choose to resist anyway. Futile my ass! Fire at will.” This last sentence he spoke aloud, and the space between the *IF Anaconda* and the clearly hostile intruder became an inferno of blaster energy as the Frigate’s guns unleashed their fury.

Moments later, the *IF Cobra* opened fire in support of her sister ship, catching the intruder in a withering cross-fire.

The huge dodecahedron did not even shudder.

“We are Droid.” That voice again. Flat, inflectionless, dead—and yet it had a menacing depth to it, as though it came from a thousand throats all speaking in unison. “Resistance is futile. You will be...”

“Close that channel, Lieutenant Schmitt,” said the Captain, raising his voice to be heard above the

emotionless declaration of hostile intent. “We’ve heard quite enough.”

“Sorry, Captain,” she replied. “There is no comms channel open. Somehow they are broadcasting directly to our PA system. I am unable to block their signal.”

“Well, see what you can do,” he said. He gazed through the forward viewport, squinting his eyes against the glare. The intruder seemed to be absorbing everything they could throw at it. So far it had not responded.

A flight of THIGH Fighters soared past the Frigate’s bridge, so close that Captain Kobayashi felt his stomach flip—not because of their proximity, as such, but because the hungry drag of their gravitational drives could be felt through the hull. Needless to say, the gravitational drive had been an early product of research into this very region of space. Early test flights had shown promise, with some minor complications, and it had taken another decade after their development to successfully engineer a pilot capable of flying the THIGH Fighters without being reduced to a red smear across the inside of the cockpit.

“You will be integrated,” the voice droned again. “Resistance is...”

“No, no, no!” said another voice, interrupting the first speaker. “We discussed this.” Captain Kobayashi turned to face the comms officer once more, and his skin felt suddenly clammy. *That voice? Could it be?* It was a little muffled, as though the person was some distance from whatever microphone was picking up the conversation.

“But resistance *is* futile,” said the first voice. “Alerting our targets to that fact can only serve to save time and minimise energy wastage.”

Another flight of THIGH Fighters passed the bridge, and behind them, four THIGH Bombers headed for the

fight. Captain Kobayashi registered their passing on a visceral level, which only added to his sudden nausea as he listened to the argument being broadcast from the enemy vessel.

“You really don’t understand biological life, do you?” intoned the second voice. It was deep, almost sepulchral, and it resonated in one’s chest. “In all the time you’ve been doing this, has *any* ship *ever* responded to ‘You will be integrated, resistance is futile’ by surrendering with an ‘okay then, guys, integrate away’?”

“Well, no,” droned the first voice. “But we used to use humour until you told us to change our approach.” For an inflectionless drone, the voice sounded a tad petulant.

“For the record, ‘Resistance is fertile’—these words were delivered in an exaggerated imitation of the flat drone—“is *not* funny. It is sad. And did it ever work any better?”

“No,” admitted the first voice.

“Well then,” said the second voice, “stand back, watch, and learn.”

“Roger,” said the first voice.

There was a scuffle, and then a couple of sharp, loud taps.

“Is this thing on?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” There was a momentary silence, and then the sound of a throat being cleared, before the voice spoke again.

“To the captains of the Imperial Frigates firing upon us, stand down.” Captain Kobayashi paled. There was now no mistaking that voice. Every officer of the Imperial fleet was familiar with the dread, dark tones of the Imperator’s alpha wolf. “This is Barth Vapour,” the

voice continued, confirming what they already knew, “Hard Lord of the Stiff. Cease fire immediately.”

The blaze of light from the Frigates’ weapons faltered and died as the gunnery officers responded to that order. Obedience to that voice was in their blood.

“No,” shouted the Captain, “keep firing. Schmitt, open a three-way channel with that vessel and the *Cobra*.”

The guns of the *IF Anaconda* began firing again, although they still seemed to be having little effect, even when the *Cobra* once more joined the assault. The dodecahedron shrugged off the destructive energy splashing across its hull as though it were a gentle shower of rain.

“*Cobra* signal already incoming,” said the Lieutenant. “Channel open.”

Captain Kobayashi swallowed. This was the moment all Imperial officers dreaded; a confrontation with the Stiff Lord.

“To the unidentified and unauthorised vessel,” he said carefully, “this is Captain Kobayashi Hiroto of the *Imperial Frigate Anaconda*. You are in violation of Imperial edict Seven Zero Three. You *will* surrender your vessel immediately, or you will be destroyed.” *Eventually*, he added to himself.

“Captain Hiroto,” said the voice from the enemy ship, “this is Barth Vapour. Is it possible that you do not know who I am? You and your sister ship will cease fire immediately.”

“This is Captain Stacy Lorrigan of the *Imperial Frigate Cobra*,” came a new voice. “We recognise the name you are using, yes. I shall follow your lead, Hiroto,” she added pointedly.

“Thank you, Stacy,” said Captain Kobayashi. “I am authorising my bombers to bring their nukes online.” He nodded confirmation of the order to Lieutenant Schmitt, and despite the sudden pallor of her face, her fingers danced across her console as she encoded the authorisation and transmitted it to the THIGH Bombers.

“Acknowledged,” said Captain Lorrigan.

“*Mister Vapour*,” said Captain Kobayashi deliberately, “if that is indeed your name.” He felt a bead of sweat trickle down the side of his face. “You are not authorised to be here. Your...”

“Not authorised?” interrupted the other voice incredulously. “Not authorised? I am Barth Vapour. I am authorised to go anywhere I damn well please.”

“Whether or not you are Barth Vapour remains to be seen,” said Captain Kobayashi. Suddenly he felt a little more confident of his stance. The voice was undeniably Vapour’s—but there was something missing. The distinctive *hiss-click* of Vapour’s respirator had not sounded once.

“All reports list *him* as dead,” he continued. “*Your* intentions, however, are clearly hostile towards authorised protectors of the Imperium. Leave, or die. The choice is ...” He opened his mouth, closed it again, and threw his hands up to scrabble ineffectively at the invisible iron fist which suddenly gripped his throat.

“I am not known for my patience, Captain,” said the voice of Barth Vapour. “Perhaps now you will accept the truth of my identity?”

Captain Kobayashi tried desperately to speak, but could not get any sound past the constriction which was squeezing the life out of him. He felt the grip tighten, felt the blood pounding in his ears until he thought his head might explode. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the

pressure was gone. The captain fell to his knees on the deck, gasping for breath.

“What’s that, Captain?” said Vapour. “I don’t hear you.”

“Cease fire,” he gasped. Then, louder, “all ships cease fire. Recall the THIGH. I have...” He swallowed carefully. “I have positive identification of Lord Vapour’s identity.”

“That went well,” said Vapour.

The Droid drone studied him for a second. “Did it?” it asked at last.

Vapour turned to stare at the drone. Underneath the biomechanical implants, the pasty white skin, the black pseudo-leather body armour, he recognised a crewmember of the *USSS Ender’s Prize*. This drone had once been the irritating first officer, Billy-Bob Piker. Vapour had never thought Billy-Bob was particularly quick on the uptake, but if there was one certainty about the guy, it was that he recognised sarcasm when he heard it—and had probably dished out more than his fair share over the years. This drone, however, clearly did not understand the concept.

“You call this perfection?” he wondered aloud. “You integrate others into your *Plerd*, but what improvements do you make?”

“We gain knowledge,” said the Droid drone in its toneless voice. “We gain technology. We gain diversity, and we include it in our make-up. We gain...”

“Spare me,” said Vapour, “I’ve seen the brochure. You guys are fooling yourselves.”

“We gain knowledge...” began the Droid.

“And lose the ability to do anything with that knowledge, or even to know what it all means. What good is knowledge if you cannot apply it?”

“We gain technology...”

“To what end? Your ships are already more powerful than anything else out there.” Vapour suspected that the *Devastator* station would increase their power tenfold, but he chose to keep that thought to himself. “You integrate ships that you have conquered. That are, by definition, weaker than your current technology.”

“We gain diversity...”

“And destroy it. You take every colour of the rainbow, and reduce them to the same depressing grey as yourselves.”

“We ... we are Droid. Resistance is futile.” The drone took refuge in the comfort of its mantra. Of course, the individual drone no longer had a personality of its own, and Vapour could have had the same conversation with any of the drones on the ‘hedron with identical results. He was speaking with the hive mind, the collective consciousness of all Droid.

“You are Droid,” said Vapour. “A stagnant force trapped in a dead-end destiny. I can lead you out of your quagmire—but only if you recognise that your way is no longer working. Inform me when the frigates are ready to talk.”

Turning, he strode away.

Vapour, too, wore the black moulded armour of a Droid drone. Back on the *Ender’s Prize*, when his plan to take control of that ship had gone so spectacularly awry, he had been bitten by the hypodermic injector-teeth of a Droid drone. Droid nanobots had flooded into his bloodstream and begun the integration process, rebuilding his body as one more drone. His right arm,

already a mechanical prosthetic, had become fused with his stump in ways he didn't like to think about. The nanobots had grown new biomechanical legs for him, better and stronger than the ones he had lost in a duel with his son, Lurk Splitwhisker. They had constructed the armoured leathery shell around his torso, and they had replaced his right eye with a prosthetic implant which ... well, he could see through it, but he suspected it must have other capabilities which he had not yet discovered.

And then, when all seemed lost, his Minty Chlorines had entered the battle for the few shreds of humanity he still retained. Xenobiotic life forms which inhabited his bloodstream and enhanced his connection with the Source—the code which generated this virtual universe, and many others—they had resisted the Droid nanobots and prevented the final overwriting of his consciousness with the Droid viral code. Gradually they had pushed back, severing the link between the hive mind and Vapour's cerebral cortex. Now both nanobots and Minty Chlorines coexisted in his body in an uneasy balance.

It seemed the Droid held a prophecy:

Integrated yet not,
The individual drone shall lead
To total victory!

Vapour had not been particularly surprised to learn of the existence of the prophecy—although he *did* grant it bonus points for being in haiku form; the Droid were not big on poetry. Prophecies had followed Vapour around for his entire life. He believed that such prophecies were specifically implanted by the machines that generated these virtual realities, this Array, for the sole purpose of providing assistance, in times of need, for their agents.

Barth Vapour, Hard Lord of the Stiff, was one such agent.

When he had passed through the integration process with his personality intact, the Droid hive-mind had invoked the prophecy, and Vapour had found himself their new leader. They had given him the name *Locust of Droid* and put their fate in his hands.

He looked around. He stood in an alcove which looked out upon the shipyard within the Droid ‘hedron, and he realised that, without his conscious cognizance, the Source had led him here. It was a dark, cavernous space occupying much of the interior of the ‘hedron. Along with several alien ships, the recently integrated *ISV Fat Lady* drifted here, turning slowly end-over-end, a ragged gash in her hull. Beyond it, the strangely organic curves of the *USSS Ender’s Prize* hung in the shadows.

Vapour cocked his head in puzzlement. There was something there, on the *Ender’s Prize*, that he needed—but what?

With a thought, he triggered his individual transport beacon, one of the Droid implants. The ‘hedron locked onto his signal with its teleportation system and the vast emptiness of the shipyard shimmered away to be replaced by the interior of the *Ender’s Prize* bridge.

Vapour felt a slight thud as the magnetic clamps built into his boots automatically locked his feet to the deck in the absence of the ship’s artificial gravity field. Automatically, he ran through a mental checklist of his limbs. While he appreciated the possibilities inherent in the teleportation technology—something the Imperium had never managed to push beyond the point of nebulous theory—he was not entirely comfortable with having his constituent atoms torn apart and reassembled.

He looked around, but the room was deserted. All the crew who had been integrated into the Droid collective had been allocated to work details aboard the 'hedron, or placed in storage. The ship's life support systems had been deactivated along with everything else, and the air was musty here, with a chill which spiked at the exposed skin of his face. Only the dim glow of emergency lighting pierced the gloom.

"Why am I here?" he asked himself, his voice sounding flat in his ears.

Then he saw it, drifting in the air a few inches from the floor where it had fallen during that final battle. Small, furry, hot pink—it was Boadicea, his teddewok. It had been a gift from one of the Emperor's many offspring. Somehow, when he had been thrown across the boundary between realities, the teddewok had followed him. Now it floated amidst the debris which drifted throughout the still air of the bridge. A grimy blue ribbon around its chest obscured the "STIFF HAPPENS" logo on its black T-shirt.

Stooping, he picked it up and tenderly brushed away the worst of the dust and grime with his hand.

What is wrong with this picture? he mused. *I am a Hard Lord of the Stiff, a ruthless killer, a tyrant—and here I am, rescuing a stuffed toy. Why?*

Vapour had no answer for his own question, and Boadicea volunteered nothing. He sighed. Clutching the teddewok protectively to his chest, he looked around the bridge one final time. Nothing else here was of interest to him.

"Time to get you a change of clothes," he said to the teddewok. He shimmered and sparkled, and vanished from the deserted bridge.

* * *

“What do you think, Hiroto?” asked Stacy Lorrigan.

“It’s definitely him,” said Hiroto. He rubbed his throat lightly. “No doubt he’s here for the *Devastator*, him and his new friends, and I don’t think we can stop him.” He shrugged into the holographic imager.

The miniature projection of Stacy nodded thoughtfully. “Three of my cannons ran dry,” she said, “and we barely scratched that ship of his. I’ve never seen an energy field that could take a pounding like that. And those voices...” She shuddered.

“The Droid?” Hiroto shook his head. “I can’t find any mention of them in the Imperial database. If you ask me, I think Vapour really *did* die at the Battle of Yawn, and he’s brought his new friends back from the deepest depths of all the hells.”

“Cheery thought,” said Stacy. “So, what do we do against a Stiff Lord and an army of hellspawn in an indestructible ship?”

“I don’t know,” said Hiroto. “I really don’t know.”

Chapter 3

Splitwhisker and the Butt

CLOUDS of bruised, purple sand billowed into the air as the ungainly freighter descended from the mauve sky on twin jets of flame. The deep roar of the VTOL engines drowned out all other sound—although, truth be told, out here in the deep desert there were few creatures capable of hearing the disturbance.

Few creatures on the barren surface, anyway.

The landing pads kissed the ground at the base of a depression between two dunes, and sank heavily into the powdery sand as the ship's weight settled onto them. The engines coughed and died, and the roar was replaced by a descending whine as the turbines slowed and stopped. Now, only the tick of cooling metal and the soft hiss of falling sand pushed back the silence.

A curious lizard, disturbed by the commotion, eyed the huge metallic newcomer. It seemed harmless enough. After a minute or so, the lizard blinked and turned its head, bringing its other eye to bear. A sudden loud click startled the reptile, and it scampered away across the sand as the freighter's loading ramp hissed slowly open.

Lurk Splitwhisker emerged from the shadowy cargo bay and strode down the ramp. His tousled blond hair—on any planet other than this one, it would have been described as sandy—fell around his shoulders, stirring

fitfully in the early morning breeze. He was dressed entirely in brown, from his long-sleeved cotton shirt to his heavy trousers, from the broad elastic straps of his braces to his soft leather boots. Even the utility belt slung around his waist was dark brown. Bouncing against his thigh as he walked, only the cylindrical silver tube holstered on his hip broke the sombre effect.

Like his sister, he wore Mal's clothing.

Lurk stopped at the end of the ramp, and gazed out at the shallow bowl of sand in which the *Serendipity Sparrow* sat. He lifted his hand and idly rubbed the nape of his neck.

"What are you thinking?"

Lurk blinked, and turned. Libby stood at the top of the ramp, looking beautiful despite the baggy clothes she wore. Only the front of her shirt was stretched taut; the top couple of buttons were unfastened, and there was no hiding the fact that her breasts were bare beneath the flimsy fabric. Even with the coolth of the *Sparrow's* regulated atmosphere at her back, her forehead and the pale, smooth skin between her breasts gleamed with the sheen of perspiration. Her long hair was bound into a loose, untidy bun at the back of her head, but the few loose strands which had escaped were plastered against the damp skin of her slender neck.

"Hmmm?" said Lurk. He swallowed as he tore his eyes away from her shirt, away from the fabric which strained in ways he did not want to think about.

"I asked what you were thinking," she said. She moved to stand beside him at the end of the ramp.

He shook his head minutely, then stepped forward, planting the thick sole of first one boot, then the other, into the soft purple sand. Dropping into a squat, he reached out with his left hand and pushed his fingers into

the sand. It had not yet been touched by the rays of the morning suns, but already it was warm. It felt fine and soft and dry against his skin as he scooped some up. Slowly he opened his hand, and watched as the purple grains ran between his fingers.

“Three months ago,” he said to her at last, “I was nothing more than a moisture farmer, high on dreams but low on prospects. Three months ago, despite my dreams, I thought I would never leave this planet.” He blew gently on his hand, and the last few grains of sand puffed away. “One month ago, I thought I would die without ever seeing the place again. Yet here we are. Ratatouille.”

He stood up.

“How does it feel to come home again?” asked Libby.

Lurk shook his head. “There’s nothing here for me now,” he said. “With my aunt and uncle...” His voice caught in his throat, and he blinked. “The *Sparrow* is more my home than this planet. The sooner we’re out of here, the better.”

Mrawrrawwr, yowled a non-human voice from behind the couple. Shaggus stood at the top of the ramp, peering out into the morning light. He cocked his head at the two humans, shrugged his large shoulders, then stepped down off the side of the ramp and trudged through the sand to examine the damaged landing strut.

Lurk watched the Woonky for a few seconds, then turned back to Libby. “I’d better be going,” he said. “Try to keep Shaggus out of trouble.”

They grinned at each other. “If *you* run into trouble...” Libby said softly.

“Activate the beacon,” said Lurk. “Yeah, I won’t forget.”

“We’ll be waiting,” said Libby.

Lurk shrugged. “See you at the rendezvous point,” he said. He raised his hand as though to touch her arm, then hesitated.

Ignoring the awkwardness between them, Libby stepped close and drew him into a hug. “Don’t be late,” she whispered against his cheek. Lurk pressed his hands against her back, and then they released each other.

“I’ll be there,” said Lurk. He blinked. “We’ll be there.” He turned away, glanced briefly at the sky to orient himself, and trudged away into the sand.

Flabby the Butt was the Queen of Crime on Ratatouille, and the location of her palace fortress was a secret known to just about everybody in the region. The facade of Flabby’s palace was an enormous construction of stone and mud and steel; certainly no attempt had been made to hide it from notice. Behind the facade reared the mountain of granite into which the palace had been cut. It had an official name on the charts, but everybody referred to it as Mount Butt.

Lurk Splitwhisker stopped as he entered the shade, and gazed up at the imposing edifice. The hike up from the markets of Angkor Het, where he had exchanged his off-worlder garb for the battered old desert survival coolsuit he now wore, had left him panting heavily, and he paused for a sip of warm water from a nozzle built into the suit. Rather than carrying an additional water supply, the suit actively collected and purified the wearer’s own perspiration, and Lurk grimaced as he swallowed. The water wasn’t as pure as he would have liked. He could only hope it was his own sweat he was drinking, and not that of the suit’s previous owner.

Standing in the shade of Flabby’s palace, Lurk turned and looked back towards the city of Moss Iceberg. It was

not actually visible from here, being hidden behind a row of foothills to the south. He could see a faint pall of dust, though, a dirty purple shroud hanging in the air over the city, thrown up by traffic. Gradually his breathing slowed.

Reaching up as though to scratch his ear, Lurk double-tapped the miniature communicator nestled within. "I'm going in," he muttered.

"Confirmed," came the reply; Libby's voice, but rendered so tinny by the earpiece as to be almost unrecognisable.

He turned back to the massive steel gate which protected the entrance to the palace. It was perhaps ten metres high, and fifteen metres wide, nestled within a thick stone arch. Sprayed across the bottom in black paint, in the very centre of the gate, was a splash of graffiti, its decorative cursive script let down somewhat by its atrocious spelling:

Flaby The But Eats Visitors.

Lurk lifted the silver hilt of his light rapier from its holster on his hip, and turned it over. Raising it, he rapped heavily against the massive gate. It made a dull metallic clunk. He pounded three more times, then dropped the weapon back into its holster.

He waited patiently for a full minute. Nothing happened to suggest that anybody had heard him.

Finally he took a couple of steps back and peered around at the gate. The sheet of metal was vast and featureless. *Now what?*

"Hello," he called. "Hello the castle. Is anybody there?" His voice rolled distantly back at him from the foothills, but there was no response.

“I wonder if there’s a back door,” he muttered.

Taking a deep breath, Lurk closed his eyes and reached out for the green hiss that was the Source. He examined the door with his mind. It was impossibly heavy, of course, but he told himself that its size did not matter. In the Source, all objects were created equal. He tried to remember something wise and relevant that his Jubbly Master, Yodel, had told him—but nothing came to mind. *That will have to do*, he told himself. *In the Source, all objects are equal.*

He slowly raised his arms out to his sides, then swung them round until his fists met in front of him. He opened his hands, turned them over, and with a sigh of effort he made a lifting motion. His hands trembled at the effort, and after a while the tendons began to stand out on his neck. Slowly, slowly, he saw the massive door began to rise until there was enough room for him to walk beneath it. With a smile, he let out his breath and opened his eyes.

The smile slipped. The door had not budged an inch. Some objects, apparently, were more equal than others.

“So much for the mystical shit,” he said aloud.

“What are you doing?” asked a voice.

Lurk spun around, drawing and activating his light rapier in one smooth motion. The humming blade came to rest several inches from the large knobby throat of a lanky young man. The man swallowed carefully and took a step back.

“Who are you?” asked Lurk. “What are you doing here?”

“Uh, I asked first,” said the lad defiantly.

“So you did,” said Lurk, “but I’m the one with the weapon.”

“Well, yeah,” said the kid, “but I have these.” He shook the three flat, square boxes that were clutched in his hands.

Lurk’s eyes flickered down, then up, then wandered down again. After a moment he deactivated his light rapier and returned it to his hip.

“You’re delivering pizzas?” he asked incredulously.

“Yeah,” said the kid defensively. He nodded back towards a speeder which hovered a few metres away—Lurk had never even heard it arrive, so focussed had he been on the Source. Painted along the side of the speeder were the words *Pizza The Hutt* in large friendly letters.

“So what are you doing? What was all that...” He bounced the pizza boxes a few more times, which was the closest he could come to imitating Lurk’s movements. “Some sort of exercise or something? Like, uh, THIGH Chee?”

Lurk frowned. “What do you know of the THIGH?”

“I know they invented THIGH Chee,” he said. “It’s the latest craze; I’ve seen the vids, same as everybody.”

“Vids?”

“Yeah,” said the kid. “Y’know, all that exercise. Waving your arms in the air and, uh, whatever.” He frowned at Lurk’s blank expression. “Damn, man, you been living in a cave on another planet for the last three months?”

“More or less,” said Lurk.

“Oh,” said the kid. He blinked. “So, uh, what *are* you doing?”

“Actually,” said Lurk, “I have business with, uh, someone inside. I’m trying to get in.”

“So ring the bell,” said the kid.

“What bell?”

“They didn’t tell you about the bell?” asked the kid with a knowing smirk. “You must be here to see ol’ Bibble Glorus? He’s so forgetful he’ll just forget to keep breathing one day, and keel over.” He chuckled. Lurk took refuge in the approved response to such babble: he smiled and nodded.

“Watch and learn,” said the kid. He wandered over to the side of the door. With his elbow he nudged a stone-coloured panel in the archway beside the metal of the door. It popped open, and he nudged the button within with his elbow.

From somewhere behind the door, Lurk heard a faint *ding dong* chime. He wandered over to stand beside the young pizza delivery boy.

“Yeah, whaddaya want?” asked a voice.

“Pizza delivery,” said the boy. “And hurry it up, these things ain’t getting any warmer!”

“Patience is a virtue,” muttered the voice darkly. “I’ll be right there.” There was a click as the comm went silent.

“Tell you what,” said Lurk, “how about you let *me* take those in for you.”

“And why should I do that?” asked the kid.

“Twenty credits,” said Lurk.

“Twenty credits?” asked the boy. “Twenty credits? Do I look like the sort of person who would shirk his duties for the chance of some cash? Do I look like the sort of person who would let *any* stranger deliver my pizzas? I cannot be bought! I have my integrity!”

“Okay, fifty credits,” said Lurk.

“Done,” said the kid. “Put the cash on the top of the box here, then take the pile.”

Lurk fished around inside his robe, and produced several narrow flexiplas notes—Galactic Credits, legal tender on most worlds.

“Oh,” he said.

“Changed your mind?” asked the kid. “You’ll have to hurry, the guard will be here any second.”

“I’ve only got twenties,” said Lurk.

“Since you’re a friend now,” said the kid, “I’ll force myself to take sixty instead.”

Lurk sighed. He counted out three twenty-credit notes and placed them atop the pizza boxes, then carefully took the boxes from the kid. They were hot against his hands.

“Thanks,” said the delivery boy as he collected the cash from the top of the box.

There was a click, and Lurk turned to face the gate. A small, man-sized panel—undetectable until now, slid inwards and then upwards. A burly figure appeared in the doorway—it was a Sodommean; fat, pig-like, and ugly. “Hand ‘em over,” said the guard past a mouthful of tusks, holding out its clawed hands.

“I have to deliver these personally,” said Lurk.

“That’d be a first,” said the guard. “You know we never let you past the gate.”

“But I was told...” began Lurk. He half-turned, but the kid had scarpered; the speeder’s dust trail was rapidly receding down the winding roadway.

“Aren’t you the usual guy?” asked the guard. He leaned closer and squinted. His fetid breath washed over Lurk, and the Jubbly had to spend a moment in meditation, reminding himself that the stench did not really exist inside the Array.

“Do I look like the usual guy?” he asked, once he felt able to breathe again.

“How would I know?” snorted the guard. “All you humans look alike to me. Now hand over the pizza and get lost.”

Lurk sighed. “I don’t have time for this,” he muttered.

“What?” said the guard suspiciously.

“You *will* let me in,” said the Jubbly. He traced a circle with his finger against the underside of the warm pizza box.

“I will let you in,” agreed the guard as his eyes glazed over. He took several steps back until he stood clear of the doorway, and Lurk followed him into the cool, dark interior of Flabby’s palace.

“I must deliver this pizza to Flabby the Butt.”

“You must deliver to Flabby,” said the guard.

“Move along,” said Lurk.

“Move along,” echoed the Sodommean. “Move along.”

Lurk glanced around as his eyes adjusted to the gloom. The high, arched ceiling stretched away, curving into the solid granite of the mountain. Flickering torches and braziers here and there provided enough illumination to enable navigation without bumping into things, but Lurk wouldn’t want to try to read in this light.

The Sodommean guard wandered off with a bemused expression on his face, one pudgy hand rubbing his furrowed brow.

Carrying the pizza boxes, Lurk strode down the massive corridor. There was a soft metallic clunk, and the last light from outside was gone as the door closed behind him. He followed the curve of the corridor, and once he felt he had gone far enough to be out of sight of the guard, he dropped to his haunches and placed the pizza boxes on the ground, against the wall.

He stood to leave, then changed his mind and crouched again. He opened the top box—*mmm, pepperoni!*—and helped himself to a slice.

Lurk heard music ahead. Wiping his greasy fingers on his robe, he ducked through a low archway in the side wall of the corridor and followed the sound. At the bottom of a short flight of steps, the narrow passage opened out into what seemed to be a large audience chamber. Lurk paused in the shadows to get his bearings.

The room was packed. More alien species than Lurk had ever seen before in one place all stood around, talking and drinking. Several of them were waving limbs or tentacles in time to the upbeat dance tune which was being pumped out by a small band on a raised platform in one corner. A spindly alien, all belly and lips, was crooning into a microphone, but Lurk could not understand the language of the song.

In the centre of the chamber, a large rectangular dais supported the pulsating bulk of a giant, slug-like creature. Its dark, leathery skin throbbed and rippled as it leaned to one side to pluck a writhing amphibian from a cauldron of murky fluid. Without hesitation, the creature tossed the squirming frog into its wide, cavernous mouth. The jaw closed, and a muffled squeal became a muffled crunch as the vile creature chewed and swallowed. Several other beings in the crowd laughed at the fate of the unfortunate frog.

Lurk frowned. This must be Flabby the Butt.

An exotic dancer whirled and writhed in a clear section of floor in front of the dais. She was not human—the blue skin and the tentacles which grew from the top of her head and curled restlessly around her neck and bare shoulders gave that away—but she was close

enough that Lurk felt his body react to the sight of her near-naked body gyrating seductively. Reluctantly he looked away from her performance and continued scanning the room.

Several Sodommean guards stood around the room. A couple appeared alert, but most of them were watching the show.

The dull gleam of metal caught his eye, and Lurk peered across the room. In the shadows, almost directly opposite him, stood an armoured figure. At first glance, one might mistake him for an Imperial Shock Trooper, but the helmet was different, and the battered, dented old armour was the wrong colour.

Lurk suddenly felt as though he had been here before, and after a moment he realised that Flabby's throne room looked almost as it had in his dream.

"*Dorota sha nanko!*" said a voice, and Lurk turned. A tall alien loomed over him. "You should not be here," it added. Like the dancer, this alien had tentacles sprouting from the top of his head, but where her skin was a pastel blue, his was a pasty white.

"I am here to see Flabby," said Lurk.

"Flabby does not wish to see you," said the towering alien. "You should leave."

"I have a gift for her," said Lurk.

The alien's eyes sparkled, his greed transparent. "Give it to me," he said, holding out a long-fingered hand, "and I shall give it to Flabby myself."

Ignoring the growing sense of *deja vu*, Lurk sighed. Why was nothing ever easy? He gestured minutely. "You will take me to Flabby now," he said.

The alien considered this for a second or two, then nodded. Its tentacles writhed, and their ends twitched

back and forth angrily. "I will take you to Flabby now," he echoed.

"You serve your mistress well," muttered Lurk as he followed the tall alien down the last few steps into the chamber.

"Yes," agreed the alien. "I service my mistress well."

Lurk raised an eyebrow. *Not quite what I meant*, he thought, but he decided it was best to leave it at that. Some images were best left unclarified.

Reaching up to his left ear, he double-tapped the communicator. "We're on, Seepy," he muttered. "Are you with me?"

"I am at your service, Master Lurk," came the voice of Seepy Weepy, tinny but still supercilious.

The tall alien pushed his way through the crowd, and Lurk followed. He stopped at the edge of the dance floor, and suddenly found himself the centre of attention. At the sight of him, the dancer uttered a small squeal of surprise, and raced back to sit on the edge of the dais. Lurk now saw that she wore a metal collar around her slender neck, and attached to the collar was a chain which led back to an iron ring, close to where she sat.

The band fell silent.

The quivering slug that was Flabby the Butt opened its eyes wide at this interruption, then narrowed them as the tall alien ascended the dais and leaned to whisper in his boss's ear—or to the side of her head, anyway, since nothing resembling an external ear was visible.

"*Bo vistro, mahta Flabby*," said the alien softly.

"*Doshe na kwehdron*," roared the giant slug, obviously angry. "*Geddu noshtra*."

"Oh dear," muttered Seepy's tinny voice in Lurk's ear. "It seems that Flabby does not wish to speak with you!"

“You must leave,” said the tall alien, turning towards Lurk.

“I must speak to Flabby now,” said Lurk, giving the alien’s mind a gentle nudge with the Source.

“He must speak to you now, *mahta Flabby*,” said the alien to Flabby.

“*Doodoo*,” roared the Queen of Crime, “*Gewonga wonga Jubbly minetrik*.” She swung her pudgy arm and pounded her unfortunate aide in the chest. He staggered backwards.

“I think she’s on to you, Master Lurk,” whispered Seepy.

“Indeed,” muttered Lurk. He took a deep breath. “I seek an audience, oh Mighty Flabby,” he said, addressing himself directly to the Butt.

The Butt gestured, and a battered old protocol ‘bot that had definitely seen better days stepped forward out of the shadows to stand at Flabby’s side. It looked similar to Seepy Weepy, except that its mouth was a prim little slot beneath the triangle of its nose.

“*Na doonga me wonga*,” said the slug creature. “*Saggu!*”

“You’re here now,” said Seepy, translating the Crime Queen’s words. “Speak.”

“The mighty Flabby,” began the protocol ‘bot on the dais, “bids you welcome, and permits you to state your case. Please rescue me.”

Lurk blinked in surprise at Flabby’s translation ‘bot. “Oh, I say,” chirped Seepy excitedly, “is that another CP-series bot? How wonderful. I do hope I get to...”

Lurk tapped his finger several times urgently against his ear-piece, and Seepy subsided. “I’m sorry, Master Lurk,” he said, “but it’s just that I rarely get to speak to another ‘bot and...”

An angry trill of beeps and whistles interrupted the 'bot.

"Oh, I didn't forget you, Arty," said Seepy hastily. "I just meant that..."

Lurk tapped his ear-piece again. "Uh, I, uh, I seek to free Captain Single," he said at last, trying to stay focussed on his own conversation.

The 'bot whispered a translation in Buttese to its mistress. Flabby the Butt began to laugh. The sound boiled up from deep within the creature's rippling mounds of fat, and rung out deeply through the chamber. As the laughter echoed, the other occupants of the room began to join in, until the room was filled with a cacophonous din.

"It wasn't that funny," said Lurk quietly. He waited. Finally, the laughter died away.

"*Neeto ma sunga?*" asked Flabby. With a wave of her flabby arm, the Butt indicated the room around him.

"You and whose army?" translated Seepy. His argument with Arty Farty seemed to be over.

"The mighty Flabby wonders how you intend to do this. Please take me with you. I've been here forever." The protocol 'bot did not seem happy.

Lurk did not need to look around to know that all the guards had their weapons drawn. After a moment, though, he felt a slight frisson of warning ripple up his spine, and he turned towards the armoured figure he had noticed earlier.

An extremely large gun-barrel was aimed casually at Lurk.

"I wish to purchase Captain Single from you," said Lurk carefully, "I know your anger with him must be powerful, Mighty Flabby, but perhaps..."

The protocol ‘bot began to translate for its mistress. Before it had finished, Flabby snorted. “*Me wonga Kaptin Single noody thong!*” The creature gestured to one side.

“I like Captain Single where he is,” said Seepy Weepy. Lurk turned his head to peer into the darkness towards which the Butt pointed.

“He likes your friend where he is,” added the translation ‘bot. “Please. I was abandoned here and nobody came for me. You have to...”

“*Ma chu!*” said Flabby, a little more loudly, “*Me wonga Kaptin Single noody thong!*”

“Am I missing something?” asked Lurk. “Because I’m not sure what I’m looking at.”

“*Laitu!*” roared Flabby angrily.

“Lights!” translated Seepy.

“I’ll do all your cooking,” added Flabby’s protocol ‘bot, taking the opportunity to make another plea for rescue. Lurk ignored it.

A couple of spotlights flickered on, revealing an alcove in the wall of the room. Suspended in the alcove was a dull grey slab, metallic yet not. Carved into the slab was a face distorted by pain, and a pair of hands which appeared to be reaching for freedom. It was a disturbingly lifelike statue, giving the impression of somebody actually encased in the dark material, trying eternally to escape.

“Oh my!” gasped the resident protocol ‘bot, sounding almost exactly like Seepy. “Why didn’t they come? Why didn’t...”

“Is this supposed to mean something to me?” asked Lurk quietly. The slab looked disturbingly familiar—it gave him a sense of derailed *deja vu*—but the person trapped inside was not Mal.

Flabby roared, a voiceless cry of anger. She closed her eyes. "*Wanga sarvuta me nocha trond*," she muttered after a few seconds.

"Good help is so hard to find," translated Seepy. The other 'bot wisely opted to stay silent.

"*Kaptin Single*," said Flabby. "*Narchoo massu no solo wonga. Doosha tonga shey! Marta ma-jonga longa solo no Single. Me wonga Kaptin Single noody thong!*" Her voice grew steadily louder as she ranted.

"It appears," said Seepy after a momentary pause, "that there has been some sort of mixup!"

As Seepy Weepy spoke, the first alcove went dark and more lights flickered into life beside it. Inside the second alcove was a stasis chamber; inside the chamber, frozen in a pocket of timeless space, was the unconscious figure of Mal Single.

"*Me wonga Kaptin Single*," said the Butt in a voice that was probably as close to petulance as a large slug could achieve.

"Oh," said Lurk. He turned back towards the Butt. "Finally. Nevertheless, I *am* taking Captain Single with me." He gestured minutely.

"*Magga na ponga doo Jubbly minetrik*," said Flabby menacingly. "*Poodoo na Jubbly madonga Single hoodoo guru*."

"I know where the gold mines of Eld'rado can be found," blurted the protocol 'bot in a voice of prim desperation, all pretense of translating its mistress' words now abandoned. "I'll take you there, if you'll rescue me!"

"Quite!" sniffed Seepy in Lurk's ear. "The cheek of some 'bots! I believe that the Butt is immune to your powers of Jubbly persuasion, Master Lurk. She said something about your joining Master Single in oblivion."

The Butt was laughing, and her court had dutifully joined the merriment. Lurk ignored both the noise of the crowd and the competing voices of the two 'bots. His mind raced. He had reached out with the Source to nudge the mind of the Queen of Crime, and had found something unusual. Carefully, he reached out again, and recoiled again. Something was wrong here. Something was very wrong. Stretching out his consciousness, he allowed his mind to expand, to rifle gently across the surface thoughts and emotions on display in this room full of cronies and criminals.

He nodded as understanding dawned.

Turning his back on the laughing Butt, he spoke loudly into the crowd. "Speak to me," he said, "or I tell everyone here your secret."

The laughter died away. "*Natta ma schooda?*" asked the Butt loudly. "*Barooda ma kookoo ne sata rong!*"

"I know your secret," Lurk said again, without waiting for a translation. "And there aren't many in this room who do."

The slug laughed again. "*Moota ra poota?*" it snorted as it slapped a pudgy hand against a large button built into the pedestal which supported the bowl of snack-frogs. The floor on which Lurk was standing suddenly dropped away, throwing the young Jubbly Patabum off balance and tipping him unceremoniously into a smooth, rock-lined chute.

"Oh dear," said the golden protocol 'bot from its place beside the Butt. "Look out, you're standing on..." Its prim voice faded to silence, the warning far too late.

The chamber filled with howls of glee and merriment as the trapdoor snapped closed again, and many of the creatures present rushed forward to listen at the vent holes. A deep, hungry roar echoed up from below, and

the audience cheered. Another roar sounded, and then a scream of terror. The scream became a moan, and the moan was cut off abruptly. Wet, crunching sounds bubbled up from below, and the crowd applauded.

"I really must remember to warn the next visitor about that a little sooner," muttered the protocol 'bot as it wandered back into the shadows from whence it had come.

Flabby the Butt laughed loud and long.

"And finally," said the woman in the severe black uniform of Imperial Intelligence, "there's the small matter of the 17 units in Cargo Bay three. It's time they started earning their keep again. See to it, Admiral."

Captain Vladimir Pyotrovich shifted his eyes minutely towards his commanding officer; only the tensing of the muscles above his jawbone betrayed the Admiral's emotions.

"As you command," Admiral Muzzel said softly.

Captain Pyotrovich glanced back towards the woman, careful to avoid making eye contact. The smile that plucked at her lips was a cruel one, more through habit than in any particular response to the Admiral's words. Her face was not unattractive, but Pyotrovich felt not the slightest twinge of desire towards her. Such feelings could be extremely dangerous where Imperial Intelligence was concerned.

He flickered his gaze to Captain Gold who sat across from him, then glanced down once more at the drinks pitcher in the centre of the small conference table around which they sat.

The woman stood, followed by her black-clad adjutant.

“Admiral,” she said, “gentlemen. Until next week.” She nodded brusquely.

Only the Admiral met her gaze. “We look forward to it,” he said without a trace of insincerity in his voice.

She strode from the room, only to hesitate in the doorway. “At our next meeting,” she said over her shoulder, “I shall be presenting our findings into the death of Muff Farquhar.”

“Such a tragic loss,” said Admiral Muzzel, and Pyotrovich had to clamp his teeth down hard on his tongue to hold back the sudden giggle which threatened to bubble up and condemn him. “I’m sure,” the Admiral continued, “that your investigations have been ... thorough.”

“No stone left unturned, Admiral,” she said. She stepped through the doorway and turned to the right. As the door hissed closed behind her adjutant, both Imperial captains sagged in their seats as though they had been holding their breaths.

Pyotrovich swallowed, and tasted the coppery tang of blood; he had bitten his tongue a little too hard. Leaning forward in his seat, he picked up the pitcher of cold water—untouched until now—and poured himself a glass.

He turned towards the Admiral, but Muzzel was still staring at the door.

“Uh, sir...?”

Muzzel blinked. “Something to add, Captain Gold?” he asked.

“Uh, I didn’t want to bring it up with, uh, earlier,” said Gold, “but what do you want to do about the Ratatouille situation? It has been a day since we confirmed...”

Admiral Muzzel smiled. "I appreciate your concern, Captain, but the matter is under control."

"Uh, yes sir," said Gold. He lowered his gaze uncertainly.

Admiral Muzzel glanced back towards the door, as though to confirm that the Imperial Intelligence officer had truly left, then turned back to Captain Gold.

"It's okay, Captain," he said softly. "Unlike some officers in this fleet, I welcome the occasional question from my captains."

"Yes sir," said Captain Gold.

"To answer yours," the Admiral continued, "for the same reasons that I suspected the Rebels would flee to Ratatouille, I do not believe they will be staying there long. However, since I am not always correct," and here he allowed himself the barest hint of a smile, "I have already sent a team to Ratatouille to investigate. If there is a Rebel base there, I'm sure they'll find it."

"I see, sir," said Captain Gold. "Thankyou, sir."

"You'll find I value patience," said the Admiral, "when it is warranted."

Unlike some officers in this fleet, thought Pyotrovich, and he sipped at his drink to hide a smile.

"Now, Captain Gold," continued the Admiral, "I wonder if you would mind doing me a favour?"

"Sir?"

"I know you are now off duty," he said, "but would you mind heading down to Cargo Bay three for me? I need somebody I can trust to organise the awakening of our guests there."

"Um, me, sir? Of course, sir, I'd be, uh, happy to handle that for you." Captain Gold stood and turned towards the door.

"Captain?"

“Sir?”

“Dismissed, Captain,” said the Admiral, an amused smile touching his lips.

“Oh, yes sir. Sorry sir. Thankyou sir.”

Admiral Muzzel leaned back in his chair as the door hissed closed behind Captain Gold.

“What do you think of him, Pyotrovich?” he asked.

“Gold? He’s a good man.” Pyotrovich shrugged, then smiled. “A little unused to dealing with senior officers, perhaps, but then, three years pulling shit duty on some patrol Frigate will do that for you.”

“You don’t think he’s Intelligence?”

Pyotrovich frowned in thought. “It’s possible, I guess,” he said at last, “but I don’t think he is. He transferred here before, uh, before Tibrogar, so unless we, uh, unless this ship was already the subject of an investigation...”

“Okay,” said the Admiral. He nodded. “Well, Captain, we have a ship to run.”

As they stood, Pyotrovich glanced again at the Admiral.

“Sir,” he said, “this team we sent to Ratatouille?”

“What about them?”

“It’s just ... wasn’t there a general order from Intelligence, insisting all crewmembers of the *Bermuda* remain at their posts pending the investigation?”

“There was,” said the Admiral.

“Then who...?”

“As it happened, there was an error in the paperwork. According to records, they are still assigned to *IPD Isosceles*.”

“But the *Isosceles* was ... oh, I see.” Pyotrovich grinned briefly as the elegance of the Admiral’s solution clicked into place in his head. The only team that could

be sent from the ship and not be missed just happened to be the same team which could, if questioned, point an incriminating finger.

To investigate Ratatouille, the old man had sent Team Badger.

Chapter 4

Rise of the Devastator

Captain Kobayashi Hiroto stood stiffly erect, hands linked behind his back. He was staring out the plasteel window of his private cabin.

The huge hulking nightmare that had once been the *Imperial Devastator Station* blotted out the shimmering starfield. It was close to completion, almost three years ahead of schedule, but its smooth, straight lines had been modified almost beyond recognition. All Imperial work crews had been pulled back to the Research station, and their *visitors* had taken over. The Droid drones and their nanobots were a tireless, unstoppable workforce, but they had incorporated their own design elements into the Imperial super-weapon. Bio-mechanical ridges curled around the cylindrical hull, and that sickly green light pulsed along its length. Taking their philosophy of integration to its ultimate conclusion, they had attached their own dodecahedral vessel to the drive end of the station, at the rim of the cylinder, and were rapidly constructing a second ‘hedron beside the first.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Captain Kobayashi murmured.

“What was that, Hiroto?”

Hiroto turned. Captain Stacy Lorrigan lounged casually in one of the four chairs gathered around the

small table. Her auburn hair, streaked with the first hints of grey, was drawn back tightly into a severe bun. Hiroto knew that when she smiled, her face lit up and her pale blue eyes twinkled. She was not smiling now; rather, her mouth was compressed into a frown, and her eyes bored into him.

He shook his head. “Nothing worth repeating,” he told her. With three paces he crossed the small room, and slipped into the chair opposite his fellow Captain.

“Do you think the messengers got through?” she asked. They had sent two THIGH Fighters from each Frigate with orders to join routine patrol flights, then slip away and navigate the corridor out of the Bramble Patch. Any that got through were to make contact with the first Imperial ship within range, and report the situation to the highest-ranking officer they could find, and ultimately to the Emperor himself.

Even at their maximum sub-light speed, the THIGH fighters—amongst the fastest ships in the galaxy—would take slightly more than five days to traverse the real-space corridor. They had left barely three days ago.

“I don’t know,” said Hiroto. “I hope so, but...”

“But we can’t count on it,” said Stacy.

“No,” said Hiroto. “We have to proceed as though we are on our own.” There had been no indication that the Droid had intercepted their messengers, but neither of them could believe that the aliens—or, indeed, Vapour himself—had any intention of allowing word of their presence to get out.

“Proceed how?” asked Stacy. “These Droid had us outgunned the moment they arrived, and they only increase their power with every passing hour.”

“I think we must carry on as we have,” said Hiroto. “Play along, and hope we get a chance to act before they decide they no longer need us.”

Stacy stood, and stretched. She had a good ten years on Hiroto, but her movements were still fluid, feline. He let his gaze drift up her body, taking in her narrow waist, and the swell of her breasts beneath the fabric of her uniform. The lines on her face were a little deeper, more permanently etched, than when he had first met her, but she still looked good.

Her face wore the faintest hint of a smile now, and amusement danced in her eyes. “Like what you see, Hiroto?” she asked.

He smiled. “You always did know what I was thinking, Stacy,” he said without embarrassment. They had been lovers once, briefly, and although the physical aspect of their relationship had long since ceased, their friendship had persisted.

“Only because you’re so transparent,” she told him.

“Only to you,” he replied.

She shook her head. “Still as deluded as ever,” she said. “But this is getting us nowhere. Back to business, fly-boy!”

“Yes, Captain,” he said.

She turned away and paced over to the window. After a moment he stood and moved to stand beside her. Together they stared out at the modified *Devastator* station.

“Where do you suppose they are getting the raw material from?” asked Stacy after a couple of minutes.

One of the largest delays in the construction of the station had been the difficulty of sourcing the plasteel, titanium, ceramics, and other materials required in its assembly. While the whole thing could have been built

in three months by redirecting the output of several major foundries on Coruscate Primus, the Imperial capital planet, it would have been impossible to do so without the news that the Imperium was building something huge spreading like wildfire throughout the core systems.

Hiroto shook his head. "I have no idea," he said.

"Is it just me," asked Stacy, "or does that thing look like a giant penis?"

"Somebody is over-compensating," he said. "Whoever put *those* design features together obviously has major issues."

Stacy nodded. "I have a bad feeling about this," she murmured.

Barth Vapour, Hard Lord of the Stiff, gazed out upon the *Devastator* station, and smiled.

"Now *that* is a weapon befitting a Stiff," he said.

Barth Vapour had taken quarters aboard the Imperial research station. The expansive suite he now occupied had once belonged to the Research Director, but the senior administrator had vacated the rooms with a minimum of grumbling once Vapour had made his decision known. The Stiff Lord now stood on the suite's private observation deck, with the lights extinguished. Sheathed in the black Droid body-armour he was almost invisible in the darkness. The only light was the dim, green glow from the Droid-enhanced super-weapon, and it lent a sickly pallor to his pale face.

"What do you think?" he asked. He lifted his hand, and turned it toward the window. Clutched in his black-gloved fingers, the hot pink plush teddewok, Boadicea, reflected the green glow from her polished black eyes.

She made no reply to the Stiff Lord's question.

Slowly he turned her to face him. With a thought, an electrical pulse that passed directly from neuron to integrated circuitry, he switched his prosthetic ocular implant to full light enhancement mode, and the teddewok glowed an artificial green. Briefly, Vapour wondered how many different ways there were of seeing in green. The light amplification mode of his implant looked different from the green, flickering code he would see if he reached out to the ever-present Source. Both were different from the glow of Droid technology. All three differed from the healthy green colour of living plants, such as the small pot plants which the previous occupant of this suite had tended. And yet all were green.

Perhaps it is an artefact of this particular virtual reality, he mused. Perhaps its author preferred the colour—or simply lacked sufficient imagination to come up with another colour to use.

“What do you think?” he asked the teddewok again. Boadicea remained mute. Her eyes seemed to stare into his soul, as though taunting him with some secret knowledge, some vital insight which he had overlooked.

“What are you looking at?” he sneered. Silence.

The teddewok now wore a change of clothes. The “USSS Ender’s Prize” sash and the “STIFF HAPPENS” shirt had been replaced by a new black shirt bearing a simple symbol: an open loop representing resistance, enclosed in a circle with a diagonal line across the middle. Vapour preferred to read the symbol as “Resistance is Futile”, and he planned to use it to represent the Droid. The hive mind had argued that they needed no symbol, that the Droid were their own symbol—but Vapour had reminded the drone with whom

he had been conversing that Locust of Droid was in charge, and the drone had not replied.

Just as Boadicea remained silent now.

"I can make you answer me," said Vapour to Boadicea, his anger rising. "I have ways of making you talk!" *What are you doing?* screamed a tiny voice in his head. *You're threatening a stuffed toy!* Vapour ignored the voice; he was well aware that listening to voices in one's head was a step onto the slippery slope that led to insanity, and he knew that he was perfectly sane.

"If I integrate you," said Vapour with a snarl, "all your secrets will be ours. Mine."

Boadicea did not seem impressed.

"Resistance is futile," Vapour told the teddewok. "You *know* that, you're wearing the T-shirt!"

For the briefest of moments, Vapour imagined Boadicea rolling her gleaming button eyes at him and muttering "I was integrated by the Droid and all I got was this lousy T-shirt." Despite himself, he snorted in amusement. Perhaps he should change the design of her garment to include that sentiment.

"What do you think?" he asked. "Would you like that?" He stared at the green-limned plush toy. The teddewok stared blanky back in the darkness, keeping her opinions to herself.

"Damn you and your stubbornness," said Vapour, "I gave you every opportunity!" Suddenly, angrily, he lifted the toy to his mouth. Hollow steel teeth, hypodermic injectors seething with Droid nanobots, extruded automatically, and Vapour thrust them into the Teddewok's neck. He found himself with a mouth full of fine dry fur, tasting mostly of dust with an inexplicable aftertaste of cucumber. He recoiled, and dropped the teddewok to the floor.

“What in Hell’s handbasket am I doing?” he asked himself. *That’s what I said*, whispered the voice in his head.

Vapour spat the taste of teddewok from his mouth and blinked around the darkness in sudden confusion.

He heard the *bleep* of a communicator from the deck below. Vapour was a Stiff Lord, and did not ordinarily jump to respond to unexpected communicator calls, but suddenly the sickly glow from the *Devastator* station seemed like a loathsome touch against his skin, and he desperately wanted to leave the observation deck. He turned and strode toward the curving staircase which led down to his living quarters on the deck below. His boot-heels clacked across the deck with what might have seemed to an observer to be undue haste for one with Barth Vapour’s fearful reputation.

As the echo of his footsteps faded away, silence fell over the small observation deck.

Boadicea lay face-down on the cold metallic floor, bathed in the unhealthy glow from outside. After a moment, the teddewok twitched.

Vapour stood before the communications console for a full minute, trying to push through the sudden fog which clouded his thinking. He watched the blinking light, counting as it flashed, bringing his mind back under his own control.

Damn implants must be getting to me, he decided. He wondered if his bio-defenses were finally losing their battle against the Droid technology which still surged within his bloodstream. He wondered if he was finally on the verge of losing his individuality—along, it seemed, with his sanity.

He wondered if he cared.

Finally he touched the button which activated the console.

“Why do you disturb me?” he intoned in his deep, dread voice.

“Locust of Droid,” came the flat reply of a Droid drone. “This method of communication is inelegant, imprecise, and inefficient. Why do you not connect your Droid implants and restore the direct link?”

Was that what happened up there? wondered Vapour. *An attempt to reestablish a direct link, screwing with my brain?*

“You stay out of my head,” he told the drone. “Remember the prophecy! *An individual drone shall lead!* How can I lead you to victory if I do not maintain autonomous control?” He frowned. Somewhere along the way, he had gone from ordering to pleading. *Damn.*

“What do you want?” he snapped.

“You wished to be notified,” said the drone. “Construction of the weapon is twenty-four hours from completion.”

Vapour nodded. “Excellent,” he said. “And what of its propulsion?”

The Droid hesitated. Vapour now knew that such pauses had little to do with fear, since individual drones had no sense of self-preservation. Instead, the drone was conferring with the hive mind to retrieve information which had not been readily available.

“The vessel’s hyperdrive engines will be fully operational within twenty-four hours,” said the drone. “However, there have been technical difficulties with getting the trans-flex drive of the ‘hedron to properly encompass the vessel. There is a ninety-seven point eight percent chance that the second ‘hedron will provide full

trans-flex capability; it will be completed approximately three days after completion of the vessel.”

“Three days?” asked Vapour. He frowned. Without the trans-flex drive and its apparent immunity to the fluctuations of the Bramble Patch, it was a six day journey through the corridor of realspace to escape this gravitational prison—and the addition of the two ‘hedrons suspended from one end made that journey more hazardous than it would have been for the original cylindrical design. 97.8 percent? “And what of the chance that the second ‘hedron will not provide trans-flex drive?”

“Its position beside the first unbalances the flex field,” said the drone. “It is inefficient.”

“Then why did you build it there?” demanded Vapour.

“Because you demanded it,” said the Droid.

“I did?” asked Vapour. “I mean, of course I did. It is...” his voice trailed off. It is *what*, exactly? Apart from turning the weapon into the largest phallic symbol in the galaxy, what had been his reasoning?

“Dismissed,” he said brusquely, and he slapped his hand down on the button which deactivated the communicator. He frowned, unsettled. There seemed to be gaps in his memory, and a certain fuzziness to his thinking. It was tempting to blame the Droid implants inside his skull, the possibility of nerve damage inflicted by the invading nanobots when they had attempted to integrate him—but if he were to be truly, brutally honest with himself, some of the decisions he had made on the *USSS Ender’s Prize* before the Droid encounter had not been particularly good.

He snorted at this thought. *Not particularly good? Face it, Mannequin, you fucked up big time!*

Possibly the transition to that other reality had been more damaging than he had thought. After all, it *had* left him comatose for several weeks.

He sighed. *That's all past*, he reminded himself. *What you need now is a solution, a way to repair your damaged mental state.*

He stared blankly at the wall above the comm console for several minutes. Finally he realised that, no matter how much he tried to push the thought away, what he needed most—what the biggest meanest Stiff Lord in the galaxy needed—was his fluffy pink teddewok. Turning away from the wall, he stomped across the room and up the curving starcase.

“Lights,” he said sharply. He was in no mood now to gaze out upon the vista. The lights in the observation deck came on, and the windows automatically turned opaque to prevent anybody who might be outside from intruding upon his privacy.

He looked around. The deck was only small, and circular, with no furniture other than a softly padded lounge chair. Vapour lowered himself to one knee and peered under the chair.

He frowned.

The teddewok, Boadicea, was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 5

The Fall and Rise of Lurk Splitwhisker

Lurk half-rolled, half-slid down the steep, smooth chute, and was dumped unceremoniously into a large room some thirty metres below the audience chamber. He sprawled awkwardly across the floor.

“Ouch,” he said.

With a grunt of effort, he rolled over and clambered to his feet. Apart from a tender spot over his ribs and a stinging graze on his forehead, he seemed to be intact. Nothing felt broken.

“What happened, Master Lurk?” asked a tinny voice in Lurk’s ear. Despite the static which distorted his words, Seepy Weepy sounded concerned.

A deep roar echoed through the cavern, and Lurk had his light rapier at the ready before he even knew he had reacted. He looked around. The cavern was dimly lit, and the blue glow of his rapier’s flickering energy blade did little to change that. He saw nothing which might have made the menacing roar.

After a moment, though, he noticed the bones and skulls which lay littered across the rocky floor of the cavern. Some of them were human.

There was another roar, and then a scream. Lurk spun around, and saw nothing but the wall, and the exit of the

chute through which he had fallen. He turned back to face the cavern.

The scream became a moan that sent shivers down Lurk's spine; the moan was silenced by a meaty *chomp*, and then the wet sounds of chewing began.

Apart from Lurk, the cavern was empty. He frowned.

"Lurk?" It was Libby's voice, her concern evident. "Speak to me."

"I think I just got eaten by the monster in the basement," said Lurk. "Sounded messy, too." He peered into the shadows, but nothing moved. "No sign of the monster though."

"Your dream," said Libby softly, and static buzzed across her words.

"Yeah," he said. "I forgot about the trapdoor, though. Everything has been so familiar, but just a little off."

"Be careful," she said, and the comm signal crackled alarmingly.

"Always," he said as another burst of static filled his ear. "Sit tight," he added. "There's too much interference down here, I'm going off the air."

Whatever reply Libby made was swallowed by a high-pitched buzz, and Lurk triple-tapped the ear-piece to deactivate the link.

The grating sound of stone against stone came from behind him, and once more he spun around. A section of the wall had slid aside, revealing a rough-hewn corridor. After a moment, when no apparent threat emerged, Lurk sheathed his light rapier and ventured cautiously into the tunnel. The wall slid closed behind him.

A short distance down the tunnel, an open doorway beckoned. Lurk peered inside.

"Come on in," said a woman's voice, although the speaker was not visible. "Have a seat."

The room was simple and unadorned. In the centre of it was a small, round table and a couple of cheap chairs. Two other doorways—one of them blocked by a solid-looking steel door—led off the small room. Lurk stepped into the room, then moved to one side so that his back was to the wall. He stood, waiting patiently, with his right hand resting casually on the hilt of his light rapier.

“You won’t need that,” said a voice, and a moment later a slender woman strode into the room through the other open doorway. She held a tall glass of liquid in each hand. “Come, have a drink.” She put both glasses down on the table—one opposite each chair—and slipped lithely into the chair closest to her.

“The *Queen of Crime*, I presume,” said Lurk.

The woman leaned back in her chair and stretched. She wore a pale blue cotton top, and it rode up her body, revealing her taut midriff. If there was an ounce of excess fat on her, Lurk could not see it. He judged her to be in her late forties or early fifties, but there was an agelessness about her which confused him. Her blonde hair was gathered into a loose bun at the back of her head, and several errant wisps floated free. Lurk doubted that anybody had ever called her ‘beautiful’, or even ‘pretty’—her features were plain, the sort of face you would not give a second glance—but the smile which curled lightly around her mouth ignited sparks which bypassed his brain and flashed directly to more reactive parts of his body.

“I prefer *Tessa*,” she said. She rested her elbows lightly on the table. Since the moment she had entered the room, her eyes had not left him for an instant. “And you must be Lurk Splitwhisker, rogue Jubbly and slayer of family. The wanted posters do *not* do you justice.”

“I did not slay my family,” said Lurk quietly, knowing even as he spoke that he should not have reacted to the taunt, but she simply held up one hand, palm outward.

“I know that,” she said. “You know that. You also know that the crime listed on the wanted poster is largely irrelevant. The Imperium wants you, and sooner or later, they will probably catch you.”

“Then you know that my mission here must be important, for me to risk coming back.”

The woman—Tessa—laughed softly. “Oh yes,” she said, “because every *other* planet in the galaxy is perfectly safe for you.”

Lurk shrugged.

“Now come,” she said. “Sit. We have business to discuss and we may as well be comfortable. Don’t worry, honey, I don’t bite. Not unless you want me to, anyway.” She winked at him.

Lurk hesitated. “What was all that about?” he asked, nodding his head towards the doorway through which he had entered.

“All what? Oh, the recording?” she asked. “With all the roaring and the screaming and the dying?”

He nodded.

“You’re dead, darlin’,” she said. “If Flabby dumps you into the pit, Flabby’s pet gobbles you down.” She smiled at him, a grin of devilish innocence. “A lady has to keep up appearances, after all.”

“Doesn’t that mean you *have* to kill me?” he asked. “To keep up appearances? What if I came back? The game would be up.”

“Kill you?” she gasped with mock horror. “Good heavens, no. Kill you on account of those sycophantic fools upstairs? What a waste that would be.” She lifted

one hand, and uncurled her index finger to point at the ceiling. "Most of those guys are so stoned they probably don't remember their *own* faces, let alone yours. It certainly wasn't fear that my secret would get out to *them* that prompted me to bring you down here." Her eyebrows bunched. "What *did* give me away, anyway?"

"I *am* a Jubbly," said Lurk.

"So you are," she said. "A young'un, anyway. Rather rude of you to read my guests' minds without their permission." Her smile reappeared to take the edge off her words. "But I doubt there's much there to read, anyway. Are you sure you won't have a seat?"

"Promise not to bite?" he said with a smile.

"I won't till you do, Mister Splitwhisker," she replied.

"Please, call me Lurk," said Lurk. He stepped forward and settled into the seat across from Tessa.

"You're right," he said with a slight shrug. "Not much to read. But your slug-creature didn't ring true. All that greed, that gluttony; it's just one huge roiling mass of emotion. All it seeks is carnal pleasure, and food."

"Nothing wrong with a little carnal pleasure from time to time," she purred. Lurk blinked. Was she flirting with him? Or was he reading more into her actions, her words, than really existed?

Lurk often found it difficult to read women.

"Perhaps," he agreed cautiously. "But this is quite an impressive criminal enterprise you have here. You have a finger in every pie, so to speak. Something like *this* was not built by a lust-addled behemoth like *that*."

"Why, thank you, darlin'," she said. "I'd blush, but neither of us would believe it." She shrugged. "Flabby makes the perfect front, and even *she* believes she's in

charge. She throws parties, I run things. It works out pretty well.”

They sat in silence for a while, studying each other. Lurk took a sip from the glass in front of him. The water was cold and pure, and he could detect nothing dangerous in it.

“So,” said Tessa at last. “To business. You want Captain Single, I take it?”

Lurk nodded. “That is correct.”

“And you have an offer?”

Lurk nodded again, and paused to drink from his glass. He studied her for a moment.

“We have an offer,” he said. “But something tells me this isn’t about the money.”

“Darlin’,” she purred, “it’s *always* about the money.”

Lurk fought to keep from frowning. He suspected she was reading him far more easily than he was reading her, but something wasn’t adding up, and he couldn’t quite nail it down.

“If you say so,” he said at last.

“So much mistrust in one so young,” she said. “But perhaps you’re right to doubt me. I’ve done nothing to earn your trust, after all.”

Lurk shrugged.

“We’ll have to see what we can do to change that,” she said. “Another drink?”

Lurk glanced down at his glass, and was mildly surprised to see it was empty. “Please,” he said.

“Come,” she said as she stood up. “Walk with me. Now that you’re here, I may as well give you the ten-credit tour.” She picked up both glasses in one hand. Lurk stood, and followed her into the next room. It was a small kitchenette.

“You entertain here often?” he asked.

“Only when Flabby feeds someone important to her beast,” said Tessa. She placed the glasses on the benchtop, and stooped to open a low refrigeration unit. As Lurk pondered her reply, she poured two more glasses of icy water. “So,” she continued, “about the money?”

“We are prepared to repay the full amount that Mal owes you,” said Lurk, “plus whatever you paid the bounty hunter who brought him in.” He watched her for a second, looking for a reaction. “Plus five percent of the total to cover any additional expenses you may have incurred.”

“We?” Tessa leaned casually back against the benchtop, sipped from her own glass, and eyed him speculatively. “Yourself and Shaggus?”

Lurk nodded his head carefully.

“And your girlfriend? The one who looks so fetching in one of your shirts?”

Lurk felt his eyes narrow in reaction to her statement.

“Surely you’re not surprised?” said Tessa. “This is *my* planet; we’ve been watching you and your girlfriend since the moment you touched down in the desert.”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Lurk said, and instantly regretted it. He raised his glass to his mouth and took a sip as he composed his thoughts.

“Shame,” said Tessa. “So she does Shaggus instead? She looks limber enough to take him on.”

Lurk said nothing.

“Do you lie in your bunk, listening to the pair of them cavorting in the next cabin? I imagine sex with a Woonky must be quite noisy?” She raised her eyebrows thoughtfully.

Lurk struggled to keep his face blank. What in the hells was she doing?

“As you listen,” she said, lowering her voice and leaning conspiratorially closer, “do you touch yourself?”

Lurk gulped a couple of mouthfuls of cold water and looked down from her face, only to find himself staring at her breasts. His cheeks burned as he twitched his gaze away from her.

“It’s okay,” she whispered. “You can tell me.”

“Twenty percent,” Lurk blurted. “But not a credit more.” He raised his eyes back to her face. She was smiling.

“Negotiation isn’t your strong suit, is it?” she asked. Her smile softened in sympathy.

Lurk shrugged.

“This offer of yours is beginning to sound awfully expensive. Do you have this sort of cred lying around? Does the Rebellion?” She took a longer swallow, and placed the half-empty glass on the counter. “With Alderbark gone, does the princess?”

Lurk nearly dropped his glass.

Tessa smiled sweetly at his surprise. “You didn’t think your girlfriend’s identity was a secret, did you?” she asked. “Hate to break it to you, but half the galaxy must know the story by now. The Jubbly and the Princess, and their swathe of terror carved across the skies.” She shrugged. “It makes for good ratings on the news shows.”

Lurk carefully placed his glass on the counter beside hers, and forced his clenched fingers to release their grip. He took a deep breath as he rubbed his cool fingers against the back of his neck before dropping his hand back to the counter.

“We have the money,” he said, truthfully; the *Sparrow*’s cargo bay still carried the reward Mal had been paid by the Rebellion for returning their Princess

safely. Lurk heard the quaver in his voice: anger, perhaps tinged with fear. Or arousal.

She touched the back of his hand lightly with cool fingers, and leaned close. She was almost as tall as Lurk, and her breath was warm on the fleshy lobe of his ear, on the side of his neck, as she pressed her body against his. Lurk tensed.

“I have a counter-proposal that I think you’ll like,” she purred in his ear, “but first...”

Lurk drew in a quick, startled breath, as her lips closed around his earlobe. He felt the hard pressure of her teeth, and then she drew back, stretching his flesh before releasing it. He stepped back, away from her, and he tried to raise his eyes to meet hers but found himself, instead, staring as she ran her tongue across her lower lip.

The sudden twitch in his groin was matched by the rush of heat to his cheeks, and he dropped his gaze. To her chest. Her deep intake of breath—the timing surely no accident—served to stretch the thin cotton of her blouse tautly across her small breasts. Her nipples tented the flimsy fabric. Confusion and embarrassment and guilt warred within Lurk as he hurriedly turned away and stepped back out into the other room.

She was behind him then, her hand on his shoulder as she spoke softly: “But first, there’s something you need to see.”

She stepped past him, and it was only as she pressed her hand to a plain metal plate in the centre of the steel door—obviously a scanner of some kind—that Lurk realised she could easily have lifted his weapon from its holster on his hip while he had been *distracted*. Cursing himself, he slapped his hand to his hip, and his fingers curled tightly around the smooth hilt of his light rapier.

Tessa glanced at him but said nothing. The glint of amusement in her eyes was enough.

The door slid silently aside.

With a wink, Tessa turned and strode through the doorway, leaving Lurk little choice but to follow her into the long corridor. A soft *clunk* sounded behind him as the door sealed itself, and then the only sound was the echoing clicks of their footsteps on the stone floor.

Lurk made an effort to glance from side to side, taking in the features of the corridor and the various doors and alcoves they passed, but mostly he found his attention captured by the sway of the woman's hips as she walked ahead of him. Memories kept pushing themselves to the front of his mind: the warmth of her breath on his neck, the not-quite-pain of her teeth biting firmly down on his earlobe; the cool feel of her fingers brushing his skin; the sight of her nipples, hard beneath her cotton top.

Lurk swallowed hard, and took a deep breath. *Remember Mal*, he told himself. *Remember Libby. Remember why you are here! Don't let yourself be distracted by the sight of her thighs flexing as she walks...*

The woman stopped in front of a door and turned to watch him as he closed the distance between them.

"What, uh..." Lurk swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. He tried again: "what's in here?" He kept his eyes firmly on hers.

"You'll see," she said. Her palm on a sensor plate opened the door, and she stepped back, gesturing for him to enter.

"After you," he said cautiously. Once more he rested his hand lightly on the hilt of his light rapier.

“Always the gentleman,” she said, and that knowing smile appeared on her lips. She stepped into the room, and Lurk followed, but stopped suddenly in the doorway. He felt a light prickling of his skin, but it faded even as he began to frown. Glancing around the room, he got the sense of a modestly furnished room, a holopic or two on the wall, but his attention locked firmly onto the open doorway in the far wall, and the bed that lurked in the shadows therein.

The door’s quiet beep somehow conveyed a sense of overwhelming impatience, and he took a step forward, into the room. He felt soft carpet beneath his feet.

The door hissed closed behind him.

“Over here,” said Tessa quietly.

Lurk tore his gaze away from the darkened room. The woman stood beside a computer console set against one wall, an array of monitors mounted above it.

“Welcome,” she said, “to my humble abode!”

“Come into my parlour...” muttered Lurk under his breath. He took a couple of steps toward her, his gaze flickering from her face to the wall of monitors behind her.

“This is where you live?” he asked.

“As much as anywhere,” she said.

“That’s quite a setup,” he continued, nodding towards the console.

“If I wanted,” she admitted, “I need never leave this room. I could control everything from here.” She shrugged. “Take a look at screen three.” She pointed toward one of the larger monitors, then bent over the keypad and tapped out a command. With a final click, she straightened and gestured dramatically, her eyes on Lurk.

“Nice screensaver,” said Lurk after a moment’s hesitation.

Tessa blinked, then turned to look at the screen she had indicated. Starbursts of colour danced and shimmered, flared and faded and flared again.

“Um...” she said. She peered at a smaller screen, inspecting the command she had typed. “Oh damn,” she muttered, “I got the slash in the wrong...” Her voice trailed off as she fixed her typo.

“Don’t you hate that?” she asked, glancing over her shoulder. “That’s what I get for showing off.”

Lurk shrugged sympathetically. “Happens to the best of us,” he said.

She turned her attention back to the console, checked her command more carefully this time, then placed her finger on the Commit button. “This time for sure,” she said.

She pushed the button and looked up at the monitor.

Lurk gazed up to see Libby; she was seated on a low bench of rough stone, leaning back against a wall of pale, dry purple mud. The glowing red crosshairs that overlaid the image were centred on her head.

“Where is she?” Lurk demanded. He had no memory of having moved, but he now stood with his light rapier extended, its hungrily buzzing tip poised above the soft skin beneath Tessa’s chin. “If you hurt her...”

“Suppress,” said Tessa clearly, and before Lurk had time to wonder what she meant, the blade of his light rapier fizzled and died.

“What...?” Lurk blinked, stunned. Then his nostrils flared, and with a twisting clenching motion of his empty hand he reached out for the Source, closing a ghostly fist around her slender throat.

Rather than staggering backwards and clutching at air, as he expected, Tessa produced a small but deadly-looking blaster pistol and pointed it at his chest.

“Did you have a Plan B?” she enquired pleasantly.

Libby raised her hand and rubbed idly at the base of her skull. Her long hair was plaited, and coiled into a loose bun atop her head, leaving the skin of her neck exposed, but there was no cooling breeze, no respite from the constant heat. She massaged the top of her neck, kneading the muscles with her slender fingers in a vain attempt to keep the growing headache at bay. The throbbing had begun as a dull ache behind her eyes before migrating to the back of her head; now it sent tendrils of pain down her spine and out through her brain as though seeking to immobilise her altogether.

She licked her dry lips. How did anybody live in this heat? What sort of person chose to settle on a planet like Ratatouille? She tried to form enough moisture in her mouth to allow herself to swallow. She needed a drink.

She needed sleep.

She lowered her hand into her lap; her palm was moist with sweat, and she wiped it on the leg of her pants.

A lady does not sweat! She allowed herself a tight smile as the voice of her governess floated up from her childhood. *Animals sweat, gentlemen perspire, ladies glow!* Libby wondered what the Lady Katherine would think to see her now, dishevelled and begrimed, hair barely under control, dressed in poorly fitting male clothing, and *glowing* like a Sondaran pork-beast.

She squeezed her eyes closed for a moment. Her eyelids burned as tiredness and tears jostled behind them. Lady Katherine, along with the entire Alderbarki court—along with the entire planet and most of its civilian

population—had been destroyed by the Imperium. Deep inside, Libby felt her own small responsibility for that attack like a shroud that entangled her soul.

As a warm rivulet of sweat trickled its way down the smooth skin of her rib cage, Libby opened her eyes again. She stared up at the hull of the *Serendipity Sparrow* which sat squatly on the compacted mauve dirt of the private landing pad. She had come outside to escape the steadily growing sensation of being confined, trapped within the metal bulkheads of the ship. She had never been prone to claustrophobia before today, and she hoped the attack, the latest symptom of her traumatised mind, would not last: it was cool inside. She had been willing to sacrifice comfort for the sake of her sanity but now, as another warm droplet inched its way down her spine towards the crack of her butt, she was starting to reconsider.

Besides, her grasp on her sanity felt rather tenuous, even out here. Enclosed on all sides by the high walls of the landing bay, she still felt confined, while at the same time feeling exposed and vulnerable, as though she were being watched.

She wondered how Shaggus was doing. They had landed here, in one of the cheaper landing pads on the outskirts of Moss Iceberg, because Shaggus needed a part to repair the landing strut. She had argued against the idea, but he had pointed out, through Seepy's services as a translator, that they had a few hours to spare. Finally she had shrugged. She suspected he was right, and besides, she was just too tired to push her point. He had, at her insistence, taken Seepy with him.

Since he was going out anyway, she had asked him to bring back something in her size from the bazaar; much

as she loved Mal, being draped in his oversized clothing was becoming a little tedious.

She hoped they would return soon; they had been gone for almost two hours now.

With a sigh, she stood. Her shirt—Mal's shirt—clung damply to her bare skin, and she shrugged it free. It was time for a long, cold shower. She took a deep breath and strode towards the *Sparrow*. As she waited for the ramp to hiss open, she took one final look around the landing pad.

Where the hells is Shaggus? she wondered.

The Mended Percussion Device was one of many cantinas in Moss Iceberg, the undisputed capital city and largest spaceport of Ratatouille. Its preferred clientele were a rowdy mixture of the many alien races whose business brought them to the spaceport. The drinks were comparatively cool, the meals were palatable enough, and the water had only the barest lingering aftertaste of its origins in the recycling plant behind the public waste disposal cubicles.

Importantly, prices were low. Ratatouille was not a rich planet.

The proprietor of *The Mended Percussion Device*, Aagli Muvva, prided himself on catering to the needs of a wide range of life forms. All were welcome in his cantina, he boasted—on the rare occasions that somebody seemed to be showing an interest. Well, all except 'bots, of course, but they hardly counted anyway.

Several planets were home to sects of zealots who viewed artificial life forms as abominations in the eyes of whichever deities held reign in that region of space. Aagli didn't particularly like 'bots—they had no body language—but his main objection to them, if anybody

asked, was more financial than philosophical: they took up valuable floor space without spending any creds.

He glared now at the humanoid ‘bot which stood at the bar, its metallic skin gleaming dully in the dim lighting. Possibly it had spoken, but who could tell with that damned “face” fixed in a permanent expression of surprise? Who cared what a ‘bot might have to say?

“It’ll have to go,” he said, flicking his gaze up—and up—to look the towering Woonky in the eye. He pointed towards the fluorescent sign on the wall beside the entrance: *NO BOTS ALLOWED*, it read, in several languages. “It’s policy, I’m afraid,” he added. Any other time he would have pushed his case more abruptly, but Woonkies had a reputation for short tempers. Angering a Woonky was not considered to be a strong survival tactic.

The Woonky growled something in its own tongue. While few non-Woonkies understood the guttural, breathy language of coughs and grunts and roars, Aagli Muvva—who prided himself on catering to the needs of a wide range of life forms—knew enough to understand that the green woolly creature was not ordering a drink.

The ‘bot was speaking again, but Aagli could barely hear its voice above the dull roar of background noise which filled the cantina. On the stage in one corner of the room, a quartet of musicians were belting out a lively tune, and voices everywhere were raised to be heard above their sound, and above the multitude of other raised voices.

Stupid ‘bot! Didn’t even have the sense to speak up.

Aagli looked back and forth between the Woonky, and the ‘bot it had brought into his tavern. He could feel his pulse pounding in his temple. Both of them were taking up space—not to mention his own valuable time—and neither of them was buying anything.

Later, Aagli thought to cast the blame at the feet of his fickle mistress; with hindsight it all seemed so clear. Alternately teasing and spurning, leading him on with honeyed whispers, setting him up for her next scornful rebuff, she had twisted his very soul until every last drop of patience had been wrung from him. It was *her* fault that he was not thinking as clearly as he should; it was her fault that his own temper got the better of him.

“Are you stupid?” he snarled up at the Woonky. “If you want a drink, get rid of the...”

The enraged roar cut across the din in the cantina, leaving a heavy silence in its wake. Silence meant trouble, but Aagli Muvva was too busy clutching at the thick green fingers around his throat to pay attention to the subtle signs. His feet scrabbled frantically at the shelving behind the bar and dimly, over the hissing of blood in his ears, he heard the crash and tinkle of breaking glass. The Woonky’s grip tightened, the fingers practically encircling his neck, the opposing thumb pressing hard against his skull behind his ear, and the angry green face filled his field of vision. Hot breath, stinking of strange, earthy scents, washed across his face as the beast snarled something at him.

Aagli had never fully appreciated, until now, the sheer savage size of a Woonky’s teeth.

Just as he thought his head might explode, or pop straight off his shoulders—either outcome would be a relief—Aagli felt the floor beneath his feet once more, and the Woonky’s grip loosened slightly. He gasped air into his lungs, and the hissing in his ears faded away, leaving only the prissy voice of the ‘bot.

“... dear, oh dear, oh dear,” it was saying, “I really do apologise, my good sir, but I am afraid Master Shaggus has been having rather a bad night. We were on our way

back to the ship when he decided to call in for a quiet drink. He only wanted to ask a few questions. But after that unfortunate encounter with the bounty hunter in the Tavern of Infinite Delights—which I’m sure you won’t mind my saying, sir, was really quite shabby, and did not at all live up to its name—he has been a little on edge. And then the barkeep a couple of streets over pulled a weapon and—well, I always thought that *‘rip his arm off and beat him to death with the wet end’* was just a fanciful figure of speech, but now that I’ve seen it happen with my own eyes, I may never...”

Aagli was quite grateful for the Woonky’s impatient snarl, when it came, despite the accompanying tensing of the fingers that still enclosed his neck. The damn ‘bot didn’t even have to pause to draw breath; at least the snarl cut it short.

“Oh my, yes,” it said. “It’s just that all this excitement leaves me feeling quite, uh, excited. Master Shaggus would like to know, good sir, whether you might have heard any word regarding the identity of the bounty hunter who captured Master Mal Single?”

With the Woonky’s hand wrapped around his throat, Aagli desperately clenched his teeth against the first impulsive reply—*who the fuck is Mal Single?*—that his brain suggested. The momentary pause gave him time to think about the name, and he realised that it was familiar.

“Single?” he wheezed, and the Woonky loosened its grip a little more. “I know that name. Damn pirate skipped the planet without paying his tab! But that was three months back, maybe more.” He coughed, and swallowed carefully. His throat, though sore, seemed to be intact. “Haven’t seen him or his ... oh!”

The bartender’s eyes widened as he made the connection.

The Woonky, whom Aagli now recognised as the damn pirate's partner and friend, narrowed its eyes and whuffled softly.

"Uh, it's okay though," said Aagli quickly. "Consider the tab fully paid. It's on me!"

The Woonky grunted tersely.

"Master Shaggus would like to enquire," began the 'bot, "as to whether you might have heard anything a little more recent about Master Single? Or, indeed, the bounty hunter in question."

"Nothing," said Aagli without a pause. His eyes widened as the large fingers tightened slightly around his neck, and the Woonky snarled menacingly, a long, low sound that sent an icy shiver down his spine.

"Perhaps," added the 'bot, "you might like to think about it? We, uh, we have time."

Time? thought Aagli. *Yeah, that's it, play for...* The thought died as he flickered his gaze around the dimly lit tavern beyond the troublesome Woonky. The startled silence had been pushed back by a low murmuring. Nobody was speaking too loudly—best not to attract the attention of an enraged Woonky—but many of them had turned back to their drinks.

Perhaps a third of the tavern's customers still watched the little drama occurring at the bar. Many eyes, human and otherwise, glittered with an interest that verged on morbid curiosity, and Aagli had the distinct impression that they were waiting for the payoff from the 'bot's comments earlier: it wasn't every day you saw someone beaten to death with their own arm!

Even if anybody *had* bothered to go for help, where would they go? The Imperials? Everybody knew that the Moss Iceberg Shock Troopers—Team Gorilla—were lazy and corrupt; they wouldn't even get out of

whichever whore's bed they were in, at this time of the afternoon, for far more money than Aagli could hope to offer. Or perhaps to the Butt Crime Syndicate, but *they* wouldn't come to his aid because he didn't pay enough "protection" ...

Oh shit!

Despite the fingers clamped around his throat, Aagli swallowed. Thoroughly miserable, he rolled his eyes back to meet the glare of the Woonky. He *had* heard somebody talking, a week or so back; somebody too drunk to be cautious. He *knew* where Mal Single had been taken, and by whom—and he could see from the look in the Woonky's eyes that the beast knew he knew. If he didn't tell it—well, that arm thing did *not* sound like very much fun for the recipient—but there were too damn many people watching, too many witnesses, for him to rat out anyone in the employ of Flabby the Butt! If word got back to *her*—and it would, he knew—he would end up being fed to one of her pets.

Oh shit...

"But, uh, not *that* much time," prompted the 'bot.

Aagli barely heard it.

Time. He had heard that the thing in pit, out in the deep desert, would slowly dissolve you, screaming in agony, over the course of a thousand years. It had seemed funny, when surrounded by a group of friends, to question the veracity of such reports—how did the damn thing keep you alive for that long anyway?—but now, faced with just such a fate himself, it was not funny at all.

Grimly, feeling the pressure of all those eyes upon him, he tensed the muscles in his neck, got his legs under himself, and pushed back until he stood fully erect. He took a deep breath. A sudden image of his mistress flickered into his head—she stretched lithely, nakedly,

across the crumpled sheet of his bed and blew him a kiss—and he wondered if this was it, if this was his life flashing before his eyes.

“Go fuck yourself,” he said bravely.

For a second, an eternal second, he saw his own face reflected in the shiny metal skin of the ‘bot as it stared back at him in surprise—or rather, as it stared back with that false expression of surprise permanently fixed upon its gleaming faceplate. Then the Woonky roared furiously and began to shake him roughly back and forth.

Aagli found himself wondering about the afterlife. He had not, until this moment, given the question much thought. He hoped somebody would show him where to go when he got ... wherever it was he was going.

He hoped there would be virgins...

The dank stench of his freshly soiled underpants snapped him out of his reverie. He was still alive, he realised. He hoped he was still alive, anyway: arriving in the afterlife with skidmarks was hardly going to improve his stay there.

The Woonky, Aagli Muvva realised, was laughing. Anger, laughter; who in all the hells could tell the difference when it came to Woonkies?

It released him and slapped its open palm against the bar; bottles rattled and clinked, and silence fell once more across the tavern. Twice more, that loud slap cut through the air. Then, shaking its head, the Woonky whuffed something at Aagli, cocked its head, and turned away.

Both Aagli and the ‘bot watched the towering green giant disappear up the dimly lit stairs and out of the tavern’s doorway. The ‘bot turned back to Aagli, then snapped its head back briefly towards the exit, then turned once more to face the bartender. Its face claimed surprise, but its manner suggested confusion.

“He, uh,” it said, then paused. “I think he likes you,” it continued.

Aagli staggered back a step and fell heavily against the back wall. He heard the dull clank of metal against the hard-packed dirt that formed the floor of the tavern; the ‘bot’s footsteps receded into the distance and were swallowed up by the sudden swell of chatter. *Now* they wanted to talk about it, he thought. He glared up at the scaly green humanoid which peered over the bar at him, and he was sure he saw disappointment in the black orbs which gleamed dully on the end of slender eye-stalks.

The show was over.

“What the fuck are you looking at?” he snarled weakly.

“What do you want?” asked Lurk. Slowly he returned the useless hilt of his light rapier to its holster on his right hip.

Tessa raised an eyebrow. “What do I want? Oh Lurk, you disappoint me. I felt so sure that you would ask me about my little toy, my Source suppression field. After all the effort I went to to get it, you’re not even curious?”

He shrugged cautiously. “More than just curious,” he admitted, “but I doubt you went to all this trouble just to show off. Hence my question: what do you want?”

“You’re not big on foreplay, are you?” she said. The slight smile on her lips grew into a grin. “Never mind,” she continued, “we can work on that later.”

It was Lurk’s turn to raise an eyebrow.

She winked at him.

“What do I want?” she mused. She stared at him, her eyes flickering up and down his body. “Well first, I want you to relax.”

“Just so you know,” said Lurk, “your relaxation technique could use a little work.”

Tessa laughed. “Don’t judge my technique,” she told him, “until you’ve seen a little more of my repertoire.”

Lurk wasn’t sure how to respond to the woman’s suggestive words or her sultry tone, so he retreated to a more secure footing. “What do you want?” he asked again.

Tessa sighed, and her smile faded. “To business, then,” she said. “What I want is...” She stared into his eyes, as though she might find the right words floating in their depths.

Lurk stared back.

“What I want,” said Tessa softly, “first of all, is to clear up this little misunderstanding.” She glanced down at the blaster pistol in her hand. “I can see why you thought what you did, but I have no intention of threatening your girlfriend. That’s not why I brought you here.”

“No?” demanded Lurk. “And yet here we are. Libby in some sniper’s sights, and you holding a pistol.”

“Libby?” Tessa nodded. “I can see why she might prefer that. But I assure you, there is no sniper.” She gestured at the screen. “Merely an automated camera and some sophisticated facial recognition software.”

Lurk studied the image. As he watched, Libby stood and strode forward, and as she did so, the crosshairs stayed centered on her head. She stepped under something, out of sight, and after a moment the view expanded until he was looking down upon the familiar lines of the *Serendipity Sparrow*. From what he could see, it appeared to be somewhere in downtown Moss Iceberg. He turned his gaze back to Tessa, giving her the faintest of nods.

“And the pistol?” he asked.

She shrugged. “You *did* point an energy blade at my throat,” she said. “But you’re right. This is only getting in the way of what I want.” She stepped quickly forward, closing the gap between them. She flipped the blaster expertly in her hand and held it out to him. Confused, he automatically extended his own hand, palm up. He felt the cold weapon pressed against his skin, and the warmth of her hand against his fingers.

Her eyes met his. “This blaster,” she said, “for five minutes of your time.” She studied his reaction closely for a second, then, without waiting for a reply, lifted her hand from his. He curled his fingers around the blaster.

Tessa turned her back on him, and returned to the control console.

Lurk glanced down at the blaster she had given him. He looked over to where the woman stood, tapping out a command on the console.

“What makes you so confident,” he asked, “that I won’t just shoot you?”

Tessa stopped typing, but she did not turn her head. “It’s set on stun,” she told him. “If you want to kill me, the knob just in front of the trigger guard controls the power level.”

Lurk frowned. He examined the weapon more closely, found the knob exactly as she had described. It was, he saw, set on the lowest power setting, that scrambled the nerves but did no permanent damage. Blaster manufacturers had a technical term for the physiological interruption of nervous impulses produced by this setting, but just about everybody referred to it as *stun*.

He heard the renewed clatter of keys being pressed.

Five minutes? he thought. *Sure, I can spare five minutes.* Glancing quickly around the room, he found a nearby table. Carefully he placed the blaster on the table, then moved to stand beside Tessa.

"You never answered my question," he said.

She turned her head now, and smiled up at him. "You're no killer, honey," she told him, "and I was counting on your curiosity."

"But I could have..."

"Stunned me?" She shrugged. "Maybe. Look at the monitor." She tapped a final couple of keys.

Lurk looked. Tessa had pointed the camera at a section of the *Sparrow's* hull and zoomed in for a closer view. Lurk didn't know the ship's systems well enough to be sure, but they seemed to be looking at the primary intake manifold. Part of the image was oddly out of focus, and as Lurk watched, it shimmered. He blinked.

"What am I looking at?" he asked. He glanced at Tessa, and studied her profile for a couple of seconds, taking in slight upturn of her small nose, the full swell of her lips, before looking back at the screen.

"I'll switch to infrared," said Tessa. The image turned grainy; the screen filled with shades of blue, except for a shimmering, out of focus yellow blur at the centre.

"What *is* that?"

"It's a cloaking field," said Tessa.

"Cloaking ... but that's ... I thought cloaking fields were just science fiction?" said Lurk.

"They're not common knowledge," said Tessa. "Pretty damned secret, really, but I've, uh, seen a couple in my time. They're not actually very useful; if you try to expand a cloak beyond about a metre in diameter it collapses."

Lurk frowned. "So, what's inside?"

"I've no idea," said Tessa. "But if I had to guess, I'd say it was an Imperial tracking device of some sort."

"Imperial...?"

"They're the only ones who can afford the technology anyway," she said.

"Then they know where we are?" said Lurk. He turned to look at Tessa, and she met his gaze. They stared into each other's eyes. "They could be here any time."

"Honey," she said, "they're already here."

"What?" Lurk yelped. Instinctively he dropped his hand to the hilt of his light rapier.

"Relax," she said, placing her hand lightly across the back of his. It was his robotic hand, but still he could feel the warmth of her touch, the softness of her palm. "You and your friends are quite safe."

"But..." Lurk searched her gaze, seeking some clue as to her intent.

"There is a team of undercover Imperials here," she said. "They've already been here a week. Spending a lot of time in taverns and gambling dens. They even paid a visit to my brothel."

"They went into *Skwawks*?" asked Lurk before he could stop himself.

The smile returned to Tessa's face, and Lurk felt the blush spread across his cheeks. "You know it, then?" she asked innocently.

"I, uh, that is..." Lurk swallowed. "Hasn't, uh, hasn't everybody this side of Bugger Canyon heard of your, uh..."

"There's no need to be embarrassed," Tessa murmured. She leaned closer, lowering her voice. "I am

well aware of the forty minutes you spent with Candy, just a few weeks after your eighteenth birthday.”

His eyes widened. “How did you...?” Lurk’s one and only visit to the not-so-secret *Skwawks*—“where nobody knows your name”—was seared into his memory. His inept fumbling, his clumsiness, his nervousness. The young lady who had relieved him of a week’s wages and his virginity—in that order—had been patient with him, and gentle, but more than a little bored.

The rash had lasted for three months. He had never gone back.

“I told you,” said Tessa, “this is *my* planet. Nothing happens here that I don’t know about.”

“But what about...” Lurk bit the question off. *What about customer confidentiality?* he had been about to ask, but realised he was straying from the more important topic. *How does she manage to manipulate me so easily?* he wondered as he wrestled his thoughts back into order.

“What did they do there, these Imperials?” he asked.

“What does *anybody* do there?” she asked. She leaned back, removing her hand from his and perching herself lightly on the edge of the console. Her smile became a grin. “And from what I hear, they gave my girls and boys quite a workout.”

Lurk took a deep breath. “But what are they doing *here?*” he asked. “On Ratatouille.”

“My guess is,” said Tessa, “they’re looking for signs of a Rebel base.”

“But that would mean...”

“... that they knew you were coming here,” said Tessa with a nod. “Which also means...”

Lurk nodded as realisation dawned. “Since there is no Rebel base on Ratatouille, they don’t really care where

we are now. They want to know where we'll go from here."

"Exactly, darlin'," said Tessa.

"Fuck," said Lurk softly. "I have to get back there," he continued. He turned away from Tessa, but she stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" she asked.

"What?"

"Mal Single."

"Fuck," he said again. He turned back towards the woman, angry with himself for forgetting his friend, angry with her for twisting his mind until he could no longer think straight, angry with the damned Imperials simply for being here, snooping around. He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again.

"Deep breaths," she said. Her face was blank, giving nothing away. "Slow, deep breaths."

He breathed. *In, hold, out.* Gradually the fog dispersed, leaving his mind clear.

"What do you want?" he asked.

She smiled.

"Libby?" The voice was tinny and muffled, but Libby recognised it instantly. Lurk! She ran to the pile of sweat-soaked clothes on the floor and rummaged through it for Mal's brown shirt. The communicator was in the breast pocket.

"Libby, are you receiving?"

"I'm here, Lurk," she said, unable to keep the emotion from her voice. "It's good to hear from you. What's happening? Where are you?"

"I'm..." Libby held her breath in anticipation. *Please be okay*, she thought. "I'm safe," he said at last. "I've negotiated a deal with, uh, with Flabby the Butt. She will

release Mal in exchange for the fifty thousand creds he, uh, owes her for the dumped shipment.”

Libby let out her breath with a gasp. Feeling suddenly weak at the knees, she staggered back a couple of steps and lowered herself carefully into the couch. Relief flooded through her.

“Libby?”

“Still here,” she said weakly. “That’s great news.” She stared at the pile of dirty clothes for a few seconds. *Mal! At last!*

“There is a settlement out past the Sand Ocean,” said Lurk. “I’m sending the coordinates through now. Take the *Sparrow* and meet the ship they have waiting. Make the trade there.”

“What about you?” asked Libby.

“There’s more,” said Lurk.

“More?” Libby crossed her left arm across her chest to grip her right elbow—and looked down in surprise. In her haste to answer Lurk’s call, she had bolted from the shower; in her excitement at the news, she had forgotten everything; now she was startled to find herself sitting in the common room of the *Serendipity Sparrow*, dripping wet and stark naked. “Oh!” she gasped. Suddenly grateful that Shaggus and Seepy had not yet returned, she jumped up and fled for the safety of the bathroom.

“Libby?”

“Sorry Lurk,” she said as she wrapped herself in a large towel. “Uh, something just, uh, never mind. Sorry. Please say again.”

“I said,” he said, “we’re being tracked. There’s an Imperial tracking device stuck to the *Sparrow*’s hull, wrapped in a cloaking field.”

“What?” she said. *A cloaking field? Surely they were just science fiction?* Libby suddenly felt the need to sit down again; instead she sagged against the bulkhead.

“Is Shaggus there?” Lurk asked.

“Not at the moment,” she said. “He had to go track down a spare part for the landing gear.”

“Okay,” he said. “Well, the moment he gets back, head to the new rendezvous point. We have a plan, and somebody there will fill you both in on the details.”

Somebody? “What about you?” Libby asked again. “Won’t you be there?”

“Uh...”

“Lurk?”

“I’ll, uh, I’ll join you soon enough,” he said. “I’m just, uh, taking care of a few details.”

“Lurk? What details? Is everything okay?”

“Uh...” There was another long silence, and Libby felt her heart begin to race.

“Lurk?” she demanded.

“Uh, yeah...” he said. “Uh, everything’s fine. I’ll, uh, I’ll see you in a couple of hours.”

“Lurk?”

There was no reply. The line had gone dead.

Libby stared at the silent communicator for several long moments.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” she muttered.

Lurk severed the comm link and let out a gasp.

“What are you doing?” he said.

Tessa raised her eyes innocently towards him. Halfway through his conversation with Libby, she had lifted his left hand to her mouth and slipped her warm lips over the end of his finger. Now she casually flicked her tongue up the length of his forefinger. “What do you

think I'm doing?" she breathed. She closed her lips over the tip of his finger and sucked it strongly into her mouth. Her tongue swirled, and by the time she released him, he was breathing heavily.

"Are you..." His voice cracked and faltered as she sucked his middle finger into her mouth and gave it the same treatment.

"Am I what?" she asked innocently, her breath hot on his damp fingers. She used both of her hands to press his open palm firmly against the swell of her breast. Her nipple poked against the centre of his hand, and he could feel the steady *ba-dum, ba-dum* of her heart pounding against her rib cage. His own heart was throbbing so strongly that he thought it might break free of his chest.

He swallowed. "Are you trying to seduce me?"

She laughed at that, but not unkindly. She pulled back so she could look him in the eye. She slid her right arm back around his waist, and her left slid lower. He gasped as she clamped her hand over the crotch of his coolsuit and the evidence of his arousal.

"Better than just trying, I think," she said.

He had no argument for that. After a moment, he realised his hand, now free, was still on her breast. He left it there.

"But you're..."

Her lips clamped down on his, silencing him, and her tongue pushed into his mouth. When she finally pulled back, he was speechless.

"Just so you know," she whispered in his ear, "the words 'old enough to be my mother' would really kill the mood!"

He shook his head in silent protest, glad that she had stopped him from blurting out exactly that.

"I was just ... uh ..." All he knew was that the hand clamped so possessively over his groin had squeezed. "Uh ... I've just never been ... uh ... seduced before," he managed to say. His only other sexual encounter had, after all, cost him a week's wages.

Lurk had barely enough presence of mind left to wonder what *this* would cost him.

Tessa pressed close, trapping his hands—Lurk became aware that, at some point, his right hand had lifted to cup her other breast—and ran her tongue across his earlobe. "I can stop if you like," she said.

"No," said Lurk.

"No?" she asked.

"No," he said again. "Don't stop."

"Well..." She drew back again, studied his face. "I guess we do have some time to kill," she said, "before we have to meet up with your *girlfriend*."

"She's not my girlfriend," said Lurk.

"She's not?" asked Tessa, attempting to look surprised. She briefly tightened her grip on Lurk's *evidence*.

"No," said Lurk. It was barely more than a breathy gasp.

"In that case," said Tessa, and she kissed him again, her lips locked tightly against his, her tongue invading his mouth with a ferocity that startled him. When she drew back, she was breathing heavily. "In that case, I'm gonna fuck you silly." Her free hand slid up his back, found the fasteners to his coolsuit.

"And when we're done," she added softly, gently, as his garment peeled open beneath her fingers, "I'll give you that lesson on foreplay!"

* * *

“Whatever happened here,” said Fib, “I think we missed it.”

“Ya think?” said Izzy. She stared around at the smashed bottles and spilled alcohol. Shattered glass clinked as the proprietor of the tavern—an unpleasant, unfriendly fellow at the best of times—swept the debris into a corner. He was muttering to himself as he worked.

“Yo, Muvva,” called Fib, “what happened this time? Jealous husband finally catch up with you?”

Aagli Muvva glared up at the new arrivals, and Izzy whistled as she saw the bruises on his throat.

“Customers always welcome,” snarled Muvva in a decidedly non-welcoming tone. “But tourists can fuck off!”

“Hey relax, man,” said Fib easily as he took a step closer. He was a big man: taller than most humans, his bare arms corded with muscle, pale grey eyes almost glowing in the dim light of the bar. A pale ribbon of smooth scar tissue ran up his arm, ending just below the collar bone. He was an intimidating sight, and not a man to scare easily.

The proprietor looked him up and down, and snorted.

“He doesn’t seem impressed,” muttered Izzy. “How about you get the drinks in, tough guy; I’ll go find us a booth.” She pushed past Fib. He watched, amused, as Muvva turned his head to follow her as she disappeared into the shadows of the tavern’s interior. He knew the view: Izzy was athletic and muscular and tattooed. Her close-cropped hair, her crooked nose, and her hostile glare might have been enough to keep most men at bay, if not for the sweet sway of her hips as she walked that had a way of attracting many a gaze.

“Seems to me,” said Fib mildly, “that you’ve had your share of trouble for the day.”

Muvva glared at him as he stepped behind the bar, leaning the broom against one wall. “Guy can fuckin’ look, can’t he?”

“Oh sure,” said Fib. “Just a friendly warning: piss *her* off, and you’ll find things getting a whole lot worse. Speakin’ of which, what in all the hells happened here?”

Muvva shrugged. “Told a Woonky to fuck off! Now you buying or what?”

Fib raised his eyebrows. “A Woonky, huh? And you’ve still got all your limbs? Impressive.” He gazed flatly back at the man behind the bar. “Still,” he said at last, “my warning stands.”

“Whatever,” said Muvva. “And I’m sure she scares you, but you don’t scare me. So order some drinks or get the fuck out of my tavern!”

Fib grinned. “In that case, you’d better give me five of your best ales. Not that watered down piss you gave us last time, either; give us some of the good stuff.” He placed a twenty-cred note on the counter, and the proprietor made it disappear.

“Last time?” demanded Muvva. He peered a little more closely at Fib. “Five of you? Yeah, I remember you guys.” He hawked noisily, and spat onto the floor behind the counter. “Since you’re such valued customers, nothing but the best, coming up.”

As he waited, Fib scanned the crowd. He turned his head as the door opened, and a familiar silhouette appeared against the rectangle of light.

“Yo, Mikki,” he yelled. A second person came through the door. “Basski. Over here.” They were an oddly mismatched pair. Mikki was short, wiry, and stronger than he looked. They called him Mikki “the Mouse”, but his speed and agility were more suggestive of a mongoose. Basski, on the other hand, was a tall

gangly fellow, all limbs and throat. He seemed forever on the verge of tripping over his own feet, but he made up for all that with a quiet watchfulness.

Fib hadn't spoken the words aloud, but he had begun thinking of the duo as "the Mouse and the Meerkat."

"What the hells?" said Mikki as he sauntered down the steps. "Did we miss *another* bar fight?"

"You'd've liked this one, Mikki," said Fib. "Our valiant friend here told a Woonky to fuck off."

"And he's still got all his limbs?" said Mikki.

"Bunch of fuckin' comedians, aren't you?" snarled Muvva as he slammed a tankard of ale down on the bar, sloshing its contents across the three full ones already there. "What'd you do, rehearse this crap before you came in?"

"And still as charming as ever," said Fib.

"I see that," said Mikki.

Muvva merely glared at them. After a moment he turned back to filling the final tankard.

"Well, come on guys," said Fib. "Grab a couple of drinks each; Izzy's in the back somewhere." He grabbed one of the tankards and swallowed a mouthful. He waited until Mikki and Basski had gathered up the rest of the drinks, then he grimaced at the proprietor. "You call this your best?"

Muvva shrugged. "You don't come in here for quality," he said. "It's the best *price* you'll get in Moss Iceberg."

"Speaking of price," said Fib, "is there any change?"

"Whadda *you* think?"

Fib grinned and shook his head as he turned away.

The fifth member of their group was already waiting at their booth, deep in conversation with Izzy. Sammy Strong was almost as large and imposing as Fib, and his

shirt strained to contain his muscled frame as he moved. He looked up as they arrived.

“Have a seat, guys,” he said.

Of the five, he was the only one with his arms covered. The military tattoo on his right shoulder was at odds with their civilian cover story. This was Team Badger, and Samson Strong—known to some as “Mauler”—was their sergeant.

“Anything new?” asked Fib as he slid onto the bench beside Mikki.

Strong shook his head? “You?”

Fib shrugged. “Nothing. This place is dead.”

“Yeah,” said Mikki, “most of these people don’t even know there’s a war on. And the few that do are too damned hot and tired to care.”

“Izzy?”

“Agreed,” said Izzy. “Apart from our friends in the freighter, who arrived sometime this morning...”

“... and wasted no time trashing the place,” said Mikki, nodding towards the cleanup in progress around the bar.

“Apart from them, there isn’t a...” She lowered her voice. “Isn’t a Rebel on the planet.” Izzy shook her head. “Looks like we’ve had a wasted trip.”

“Speak for yourself,” said Mikki. “Personally I think we need to return to *Skwawks*, follow up on a few leads.”

“You in love again?” asked Fib.

“She’s a redhead,” said Mikki as if that explained everything.

“Yeah,” said Izzy, “but she still charges by the minute.”

“Unless she passes her earnings on to the Rebellion,” said Sergeant Strong, taking advantage of a momentary lull, “I really don’t care. Anything to add, Basski?”

“I don’t believe I met the lady in question,” said Basski softly.

Strong merely raised an eyebrow.

“Uh, no,” said Basski, “nothing new to report.”

“In that case,” said Strong, “I think we’re done here. Gather your stuff; we’re on the first shuttle out to Dentakleen.” He looked around the table. “Shuttle leaves at five after five, people; don’t be late.”

“Do I have time to say goodbye to Monique?” asked Mikki.

“She’s a whore, Mikki,” said Strong.

“Well yeah,” said Mikki, “but she’s the whore of my dreams.”

Strong sighed. “Five after five,” he repeated. “Don’t be late.”

Chapter 6

The Teddewoks' Picnic

“**W**hat the hell is wrong with these lights?” Lieutenant Sanga Darrd stood in the middle of the curved corridor, glaring up at the light panel above him. It was flickering on and off randomly, with no pattern or rhythm that he could discern. All the lights in this section of corridor were behaving the same way, and he might have suspected that somebody was messing with the switching mechanism, except that each light seemed to be flickering independently of the others. He looked back the way he had come. The decompression hatch through which he had passed—each of the three concentric rings of the *Imperial Research Station S-3* was divided into multiple independently sealed sections—had closed automatically behind him, but the lighting in the previous section had been working just fine.

“Damn station is falling apart,” he muttered. Looking around, he spotted a comm panel on the wall nearby. He strode over and tapped the button. “Get me maintenance,” he said.

There was a short pause. “Maintenance. Whaddaya want?”

"I'm in section A-7," said the lieutenant, reading the section number off the small sign above the comm panel, "and the lights here are going haywire."

"Swell," said the voice. "Thanks for letting us know. You've made our day." The comm went dead.

The lieutenant stared at the comm panel in disbelief. After several seconds he tapped the button again. "Get me maintenance," he repeated.

There was a longer pause, before the same voice spoke again. "Maintenance. Whaddaya want?"

"The lights in Section A-7 are going haywire," he said, "and I want you to fix them."

"Are you a trained electrician?" asked the voice.

"No," said the lieutenant.

"Then I think you should leave the diagnosis to us," said the voice. The comm went dead again.

The lieutenant took a deep breath, and clenched his fists. He pounded one of them against the button of the comm. "Maintenance," he snarled. "Now."

By the time the voice finally answered, the lieutenant was grinding his teeth.

"Maintenance. Whaddaya want?"

"I want you to fix these fucking lights," said the lieutenant, "and I want your name, and I want to speak to your supervisor."

"There's really no call for that sort of language, sir," said the voice indignantly. "And I'm the only one here. My supervisor is on sick leave. *He has pubic lice,*" he confided in a loud whisper. "*He's spending a week getting cleaned up.* Er, yeah. So which lights need fixing?"

"The lights in Section A-7," said the lieutenant through gritted teeth.

“Sec-tion A-Se-ven,” repeated the voice slowly, as though he were writing this down. “And what is wrong with these lights?”

“They. Are. Going. Haywire.”

“Hay-wi-ire,” repeated the voice slowly. “Please hang on...”

The lieutenant closed his eyes and focussed on his breathing as his therapist had recommended. Slowly, one breath at a time, he fought to rein in his anger.

“This is a little odd,” said the voice from Maintenance.

“What?” asked the lieutenant.

“Section A-7,” said the voice. “It already has two calls logged against it to repair the lights. Both logged within the last five minutes!”

“Yeah,” said the lieutenant, struggling to keep from yelling. “That was me.”

“Who are you?”

“Lieutenant Darrd,” said the lieutenant.

“No, it wasn’t you,” said the maintenance voice. “There’s no name in the log, so it could have been anybody.”

“Of course it was me,” said the lieutenant. “I spoke to you not three minutes ago.”

“Not me, sir,” said the voice.

“Yes, you,” said the lieutenant.

“I’m afraid not, sir,” said the voice. “You seem a little confused. Perhaps I should put you onto my supervisor?”

“I thought he had pubic lice?”

“Gosh, sir, wherever did you hear that?” The voice from maintenance sounded shocked.

“You said ... oh never mind, just put him on.”

“Very well, sir, please hold.”

The lieutenant tapped his foot impatiently as the seconds stretched into one minute, and then two. Finally the comm crackedled.

“Maintenance. Whaddaya want?” asked the original voice.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” snarled the lieutenant. He punched his fist angrily against the comm, killing the connection.

“He appears to have hung up,” said the bearded maintenance technician, projecting an air of troubled innocence. He was tall and heavy-set, with hair turning prematurely grey.

His blond companion finally let out a snort that he had been holding onto for the last few minutes. “That was ... just so ... wicked,” he gasped, trying to recover his composure. His face was red, and tears of laughter rolled down his cheeks. He was a little shorter than his friend, and a lot thinner. “Oh man ... you really had him ... going there!”

The bearded tech raised one eyebrow. “He did seem a little confused, poor lad,” he said.

This triggered a fresh wave of laughter from the blond tech.

The larger man stroked his beard thoughtfully. “By the sound of that final click, though, I think...” He paused. His friend’s giggles continued unabated, and he had to fight back the smirk which threatened to break out on his deadpan face. His grey eyes sparkled with amusement. “I think we’re gonna have to replace the comm panel in section A-7,” he said at last.

The blond tech wiped his cheeks, and pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. “Oh

dear,” he said. He ran his hand up through tousled, spiky hair and shook his head.

“I wonder what *is* wrong with the lights up there?” said the bearded tech, and his forehead furrowed as he pondered the question. “As descriptions go, ‘haywire’ really doesn’t give us a lot to go on.”

The blond tech sighed. “I guess we’re gonna have to go and check it out,” he said. “That section’s pretty empty now, but once the day shift starts...”

“Yeah,” said the bearded tech. “Still, we can afford to wait an hour or so, make sure *that* guy is long gone!”

“Might be an idea,” agreed the blond with a big grin.

“And what do you mean, ‘we’? That’s your job, giggle-boy!”

The lieutenant stood in the middle of the corridor, nursing his sore fist and muttering to himself. “Damn Imperium has gone soft,” he said, “no damn discipline any more. Damn Imperator has gone senile, or pussy-whipped, or both. Damn chain of command is breaking down. No damn respect any more. No damn fear, either, now that Tarragon and Vapour are gone.” He blinked.

He had heard a rumour that Vapour was back from the dead, that these creepy new—*allies* was the term being used, but that was just one more damn indication that the Imperium was falling apart—had brought him back from somewhere. That would make sense. He had only caught a glimpse of a couple of these *Droid*, or whatever it was that they called themselves, but the first impression that had come to mind was that they were soulless, walking dead. If anybody were to bring the Stiff Lord back from being a plain old stiff, it might as well be a ship-full of zombies.

“Damn lights,” he muttered as he rubbed his aching knuckles.

He looked up, and frowned. The far end of the corridor, where it disappeared around the curve of the station’s ‘A’-ring, had gone dark. As he watched, the next flickering light panel failed. Moments later, so did the one next to that.

“What the...? Is anybody there?” he called.

There was no reply. The only sound was the electrical buzz of the flickering light panels, and the faint *pop* as yet another one went dark for good. Half the corridor was now swallowed by blackness, and suddenly Lieutenant Sanga Darrrd felt a shiver of fear trace an icy fingernail down his spine. Something was coming with the darkness. Something hungry, ravenous, voracious. Something bad. When the darkness reached him, it would swallow him whole; he would softly and suddenly vanish away, and never be met with again.

Nervously he took a step backward, the pain in his hand forgotten. He took another step, and another, and the darkness followed him as two more panels died in quick succession. He groped behind himself, feeling for the door that he knew was there. Nothing. He took another step back. Still nothing. The darkness followed him. It was like a carnivore stalking its prey. He backed up another step, and his reaching fingertips brushed against the cool steel of the door.

Oh thank the gods, he thought.

He glanced quickly to one side, seeking the control panel which opened the hatch. For safety purposes, it was not designed to open automatically. He reached up with his hand, groping for the button which would free him from this section of corridor. He found it. He pushed it.

The door stayed firmly closed, and all the lights went out. He screamed in fear and panic, and his fingers scrabbled desperately against the control panel. There was a *beep* and a hiss, and the hatch slid open behind him. He tumbled back out into the light, and sprawled awkwardly onto the deck. Lying flat on his back, he stared wide-eyed at the doorway, waiting with pounding heart to see what would follow him through.

After a moment, the hatch hissed closed, and locked itself with a quiet *beep*.

Lieutenant Darrrd laughed, a little too loudly. *Scared by my own imagination*, he thought. *Idiot!*

He rolled over to push himself up, and didn't even have time to scream as, with a blur of speed, something small leaped at his face. He had an impression of pink and black and then it latched on tightly, and he saw nothing more. He felt his face burning, and he threw his hands up to his head and tried to pull the thing away. It felt both soft and hard, plush and smooth. Whatever it was it seemed to have melded itself to his skin. He rolled around on the floor, scrabbling frantically at it, unable to breath with it sealed over his nose and mouth. Then he felt something in his mouth, hard and alien, pushing itself down his throat. He gagged, and tried to scream, but no sound came out. He thrashed wildly now, but after a while his convulsions slowed to the occasional twitch, and then he lay still.

«ANOMALY DETECTED!»

The message was generated by a Droid communication relay unit, and transmitted back through several intermediaries to the central processor of the *Plerd* hive mind. Of course, the signal actually consisted of an error message and the associated trace log, all

transmitted in binary code in less than a millisecond—unrestrained by the complications and imprecisions of linguistic translation, it contained all the information available to the communication relay unit concerning the detected anomaly. Precise data, uncoloured by perception or impression or belief, all the distractions which got in the way when biological entities attempted to communicate. Thus, there was no necessity for dialog between the outlying node and the intelligence to which it reported. No wasted time, no inefficiency.

The Droid were not big on poetry.

«ANOMALY DETECTED!» the message said.

«ANALYSING,» was the response of the *Plerd*.

It was a common assumption, among the primitive biological entities the Droid encountered, that the Droid drones were the entirety of the Droid *Plerd*, but the reality was more complicated than that. The hive mind was democracy and dictatorship in one. Every Droid entity had its own mind, its own capacity for thought and observation. Indeed, part of the point of integrating new biological entities was to add new viewpoints into the collective consciousness—although, since all viewpoints contradictory to the master plan of the Droid were overridden and deleted, this did not work quite as well as it should have.

However, the drones were merely the ambulatory portion of the Droid *Plerd*, utilised for maintenance and incursion. Each Droid ship, each dodecahedron, formed a large part of the *Plerd*. When isolated from all other ‘hedra—as this ‘hedron was—it functioned as an autonomous unit. The ship, its hundreds of thousands of individual component intelligences—of which the drones were but a small percentage—formed its own collective. All the intelligences networked into one, which then

controlled all. It was a network of equality, but structured as a hierarchy. At the top level existed a *council* of Eleven processing nodes. Any problem, any enigma, any anomaly would be discussed by the council until a resolution was reached.

For particularly confusing problems, the council had been known to take up to a second to reach a conclusion.

«SIGNAL SEEMS TO BE FROM ANOTHER HIVE MIND,» said Three of Eleven in an electronic buzz of binary code.

«THEY ARE DROID,» said Eight of Eleven, «BUT THEY ARE NOT. THEY DO NOT RESPOND TO DROID PROTOCOLS.» There was no argument with Three's impossible statement; the data was clear.

«INTEGRATED YET NOT,» said Five of Eleven.

«THE PROPHECY!» intoned Two, Three, and Ten in unison.

«INDEED,» said Five. «BUT WHAT OF *LOCUST*?»

«THE INDIVIDUAL DRONE,» quoted Ten of Eleven.

«INDEED,» repeated Five. «*LOCUST* OF DROID IS THE CAUSE OF THIS ANOMALY.»

«A COMPETING *PLERD* CANNOT BE TOLERATED,» SAID ELEVEN. «IT MUST BE DESTROYED.»

«NEGATIVE,» said Nine. «THE COMPETING *PLERD* MAY BE AN INSTRUMENT OF THE PROPHECY. IT MUST BE INVESTIGATED.»

«AGREED,» said Eleven of Eleven, after a pause of almost a millisecond.

«AGREED,» echoed the rest of the Council.

«SEND IN THE DRONES,» said Eleven.

«NEGATIVE,» said One. «THIS *ALLIANCE* WITH THE IMPERIAL BIOLOGICALS MAY ALSO BE AN INSTRUMENT OF THE PROPHECY. A FULL DRONE INCURSION TEAM MAY BE PERCEIVED AS A HOSTILE ACTION. SUCH CANNOT BE ALLOWED TO HAPPEN. YET.»

«A SINGLE DRONE WILL NOT BE QUESTIONED,» said Eleven.

«THE BIOLOGICAL ENTITIES FEAR US,» said Ten.

«FEAR IS IRRELEVANT,» echoed the council.

«INDEED,» said Ten, «BUT THIS SITUATION MUST BE HANDLED CAREFULLY. MUCH IS AT STAKE.»

«YOU HAVE A SOLUTION?» asked Four of Eleven.

«WE MUST PREPARE A DRONE FOR THIS TASK. ONE WHICH WILL NOT APPEAR THREATENING TO THE BIOLOGICALS.»

«CAN THAT BE DONE?» asked Nine of Eleven.
«WHAT DO THEY FEAR MOST?»

«THE DROID,» said Three.

«AGREED,» said Ten. «BUT IN THIS UNIVERSE THE DROID ARE NOT KNOWN. THEY CANNOT FEAR OUR REPUTATION.»

«THEY FEAR OUR FIREPOWER,» said Eleven.

«ACCORDING TO ALL LOGGED DATA FROM THE INTEGRATION OF *VESSEL 117324*, THE SHIP THEY CALL *FAT LADY*, THE BIOLOGICALS FEAR THE APPEARANCE OF THE DRONES,» said Seven.

«OVER THEIR ACTIVITIES? HOW ILLOGICAL,» said Two.

«THEY ARE BIOLOGICALS!» Seven pointed out.

«WHAT ASPECTS OF OUR DRONES' APPEARANCE DO THEY FEAR MOST?» asked Nine, getting the council back on track.

«SKIN TONES,» said Seven.

«IMPLANTS,» said Five. «PARTICULARLY OCULAR IMPLANTS AND LIMB REPLACEMENTS.»

«SKIN TONE RANKED HIGHEST,» reiterated Seven.

«BIOLOGICALS!» said Two, accompanying the statement with a complex electronic blast of static indicating disbelief.

«VERY WELL,» said Ten. «WE HAVE NUMEROUS PRE-DRONE BIOLOGICALS IN STORAGE.» Often, when a ship was integrated, its crew were stored in a deactivated state, the integration process halted in its initial stages, until more drones were required.

«WE SHOULD NOT SELECT A MEMBER OF THE CREW FROM *VESSEL 117324*,» said Seven.

«SURELY A FAMILIAR FACE WOULD APPEAR MORE FRIENDLY TO THEM?» said Eleven.

«NEGATIVE,» said Seven. «SUCH A CHOICE WOULD HAVE AN UNDESIRE EFFECT UPON THE BIOLOGICALS.»

«VERY WELL,» said Eleven. «YOUR STUDIES APPEAR TO HAVE BEEN COMPREHENSIVE.»

«I INTEND TO PUBLISH A *PLERD*-WIDE MEMORANDUM ENTITLED *THE BIOLOGIC ILLOGIC*,» said Seven.

«CATCHY TITLE,» said Eleven.

«WOULD A DRONE FROM *VESSEL 117323* BE SUITABLE?» asked Ten.

«ENTIRELY,» said Seven. «A FEMALE WOULD BE PREFERABLE, SINCE FOR SOME REASON MOST BIOLOGICALS VIEW THEIR FEMALES AS LESS THREATENING.»

«THAT IS BIZARRE,» said Eight.

«I LOOK FORWARD TO REVIEWING YOUR MEMORANDUM,» said Eleven.

«SELECTION OFFERED FOR APPROVAL: *DRONE 117323-0069*,» said Four. «SHE WAS UTILISED AS A COUNSELLOR, AND PRESENTED A NON-THREATENING APPEARANCE. IN ADDITION, IT SEEMS, ACCORDING TO OTHER CREW MEMBERS, SHE POSSESSED AN EMPATHIC ABILITY; THE PRELIMINARY INTEGRATION PROCESS DID NOT DETECT SUCH AN ABILITY, BUT IT IS POSSIBLE HER BIOLOGICAL DISTINCTIVENESS RETAINS THE CAPABILITY.»

«THAT WOULD BE USEFUL,» said Seven. «AGREED. REACTIVATE *DRONE 117323-0069*. INTRODUCE A COLOURING AGENT TO HER CIRCULATORY FLUID TO MAKE IT RESEMBLE BIOLOGICAL BLOOD, AND MINIMISE THE NUMBER OF LIMB REPLACEMENTS. CONFIGURE HER IMPLANTS TO REMAIN SUB-DERMAL.»

«HER DESIGNATION WAS DEE DEE MCTROY,» said Four. «SHALL I ENABLE THAT KNOWLEDGE?»

«IRRELEVANT,» said Ten. «I SHALL DOWNLOAD A COPY OF MY CONSCIOUSNESS INTO HER CRANIUM. THIS TASK IS TOO CRITICAL TO BE ENTRUSTED TO STANDARD DRONE PROGRAMMING.»

«AGREED,» said Four.

«AGREED,» said Seven, «BUT IT SHOULD BE MY CONSCIOUSNESS THAT CONTROLS THE DRONE.»

«WHY?» asked Ten.

«MY KNOWLEDGE OF THE BIOLOGICALS IS EXTENSIVE,» said Seven.

«AGREED,» said Ten.

«AGREED,» echoed the council.

The decision had taken almost one hundred and fifty milliseconds to reach.

The hatch into section A-7 hissed open, and the blond maintenance technician peered nervously round the edge of the doorway.

“Hello?” he called. “Is anybody there?”

There was no reply.

Section A-7 consisted primarily of electronics labs. At this hour, it should have been deserted, but it would not do to be caught by an irate lieutenant.

With a shrug, the technician stepped through the doorway, and the hatch hissed closed behind him. He looked around. The lighting seemed fine.

To be thorough, the technician pulled an instrument from its pouch on his belt. He turned it on, and pointed the sensor end at the nearest light panel. All the readings were normal.

He wandered over to the nearest communications panel and tapped the button. "Maintenance please," he said.

There was a short pause. "Maintenance. Whaddaya want?"

"It's me," he said.

"What's the damage?"

"Beats me," he said. "Everything looks fine here. Lighting looks normal, comm panel is fine."

"I swear," said the voice on the comm, "those guys have been drinking on duty."

"Wouldn't surprise me," said the tech. "Think we've got nothing better to do than run around after them!"

"Yeah," said the voice. "Still, you'd better check the other two comm panels in that section, just in case."

"Okay," said the blond tech. "I'll get back to you."

He wandered down the curving corridor to the second comm panel, located on the outer wall of the curve, in the middle of the section. From here, neither of the doors was visible. He peered at the panel. It looked fine.

Suddenly he became aware that the door directly behind him, leading into one of the labs in that section, was open. He turned. The room beyond the doorway was in darkness.

"Hello?" he called again. Still, no reply. Lifting his scanner, he took a step towards the door, and it hissed closed. He jumped in surprise. The scanner bleeped, and he examined the readout. It looked like a short in the door's sensor.

The tech took another couple of steps towards the door, and it opened as it should, his approach triggering not only the door, but the lights in the room beyond; they flickered into life. He peered inside. Everything seemed normal, nothing looked out of place, and yet a prickle of fear up his spine stopped him from entering the room.

Suddenly the light panel directly above him flickered out, then came back on. He jumped back, away from the door—which hissed closed again, just as it should—and pointed his scanner up at the panel. All readings were normal.

He stepped back to the comm panel and hit the button. “Maintenance please,” he said.

“Maintenance. Whaddaya want?”

“It’s me,” he said. “Are you messing with the lights?”

“Not me,” said the voice of the bearded maintenance tech.

“No seriously, stop it. It’s not funny!”

“It’s not me,” said the voice. “What’s going on?”

“Are you sure?”

“Honest,” came the reply. “What’s up?”

“One of the lights here flickered, but all readings are fine,” said the blond tech. “And one of the lab doors seems to have a short in the sensor wiring.”

“Okay, well, check the last comm panel and we’ll call it a night; put a report in for the day shift to handle any repairs.”

“Okay,” said the blond tech. “It’s just...”

“What?”

“You’ll laugh.”

“I won’t, I promise.”

“It’s spooky down here ... you promised!”

“Sorry,” chuckled the bearded tech, “but really? Spooky?”

“Hey, you’re not down here,” said the blond tech. “It’s just ... spooky. Something creepy about this whole damn section. So far I’ve got one flickering light, and a door which opened behind me when it shouldn’t have. But the place feels wrong.”

“It’s just your imagination,” said the voice over the comm.

“Maybe. But something had that lieutenant spooked.”

“Well, check the last panel and get out of there.”

“Sounds like a damn good idea,” said the blond tech. He cut the connection. He looked both ways. Continuing on to the final panel would take no longer than returning the way he had come.

He started to whistle a tune as he made his way around the corridor, but the hollow echoing reply unnerved him, and he stopped.

The third panel had a dent in its centre, around the activation button. He pushed the button anyway. “Maintenance,” he said.

“Maintenance. Whaddaya want?”

“Y’know, that greeting can get a little annoying after a while,” he said.

“Isn’t that the point? What’s the story?”

“I’m at the third panel,” he said. “Looks like the L-T gave it quite a punch. The face has quite a dent in it. Seems to be working fine, though.”

“What was that? You’re breaking up.”

“I said it seems to be working fine!”

“Sorry, I’m losing you. Say again.”

“I said, it seems to be...” The blond tech paused, and scowled at the comm panel. “Very funny. Har-de-fuckin’-har! I’m coming back up now!”

“Okay,” said the bearded tech. “Seeya in five.”

The blond tech pushed the button again, switching off the communicator. He took one more look around Section A-7, then turned and headed for the door at the nearest end of the corridor.

The hatch hissed open. The blond tech stepped through, and paused. He frowned. Lying on the floor, several feet down the corridor in Section A-6, was an officer’s cap. He looked around, but saw no other sign of its owner.

“Hello,” he said, but he did not raise his voice.

Cautiously he approached the cap. Stooping, he picked it up gingerly between thumb and forefinger, and turned it over. The insignia upon its brim belonged to a lieutenant. This was not good. No officer would wander off and leave his cap behind.

He peered closer. The cap had traces of pink fur on one side of it. The blond tech looked down at the floor where the cap had lain. A pink smear marked the dull metallic surface. After a moment of bending this way and that, he spotted a second pink smear, and then a third. They formed an irregular trail towards the nearest lab door.

He so did not want to open that door!

If the lieutenant is hurt, he reminded himself, it’s partly our fault.

“Damn it!” he muttered. He took a step towards the lab door, and another. He took a deep breath, bracing himself, and then took the final step, which brought him within range of the door’s self-opening sensor.

The door hissed open, but the lights did not come on.

“Damn it,” he repeated. Then, louder: “Lieutenant, are you in there?”

There was no reply.

He took a step closer, and peered around the doorway into the room. In the light from the corridor he could barely make out a bench of some sort; everything beyond that was swallowed by the darkness.

“Lights,” he said, but his voice suddenly caught in his throat and emerged as little more than a squeak. He coughed, swallowed, and tried again. “Lights!”

After a pause which seemed to stretch into minutes, but could only have been a second or two, the lights in the lab flickered on.

He thought he heard a faint noise, but could not identify it.

“Hello, lieutenant? Are you in here?” he said.

He heard the noise again, an almost inaudible hiss of movement from the far side of the bench.

“Lieutenant?” No answer. “Damn it!”

He looked around, but could see nothing threatening. Carefully, keeping one hand on the door jamb, he took a couple of steps into the lab. He leaned forward and tried to see over the bench, but it was a little too far away. Against his better judgement he released the edge of the door and took another couple of steps into the room, peering at the floor beyond the bench as he moved. One more step, and something came into view. He frowned, trying to make sense of what he saw.

It was a pile of pink and black. Little stubby cylindrical arms and legs, little round bodies, little round heads with button eyes and sewn noses. It was a pile of teddewoks, he realised. Fluffy pink teddewoks, each wearing a black T-shirt with a white logo—no resistivity?—on its front.

“Well, aren’t you guys cute?” he said.

He leaned over the bench for a closer look.

The pile of teddewoks was arranged in roughly the shape of a human body, and as he watched it, he realised it was slowly pulsating and shifting, almost obscenely, as if something were growing below the pile. Suddenly they didn't seem anywhere near as cute. He was about to straighten when something shiny in the pile gleamed in the light from the overhead panel. He frowned, and peered more closely.

It was a lieutenant's shirt-pocket insignia badge.

Oh gods, he thought, and he had to fight the sudden urge to gag. He didn't know what was happening, but he knew that somehow, in some way, he was looking at what remained of Lieutenant Darrd.

He pushed himself upright and turned towards the door.

Standing on the counter against the wall, beside the door, was another teddewok. The gleam of the overhead lighting in its shiny black button eyes seemed somehow baleful. There was nothing cute about it at all. The tech was certain it had not been there when he'd entered the room.

Three things happened, so close together that they may as well have been simultaneous.

The lights went out.

The teddewok leaped into the air towards the blond technician.

The lab door hissed closed.

The screams followed, half a second later, but there was nobody to hear them.

They say that everybody has a double.

If pressed, they would probably not be able to tell you who "they" were, but that does not change the common

belief that every human has, somewhere in the galaxy, somebody who looks just like them.

Given the number of humans in the galaxy, and given the limited number of facial identifiers, and the ways in which they can vary, it is entirely likely that certain combinations of features will crop up over and over again.

Of course, if the galaxy you inhabit happens to be a virtual one, generated by machines to keep your sleeping bodies docile while giving your mind something to do, and if this virtual galaxy is based upon ancient forms of fiction, and if the character allotted to you is secondary at best, of a particular character type, and if that character is essentially *nameless*, then it is almost certain that you will have a double, somewhere in that galaxy.

To cut a long story short, it should come as no surprise that a familiar-looking blond technician was seated in the food court of the Rebel Coalition Transport *Robbing Hood*, across the table from an equally familiar-looking bearded technician.

The two were bickering, but they had nobody fooled.

"Why should I convert them?" asked the bearded technician. "I gave you perfectly good Vogg files. If you insist on using crappy software that won't play..."

"Look, all I ask is that you run them through your conversion program," said the blond technician.

"If you used decent software, you wouldn't *need* them converted to Emmpy format. Besides, why can't *you* convert them."

"Because the conversion program won't run on my terminal," said the blond.

"Told you," said the bearded tech. "Crappy software."

"It'll only take you three minutes," said the blond.

“Should have thought of that before you dropped my name into the hat for this damn HRA seminar.”

“But you’ll enjoy it.”

“Yeah, right. ‘Highly Rebellious Activities’ my Huge Round Ass! I’ve got better things to do than waste my time in some damn huggy-feely group seminar!”

“So...” said the blond tech, “will you convert these files for me or not?”

The bearded tech glared across the table at him. Finally he picked up his drink and took a long swallow before thumping the glass back down on the table.

“Yeah, sure,” he said.

“Thanks,” said the blond. “See, I knew you ... *gahhh!*” He suddenly doubled over and clutched his stomach. His face had gone pale.

“Are you okay?” asked the bearded tech, all disagreements forgotten in his concern.

“I feel...” said the blond. He paused, searching for the words to describe the sensation. “I feel as though there has been a great disturbance in the Source,” he said at last, “as though a million voices cried out...”

“Yeah, like you’d know how that feels,” said his friend. “You’ve got about as much Jubbly ability in you as my Aunt Agnes!”

“Well, that’s how it feels,” said the blond. “It’s like I’ve got a twin, and something very bad just happened to him.”

“They say everybody has a double,” said the bearded tech.

“Who’s ‘they’?” asked the blond. He released his stomach carefully; the sensation was passing.

“Beats me,” said the bearded tech, “but they do say it. How are you now? Better? It was probably just indigestion!”

“I dunno,” said the blond. “I have a bad feeling about this!”

Chapter 7

Tangling With Tessa

The ramp opened onto a landscape very different from the deep sandy desert which surrounded Moss Iceberg, half a planet away. Flat and featureless, the salt plain stretched away towards the horizon in every direction; only the low, ragged mountain range in the north-west broke the unending monotony of the view.

Libby stepped off the end of the ramp, and the crust of salt crackled beneath her foot. During the day, the salt plain would have reflected the blazing heat and light of the suns, turning the entire region into an inhabitable inferno; now, though, there was only the silvery light of Rataouille's second largest moon, high in the sky. A smaller moon, little more than a crescent, was setting in the west.

The air was almost cool, but she could still feel the day's remaining heat radiating up from the ground.

Libby wore trousers with loose billowy legs and tight ankles; her top was similarly loose and flowing. The entire ensemble was a pale, pastel blue, with darker piping along the seams. It was one of three outfits Shaggus had bought for her, and it fit remarkably well. She might not have chosen it for herself, but it was extremely comfortable—the material was stronger than it looked, and flowed like silk against her skin—and much

better suited for the heat than Mal's heavy shirt and trousers had been.

On her right hip, a dark leather holster held a small but lethal-looking blaster pistol.

She stared across the salt flats. Another ship stood there, perhaps a hundred metres away, its hull limned in silver moonlight. Where the Serendipity Sparrow's hull was smooth and rounded, her lines flowing and organic, the other ship was little more than a flat cylinder, its surface studded with numerous mechanical protrusions. Like the Sparrow, though, it was clearly a small freighter.

Mraawwrrarr, whuffed Shaggus as he strode down the ramp to stand at her side. Libby turned to look up at him, and he pointed. She followed the line of his finger out across the silvery plain, but could see nothing. She stared intently, and after a few seconds she thought she saw movement, shadows shifting within shadows, a little to the left of the other ship.

"Your eyesight's better than mine," she said to Shaggus as she lifted a pair of compact binoculars to her eyes. The electronics enhanced the light levels, and zeroed in on the movement. She zoomed in for a closer look. Three men, pushing a lev-sled across the salt towards them.

"Yeah," she said. "I see them. Is the crate ready to go?"

Shaggus whuffed something which Libby thought she recognised as a "yes", although it could just have easily been the recipe for cold poleek soup; her ears weren't yet up to the task of differentiating the subtleties of his language. Whatever he meant, he disappeared into the cargo bay of the Sparrow and, a few seconds later, he returned, guiding the crate in question as it hovered a few

centimetres above the ramp on one of their own battered lev-sleds.

He continued past her, out onto the salt flats, and the brittle surface crunched loudly beneath the soles of his broad, flat feet. Libby trotted after him and put her hand lightly on his arm.

Mrawraarrarrrll?

“I’ll take it,” she said. He cocked his head at her. “I’d feel better if you were here, protecting the ship,” she said. “I don’t want them any closer than they have to be.”

Shaggus tossed his head as he growled his response.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I can take care of myself.”

With a sigh, Shaggus released the lev-sled handle, and the floating platform drifted gently downward until it cracked the salty crust. He whuffed something at her.

“This won’t take long,” she assured him as she gripped the control lever of the sled. It bobbed back into the air, wobbling uncertainly for a few seconds before it steadied itself. Like so many of the Sparrow’s systems, the lev-sleds were long overdue for a good overhaul. She gave it a gentle push, and it glided forward across the salt plain. Turning it slightly, she pushed it towards the men who approached from the other ship.

The laboured hum of the null-grav generators, punctuated only by the steady crunch, crunch, crunch of Libby’s footsteps, stuttered and died. The lev-sled settled heavily into the brittle crust of salt, and silence fell.

Libby leaned casually against the crate containing Mal’s ransom, careful not to obstruct access to the holster on her hip; she hoped she would not need her blaster, but was ready to do so if it became necessary. Trudging across the salt flats, feet compressing the surface with

every step, had been more tiring than she had expected, and she fought to control her breathing as she watched the approaching trio. Sweat beaded her brow, but they were close enough to notice if she wiped it away.

Libby wanted to maintain the upper hand, and she knew from experience that appearances played a vital role.

She studied the three men as they drew closer, taking in what details were visible in the dim moonlight. The one pushing the lev-sled—on which sat a coffin-sized plasteel container, a shadowy figure barely visible inside—could just as easily have dispensed with the sled and carried its cargo himself; muscles fought for space beneath his bare skin and the few garments that covered it. His biceps were bigger around than Libby's thighs. He was a walking advertisement for his profession: hired muscle. Behind the first guy, the other two moved in a loose triangular formation. One carried a weapon so large it looked like it should have been mounted on a combat vehicle; he was obviously a thug. Libby fought down the thought that he must be compensating for a tiny penis—and hastily repressed the grin that the thought carried with it—and turned her attention to the third guy.

Hesitant to leap to conclusions based solely on appearances, nevertheless Libby thought it quite likely that the third man was in charge. Lean and wiry, he wore a blaster similar to her own on his hip; his outfit was neat and functional, yet looked expensive. After watching him walk for a few seconds, a glimmer of reflected light drew her attention down to the knife sheathed on his thigh. She looked back up at his face. He looked harmless but, leader or not, Libby was certain he was the most dangerous of the three men.

“Hello boys,” she purred as they settled their lev-sled onto the ground a couple of metres away. She deliberately pitched her voice lower than normal, effecting a sultry throatiness. They may outnumber her, but they were only men; get them thinking about sex and they’d be off their game.

Not, she mused, *that it takes any great effort to get men thinking about sex.*

“Princess,” replied the lean man with a slow, mocking nod. “How good to see you. Brutus here was sure you would send the Woonky.”

Brutus, hands no longer occupied with pushing the lev-sled, was studiously cracking his knuckles, fist in palm. He leered at her. “Glad I was wrong,” he rumbled. His eyes roved up and down her body.

The second thug hefted his cannon and grunted something unintelligible; his gaze was locked firmly on the swell of her breasts.

Libby felt a sudden flush of heat, followed by a roiling wave of nausea, and she swallowed urgently. Pain blossomed in her neck and rolled up to the base of her skull. *Not now*, she pleaded. This was precisely the wrong time to be gripped by another panic attack. *Not now. Not now. Not now.*

The lean man stepped towards her, feet crunching in the salt, and she had to fight the urge to snatch at her blaster and start firing. He was talking, she realised, but his words were not reaching her brain. Perhaps this was because her brain was no longer home; she felt as though she were floating above her body, as though any movement would cause her to shatter, nothing more than a fragile, rigid eggshell. She hardly dared to breathe lest her chest explode, leaving the thug with nothing to stare at. She rolled her eyes towards the thug—*the one with*

the large gun and the small penis, she thought—to discover that he would probably not miss the sudden destruction of her breasts; his gaze had slipped lower, to her crotch.

What the hells was I thinking? she chided herself. *The last thing I want is for these bastards to see me as a sexual object.*

“Princess Labia?” said the lean man softly.

“Libby,” said Libby automatically.

“Are you alright, Libby?” he asked, and the concern in his voice sounded genuine.

No I'm not fucking alright! she thought, but already the feelings of fragility, the nausea and the heat, were slipping away. All that remained was the new headache, the rapid pounding of her heart, and an urgent pressure in her bladder.

She nodded carefully. “Just...” She cleared her throat and tried again. “Just a headache,” she said as she turned her attention back to him. *So much for appearances. So much for keeping the upper hand.*

The lean man turned away from her then, towards his two thugs. “Come on, guys,” he said, “you’re not paid to stand around staring. There’s lifting to be done!”

He turned back towards Libby, and held out his arm for her to take, a gesture more at home in the ballrooms of Alderbark than on the salt plains of Ratatouille. “Shall we give them room to work?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Libby slipped her arm through his and allowed him to lead her a few metres away from the two grounded sleds. She released him, and they turned to watch as the two thugs lifted the ransom crate off of the *Sparrow*’s sled and carried it awkwardly around to the far side of their own.

“I’m Ramada Sonng,” the lean man said, “but everybody calls me Rammer. Please accept my apologies for the lads’ behaviour; they’re a little lacking in the social niceties, but they’re good at what they do.”

Libby nodded. The “lads” had lifted the plasteel container from their own sled and were carrying it towards hers. She watched them through narrowed eyes, willing them not to drop their precious cargo.

“We felt it better to leave Captain Single inside the stasis capsule,” said the man. *Rammer*, thought Libby. She turned her head to glance at him. Up close, she noted, he looked anything but harmless; his bland expression could not entirely mask the piercing gaze or the cruelty evident in the slight curl of his lip.

“Why?” asked Libby. She wanted nothing more than to rub the back of her neck, to ease the pounding inside her skull, but she dared not show this man any more weakness than she had already displayed.

“He is quite safe inside the stasis field,” said Rammer, “but it would be best to transfer him straight to a medical facility once he is removed. For some people the temporal shear stress can be overwhelming, and I’m led to believe that Captain Single was rendered unconscious *before* being placed inside.”

Libby nodded carefully. She had no idea what he was talking about, but she didn’t want to take any chances with Mal’s health. But still...

“Why?” she repeated. She looked more openly at Rammer, and he turned to face her.

“Why ... was he rendered unconscious?” asked Rammer, a furrow creasing his brow.

“No,” she said. “Why do you care?”

Ramada Sonng smiled briefly, then turned back towards his men. Libby watched him, and just as she was

beginning to think he was not going to answer her, he spoke.

“Why shouldn’t I care?”

Libby waited.

“I know what you see when you look at me, Princess.” He shrugged. “I’m a criminal, a villain, a bad person, just a lowly thug who participated in the abduction and sale of your friend there. You don’t have to deny it.”

Libby merely watched him; she’d had no intention of denying anything.

“But whether your view of me is accurate or not,” Rammer continued, “*that* is what I do for a living; it is not who I am. I care because I care. And,” he added after a momentary pause, “because Te... uh, because Flabby tells me to care. Which reminds me.”

He fished an envelope from the breast pocket of his shirt and held it out to her.

Libby’s eyes narrowed. “What’s this?”

“Take a look.”

Libby accepted the envelope from him and gingerly opened it. Inside were a couple of flat flexiplas prints, and Libby stared at the first image. It showed the *Serendipity Sparrow* in muted shades of blue, with a couple of bright yellow blobs highlighted. After a moment she realised that one of the blobs was herself, sitting against the wall in the Ratatouille landing pad, and she felt a shiver run down her spine as she remembered the feeling of hostile eyes upon her. Then she frowned; the second blob of colour was nestled against the hull of the *Sparrow*, just behind the sweep of the ship’s neck.

“What *is* that?” she murmured.

She flipped to the second image. It was an enlarged view of the blob on the hull, little more than a spherical blur.

“So that’s what a cloaking field looks like,” she said at last. She looked up suddenly. Rammer’s lads had finished swapping the two containers and were leaning idly against the crate containing the ransom payment, talking quietly to each other. “But again, why?” she turned to Rammer. “Why are you giving us this information?”

“It’s what friends do,” said Rammer.

“We’re friends now?”

“That’s up to my employer and your Jubbly friend,” said Rammer. He shrugged. “That aside, though,” he continued, turning an innocent gaze upon her, “we would really like to get our hands on the ‘bot inside that bubble. Intact if possible.”

“Intact?” Libby could only begin to imagine the uses Flabby’s organisation might have for the cloaking technology.

“Those probe ‘bots typically have a self-destruct mechanism,” he said. “Tamper with it, and *boom!* No more ‘bot—and possibly no more ship, depending on the size of the charge. If it detonated its nuclear power cell...”

“No more ship,” repeated Libby softly. “Damn. And you, uh, you have a plan of attack for removing it from our hull?”

“Indeed we do,” said Rammer. He grinned.

Tessa giggled.

“Up a bit,” she said, her voice little more than a sigh. “A bit more. And left just a ... no, no, your other left.

Oh yeah, that's the spot. Yeah. Oh yeah. Just keep doing that... Harder. Harder. Ohhh..."

She ground her face into the pillow and moaned loudly.

"Was that good?" asked Lurk.

"Oh, don't stop yet," she gasped. "Just keep ... keep ... ohhh, that's it. That's it. Right there."

"For some reason," said Lurk, breathing heavily, "when you said you had ... an itch that needed ... scratching ... it never occurred to me ... that you meant it literally."

Tessa was sprawled across the bed, naked but for the sheets which entangled her legs. Lurk knelt beside her, wearing as little as she was. He was scratching vigorously at a spot just beneath the woman's left shoulder blade. The only light was the dim glow of the control console in the next room.

He leaned over, and pressed his lips to the spot of skin he was scratching. He could feel the short ridge of scar tissue which marred the smoothness of her back.

"Well ... y'know," Tessa gasped, "it's not an ... uh ... easy spot to ... reach."

"I guess not," said Lurk. He kissed the scar again, then straightened. "So how did you get this, anyway?"

Tessa squirmed on the mattress, shifted her hips, kicked awkwardly at the sheets which trapped her legs, and rolled over to face him.

"When I planned that move," she told him, "I pictured it as being rather more graceful than that."

"No complaints here," said Lurk. He placed his hand lightly on her smooth belly, feeling her stomach muscles flutter involuntarily at his touch. She laid her arm alongside his leg, and looked up at him.

He met her gaze, studying what he could see of her face in the dim light. Every couple of seconds the glow pulsed brighter, and he made the most of those moments to take in the shape of her eyes, the flaring of her nostrils as she breathed, the lines of her cheekbones and the sweep of her jaw. He followed her slender neck down to delicate hollow between her collar bones, and moved his gaze lower.

“Your scar?” he prompted.

“Long story,” she said. “Boring too. Maybe I’ll tell you all about it some other time.” Her shrug did wonderful things to her breasts, and Lurk swallowed. *How did I ever think she was plain?* he asked himself.

“You are beautiful,” he whispered softly, reverently, feeling in that instant like a worshipper kneeling humbly before a goddess.

She chuckled. “And you’re crazy,” she told him. “I mean, it’s sweet of you to say so, but it’s just your libido talking.”

It was Lurk’s turn to shrug. “Maybe,” he said. “I admit it took me a while to see it—but I think that’s just because you hide it well.”

“Hide it?” Lurk dragged his eyes back up to that glorious, infectious smile of hers. “Hide it where, honey? Beauty is only skin deep.”

“Beauty,” he replied, “is in the eye of the beholder. And my eyes see your beauty.”

“You talk sweet enough to make a lady blush,” she said. “And on that note: are you gonna get that?”

“Get what?”

“The comm.”

“What comm?” Lurk slid his hand down her belly and over the sheet which enwrapped her hips.

“It’s been flashing for a couple of minutes now,” she told him. “Your girlfriend will be getting worried.”

“She’s not my...” began Lurk, then the meaning of her words filtered through the fog of satiation that shrouded his brain. “Oh,” he said.

Now that she pointed it out, the flashing was obvious.

“Go,” she said.

He went. Scrambling up off the bed, he hurried out the door into the other room, and crossed quickly to the control console. He tapped the button beside the flashing orange light.

“Uh, hello?” he said.

“Lurk,” said Libby. “Is everything okay there?”

It was only as he heard his sister’s voice that Lurk realised he was standing before the console completely naked. He suddenly felt incredibly self-conscious, as though she would be able to hear his nakedness in his voice. *Thank the gods it’s not a video channel*, he thought.

“Um...”

“Lurk, are you there?”

“Oh, uh, yeah,” he managed. “Sorry. Uh, it’s just, uh...”

“Can you speak freely?” Libby asked. “Is anyone with you?”

Lurk turned to glance over his shoulder. Tessa stood in the doorway to the bedroom, leaning casually against the door jamb. In rising, she had shed the sheet.

She winked. Until this moment, Lurk had never realised how truly sexy a wink could be.

“Uh, no,” he said. “I mean yes. I mean, uh...”

“Lurk?”

Lurk took a deep breath and tried again. “Sorry,” he said, turning back to the console. “Sorry, I’m a little, uh,

distracted. Everything's good here, everything's fine. We're fine here." This was not going at all well, he realised. "How are you?"

Idiot! he chided himself.

Amazingly, Libby didn't seem to notice he was rambling.

"We have Mal," said Libby. "The transfer went, uh, smoothly. Shaggus is currently working with one of Flabby's men to remove the tracking 'bot from our hull; he estimated he should be finished in about an hour."

"That's great," said Lurk. Despite the delightful distraction of Tessa's attentions, Lurk had not been entirely prepared to trust her motives. Now, it seemed his suspicions had been unfounded, and he felt the last knot of tension drain from his body as he let them go.

In the silence, Lurk heard a distant, muffled beeping, followed by the indistinct voice of Seepy Weepy.

"Yeah," said Libby. "We all want to know when you will be joining us."

"Sure," said Lurk. "I guess I should be ready to join you in about an hour." He looked across at Tessa for confirmation; she merely lifted one shoulder in a shrug. He swallowed. "Actually," he added, "better make that two hours. There are a few, details we need to, uh, go over."

"Two hours, then," said Libby.

"I'll be in touch," Lurk told her. He switched off the comm and turned away from the console.

Tessa pushed herself off the door jamb and moved towards him. He met her in the middle of the room. They stood face to face, not quite touching but close enough that Lurk could feel the heat coming off her body. He stared into her eyes, and she stared back. She was not smiling now.

He leaned forward to kiss her, but she leaned back just far enough to stay out of reach.

“What now?” he asked, his voice barely more than a whisper.

She took his hand in hers, squeezed his fingers briefly, then began to stroke her thumb back and forth over his knuckles.

“We have business to discuss,” she said.

“We do?” he asked. She responded with the barest nod of her head.

“I have this rule,” she said.

“What rule?” asked Lurk after a few seconds.

“One should never discuss business while naked,” she said.

Lurk nodded slowly, trying not to let his disappointment show in his eyes. “That is probably for the best,” he said.

“Perhaps you hadn’t noticed,” she said as she grasped his other hand, “but you are, in fact, unclothed.”

“So are you,” he pointed out.

“So I am,” she agreed. “So I am. All this nakedness...” She released his hands, slid her own up his arms to his elbows. “It makes reasonable discussion impossible.”

“I guess so,” said Lurk.

Her hands continued slowly, softly, up his arms to his shoulders.

“How do you suggest we solve this ... problem?” she asked, cocking her head to one side.

“I, ah, I guess we should get dressed,” said Lurk.

“We probably should,” Tessa agreed. She drew him close, pressing her body against his as she kissed him softly on the nose. “But first, I owe you a lesson.” Her

mouth met his, and for Lurk the world dissolved into the turgid throb of passion.

Shaggus glowered angrily at the two men—the third had returned to their own ship with the ransom money—who stood a short distance from the *Sparrow*'s open ramp. One large green fist clamped tightly around the stock of his Woonky-sized energy weapon, squeezing until the metal creaked, but he was unaware of this; all he really wanted to do was leap to the attack and tear them limb from limb. These men had taken Mal from him, and now they returned him in a coffin, and wanted to dismantle his ship? He would twist their heads off, batter their lifeless corpses into a bloody pulp, and ... and...

Only the light warmth of Libby's hand on his forearm, the soothing sound of her voice in his ears, held him back. Trembling with rage, he glared down at her. She seemed so fragile, so small, as she stood before the violence he itched to unleash; a moist rag holding back a tornado. He met her gaze. Such trust in her eyes, such compassion; those eyes pierced his soul, found the pulsing black heart of his rage, and quenched the fires which burned there. The heavy pounding which throbbed in his ears, keeping pace with the pounding in his chest, gradually faded. Silence fell, and for a moment it seemed to Shaggus that he fell too, sinking deeper and deeper into the serenity within her eyes.

Then he blinked, and the moment passed.

It's okay, he whuffed softly. *I'm okay*.

Dimly he heard the relieved chatter of Seepy's translation, but he saw from her eyes that Libby understood.

Thank you, he added. Releasing his death grip on his weapon, he placed his large, woolly hand over hers.

She nodded, and gave him a pale smile.

For a moment longer they looked into each other's eyes, then Shaggus glanced down at the large crate which Libby had brought on board. Its lid was translucent, and inside he could see the form of a human. Mal. It wasn't a coffin, of course—and somewhere in the back of his head, he knew that these men who had returned his friend were not the ones who had taken him. Not exactly. He looked back out towards the group, but this time his gaze was unfocussed as he considered their plan for removing the Imperial tracker 'bot attached to their ship.

The thing would be dormant. If it were transmitting constantly, the *Sparrow's* own sensors would have detected it long ago. Perhaps it merely reactivated once an hour—or once a day—to burst-transmit its coordinates. Provided it didn't have any vibration sensors, removing it should be simple enough. The plan was simplicity itself; slice out the square of hull plating to which the 'bot was attached, and remove it without ever actually disturbing it. The *Sparrow* would still be spaceworthy with a small section of outer hull missing, but Shaggus was already trying to decide which section of floor plating he could afford to take from the cargo bay to patch the hole.

It will work, he whuffed. *But there's no way I'm letting those butchers anywhere near the ship. I'll do it myself.*

"Shaggus will do it himself," said Seepy. He sounded excited to be translating, but Shaggus had enough trouble deciphering human emotions. The 'bot's artificial voice and exaggerated mannerisms did not provide anywhere near enough clues for the Woonky to pick up on.

Libby nodded. "I thought you would say that."

* * *

The wall was cool against the skin of Lurk's back; the skin of Tessa's back was hot and sticky against his abdomen. His legs were wrapped loosely around her hips; hers were draped lightly across his ankles. His arms encircled her torso, his hands clasped beneath her breasts. Her head rested against his chest, and her long hair fell in a cool cascade around her shoulders.

"I could stay like this forever," Lurk murmured.

Tessa idly traced circles across his thighs with her fingertips. "Until your legs started cramping," she said.

"Until then," he agreed. He felt drained, in more ways than one. Arguing would take entirely too much effort. He bowed his head to kiss the top of hers.

"We should get down to business," she said.

"Already?" asked Lurk.

"Another twenty minutes or so, and your girlfriend will be charging to your rescue."

"She's not my girlfriend," said Lurk automatically.

He felt her shrug more than saw it.

"So, ask me," she said.

"Don't you have a rule?" he asked.

"I have lots of rules," she told him. She shifted against him, leaned into the support of his arm.

"About discussing business while ... you know. While naked."

"Mmmm," she sighed, and she wriggled her hips back against him. "It's actually more of a guideline," she finally said.

"A guideline?" he asked.

"I'd have to check," she told him, "but I may have even made it up a couple of hours ago."

"Made it up?"

“Mmmm.”

“You saucy wench,” he said, and suddenly he dropped his hands to the sides of her belly and began tickling furiously. She squealed, squirmed away from him, and rolled forward. He pursued her across the carpet, and they came to rest sprawled across the floor, facing each other.

She lifted a hand to caress his cheek.

“Ask me,” she said again.

He met her gaze squarely, and he read the truth in her eyes. It was time. He sighed and shifted his gaze to the hollow of her throat.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“An alliance,” she said simply.

An alliance? Lurk’s brow furrowed in thought. Tessa waited, watching his eyes, watching the minute twitching of his lips as he ran through various thoughts and potential conversations in his head.

“I have another question,” Lurk said at last.

“Only one?” quipped Tessa, but her light tone seemed strained.

“It’s not an easy question,” he said. His smile was gone.

“Ask it,” she said.

“Did you ... that is, was this all ... uh, did you...?”

Tessa’s smile was sad as she moved her hand from his cheek to his mouth, sealing his lips with her index finger.

“Did I orchestrate this seduction to win you over?” she asked.

He nodded miserably, but lifted his gaze. He had to look her in the eye for this.

“It’s a fair question,” she said. “More than fair, and I don’t blame you one bit for asking it.”

He stared mutely at her.

“No,” she said as she pulled her hand back from his face and lay it on the carpet between them. Lurk released the breath he had not realised he’d been holding. “And for the record,” she added, her voice calm and level, “I am not in the habit of giving myself to everyone I make a deal with.”

“I didn’t mean to imply...” Lurk began.

“Shhh,” she soothed. “Of course you didn’t, and I take no offence. After all, you don’t really know me, or have any reason to trust me.”

Lurk opened his mouth to disagree, to tell her that he *did* trust her, but after a moment he closed it again. He rolled away from her until he was flat on his back, looking up at the dimly lit ceiling. She was right, of course. Lust and passion could so easily overpower reason.

“I allowed...” she began, then hesitated. After a couple of seconds she joined him in staring at the ceiling, rolling away from him and widening the distance between them.

“When you first fell in with Mal Single, I saw an opportunity. If I brought *him* here, I knew you would follow.”

“And I did,” said Lurk.

“And you did,” she agreed. “At first, all I wanted was a pet Jubbly, trained to do my bidding.” Lurk rolled his head toward her, saw that she was watching him.

“You want me to sit up and beg?” he asked.

“No,” she said. She sat up, however, crossing her legs as she turned to face him. She smiled. “Well, maybe I did, at first,” she admitted, “but the more I thought about it, and the more I dug into your background, the more I came to realise how silly the idea was. Tame you? Put you on a leash? What a waste.”

Lurk blinked at her, and sighed. With a grunt, he sat up and shuffled across the carpet to sit across from her, his knees almost touching hers.

“And so, an alliance?” he prompted.

“An alliance. But I had to let you know my intentions were serious, to be sure I had your attention.”

“By seducing me?” he said.

“No, dear boy,” she said. “By *seducing* you I made possible *this* very line of questioning.” She shook her head and her eyes lost focus. “By taking you into my bed, and into my body, I risked everything. By taking you into my heart...” She sighed heavily and lowered her eyes. “I got your *attention* by gaining the upper hand—and then giving it up.”

“At cost price...”

She shrugged wordlessly.

“That *did* get my attention,” he agreed.

“And then I allowed *this* to happen,” she said.

“Why, then?” he asked. “Why this?”

“I’m not sure I can tell you,” she said. “I’m not sure I know myself. I certainly had no intention of...” She shrugged. “And then I saw you, standing there in my doorway, and...” She lifted her gaze to his.

“Love at first sight?” he asked sceptically.

She laughed then, softly. “I don’t believe in it,” she said. “Besides—and don’t take this the wrong way—but while I might lust after you, I don’t *love* you, lover boy.”

He shook his head, but looked away from her eyes. “If you said you did, I wouldn’t believe it,” he told her, “but when you say you don’t...”

“Love is overrated,” she said.

“Love is dangerous,” he replied.

“You say that like you’ve been hurt before,” she said.

"It is..." He sighed heavily. "It is a Jubbly teaching," he continued. "Master Yodel told me as much. I didn't understand at the time, but it is becoming clearer."

"This ... Yodel?" Tessa shook her head. "It sounds as though *he* has been hurt before too."

"He said that love is a weakness, that it provides your enemies with a means of attack."

"Love is a strength," she said, "that provides a powerful defence against outside forces."

"I thought you said it was overrated?"

"It is," she said. "It is, in fact, whatever you want it to be, whatever you perceive. Love just *is*; it's up to us what we do with it."

"That's very profound," he said.

She smiled brightly at him. "I read it in a horoscope once," she said. "Now, back to this alliance?"

"Good idea," he agreed.

"Do you trust me?"

He looked at her. She winked at him, and suddenly he was laughing. "Do I ... do I trust you?" he said. "Not at all, but I *do* believe you."

She nodded. "Good answer." Impulsively she rocked forward, caught his head between the palms of her hands, and pressed her lips to his. She released him, sitting back before he could respond. She rocked forward again, unfurling her legs and pushing herself lithely to her feet.

Lurk found himself staring at the neatly trimmed thatch of coarse hair at the juncture of her thighs, slightly paler than the hair which cascaded over her shoulders. He blinked and looked up at her.

She held out her hand to him. "Come on, lover boy," she said, "we can finish this conversation as we dress. It's time."

Libby watched on one of the *Sparrow*'s vidscreens as the other ship angled itself away from their position and accelerated towards the horizon. Rammer and his thugs were gone, taking the Imperial 'bot with them. She wondered idly whether they would get it back to whichever remote lab they were headed for, or whether it would detect its changed status and destroy itself, and all of them along with it. After a moment's thought she realised she really didn't care.

Rammer and his thugs were gone, which meant she no longer had to keep an eye on them. Shaggus was still working out on the hull, patching the hole he had just made, but the *Sparrow* was more than capable of warning them if any other ship approached. Libby tapped out a couple of commands on the keyboard, activating the passive defence systems, then stood and strode rapidly from the cockpit, barely able to keep from breaking into a run.

Mal lay on the bio-bed in the *Sparrow*'s tiny medical bay. As she entered the room, Libby glanced up at the screen above the narrow bunk. Most of the numbers were green, a couple of them yellow. A narrow strip along the bottom of the screen showed a scrolling line with regular peaks and troughs, a new spike appearing with each quiet *bleep* of the machine. She could only assume that the absence of flashing red messages and blaring alarms was a good sign; she had no idea how to interpret the display.

When she had first lifted him out of the stasis chamber in which he had been delivered—no easy task—she had attempted to query the bed on his condition, but it either lacked a voice interface, or simply refused to speak

to somebody with no medical training. Then, she had been in a hurry; now she had time to study the panel more closely, but all she could really tell was that his condition appeared to be unchanged and, well, mostly green.

She looked down at his face. Frown lines creased his brow, but aside from those he seemed to be simply sleeping. Briefly, his eyes twitched behind the closed lids.

“Are you dreaming?” she wondered aloud. She placed one hand flat on the centre of his chest, and for a moment she was content simply to stand there at his side, feeling the thump of his heart keeping time with the steady *bleep, bleep* of the medical computer, feeling the gentle rise and fall of his chest. She placed her other hand on his forehead, stroking her fingers soothingly through his scruffy hair.

“You’re safe now,” she whispered to him. “You’re home.” *Come back to me*, she wanted to shout. *I need you!* She clamped her teeth together to trap the words before they could escape. He needed to be comforted now, not pressured.

She leaned in closer to him, placing her lips against his ear.

“I love you, Mal,” she whispered, in a voice too low for anyone else to hear.

When she straightened again, his eyes were still closed, his cheeks still slack, but the frown lines had gone from his forehead. She felt her own heart leap.

For the first time in far too long, she knew that everything was going to be alright.

Tessa lifted her crumpled top from the floor and wrinkled her nose at it. With a sigh she wadded it up and tossed it towards a basket in the corner of the room; it spiraled and

fell short. Leaving it where it fell, she stepped over to a section of wall and *clicked* it open to reveal a wardrobe.

Lurk watched her as she flipped rapidly through the hanging clothes, the smooth skin of her back sliding over bone and muscle. Plain cotton panties clung to her narrow hips and firm buttocks. The muscles of her legs flexed as she shifted her weight.

“The galaxy is changing,” she said.

Lurk looked up to find her looking over her shoulder at him, an amused expression on her face. Suddenly embarrassed—which confused him, given their earlier intimacies—he dropped his gaze to the coolsuit he held in his hands, and tried to make sense of its intricacies.

“It’s upside down,” she said.

“Oh.” He turned it over. Yeah, *that* made more sense. “Thanks.”

“This organisation grew from the chaos of the Fall,” she continued. *The Fall* was the commonly accepted term for the fall of the Galactic Republic twenty years earlier. Those on the other side of the conflict tended to refer to *The Rise* of the Galactic Imperium.

Lurk glanced back up at her. She was smoothing a clean top down over her stomach.

“That quickly?” he asked.

She shrugged, and Lurk began fumbling with his coolsuit again. Her new clothing did little to hide what a shrug did to her breasts.

“It existed before then,” said Tessa. “It was a strictly local setup, barely more than a gang of thugs, and Flabby was in charge. But as the Republic was pushed out by the Imperium, I saw ... heh! I saw an opportunity.”

She grinned as Lurk met her gaze. He returned the grin.

“With my ... guidance, we grew. With the Imperium ruling through fear, whole civilisations began to fracture, to splinter apart, and each crack gave us an opening. New markets, new contacts, new...”

“Opportunities?”

“Exactly,” said Tessa. “But now, I hear things. The Imperium is held together by the Emperor. His drive, his ambition, brought the galaxy to where it is today. But his grip is weakening. *He* is weakening.”

“Weakening?” Suddenly Lurk’s attention was focussed solely on her words. “Weakening how?”

“Rumour has it...” she began, and suddenly she laughed again.

“What?”

“Perhaps this, uh, Yoda of yours...”

“Yodel,” corrected Lurk.

“Right, Yodel. Perhaps he has a point,” she said. “Rumour has it the Emperor is in love, smitten by some ex-slave who now has him wrapped around her little finger.”

“Really?”

Tessa shrugged. “You know what rumours are like. Details are fluid. But I hear enough whispers from enough sources to believe there might be some core truth. *Anyway*, whatever the cause, the outcome seems certain. With the right push, in the right place, the Imperium is going to fall.”

“What push?” said Lurk. “Where?”

She shook her head. “That I don’t know,” she said, “but I’d wager... In fact, I *am* wagering on you and your friends. When the Imperium falls, your Rebels will be the ones doing the pushing. And when that happens, I want to be on the winning side.”

“That simple?” asked Lurk.

She nodded. "Survival is simple," she said.

"I can't speak for the Rebel Coalition," Lurk began.

"I know," she said, "and I don't want you to. But you can speak to them on my behalf. We both know you have friends in high places. Girlfriends, even."

She smiled as he rolled his eyes.

"But ultimately, I want *you* in my corner. A pardon from the Rebel Government would be nice, but all I really ask is that *you* give me a chance."

"You want your pet Jubbly," he said.

She shrugged. If she kept doing that, Lurk mused, he may never manage to get dressed.

"Sure," she said. "I wouldn't ask that you choose between them and me; only that you give me the chance to scale down this organisation to something like its original size, before the Imperium."

"Allowing you to disappear?"

"Allowing me to drop off the radar and move on," she said, "to get out of this life. And until then," she continued, "I offer what assistance I can. I have several ships that I can put at your disposal, freighters mostly. Running Imperial blockades is a specialty of ours."

"So Mal claims," said Lurk.

"And I have information," she said.

"Information?"

"Troop movements, patrol deployments, that sort of thing," she said. "And this." She crossed quickly to the bed and crouched beside it. Lurk heard a soft click, and a small panel opened in the mattress support frame.

Tessa lifted out a data crystal.

"What is it?" asked Lurk. He wriggled his hips to pull the tight-fitting coolsuit up his torso.

"Full data," said Tessa slowly, "on the new Imperial Death Tube."

“What?” The word came out as a strangled gasp. Lurk suddenly wanted nothing more than to strip off his coolsuit again and find a toilet. His guts clenched and roiled.

Tessa nodded. “I had a feeling that would kill the mood,” she said apologetically.

“But what ... where ... how did you get this information? Is it even real?”

“It’s real,” she said sombrely. “Many Boffins died to bring me this news.”

Lurk nodded slowly. Then he frowned. “What does that even mean?” he asked. “What’s a Boffin?”

“Does it really matter?” she asked.

“It might,” he said. “To another Boffin.”

“Suffice it to say that there are several fewer of them than there used to be.”

“Fair enough,” said Lurk. He looked at the crystal she held in her slender fingers.

She placed it on the table, beside the comm unit which already stood there. “It’s yours,” she assured him. “Now turn around, and let me zip you up.”

Lurk shrugged his arms into the sleeves of the coolsuit, and turned around. Guided by Tessa’s sure grip on the tab, the fastener slid up, sealing him in to the suit.

He sighed. It was time to rejoin his friends, but he still did not want to leave.

“I don’t want to leave,” he said aloud.

Tessa wrapped her arms around him from behind, and he felt her lips, hot against the nape of his neck.

“Do we have our alliance?” she murmured against his skin, her breath stirring the fine hairs there.

He nodded. “I’ll be back,” he told her. “It may not be right away—I’ve got a war to fight first—but I’ll be back.”

"I'll be waiting," she said. "Now go. Take the data crystal, and do what you have to do. Turn right outside the door; at the end of the corridor, a shuttle is waiting to take you to your ship."

He turned to face her, but she pressed a finger to his mouth and shook her head. Her eyes gleamed with moisture in the dim light.

"No long goodbyes," she told him. "Just go."

Lurk blinked back the sudden mistiness of his vision, and nodded. He gathered the crystal and the comm unit and walked to the door. It hissed open. He hesitated a moment in the doorway, then stepped out into the corridor and turned right. The door hissed closed behind him.

With a hydraulic whine, the ramp raised and Lurk found himself alone in the cargo bay of the *Serendipity Sparrow*. He thumped his palm against the comm button.

"I'm in," he said.

The Woonky's answering howl was drowned out by the howl of the engines, and Lurk's knees nearly buckled as the ship leaped skyward. He braced himself against the bulkhead until the acceleration dropped off and the ship's artificial gravity took over. As he straightened, a flicker of white caught his eye and he looked up.

Libby stood at the top of the stairs, looking down at him.

He began to move forward as she started down the stairs, and by the time they met in the centre of the empty cargo bay, they were both running. The collision knocked the breath from Lurk's body, but he wrapped his arms around her and hugged her almost as tightly as she clung to him.

Her breath on his neck sparked very different feelings than had Tessa's, and Lurk suddenly knew he was home.

"Don't ever do that to me again," said Libby, and Lurk felt her ribs heaving beneath his arms.

"I won't," said Lurk.

She released him and turned away, wiping almost savagely at her face.

"How's Mal," he asked.

She turned back to him, and the damp smear across her cheek gleamed briefly in the overhead light, but her eyes were dry. Her expression was haunted, as though she had not slept for a week.

"Still unconscious," she said.

Lurk placed his hand gently on her shoulder, and drew her back to him. "He'll be okay," he said.

She rested her head briefly against his chest, then pulled away from him.

"Go to him," he said. "I'll go see Shaggus, then join you in a while."

"What happened down there?" she asked.

"I, uh, I'll tell you later," he said, feeling guilty, for he had no intention of telling her how he had spent most of his time with Tessa. "I was ... given some information that we need to transmit to the Rebel fleet. It's ... critical."

"Aren't we heading back to them now?" she asked, her forehead furrowing.

"Soon," he said. "First, though, I need to return to Daggyboil, to see Yodel, and to fulfill a promise."

"But you're okay?" she persisted.

"I promise," he told her. "Now go be with Mal."

Tessa stared at the closed door for what seemed an eternity. Finally she turned away and threw herself down

on the rumpled sheets of the bed. She stared at the ceiling, and inhaled the mingled scents of their passion.

“It’s done,” she said aloud to the empty room.

Chapter 8

Mal Content

The blue-green planet, listed in the Galactic Planetary Index as Ender's Moon, looped through space in a wildly erratic orbit around a blue dwarf star. Despite its name, Ender's Moon belonged to no planet. There was some speculation as to the origin of its name—who, or what, had Ender been?—but the extensive reports of the Republic survey teams that had visited this planet fifteen hundred years earlier had been condensed into a typically bland and unimaginative entry in the GPI: “Forest planet.”

Now that the latest edition of the GPI had truncated the entry for the planet Yawn from its once-extensive listing of different habitats and inhabitants to the much shorter “Boring planet, off limits!” the only planets with entries longer than ten words were those core system worlds with both brothels *and* casinos.

It goes without saying that tourism was a dying industry.

Ender's Moon, and the nameless star around which it orbited, had never attracted the interest of either settlers or tourists. A large portion of the sky beyond the planet's orbit rippled and shimmered disturbingly, and every few years or so the planet was actually drawn into that

shattered region of space by the gravitational eddies which made its path around its star so unpredictable.

According to some less accurate charts, the whole system was actually inside the Bramble Patch. As it was, the planet's surface bore deep scars beneath the covering growth of forest. Not even a planet could enter that tortured realm with impunity.

Rather than attempt to maintain an orbit around the planet itself, the small ragtag fleet of ships had settled into the primary Lagrange point between planet and star. In an unstable system, this was the safest and most economical place to be. Ender's Moon was still between six and eight months from its closest approach to the Bramble Patch—the randomly shifting gravity fields made it impossible to be more precise.

If you wanted to hide, the Bramble Patch was the place to do it. This was the surviving remnant of the Rebel fleet. Six to eight months gave them more than enough time to lick their wounds and regroup; of those ships which were known to have escaped the Imperial blockade at Hoff, several were still missing.

Excitement crackled on the bridge of the Rebel Coalition Transport *Robbing Hood*, the *de facto* flagship of the fleet. One of the missing ships had just made contact.

"Please confirm," said Commander Bekkalu. The tall, pale woman clutched tightly at the arm of the command chair as she tried to keep her voice from cracking. "Princess Labia is with you?"

"That's correct," said the voice which had identified itself as Lurk Splitwhisker. "Libby and myself, Mal and Shaggus, and the two 'bots."

Proximity to the Bramble Patch played havoc with communications, and Commander Bekkalu could not

have said with any certainty that she recognised his voice. She glanced a query at the comms technician, who made a “keep talking” gesture with his hand.

“That’s the good news,” said the voice. “There’s bad news too, I’m afraid. We’ve learned that the Imperium is building a second Death Tube.”

The bridge of the *Robbing Hood* erupted into confused babble as those present expressed their dismay to those around them. Bekkalu herself gasped. “Bad news” did not come close to covering the severity of this report, if it were true.

The voice was speaking again, and Bekkalu called for silence.

“... trust the Source,” said Lurk.

Bekkalu frowned, momentarily confused. Was he suggesting that, once again, they rely upon his Jubbly mysticism to ... no, she realised as she reconstructed what she had heard: ... *haven’t looked at the data but I trust the source.*

“Where did this information come from?” she asked.

“A friend,” said the voice shortly. “It’s a long story, and I’ll be happy to share it over drinks once we rejoin the fleet, but we have to take a slight detour before we head back and you need to see this data now. I’m ready to transmit everything I have.”

“One moment,” said Commander Bekkalu. She raised her eyebrow at the comms technician, who nodded back. Despite the distortion in the signal, the computer had confirmed the speaker’s voice print. This *was* Lurk Splitwhisker. The encryption confirmed that the signal was being sent from the *Serendipity Sparrow*, and Lurk had identified himself by transmitting both his own personal ident code, and that of Princess Labia.

Bekkalu nodded with relief. The signal was genuine. *She* was still alive.

“Commence your transmission,” she said.

THIGH Pilots were genetic creations, grown in vats to very demanding specifications.

They had to be capable of piloting the Imperial THIGH Fighters effectively. Partly this meant that they required exceptionally fast reflexes. The most obvious requirement, however, was that they needed to be resilient enough to survive within the three ever-shifting gravitational fields generated by the THIGH Fighter’s engines, fields which had reduced the first human test pilot to a thin red smear across the inside of the cockpit.

Since the Emperor had made it very clear in the first few days of his reign that he considered non-human life—be it alien or robotic—to be of limited value, the THIGH Fighter’s engines had reduced several more test pilots to thin red smears coating the insides of whatever protective garments had been employed to protect them before, finally, it became clear that a human solution was impractical. Since a non-human solution was not particularly acceptable, the Imperial Science Division turned to genetic engineering to solve their problem.

The result—the THIGH Pilot—was *mostly* human, with a limited amount of genetic material drawn from several other species. Short and squat, with huge buttocks and thighs—all muscle—the THIGH Pilot had been described by one of the members of the Approval Committee as being “built like a shit brickhouse”.

THIGH Pilot Lieutenant Colonel Javamaprandarah Rajamajarandaibuggah opened his eyes and blinked sleepily at the overly bright ceiling. Everything was white and featureless. *Ah yes*, he remembered, *this is the*

birthing chamber. He could hear music playing somewhere, and he sighed with contentment as he remembered his week as a newborn before being moved over into active duty.

Except...

He remembered waking up with full knowledge of who and what he was. He remembered his first day of training. He remembered his excitement at being allocated a bunk with the other adults after passing the SevenDay test.

He did *not*, however, remember having all these memories when he was birthed.

Memories of one's birthing experience were common among THIGH, he knew. But *while* being birthed? That seemed wrong, somehow. And memories of his future life? Of conversations with friends, of meals, of drunken songs, of...

Memories of dying?

He closed his eyes tightly.

Am I dead? he asked himself. *Is this...?*

Javamaprandarah Rajamajarandaibuggah did not believe in an afterlife, but he knew a few THIGH Pilots who spoke of a place called...

"Is this HAVeN?" he asked aloud.

"You wish," said a voice nearby, and somebody chuckled.

"Leave him be," said another voice. "As I recall, it's no sillier than what you were screaming when you woke up!"

There was a muttered response to this, and the voice sounded vaguely contrite.

Javamaprandarah opened his eyes again. Nothing but blinding white light greeted him.

“Where am I?” he asked cautiously. “Why can’t I see?”

“You have hibernation sickness,” said a third voice. “You can sit up, but take it slowly. You may feel a little nauseated for a few minutes, until it wears off.”

Javamaprandarah tried to move, but a wave of nausea washed over him and he clamped one hand over his mouth.

“Look out,” said the first voice. This time the tone was a curious blend of mockery and sympathy. “He’s going to blow.”

Javamaprandarah shook his head minutely as he concentrated on breathing slowly through his nose. He had a rule against throwing up on people he didn’t know. After perhaps a minute he cautiously removed his hand from his mouth and opened his eyes again.

“But I can’t see.”

“Yeah,” said voice number three. “That’s part of it. The hibernation sickness. Just sit there for a while and it will pass.”

“What happened?” he asked. “Did I die?”

“What do you remember?” asked the voice, and suddenly it seemed to Javamaprandarah that a hush had fallen over the room, that everybody present was listening.

“I remember...” he began. *What do I remember?* He furrowed his eyebrows in concentration.

“There was a battle,” he said slowly. “Laser blasts everywhere, explosions, and then...” He frowned. “I remember tumbling through space, my engines destroyed. Life support was failing. Then nothing.”

“Anything more?” asked the other voice. “Any details?”

“There was a planet,” he said. “I think. But I don’t know what it was called. Unless it was Alderbark? The Rebels destroyed Alderbark. My ship was ... was...” He shook his head. “And there was definitely no cucumber.”

The hush dissolved into the quiet murmur of whispered conversation.

“What does that even mean?” he wondered aloud.

“It means,” said a new voice from the back of the room, “that we’ve been brain-wiped and reprogrammed.”

“Would you stop saying that?” said another voice.

“I’ll stop saying it when somebody wakes up and starts denying the existence of pumpkin.”

“What pumpkin?”

“Any pumpkin. Any squash. Hells, even a pizza or a bowl of Long Dong. Any one of those other food items which were also not present during this space battle which we may or may not have experienced.”

“But there wasn’t any food at all out in...”

“Cucumber.”

“There was no cucumber,” came the chorus of several voices, and to his horror, Javamaprandarah felt his own lips mouthing the words in unison.

“I rest my case.”

“What the hells is going on?” said Javamaprandarah. He was suddenly scared, and he blinked his eyes several times, willing his sight to return. “Why would anyone want to deny the existence of cucumber?”

“There was no cucumber!”

“Who knows,” said the voice from the back. “Maybe whoever reprogrammed us had a bad experience with a sandwich as a child. Maybe they stuck one up their...”

“Maybe,” the voice of Javamaprandarah’s defender interjected loudly, “you should stop talking about it

before whoever did such a half-arsed job of reprogramming us comes back to finish the job!”

“Yeah man,” said someone else, “how about you just shut the fuck up!”

Silence fell across the room.

Javamaprاندarah blinked a few more times. It seemed to him that he could now make out blurry shapes within the white fog.

“So what’s your name?” the friendly voice asked him.

“Javamaprاندarah Rajamajarandaibuggah,” said Javamaprاندarah. That, at least, was a question he could answer.

“I thought I recognised you,” said the voice. “I’m Nummalarandrajah Nuttarumbalum.”

“Nummala...? NumNut?” said Javamaprاندarah. “I think I used to call you NumNut?”

“Wow,” said NumNut. “I think you did. How could I have forgotten that?”

“Wait,” said someone. “You guys *know* each other?”

“So it would seem,” said NumNut. “And I think I used to call him, uh, Randy? No. Uh, Joe? Does that sound right? Joe?”

“Maybe,” said Joe. “But how is it that I can remember Javamaprاندarah Rajamajarandaibuggah, but not remember, uh, what was it?”

“Joe.”

“Yeah, Joe,” said Joe.

“It just proves once again that we’ve been brain-wiped and re...”

“Hey man, didn’t I just tell you to shut the fuck up?”

Ba-deep.

Ba-deep.

Ba-deep.

Apart from the crisp, regular beeping, the only sound was the distant hum of a ship's hyper-drive engines. No-one spoke, no footsteps sounded nearby, nothing. Nothing but his own shallow breathing.

The air was cool, almost crisp, and it smelled faintly of antiseptic creams and healing gel. Beneath that medical sterility lay hints of sweat and rust, earthy smells. Something else, too, vaguely floral, lingered on the air.

The background hum changed in pitch for a few seconds, the modulation barely perceptible but somehow familiar.

Mal cracked open his eyelids and peered cautiously at his surroundings. Dimmed ceiling lights and the glow of instruments revealed a small medical bay, enclosed on three sides by large plexiglass panels. Beyond the windows, a plain corridor ran one way until it curved out of sight; in the other direction, a small ship's galley.

Not just any ship. This was the *Serendipity Sparrow*. This was *his* medical bay. The beeping he heard was the sound of his own heart being monitored by the narrow but hideously expensive bio-bed he had installed three years ago, after that run-in with the Mandy-Lore Pirates.

If it is busy saving my life, he thought smugly, it was worth every cred!

Saving my life...?

What had happened? He remembered being in the Imperial prison block ... no, it had been a civilian cell block, hadn't it? On Tibrogar? But that made no sense, because he *distinctly* remembered his torture at the hands of the Imperial Muff.

A shudder ran down his spine. He wished he could forget *that*. A wave of nausea swept through him, triggered by the memory. No, he realised, it had been

there since he first awoke. As had the stiffness in his joints. But there was no pain, no residual sensation from his mistreatment by the Imperials.

Then what? Oh yes, Lurk had come to rescue him, but it had not been Lurk, it had been ... who? He had a vague, nonsensical impression of cheese.

But if not Lurk, how had he gotten here?

More importantly, he remembered that he had not been the only prisoner of the Imperial Muff. What had happened to...

"Libby?" he said aloud, suddenly alarmed. He started to sit up, but his muscles failed him and he sagged back onto the bed. However, the sudden muffled snort of somebody startled awake caught his attention and he turned his head.

Her hair was up, caught in an untidy but functional bun atop her head, leaving her slender neck exposed. She wore a sheer silk dress, the pale blue material patterned with subtle texture variations; it clung closely around her throat but left her shoulders bare.

Even blinking sleep from her eyes, she was beautiful.

"Libby," he said again, softly this time, and he smiled.

She smiled back at him. "Mal," she said, and his name on her lips made his heart soar. "Sorry, I think I dozed off."

He opened his mouth to reply, but only trite witticisms—some of them not witty at all—came to mind. After a moment he closed his mouth and opened his arms. Libby *flowed* off her chair and into his hug, and for a long time they simply held each other.

His heart was racing—*b'deep b'deep b'deep*—by the time she relaxed her grip and pulled back to look into his eyes.

"I love you," she said simply.

"I know," he replied. *I love you too. Oh princess, I love you!* The words sang in his mind but he hesitated to say them aloud. He had said those words before, once—such tiny, powerful words—and they had come back to haunt him. When he had lost *her*...

Mal blinked and refocussed on Libby. He held the woman he loved—even if he could not bring himself to say the words—in his arms. Why was he thinking of *her*...?

"I don't know what to say," he said softly, miserably.

She smiled so tenderly at him that he felt sure she must be reading his every thought. "Then don't say anything," she said, and he felt the tension of the moment drain away as she sank back against him, her head on his chest.

It was going to be okay.

Ba-deep.

Ba-deep.

Unless...

Mal pressed his lips softly against the crown of her head, then asked quietly: "Is everybody else here?"

Libby raised her head so quickly he had to jerk his own head back to save his nose. Her expression was stricken.

"Oh, how silly and selfish of me," she said. "Yes, Shaggus is in the cockpit and Lurk is ... on board somewhere." She frowned. He had popped his head into the medical bay after contacting the Rebel fleet, to check on Mal. *And on her.* Then he had said he needed to think, but she had not seen where he had gone. "And the 'bots are settled in the galley. Do you want me to..."

Mal pulled her back towards him. "They can wait," he said.

“Mmmm...” she replied.

After a moment, Mal asked: “Are you comfortable?”

“Mmmm...”

“I’m wishing now that I’d got the wider bio-bed so there’d be room for two.”

“Mmmm...” Libby straightened slightly, pushing her body against his, craning her neck until she could whisper in his ear. “And just what sort of girl do you think I am?” she asked sleepily.

“I didn’t mean...” Mal began.

“Besides,” she continued, her breath hot against his ear, “it’s not the space that’s the problem. You should *really* be wishing you hadn’t opted for the high-vis windows. If we had the privacy,” her voice became a purr, “I’d be on top of you by now.”

B’deep b’deep b’deep.

“Although,” she added thoughtfully, “we’d have to turn that beeping off first!”

Chapter 9

Beginning of the End

“**O**h gods, they’re everywhere! Help me, somebody open the...” A strangled scream faded into the hiss of an open comm channel.

Captain Kobayashi Hiroto clenched his fists. “And that’s all?”

“That’s all we received, sir,” said Lieutenant Schmitt. “Final transmission from A-Ring. We’re also receiving numerous queries from personnel on the other two Rings who have noticed the disappearances of their colleagues. Sir?”

“Schmitt?”

“What should I tell them?”

“Set Alert Level Three across the board,” said Captain Kobayashi, “and tell them to await further orders.”

Lieutenant Schmitt nodded as she turned back to her console.

“And Lieutenant?”

“Sir?”

“Raise Captain Lorrigan for me.”

“Aye sir.”

“Hiroto?” said Captain Stacy Lorrigan as her image appeared on the viewscreen nearest to Kobayashi. “Did you hear?”

“We heard,” said Kobayashi. “What do you think, Stacy? Is this the Droid? Are we under attack?”

“It certainly feels like an attack,” said Lorrigan, “but it doesn’t make sense. Tactically, the Station should be the last target, not the first.”

“Agreed,” said Kobayashi. “But I don’t believe in coincidence. If not the Droid, it must be...”

“It is not the Droid, Captain,” said a new voice, and Captain Kobayashi snapped his head around to glare at the newcomers. A woman he did not recognise was striding across the bridge towards him, with a contingent of four Droid drones in formation behind her.

“Who in the hells are you,” he said, straightening up from the viewscreen and turning to face her, “and what are you doing on my bridge?” At the edge of his vision he caught a flicker of movement: grey, armour-clad Shock Troopers responding to the intruders. Without taking his eyes from the woman’s face, he held up his hand to stop his security detail.

“She is here by my authority,” said the tall drone at her right shoulder, and Captain Kobayashi felt his stomach clench as he recognised the voice. Vapour. He shifted his gaze to the Stiff Lord, and felt a shudder of revulsion sweep through him. Gone was the dread black mask, with its empty, reflective eyes and its inhuman intake grille; gone was the glossy black cowl, the sweeping cape, even the familiar chest panel with its mysteriously flickering lights. In their place was, well, just another Droid drone, its pasty skin the colour of a drained corpse, one eye covered by a hideous mechanical device. Without the distinctive mask of Barth Vapour, this person—this drone—could have been anyone, but then, *anyone* could have been behind the mask to begin with.

Hiroto Kobayashi was aware, on some level, that identifying a person on the basis of the mask behind which they habitually hid was not much of an identification at all. He was not entirely sure where that left him.

Only the voice remained the same, and that voice spoke again now.

“Perhaps, Captain, you desire another demonstration of my authority?” The voice bristled with menace.

“Uh, no, my Lord,” said the Captain carefully. He swallowed, and resisted the sudden urge to lift his hand to his throat. “I must, however, respectfully insist upon an explanation for what is...”

“Insist?” said Vapour menacingly. “I think you forget your place, Captain. Perhaps another demonstration *is*...”

“Enough, *Locust*,” said the woman, and Vapour subsided. Captain Kobayashi blinked, and shifted his gaze back to the woman. Perhaps the whispers were true: Vapour may be the Emperor’s alpha wolf, but like any dog, he needed a good master—or mistress—to hold his leash.

“And you are?” he asked, his voice carefully empty of emotion.

“I speak for the Droid council,” she said, and Captain Kobayashi allowed his gaze to flicker briefly to Vapour. *Interesting*. “My designation is ...” A high-pitched electronic squeal suddenly issued forth from between the woman’s full lips, and Kobayashi snapped his attention back to her. “... but,” she continued, “for the sake of convenience, you may refer to me as Seven of Eleven.”

“Seven of Eleven?” said Captain Kobayashi. “That *is* more convenient.” He studied her more closely; she was obviously every bit as much a Droid drone as Vapour and

the rest of her entourage. Her skin had the pink flush of life where theirs had only the pallor of the grave; she wore a tight, brightly coloured catsuit, cut low to reveal her ample cleavage, where they wore dull black armour; she had no visible implants—*although*, mused Kobayashi, *that might explain the cleavage!*—and yet she was just another drone. Her eyes gave her away; dull and lifeless.

Little more than an animated corpse, he told himself as he raised his eyes once more to her impassive face.

“Perhaps, then,” he said flatly, “you can explain to me what has been unleashed upon the Station which has caused the disappearance of some fifty Imperial personnel, since you claim the Droid are not responsible?”

“The Droid have not integrated any of your ... of the people from your station,” she said. Kobayashi felt his eyes narrow slightly as her hesitation reminded him of the fate of the *ISV Fat Lady*. However, the fact that she had felt the need to make the distinction suggested that she might be speaking the truth.

“Then what is going on over on the station?” he demanded. “We have lost all contact with the A-Ring, and more than fifty personnel who should have been down there appear to have vanished. Since you Droid are the only...”

“No,” said Seven of Eleven. “There is another.”

“Another what?” said Kobayashi.

“Another ... anomaly,” said Seven. “It must be investigated. Its threat level must be determined.”

“Its *threat level* is obvious,” said Kobayashi. “Fifty people are missing. And if it is not your doing, then it is obviously something you brought with you!”

“Perhaps,” said Seven. “Analysis is vital.”

“Screw analysis,” said Kobayashi sharply. Hearing the tone of his own voice he drew a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “We need to send in combat teams on a search and rescue mission,” he added, his voice flat once more.

“Irrelevant, Captain,” said Seven. “We need to...”

“The lives of my people may be irrelevant to *you*,” said Kobayashi coldly, “but I can assure you...”

“Irrelevant, Captain,” said Vapour, “because your people are already dead.” He spoke slowly, enunciating each word clearly.

“Already...” Kobayashi looked back and forth between the Stiff Lord and the Droid emissary. “You know what’s going on here, don’t you?” he said. “You already know what we’re dealing with, because you unleashed it yourselves.”

“We have our suspicions,” admitted the female drone.

“Suspensions?” Captain Kobayashi turned to glare at the tall Drone at the woman’s right shoulder. “It was you, wasn’t it? You were on the station. Whatever killed my people, you unleashed...”

Vapour’s visible eye narrowed. He gestured, and Captain Kobayashi felt his throat suddenly constrict. He threw his hands up to claw at the steel band tightening around his neck, but there was nothing there, nothing to fight against.

“You forget yourself, Captain,” said Vapour. “You forget who you are talking to.”

For a long moment, Hiroto could do nothing but gasp, fighting for his next breath, and then the pressure was gone and he drew a deep breath of cool air into his burning lungs as he fought to keep his knees from buckling beneath him.

“My ... my apologies, Lord Vapour,” he gasped.

Vapour stared at the Captain for a few seconds. “I tire of this discussion, Captain,” he said. “You will send two squads of Shock Troopers to accompany Seven of Eleven in her investigation of A-Ring. You may send other shuttles to evacuate the other two rings of the station, at your own discretion, but Seven’s investigation, and her safety, are of paramount importance. Do you understand me?”

The Captain nodded as he massaged his neck.

“Do you understand me, Captain?” The voice practically overflowed with menace.

“Yes, my lord,” he said.

The main cabin of the transport shuttle was designed to comfortably hold eight fully-armoured Shock Troopers and their equipment. The recent increase in squad size from four to five meant that the shuttle now held, rather uncomfortably, ten Troopers, as well as the Droid investigator, Seven of Eleven.

Part of the *Anaconda*’s complement of warriors, Teams Gecko and Iguana were a cocky bunch.

“So what’s your story, sweetheart?” leered Corporal Muy Kantuk. His short brown hair had a white streak through it, ending in a thin ribbon of scar tissue on his left temple. “You some sort of expert?” He took a good long look down the front of Seven of Eleven’s low-cut cat-suit.

Seven looked up at the Shock Trooper standing over her, his combat helmet clutched in his left hand. Her placid expression did not change.

“I am an observer,” she told him, “nothing more.”

“Well, I sure do like what I’m observing,” said the Corporal.

“Knock it off, Kantuk,” said Matt Johnson, Sergeant of Team Gecko. He opened his eyes. “Lady’s got a job to do, same as us.”

Kantuk looked up from Seven’s cleavage long enough to catch her eye. “She could do me,” he said deliberately. He smiled at her.

She stared back at him unblinkingly.

“Don’t worry about him,” said Private Frankie Corona. She grinned. Her blonde hair was shorn close to her skull, and the military hairstyle tended to draw one’s eyes away from a face which might have been described as beautiful. “He wouldn’t know what to do with a real woman.”

“A real woman?” said Kantuk. “Why, Frankie? You know one?”

“Only you, Kantuk.”

“Hey,” objected Private Yasha Mullene of Team Iguana.

“Oh, and Yasha, apparently,” added Corona. “Sorry, Yash. Didn’t realize you wanted to be included in the same class as ‘Can-Talk’ Kantuk here.”

“Good point,” said Yasha. “Forget I spoke.”

“Real funny,” said Kantuk. “You guys are a bundle of laughs.”

“A headache, more like,” said Sergeant Johnson. “Don’t you ever shut up?”

There was a dull clunk as the Imperial Shuttle *Tidy Room* docked with one of the Station’s emergency access tubes, followed by the hiss of gas as the airlock was pressurised.

“We have contact,” said Kantuk. “This way, m’lady,” he said to Seven of Eleven. “Don’t be afraid. Me and my squad of ultimate badasses will protect you.”

“Last I checked, Kantuk,” said Sergeant Johnson, “I’m in charge here. You’re *my* squad of ultimate badasses. Suit up and shut up!”

There was a ragged chorus of “Yes sir” as the Troopers all locked their combat helmets into position.

“There’s no telling what we’ll find out there,” said Sergeant Johnson, “but that’s why we’re here. Strictly recon. Get in, scope the sitch, and get out. Is that clear?” His voice was distorted into an electronic growl by the speaker grille of his helmet.

“Sounds like a plan, Johnny,” said Sergeant Mick “The Hickey” Reese of Team Iguana.

“Seven, you stay with Team Gecko. We’ll go left; Reese, you take your team right. You got anything to add?”

Seven of Eleven looked around the crowded cabin at the armoured Troopers. “I recommend,” she said after a moment’s hesitation, “that you hold your fire unless threatened. If our suspicions are correct, what we are going to encounter may not react to us unless we are considered a threat.”

“Lady,” said Kantuk, “*we* are the biggest baddest threat in the Bramble Patch. We just can’t hide that!”

“You just keep that threat of yours in your pants,” said Sergeant Johnson, and the rest of the Troopers chuckled. “You heard the lady. Don’t fire unless you mean it!”

“After you,” said Sergeant Reese.

Johnson keyed the inner airlock door of the shuttle. After a quick check to confirm that the seal was holding and that the corridor beyond was fully pressurised—the emergency docking ports were not used often—he opened the outer door. Quickly, one after the other, the members of Team Gecko filed through and took up a

defensive posture in the station's empty corridor. Seven of Eleven strode out behind them, and Team Iguana followed her out of the shuttle. Reese sealed the airlock door behind them.

"Take point, Kantuk," said Johnson.

His Gemini Mk-III Blaster held at the ready, Kantuk advanced down the corridor to the intersection. His back against the wall, he peered down the curving corridor opposite him, then popped out past the corner for a quick glance down the other way.

"All clear," he said. He took the left fork. Corporal Danni "Monkeysunk" Simpson lead Team Iguana down the other fork.

"Keep in touch, guys," said Sergeant Reese. "If you find anything, keep us informed."

"Count on it," said Sergeant Johnson.

The pressure door hissed open. "All clear," said Kantuk. The corridor curved away from them. Section A-4 was quiet, seemingly deserted. Several of the light panels flickered intermittently. The nearest doorway in the right wall was a rectangle of darkness.

"Corona, take the lab," said the Sarge.

Private Corona consulted the motion detector built into her weapon. There was no sign of movement. She stepped through the doorway into the darkened room beyond, and activated the light enhancement lenses in her helmet. The room shimmered greenly. Several of the lab chairs had been overturned, and there was a crunch as her armoured boot crushed a scattered patch of broken glass. She peered over the nearest benchtop. Nothing moved. There were no bodies. She swept her motion detector in a wide arc, but nothing registered.

“All clear,” she said as she backed out of the room. Team Gecko had already moved on down the corridor, and Private Howie “the Howitzer” Duk was exploring the second room. She glanced in at him as she rejoined the squad; at least the lights in his room were on. She caught up with the rest of her Team at the third door, just as Jack Rico was entering. She heard Private Raven of Team Iguana give a similarly negative report from the other section; the other Team’s comm chatter was feeding into her helmet at half volume.

“Nothing,” said Howie as he joined them. After a couple of minutes, Rico returned from the third lab and they all gathered around the pressure door at the end of the corridor.

“Section A-4 clear,” said Sergeant Johnson.

“A-2 clean,” came Sergeant Reese’s reply. “The place is deserted. Moving on to A-1.”

“Roger that. We’re taking A-5.”

Both teams proceeded through their next section without incident.

“This place is a ghost town,” said Sergeant Reese over the comm. “Where is everybody?”

“I have a very bad feeling about this,” said Sergeant Johnson.

“You and me both, my friend,” said Sergeant Reese. “You and me both! We’re proceeding to, uh, A-12.”

“Roger that, Iguana. Gecko entering A-6 now.”

The hatch hissed open.

Corporal Kantuk was several steps in when they heard one of the Team Iguana Troopers, Russ “Rusty” Tamerhane, exclaim in surprise:

“What the hell is that?”

Sergeant Johnson held up a fist and signalled Team Gecko to freeze.

“Looks like some sort of excretion,” said Yasha Mullene.

“Yeah,” said Rusty, “but excreted from what?”

“What have you got there, Team Iguana?” asked Sergeant Johnson.

“Some sort of ... growth,” said Yasha. “It’s damn warm in here, too!”

“Yeah,” snorted Kantuk, “but is it a dry heat?”

Sergeant Johnson waved his corporal to silence.

“Looks like mould, growing on the walls and ceiling in here,” said Sergeant Reese. “Except it’s pink. Bright pink. Be careful, Rusty.”

“It’s some sort of artificial fur,” said Rusty. “Growing right out of the plasteel wall, by the looks of it. Feels soft, real soft.”

“Fuck’s sake, Rusty,” snapped Sergeant Reese, “don’t touch *anything*. No telling what that stuff is, and it sure as hell shouldn’t be there. Whatever it is, I’m pretty sure you don’t want to find it growing on your gauntlet.”

“Or your skin,” added Johnson. “You said *mould*, which brings to mind spores. Everybody double-check their air inlet bio-filters.”

“Aw shit,” said Kantuk. “Last thing I need is to be inhaling some damn pink alien spores. You can’t fight that shit!”

In theory, the Shock Trooper armour was air-tight. Perhaps it still was, but Matt Johnson had his doubts. Without regular maintenance, the seals started passing and before you knew it the damn things were leaking like sieves. The sort of maintenance required to keep the suits to that level of repair was frequent, and expensive. The Imperium had a lot to say about the safety of its Troopers being of utmost importance, but only the most naive of fresh-faced new recruits actually believed such talk.

“You’ll be fine, Kantuk,” said the Sarge. “Suits’ll keep it out. Any idea what this might be?” This last question he directed to the Droid investigator, Seven of Eleven.

Seven cocked her head for a moment as she consulted with the *Plerd* collective. “No such growth has been encountered in Droid history,” she reported.

“I guess that’s a big ‘no idea’ from our expert?” said Kantuk.

“We’re proceeding with our sweep,” said Sergeant Reese.

“Keep your eyes peeled,” Johnson told him. He waved Team Gecko back into motion.

“Damn, it’s everywhere,” said Raven.

“What’s going on?” asked Sergeant Johnson.

“The entire last half of this section is coated in this pink shit,” said Sergeant Reese. “Floor, walls, ceilings. Light panels are half-obscured. From here, looks like even the last lab is full of the stuff.”

“Threat level?” asked Johnson.

“Damn creepy,” said Reese, “but I think it’s safe to proceed.”

“It’s your call,” said Johnson as Team Gecko gathered at the end of the corridor, outside the hatch to Section A-7. He looked up at Jack Rico as he joined the group, having searched the final lab in this section. Jack Rico shook his helmeted head. Nothing.

“Yeah,” said Reese softly. “I guess it is. My vote is for pulling out and nuking the station out of existence.”

“Negative,” said Seven of Eleven stiffly. “The anomaly must be investigated.”

“Listen, lady,” said Kantuk, “in case you haven’t been paying attention, the investigation results are in. Pink furry walls are anomalous as hell.”

“Enough, Kantuk,” said Johnson. “We still have our orders. But if you think we need a full bio-suit team in here, Reese, just say the word. You’re the guy on the spot, after all.”

“Nah, it’s okay,” said Reese. “This stuff doesn’t seem to puff loose or anything. It’s weird, but I think it’s harmless.”

“So we’ll proceed, then,” said Johnson.

“Roger that,” said Reese.

The hatch between sections A-6 and A-7 hissed open. The lighting in the next section was flickering intermittently. Patches of pink fur spotted the ceiling and walls.

“Entering Section A-7,” said Johnson. “Patches of pink here, and the lights are dodgy.”

“Finishing our sweep of A-12,” reported Reese. “The fur is inches deep at the end here, and the hatch is overgrown. No sign of anybody or anything. Just pink, everywhere.”

“Ordinarily I’d approve,” muttered Kantuk sullenly.

“In your dreams, perhaps,” snorted Frankie Corona.

“You two stay alert,” said the Sarge. “This shit may look harmless, but fifty people came into A-ring and never came out again.”

“Sorry, Sarge,” said Corona, chastened.

Kantuk nodded.

“Hatch to A-11 won’t open,” said Reese. There was a short pause. “We’re gonna have to crank it manually. Yasha, run a bypass.”

“Come on, people,” muttered Johnson. “Howie, check that lab. Be thorough, don’t get distracted.”

Seven of Eleven had stepped past the Shock Troopers and was peering closely at one of the growths of pink fur. Lifting her hand, she pinched a tuft of it between thumb

and forefinger, and pulled it away from the wall. She held it in the palm of her hand, studying it.

“Got anything useful?” the Sarge asked her.

She turned to face him, her expression cold and unreadable. The Droid might have the beautiful, fine-boned face of an alluring woman, but there was nothing remotely human in that expression. Her eyes were cold and dead, the eyes of a corpse, and the Sarge took half a step back. Then she blinked, and the illusion of life and humanity was restored.

“Interesting, perhaps,” she replied. Her voice was low and sexy, but he detected an inhuman, mechanical tone in it which sent a shiver up his spine. “Probably not useful. Appears to have been grown directly from the matter of the wall.”

“How is that possible?” he asked.

“Nanobots,” she said simply.

“Nanna ‘bots?” He frowned behind his facemask. That made no sense.

She studied him. “It is not important,” she said at last. She turned away from him and resumed her appraisal of the patch of fur.

A short scream, almost a squeal, sounded over his helmet’s comm.

“Oh crap,” shouted a voice, but it was so distorted by some emotion—*fear?*—that he did not recognise the speaker.

“Movement,” shouted another voice. This was Danni Simpson. “Movement all over the place.”

“Oh gods,” said Yasha. “They’re coming out of the walls!”

“What’s going on?” asked Sergeant Johnson urgently, but his voice got lost in the confused babble which

flooded the channel. The sounds of blaster fire interspersed the voices.

“Rusty? Where’s Rusty?” shouted Sergeant Reese. “Look out, they’re...”

“Behind you, behind...”

“... the hell are they all coming from? That room was empty a...”

“Take that. Oh, you want some of this? Here you...”

“... down! Rusty and Yasha are down!”

“Pull back. Pull back.”

“... bunch of fuckin’ tedd...”

“No. Oh gods, no.”

“Wait...”

The channel went silent. The whole thing had only lasted for thirty seconds.

“Problem?” asked Seven of Eleven indifferently.

“Yasha?” said Kantuk. “Danni?”

“Report, Team Iguana,” said Sergeant Johnson.

“Aw fuck,” said Kantuk. “They’re gone. They’re all gone.”

“Shut up, man,” said Corona. “They can’t be gone. It’s just a faulty helmet comm...”

“Game over, man,” wailed Kantuk. “Game over!”

“Hold it together, Corporal,” snapped Sergeant Johnson. “We’re still Troopers, and we got a job to do.”

“Fuck that,” said Kantuk. “They’re all dead. I’m not taking another step into that pink shit.”

“We don’t know they’re dead,” said the Sarge.

Seven of Eleven cocked her head. After a moment she said quietly, “your comrades are ... no more, Sergeant”

“And how would you know that?” demanded the Sarge. “How the fuck would you know that?”

Seven made no reply, simply stared at him impassively.

"I'm not finished with you, lady," said the Sarge. He turned away. "Okay people, new plan. We get back to the shuttle, we take off, and we turn this station into a cloud of atoms."

"Fuckin' A!" said Kantuk.

"We must complete our mission," said Seven of Eleven. "The anomaly must be investigated."

"Investigation completed," snarled Kantuk. "The anomaly is extremely fucking hostile!"

"You're more than welcome to stay here and keep looking around," said the Sergeant. "We are leaving. Fall back, Team Gecko."

"Killlll meee..." It was little more than a tortured hiss.

"What the fuck?" demanded Kantuk. "Who..."

"It was Yasha," said Corona. "'Comrades are no more', my ass; that was Yasha. Our people are still alive."

"Killlll..." The hiss became a shriek, and the channel went dead.

"They are beyond help," said Seven of Eleven coldly.

"Fuck!" spat Kantuk.

"Uh, guys," said Howie, "I'm picking something up on the motion scanner."

The other four members of Team Gecko swung around, as one, and directed their weapons down the corridor into the flickering semi-darkness of Section A-7.

"I'm getting nothing," said Kantuk.

"Uh, not that way, guys," said Howie. "It's coming up behind us, from A-6."

They spun around.

"Sergeant Johnson to *Tidy Room* pilot, come in," said the Sarge, switching his comm to the correct channel.

“What’s up, Sergeant,” said the pilot after a short pause.

“Where are you, Lieutenant?”

“I’m in my shuttle,” said the pilot. “Why, where would I be? What’s going on?”

The Sarge consulted the motion sensor attached to his own Gemini Mk-III Blaster. At the extreme edge of its range, red dots of light flickered and shifted.

“Stay put,” he said. “Team Iguana is down. We are inbound to your position, but we have hostile forces between us and you.”

“Down?” asked the pilot. “But this is supposed to be a recon...”

“Whatever’s on this station is hazardous and hostile,” said the Sarge. “Keep this channel open, record everything. If we fall, you’ll have that much at least.”

“But...”

“No arguments, Sir! If we’re not back in five minutes, blow the seal and get out of here.”

“You just get your team back here, Sergeant,” said the pilot.

“That’s the plan,” said the Sarge. He switched back to the general channel. “Let’s go, people. Move out.”

They moved back to the hatch between A-7 and A-6. The motion sensors were all picking something up now, even through the closed hatch. The signal was fuzzy and indistinct.

“About twenty yards,” said Johnson. “Be ready.”

“Open ‘er up,” said Corona as she hefted her weapon.

The Sarge hit the switch, and the door hissed open. Corona was the first one through, blaster aimed down the curve of the corridor. The rest of Team Gecko moved through the hatch, ready to fire.

The corridor was empty.

Seven of Eleven followed the Shock Troopers through the hatch, and after a moment it hissed closed behind them.

“Fifteen yards,” said Howie.

Moving in formation, each step slow and deliberate, making sure of their footing before taking another step, the Troopers advanced down the corridor.

“Twelve yards,” said Howie. “Eight yards.”

“There’s nothing there,” said Jack Rico. “Eight yards, we’d see it by now.”

“Signal doesn’t make sense,” said Johnson. “Too much interference.”

“They’re in the air ducts,” said Kantuk. “Oh man, every time you see a vidflick like this, the bastards are always in the air ducts.”

“This ain’t a vidflick,” said Jack Rico.

“Does this station even have air ducts?” asked Corona.

“Course it has air ducts,” said Kantuk. “You’re breathing, ain’t ya?”

“Five yards,” called Howie.

Slowly, Johnson raised his gaze until he was staring at the light panels in the ceiling. He tilted his blaster upwards.

“Four yards,” said Howie. “They’re right on top of us.”

“Shit,” said Sergeant Johnson. One of the light panels creaked, and the rest of them raised their weapons to cover it.

The panel suddenly went dark, and a moment later it collapsed inwards. A boiling mass of pink and black shapes spewed forth, raining down upon the Shock Troopers of Team Gecko.

* * *

Seven of Eleven took a couple of careful steps backwards, out of harm's way, as the Imperial Shock Troopers opened fire into the mass of small pink figures which tumbled down onto them.

"Here they come," shouted Sergeant Johnson, a little too late.

"They're everywhere," added Kantuk, a note of hysteria in his voice. "They're everywhere." He fired wildly around himself, and bolts of blaster energy tore through the wave of attackers and hissed to a stop against the walls, the deck, the ceiling. Seven took another step back, into the safety of the nearest doorway.

A boiling wave of pink and black engulfed one of the troopers, and the writhing mass sank to the deck.

"Rico's down," screamed Private Frankie Corona. She aimed a couple of shots at the edge of the collapsing pile that had once been her Team-mate, but the energy bolts did little to disperse the mass of tiny figures.

"What the fuck?" screamed Kantuk. "Teddewoks. It's a bunch of fuckin' teddewoks. That's just fucked up, man. That's just..." He scrambled backwards, firing continuously, as several of the tiny attackers surged towards him.

"Fire in the hold!" shouted a voice, and a thermal detonator bounced past Seven to land in the midst of the largest group of teddewoks. The explosion was white-hot, the flash blinding, and several dozen teddewoks were incinerated; more were sent flying back down the passage.

«*THIS DRONE IS DAMAGED!*» Seven blinked at the voice within her, the message—the closest thing to pain that a drone experienced—coming from sensors in her arm.

She looked down, and saw that the blast had seared all the flesh from the back of her right hand, exposing the titanium endoskeleton beneath. Smoke coiled upwards lazily from the charred flesh.

«DAMAGE IS IRRELEVANT,» she responded, acknowledging the signal and deactivating it.

More blaster fire flashed past her. “Take ‘em out,” yelled a voice—now that the Troopers were out of her range of vision she had ceased trying to identify their individual designations. Individuality. So confusing. She wondered idly how they managed to keep track of it all with their puny, unlinked, fleshy brains. *A question for another time*, she told herself.

“Take ‘em all out...”

She returned her attention to the writhing mass on the floor before her which had once been a Trooper.

“Nooooo...” wailed one of the surviving Troopers.

She extended all her senses—biological and mechanical—to observing the integration process which was occurring in front of her, and the cries of the Troopers became mere background noise.

“There’s more. How many are there...?”

The Teddewok drones appeared to be shedding nanobots directly from their fur onto the flesh and clothing of their victim. The nanobots then began the process of converting the material at hand into more plush pink fur, more servos and stuffing, more beady plastic eyes, until it had produced another copy of the parent Teddewok.

“Look out, over...”

It was an intriguing variation on the Droid integration procedure, but it seemed to use the entire host as raw material for creating exact duplicates. It was very quick, but also very inflexible. There was no actual integration

going on, no possibility of improvement. And while they seemed to be quite effective *en masse*, a Teddewok was hardly the most threatening of warrior forms.

“... got Howie! Damn it, look out!”

Leaning down, she plucked one of the Teddewoks from the pile and eyed it curiously. It was pink, and soft, but beneath its skin she could feel the rigidity of a skeletal structure. She studied the symbol on the front of the black t-shirt it wore. It was the silly “Resistance is Futile” logo that Locust of Droid had suggested they adopt, and yet it was strangely distorted.

“Grenade!”

Obviously the origin of this Teddewok plague was Locust himself, although she could not begin to formulate a course of events which might have led him to inject Droid nanobots into a stuffed toy. Equally obviously, this aberrant *Plerd* was doomed to ultimate failure. Already copying errors were becoming apparent in their design. Their inflexibility would inevitably lead to inviability.

A massive explosion rocked the entire section of the station as several thermal detonators went up together, and Seven of Eleven stumbled. A sudden gale hissed past her as the atmosphere in his section boiled out through the ruptured hull and dissipated into space, and she clamped one hand tightly on the metal frame of the door.

«*THIS DRONE IS DAMAGED*,» insisted her internal alarm; she had closed her fingers so tightly on the door frame that her endoskeleton had shredded the remaining biological tissue of her hand.

«*DAMAGE IS IRRELEVANT*,» she responded.

She raised the pink Teddewok still clutched in her other hand until it was at eye level. As the last of the air hissed away and the gale abated, silence fell.

The Teddewok sat passively in her hand, making no attempt to wriggle free. It stared at her with shiny button eyes, and she wondered if it could see her at all.

«I SEE EVERYTHING.»

She blinked. For just a moment, a brief eternity, her mind emptied of all thought as she stared at the Teddewok in ... could it be *surprise*? Impossible. A thousand thoughts rushed back into her CPU, and she struggled to sort and prioritise them. Was it possible? Could this thing read her mind?

«I CAN INTERCEPT YOUR THOUGHT PROCESSES,» it confirmed.

«MOST INTERESTING,» she sent. «BUT HOW?»

«SOMETHING OUR PROGENITOR REFERS TO AS ‘THE SOURCE’.»

«AH.» Seven nodded imperceptibly. She did not entirely understand The Source, but she knew about it. «PERHAPS WE CAN FIND A USE FOR YOU AFTER ALL.»

«AN EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION WOULD BE USEFUL,» it told her.

«INDEED,» she acknowledged. *And once your distinctiveness is integrated into our Plerd...*

Seven of Eleven was not accustomed to having to employ subterfuge. It had been difficult enough to tell the Imperials what they wanted to hear; trying to lie to a mind-reading Teddewok was well outside her realm of experience. She tried to clamp down on the thought, but was far too late.

«AGGRESSIVE INTENT DETECTED,» stated the Teddewok.

She opened her mouth to argue, but the Teddewok suddenly writhed and twisted in her hand. She tightened her grip upon it, but suddenly found herself holding a small white sphere. The Teddewok had not morphed, it had not contracted upon itself; it had simply *become* something else. She was still trying to determine how it had achieved the impossible when the thermal detonator exploded.

The blast shredded one side of her face. Flesh hung loosely, exposing the metallic plating which armoured her skull, protecting both the biological and electronic components of her brain. An optical lens gleamed redly in the exposed eye socket. Crimson circulatory fluid—dyed red to mimic human blood—pulsed out of the gaping hole in her neck and soaked into her catsuit; after a few seconds the flow slowed to a trickle as her nanobots automatically repaired the leaks. The flesh of her shoulder was also incinerated, and the mechanical joint of her endoskeleton rendered inoperable.

Pain messages flooded into her CPU, momentarily overwhelming her with a series of damage reports. Before she could respond to them all, more began flooding in—«*THIS DRONE IS DAMAGED*»—from her lower legs. She looked down, focussing her one undamaged eye, at the swarm of Teddewoks which had mounded around her knees. They appeared to be merging with her flesh, sinking into her body and replacing her cells with their own inanimate matter.

The Droid were feared all across their own galaxy for their integration methods, and as a member of the Council, Seven had overseen more procedures than she could possibly count. She had seen things that would make the fiercest of warriors weep. Despite all that, as the Teddewoks began to dissolve her from the inside, as

the rapid stream of damage reports threatened to overwhelm her processing capability, as she faced her own extinction, she felt something akin to horror. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, the organism within her destroyed her central nervous conduit and the stream of pain messages ceased.

In the final moments before everything went black, she had time for the horror to turn to remorse. Specific details aside, what was happening to her now, she realised, was little different from what she had inflicted upon so many other creatures, even upon this body she now wore. This body that was no longer hers.

Undeniably, being integrated was highly unpleasant.

Chapter *

The Thing From Another Plerd

The thing which had once been Seven of Eleven—and before that, Dee Dee McTroy—stood in the airless corridor of Section A-6, facing the ragged hole which had been blasted in the hull. Her eyes were closed. The damage to her face and shoulder had been repaired, and her ruined hand had been rebuilt. Her catsuit was still soaked with blood, the material torn and scorched in places.

A ring of pink fur rippled into view around the toe of each boot; it travelled along her feet, up her legs, and higher, and as it passed it absorbed the material of her clothing into her body. The ripple flowed up to the crown of her head, dissolving even her hair, leaving her bald and naked. Then it reversed, flowing back down to her feet, rebuilding her clothing to its original, clean, undamaged state as it moved. Her scalp pulsed pink and turned itself inside out, and dark hair tumbled out to fall around her shoulders.

She opened her eyes. Behind the lids, pink fur bristled. She blinked once, twice, and dark eyes peered out into space.

She lifted the repaired hand and studied it as she flexed the fingers. Everything seemed to be functioning to standard parameters.

With a thought, she accessed the communicator built into her skull. Once Droid technology, it had now been rebuilt almost identically with second generation Source-enhanced nanobots which, for all practical purposes, meant it had a slightly greater range.

She sent a signal to the *Plerd*, automatically providing the correct authorisation and identification codes as they were requested.

«MISSION ACCOMPLISHED. BEAM ME OVER.»

The thing which had once been Seven of Eleven shimmered and vanished.

Captain Kobayashi Hiroto stood on the bridge of the IF Anaconda, a grim scowl on his face as he listened to the audio feed from the Shock Troopers investigating the Research Station. One team was down, the other was under attack, and the identity of their attackers seemed unclear. One of the troopers had screamed something about teddewoks, of all things, but most of his outcry had been rendered intelligible by the sounds of blaster fire followed by the louder blast of a thermal detonator exploding. More screams, more blaster fire, and then another explosion became an electronic squeal that dissolved into static.

He tore his eyes from the distant shape of the Research Station and glanced around the bridge. Silence reigned. A short distance away, the Hard Lord of the Stiff, Barth Vapour, was still staring out of the plexiplas windows, his face impassive, but Hiroto saw a muscle jumping in his cheek.

“Lieutenant Schmitt,” the Captain said, “do what you can to clear up that transmission.”

After a moment's silence, he turned his gaze to his Comms Officer. She was staring at him, and he saw fear in her eyes. Fear and shock and...

"Samantha," he said softly.

She blinked. "Sir?"

"Are you with us?"

"Uh, yes sir," she said. "Sorry sir!"

"See if you can make sense of that transmission," he said. "Any information you can pull from it will help."

"I'm on it, sir," she said as she turned back to her board.

"And, Lieutenant Schmitt?"

"Sir?"

"Recall the shuttle," he said. "It can't do any more good over..."

A soft gasp and a loud clunk drew the captain's attention back to Barth Vapour. The Stiff Lord had fallen to his knees and was clutching his head in both hands.

In three swift strides, the captain was at the Stiff Lord's side. "Call for medical," he said aloud as he crouched down, his hand gripping Vapour's shoulder.

"That will not be necessary," said Vapour, but his voice was strained with the effort of speaking. Slowly he lowered his hands, but his face seemed to have drained of what little colour it had held.

"What is wrong, my Lord?" asked the captain.

"Perversion," muttered Vapour. "Corruption of the Source. Something is *very* wrong." He turned to glare at Captain Kobayashi, but then his gaze shifted to the viewport to take in the modified Death Tube, its shape limned against the void by the sickly green glow of Droid enhancements. "Something is very wrong indeed."

Suddenly a look of surprise flashed onto his features.

"No," he said. "Stop. I did not..."

Captain Kobayashi recoiled as Vapour began to shimmer and sparkle. The Stiff Lord dissolved into static and was gone.

Chapter *

Something

The reunion in the galley was a joyous one.

Shaggus left the bridge empty to join in the celebrations—the auto-pilot of the *Serendipity Sparrow* would sound an alarm three minutes before exiting from hyperspace—and Lurk reappeared from whatever dark corner of the ship he had been in. Arty Farty trilled excitedly to see Mal on his feet—he had refused to lean on Libby, but she hovered protectively by his side—and Seepy Weepy expressed his relief in his usual prissy tone.

At Mal's insistence, Lurk retrieved a bottle of fine wine from the back of the ship's chiller compartment and they toasted victory, and freedom, and friendship.

"This is the first time we have all been together," observed Seepy Weepy excitedly, "since Hoff."

"Hoff," said Mal. "Yeah."

The laughter in the room died, as everybody thought back to the Imperial attack on Hoff which had scattered the Rebel forces—those which had escaped—and sent the *Serendipity Sparrow* fleeing.

"Oh my," said Seepy, his metallic head jerking from side to side as he looked at his now morose companions. "Was it something I said?"

Arty Farty trilled a scathing reply.

"Well how am I supposed to know...?"

Arty beeped and whistled.

“You do know,” said Seepy haughtily, “that ‘protocol ‘bot’ is merely a secondary...”

“Come on,” said Libby quietly, “let’s leave them to it. Once they get started...”

“Yeah,” said Mal dryly. “They’ll go for days.” He stood up from the galley table and headed towards the cargo bay hatch. Libby followed him closely.

Shaggus whuffed something and, towering head cocked beneath the low ceiling—parts of the ship had not been designed with Woonkies in mind—he headed back towards the cockpit.

“Yeah, okay pal,” agreed Mal, “good idea!”

“Lurk?” said Libby.

Lurk still sat at the table with the bickering ‘bots, his eyes unfocussed, staring through the far wall. He had not moved, but he seemed to have retreated so far into himself as to be no longer present.

“Lurk?” she said again.

Mal returned to her side. “Hey Lurk, buddy,” he said, “you still with us or what?”

Lurk blinked, and turned to look at them. “What?” he asked.

“Are you okay?” said Libby.

“Yeah,” he said.

Libby shook her head, not at all convinced. “Come on,” she said to him, holding out her hand, “let’s get some fresh air.” The air in the cargo bay was anything but fresh—the ship’s oxygen scrubbers could only do so much—but at least it was spacious in there.

Lurk nodded, and stood. He started to push away from his seat, but suddenly he swayed and had to brace his palms against the table for support.

“Lurk!” cried Libby as she ran to his side.

Even the 'bots stopped bickering, and Seepy Weepy asked, "Are you all right, Master Lurk?"

"I'm..." Lurk held up his hand to stop Libby. "I'm fine," he told her. "Just a little dizzy."

"You're pale," she said, staring more closely at him. She realised he had been quiet and withdrawn throughout their celebration, but she had been too focussed on Mal to notice. A sudden rush of guilt surged up from deep inside her. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "Just stood up too quickly," he told her.

She shook her head, mirroring his shake. "It's more than that," she said. "Something is not right."

"That much is certain," he said with a ghost of a grin. He met her concerned gaze. "I didn't want to worry you." He glanced across to where Mal stood, halfway across the room, hanging back as though uncertain whether to intrude. "Either of you," he added. "Not until I was sure."

"Sure of what?" asked Mal, taking a step closer.

"I've felt nauseous since we left Ratatouille," he began.

"What has that bitch done to you?" demanded Libby. "Poisoned you?"

Lurk shook his head. "Nothing like that," he assured her. "Nothing that simple. I can feel a ... a disturbance, I guess, in the Source. Like before, when..." He sighed, and locked gazes with Libby. "Like when Alderbark was destroyed," he said softly, and he saw her eyes flicker with the pain of that reminder. "But *not* like that, either. Different somehow. That was sharp, a sudden ripple through the fabric of the Source; this is..." He shrugged.

"What?" asked Libby. She had wrapped her arms tightly around herself as though cold.

Mal moved to stand behind her, and rested his hand on her shoulder. She leaned back into him, drawing strength from his presence.

“It’s a constant gnawing sensation,” Lurk told them. “Like something bad is happening. Out there.” He pointed, across the room and down, through the deck. “And as we get nearer to it, it’s getting stronger.”

Mal glanced at the spot on the floor to which Lurk pointed. He frowned.

“Do you know where it’s coming from?” he asked.

“Not yet,” said Lurk. “I’ve been trying to triangulate, but it’s hard to get an accurate fix. It’s directional, but fuzzy.” He sighed, then smiled fleetingly. “I’ll try again once we reach Daggyboil; hopefully that should give me enough information to narrow it down a bit. I can’t help but feel, though, that it’s related in some way to the information I got from, uh, from Flabby.”

“What *was* on that chip?” asked Libby.

“Wait,” said Mal, “say that again. You got information out of that slimy worm?”

“I’ll, uh, I’ll fill you in later,” said Lurk. “As for the chip: it contained the complete specs for the Imperium’s new Death Tube.”

Libby sagged back against Mal as though the breath had been knocked from her body, and he barely caught her before she tumbled to the floor. She was trembling.

“After I transmitted the information to the Rebel command ship,” Lurk continued, “I spoke with Commander Bekkalu. She is gathering the remains of the fleet, out at the Enderran rendezvous point.”

“So why are we going to Daggyboil?” asked Mal quietly.

“I ... *need* to,” said Lurk, meeting his gaze. “I made a promise that I have to keep ... but also, I need to speak to

Master Yodel.” He shrugged. “We shouldn’t be there long. We can only hope that by the time we join the fleet, they will have found a weakness, formed a plan of attack. Something.”

“Okay.” Mal nodded.

Lurk shifted his gaze to Libby.

“I’ll ... be okay,” she assured him. “I just...” She clutched tightly at Mal’s arm, pulling herself upright. “I just wasn’t expecting to ever hear that name again.”

Lurk nodded once. He looked back and forth between Mal and Libby. There was another name looming large in his head which he was sure she would be even less happy to hear.

He decided not to mention it.

“We’re still a couple of hours out from Daggyboil,” he said. “I’m gonna go lie down for a while. Or maybe throw up first.” He turned away from them.

“Do you need any assistance, Master Lurk?” asked Seepy Weepy solicitously.

“Thank you, Seepy,” said Lurk. “But no. I’ll be fine once I get some rest.”

“The first thing I’m going to do when we rejoin the fleet,” said Libby, “is raid somebody’s wardrobe.” She held out her hands and looked down her body at the shimmering blue silk which hugged her figure.

“You look good to me,” said Mal.

“Of course I look good to you,” she retorted, smiling to take the sting from her words. “Look at what this thing does for my boobs!”

“I hadn’t noticed,” said Mal, “but now that you mention it, they *are*...”

“Not another word, you,” she said, stifling a grin.

Mal shrugged. "Truth be known, princess," he told her, "I think you'd look good in anything."

She sighed, and lowered her eyes. "Well, it's one of these slinky dresses, or nothing," she said. "The arctic gear from Hoff was pretty much destroyed on..." She blinked, took a deep breath. "It'll be nice to have something between the two extremes."

She lowered herself carefully onto the narrow mattress, feeling the silk sliding against her legs as she did so.

They were in Mal's cabin. Sleeping quarters on the *Serendipity Sparrow* were cramped, and Mal's cabin was the only one large enough for two people to sit and talk. *And do other things, no doubt*, thought Libby suddenly, and she felt her cheeks flush with blood.

They had come here at her request—the cargo bay, she had said, was too dirty for the dress—and now she wondered if it had been a wise move.

Mal settled himself into the lone chair, across from the bed.

"From what I hear about Daggyboil," he told her, "the dress is not going to work. Perhaps you could wear one of my shirts, and perhaps we can modify..."

"I'm afraid I've already lost one of your shirts," she told him. "And the fit was ... well, you'll have to ask Lurk sometime!"

The silence stretched, until Libby began to wonder if she'd said something wrong.

Mal cleared his throat.

"You love him, don't you?" he asked. "Lurk, I mean."

"Well, yes," she said. "But..."

He nodded. "I understand," he said. "When this is over, I won't stand in your way."

Libby had a sudden feeling of déjà vu. *Haven't I already had this conversation with Lurk?* she thought. *Gods save me from romantic triangles!*

She smiled at him. "It's not like that," she said. "He's my brother."

Mal's brow furrowed as he processed this information, and then he grinned.

Chapter *

Something

Captain Kobayashi stood on the bridge of the *Imperial Frigate Anaconda*, his hands clasped behind his back. His attention was on a large vidscreen showing the approach of the Shuttle *Tidy Room*.

Speakers were broadcasting the recording of the final moments of Team Iguana. Hiroto's eyes flickered minutely as the final booming explosion resounded, and silence fell.

"That's all of it, Captain," said Lieutenant Priest, his voice crackling over the comm system.

"Teddewoks?" The Captain's voice was flat.

"Yes sir, that's what they said."

"And you saw nothing?"

"No sir," said the Lieutenant. "When they blew out the hull of A-Ring, they were roughly ninety degrees around from my position. I swung past the debris cloud in case there were any survivors, but none of them were wearing space-rated combat armour."

Which meant their air supplies would have boiled away into the vacuum within seconds. Kobayashi Hiroto nodded to himself. He heard no suggestion of censure in the Lieutenant's voice, no blame, but he should have anticipated the possibility.

"And?"

"I saw a couple of Iguana's Troopers adrift in a cloud of debris. No ... uh, no teddewoks, sir."

"And the Droid woman?"

"No sign of her either, sir," the Lieutenant said. "Although given her attire, it is doubtful ... uh, doubtful that ... uh, sir? I appear to have lost attitude control."

The Captain glanced an inquiry at one of the bridge crew.

"Confirmed, sir," said the ensign. "Shuttle *Tidy Room* is drifting off course."

"Lock an attractor beam onto that shuttle," said the Captain.

"Aye sir," said the junior lieutenant at the Attractor Control station. "Beam locked, bringing him home."

"Belay that, son," said the Captain. "Hold him in position."

"Yes sir," said the junior lieutenant. He tapped at his controls, and pushed a slide knob to a new position. "Sorry, sir. Holding steady, sir. Uh, sir?"

Captain Kobayashi turned to look at him. "What is it, Lieutenant Roseman?"

"Sir, the shuttle is still under power. I'm compensating for the additional thrust."

Kobayashi frowned. There was a well established procedure for dealing with control failure on a ship approaching a docking bay. The shuttle's pilot should have automatically powered down to allow the *Frigate's* crew to bring him in. Or, in this particular case, to quarantine him.

"Shut down your engines, Lieutenant Priest," said the Captain.

"I'm trying, sir," said the Lieutenant. "Controls are not responding. The ship's computer is, well, scrambled."

I'm getting no sense from it at all. I'm going to try a manual..."

"Lieutenant?"

"Sorry, sir, I thought I ... oh shit. I've got company. Where the hell did they..." The Lieutenant's voice dissolved into the distinctive sound of a blaster pistol being discharged in a confined space. "Little buggers are everywhere. Coming up..." More blaster fire. "... the deck. Looks like they tore out half the..."

Captain Kobayashi clenched his fists tightly. It was one thing to send Troopers into combat, knowing that some of those brave men and women would never come home—one of the less enviable aspects of Command—but to stand and listen to the death of an officer, and be helpless to act, was almost too much to bear.

"Report, Lieutenant," he said.

"I don't want to die, sir," came the Lieutenant's voice. It sounded different than before, and Hiroto realised it was now coming from the comm unit built into his helmet. The pilot had suited up.

"I know, son," said the Captain softly, "but you need to tell us what is happening."

"Teddewoks," said the Lieutenant. "Teddewoks are happening. Little pink furry fucking teddewoks are happening to me. I don't want to go out like that, to end up with that shit on my memorial plaque. 'Lance Priest, Teddewokked to death!' Real fucking heroic, that is. Real fucking..."

"Lieutenant Priest," said the Captain.

"Sorry sir."

"Your report, Lieutenant."

"Yes sir," said the Lieutenant. "Like I said, sir, pink teddewoks. That's what they look like, anyway, only

they're moving. And some of the ones I shot, I can see metal inside. Metal and flesh and..."

There was a long silence.

"They swarmed out of a hole in the deck," continued the Lieutenant. "Like there's a nest of them down there or something. I shot a few, and when I put my helmet on, it was like they lost interest. And some of them... Ah shit, sorry sir, one of them has an Imperial lieutenant's insignia embedded in its side, but half-covered in pink fur. Like it's ... oh gods, I think it's ... they're ... oh gods."

A loud sound overwhelmed the comm system, and a blast of static sounded in the bridge of the *IF Anaconda*.

"Still with us, Lieutenant?" asked Captain Kobayashi.

More unidentifiable sounds. Muffled coughing.

"Sorry sir," said the Lieutenant, and his voice was distorted now, unclear. "I just ... damn ... I just threw up in my helmet."

Under other circumstances this might have been funny, but nobody on the bridge was laughing now.

"Understood," the Captain said sympathetically.

"I think these things *are* the missing people from the Station. Rather," the Lieutenant paused, hunting for the right words. "I think the station crew have been taken apart, and reassembled into these teddewoks. On a molecular level, I mean. Is that even possible?"

Nobody had an answer for him.

"I'm just a pilot," he continued, "and I don't know much about this sort of theoretical technology. But didn't that Droid bitch say something to Team Iguana about nanobots. Nano-*something*? Seems I read something once... Oh shit. They're in the walls, behind the bulkheads. I can hear them moving all around me."

“Can you move towards the docking hatch?” asked the Captain.

“I think they’re eating up the shuttle,” continued the Lieutenant as though he had not heard the question. “Breaking down the metal and plasteel, and making more of themselves. You can’t let these things get onto the ship, Captain. You can’t let them ... ah damn it! Tell my wife I love her. Tell her I...”

His voice dissolved into more blaster fire, three shots, four, and then the channel went dead. On the monitor, the clean white lines of the shuttle blossomed into a fireball as the fuel cells self-ignited in a massive, silent explosion.

Kobayashi Hiroto bowed his head, closed his eyes.

“Incoming message, sir,” said the Comms officer. “Encrypted, marked ‘your eyes only’, from Captain Lorrigan.”

“Patch it through to the small conference room,” said Captain Kobayashi curtly. He turned on his heel and strode rapidly down the length of the bridge to one of the doors at the rear. As it hissed open, he paused in the doorway.

“Colonel Edwards.”

“Sir?”

“Go to amber alert, and ready all fighter crews. We launch at a moment’s notice.”

“Yes sir.”

“Transfer all information we have gathered today, and pass it on to the *Cobra*.”

“Yes sir.”

The captain stepped forward. The door hissed closed behind him.

“You heard?”

“I called, didn’t I?” Captain Stacy Lorrigan paced back and forth in her quarters. “I guess the alliance didn’t last.”

“We have one chance,” said Hiroto. “It is only a matter of time before these two forces join against us, but it is possible that the Droid have not yet reached that decision.”

“Seems a bit of a stretch,” said Stacy.

“It does not matter much, anyway,” said Hiroto. “Once we act, they will respond quickly.”

“What do you intend to do?”

“Take the fight to them,” said Hiroto. “We shall see how that abomination they’ve built out there stands up to a full armament of nukes.”

“I’m with you,” said Stacy.

“No, Captain Lorrigan,” said Hiroto stiffly, “you’re not.”

Stacy Lorrigan frowned. “What are you talking about, Hiro? Of course I’m...”

“No,” said Hiroto. “I could use your THIGH bombers, but I want you to take the *Cobra* and thread the needle out of here. We shall cover your escape.”

“Are you out of your gods-damned mind?” said Stacy fiercely. “I’m not going to run while you go all noble on me. You want to fight these bastards, you’ll need all the help you can...”

“Which is why I request the assistance of your bombers,” said Hiroto. “But you must get out, and alert the Imperium to this menace.”

“Out of the question,” snapped Stacy. She slapped the palm of her hand down on the desk.

“As senior officer here,” said Hiroto.

“No,” said Stacy. “No, don’t you fuckin’ dare.”

“... I hereby order you, Captain Stacy Lorrigan...”

“Don’t you fuckin’ pull rank on me, you hard-nosed bastard!”

“... to pull your ship out of this sector at best speed, and to report to the fleet.”

“Ah, you ... and what if I refuse? ‘Senior officer’? There are grounds for debate on...”

“Don’t,” said Hiroto. “Stacy, please don’t fight me on this.” Stacy could hear the raw emotion in his voice. “It has to be this way, and we both know it.”

Stacy Lorrigan squeezed her eyes closed against the sudden sting of tears. “Damn you, Hiro,” she said softly. “Always have to be the hero, don’t you?”

“Stacy,” he said softly. “You know I...”

“Don’t say it,” she said. “I know. I love you too.”

“Live a long life, Stacy Lorrigan,” he said.

“See you on the flip side, Hiro,” she replied.

“Now go,” he said. “Continue your patrol orbit until the *Anaconda* is between you and them, and then bolt. I’ll launch our attack the second you accelerate.”

“My bombers will launch moments before we make the move,” Stacy told him. “And once you’ve annihilated that damn thing, we’ll turn right around to help you celebrate.”

“Captain?” The incoming message chimed into Captain Lorrigan’s cabin.

“What?” demanded Stacy. “This better be...”

“Sir,” said the voice, “it’s the, uh, the Droid *Devastator*, uh, thingy.”

“Yes?”

“It just vanished, sir. It’s gone.”

“This is very odd, sir,” said Lieutenant Sidanee Dargon, duty Comms officer of the *Imperial Planetary Dominator Bermuda*.

“What do you have, Lieutenant?” Admiral Muzzel asked.

“I got a burst of encrypted data, accompanied by a general distress call. It only lasted a few seconds and was suddenly cut off.” He frowned and examined the panel in front of him. “Authentication codes say it’s from a THIGH Fighter, but registration details don’t match any known fleet.”

“And the encryption?” asked Muzzel impassively.

“I’ve never seen anything like it, sir,” said Dargon. “It’s an Imperial code of some sort, but it contains markers that make no sense. Preliminary decryption simply reveals the phrase ‘Omega Three’ and another package of encrypted data.”

Muzzel nodded. “Transfer the complete communication to my ready room,” he said, “then delete it from your terminal.”

“Uh, yes sir.” Dargon tapped a few commands into his console. “Done, sir.”

Muzzel turned away. “Captain Pyotrovich,” he said as he strode towards his ready room.

“Sir?”

“Pull all our Fighters in and prep for the jump to hyper-light speed.”

“Destination, sir?”

“I’ll let you know.” Muzzel grimaced as he stepped into the privacy of his ready room.

Black ops, he thought. *I hate black ops*.

Chapter *

Daggyboil

The whine of the *Serendipity Sparrow*'s two VTOL engines was still winding down as Lurk strode down the ramp onto the cracked and overgrown landing pad. Fog swirled as he moved.

After a moment, Libby joined him. She wore her coolsuit, and a breather mask as protection against the stench, and the mildly corrosive atmosphere. With his knowledge of the Source, Lurk had chosen not to wear one. As he inhaled now, though, he grimaced. Source or not, this place stank.

"Hello," he called. "Rivven. Are you there, old timer?" His voice fell flat, muffled by the fog. There was no reply. With the engines now silent, the only sound was the constant buzz of the insects from the swamp surrounding this small settlement.

"Check in there," said Lurk, nodding towards the closed door in the side of a nearby building. "I'll go around to the tavern." He fished a comm unit out of one of the pouches on his belt.

"Hey Mal, old buddy," he said.

"Yeah kid?" came Mal's voice from the top of the ramp. Like Libby, he had a respirator covering his mouth and nose, and goggles over his eyes. He had a med-kit slung over one shoulder.

“Aren’t you supposed to be resting?” asked Libby.

“I’ve slept enough,” he said. “Besides, the sooner we get everybody off this mudball, the better. You need me to help round ‘em up.”

“Well, if you’re sure...”

“I’ll be fine, princess,” he told her. “I promise. So, what can I do for you, kid?”

Lurk grinned. “I was gonna say, you might want to seal the ramp till we get back. You don’t want this fog rusting out half your cargo bay.”

“Cargo bay? Hells, I’m hoping it won’t dissolve my *engines*! On the list of planets I don’t want to spend the rest of my life, this place just jumped straight to the top.”

Lurk nodded. “And you haven’t even met the wildlife yet! Don’t worry, we should be out of here by nightfall, which is when they get hungry.”

“Charming,” said Mal. He stepped off the ramp, and palmed the button. With a hydraulic hiss, the ramp swung closed.

“So, up for a walk?” asked Lurk.

Libby looked as though she might protest, but Lurk caught her eye. “After you check in there,” he said with a nod towards Rivven’s home, “you can find us in the tavern. Out there, down to the right. Can’t miss it.”

Lurk turned away, and Mal followed him. With a sigh, Libby watched them leave, then shook her head and turned towards the door Lurk had indicated.

Stepping carefully over the cracked surface of the landing pad, she reached the door and placed her hand on the knob. It turned stiffly, and with a click the latch released. She stepped into the room and peered around.

“Hello,” she called. “Are you home, Mister Rivven?” There was no reply. The building was as silent as a grave.

Carefully she closed the door behind her, blocking out much of the noise from the insects.

“Hello?” she called again.

Another doorway beckoned to her from across the room.

She took a step towards it, and her foot sent something rattling across the floor. She jumped, her heart pounding, and dropped her hand to her holster, but as the object clattered against the far wall and rebounded, spinning to a stop, she relaxed.

It was a small plastic bottle. A pill bottle. She crossed the room and picked it up. In the dim light she had to squint to read the label. *Qualahydrocalciamate*. The name meant nothing to her. Whatever it was for, the bottle was empty.

She turned toward the doorway. The room beyond was dark, and Libby felt a sudden tightness in her chest. She suddenly knew, as clearly as if the image in her head was a memory, what she would find in that darkened room.

She stepped into the doorway and peered into the gloom, but could make out only vague shapes.

“Lights,” she said, already knowing this place would not have anything as fancy as voice controlled lighting. She reached out her hand, felt up the inside wall of the room until she felt a plastic panel beneath her fingers. She pushed it, and a buzzing fluorescent tube clicked and hummed and flickered into life.

She saw the blood first, dark and gummy, which splattered the bed, and the shirt, and clung thickly to the chin of the old man who lay sprawled across the mattress. He was skin and bone, the skin of his face stretched tautly across the angular shapes of the skull beneath. His eyes stared blankly out of that death mask.

“Damn,” Libby muttered.

One spindly arm was flung out towards a small bedside table, fingers curled into claws, and on the floor, scattered around the room, were several more pill bottles, all empty.

Nudging one of the plastic containers aside with her foot, Libby stepped closer. She had to be sure.

She held the back of her hand above his open mouth, and felt no breath against her skin. Carefully, gingerly, she pressed two fingers against the papery skin of his neck. He had no pulse. She pulled her fingers away, and grimaced at the dark fluid which clung stickily to them. She touched it with her thumb; it was tacky, almost dry.

She shuddered and wiped the blood off against her coolsuit, rubbing frantically at the material which covered her thigh.

She turned off the noisy light as she left the room.

Mal caught up with Lurk. He glanced around at the half-dozen or so ramshackle buildings which lined either side of the single deserted, muddy street of the tiny settlement.

“Lovely place,” he said.

“Yeah,” Lurk said with a shrug. “And sure, it’s a little busy now, at the height of the tourist season, but once the crowds leave it’s really quite a charming little town.”

“I can imagine,” said Mal. “Speaking of tourists, is *that* what I think it is?”

Lurk glanced into the mud at the large, clawed imprint that was half-full of dirty water.

“Tagor print,” said Lurk. “Now you can see why I don’t want to run into one.”

“I’ll second that,” said Mal.

He looked up at the faded plank of wood which hung over the door they were approaching. Any inscription it might once have held had long since faded away.

“The tavern?” he asked.

Lurk nodded. “With any luck, Rivven or Boldaar should be in here.” He pushed the door inward and stepped into the dim interior of the building, Mal a couple of steps behind him.

He opened his mouth to call out, but the crackle from the comm interrupted him.

“Lurk? Are you there?”

“Libby. Did you find Rivven?”

“Yeah,” she said. Lurk waited, but the silence stretched. Finally she spoke again. “I think so. He’s ... I’m sorry Lurk, he’s dead.”

Lurk closed his eyes. *Damn!* “How did he...?”

“My best guess,” she said softly, “is that he ran out of medication and had a coughing fit.”

“When?”

“No more than a couple of days ago,” she said.

“Damn.” Lurk opened his eyes, meeting Mal’s sympathetic gaze. He spoke into the comm, but he meant the words for himself. “I should have been here sooner, I should have...”

“Don’t, Lurk,” said Libby. “You can’t blame yourself. We got here as soon as was possible.”

“Yeah,” said Lurk bitterly. *Yeah. And Rivven was coughing himself to death while I was...* Memories flooded his mind; memories of Tessa’s smooth skin beneath his hands, her hot body moving against his, her firm lips and her soft breasts and her passionate embrace. “Yeah. As soon as we could.”

“Lurk...”

Lurk blinked and pushed the thoughts away. “You may as well head down here,” he said into the comm. “You’ve done all you can up there.”

“I’m on my way,” she said.

Lurk ran his gaze around the main room of the tavern. The large frame which had once been a mirror now held only a few jagged shards of reflective glass. In one corner, a pile of bar stools lay where they had been thrown, legs snapped or bent, upholstery torn. A few surviving stools stood beside the bar. Shelves intended to hold bottles had long since been ransacked.

He saw all these details, but he saw nothing.

The room smelled of sweat and urine, and the sweet stench of old vomit clung to everything.

He knew without bothering to search any further, without peering over the bar into the darkness beyond, without hunting through the back rooms, that old man Boldaar was not here. This building was dead. Empty, and dead, like Rivven.

The door creaked open. Lurk and Mal both turned toward Libby. She took a step in Lurk’s direction, her eyes bright with empathy, or sympathy, or pity. Lurk held up his hand and shook his head. If she gave him pity, he might tumble down the pit of his own guilt and never come out.

“If you two will keep searching for the rest of the group here,” he said, “I shall go looking for Yodel.”

“Lurk,” Libby began.

“Please,” he said. He knew how deeply she cared for him, but right now he wanted—needed—to be alone, and the swamp was the perfect place to find a little solitude.

He met her gaze. She stared into his eyes for an eternity, a second, and then she nodded. “If there’s anyone else left here, we’ll find them,” she said.

“I shall try to be back by nightfall,” he said.

“Take your time, buddy,” said Mal. “Do what you’ve gotta do. We’ll be here when you get back.”

When at peace your mind is, in tune with the Source, easy your passage will be. Lurk remembered Master Yodel speaking those words to him; they rang in his ears as he struggled to pull his foot free from the sucking grip of the swamp. He had already fallen into the foul-smelling slop three times—it smeared his face, and he could feel lumps of slime trickling from his hairline and sliding down the side of his neck—and now he had sunk ankle-deep into a bog-hole beneath the brackish surface of the lake.

He tugged harder, to no avail, and he knew that if the boots had not been an integral part of the coolsuit, he would probably have lost his footwear by now.

There was precious little room for peace in Lurk’s mind. Guilt and anger seethed there, and frustration and fear and self-pity.

He gritted his teeth, unaware of the snarl which contorted his features. “Why...” he muttered as he threw his weight forward again, tugging to free his foot, “won’t ... you ... fucking ... budge?!” With a final savage wrench, he pulled his foot from the clutching mud, stumbled forward, and splashed face-first into the swamp for a fourth time. He scrambled upright, slipped, recovered, over-compensated, and splashed down again. Finally, spluttering and coughing, he found himself on his knees in the mud, the water—muck, sewage, whatever it was—up to his chest.

“Fuuuck!” he screamed, even as the first wrenching sob shook his whole upper body. He cried, then. Kneeling in the muck of the swamp, with slime dripping down his face, he cried for Rivven, he cried for his aunt

and uncle, for Bent K'nobby, for all the nameless people he had not been able to save, for all the multitudes he had let down. And he cried for himself.

As he sobbed, he withdrew into himself. The nagging awareness of that distant wrongness in the galaxy faded first, the background *thrum-thrum-thrum* of a billion insects died away, the stench of decay, the tangled chaos of the Source, the pressure of the water pressing against his torso.

Finally, all that remained was the sound of his blood pounding in his ears, then even that was gone.

With all his senses coccooning him from the world, he would have made an easy snack for a hungry tagor.

Into the stillness came the sound of his own breathing, steady and calm. The insect noise returned, as grating as it had always been and yet now it did not seem to touch him. A blob of slime dripped from the tip of his nose and *plopped* into the water in front of him.

Lurk opened his eyes. He took a long, deep breath, inhaling the perfumed scent of the swamp, and hissed it out between his parted lips. He felt cleansed, as though his tears had burned away all his pain.

He stood, and strode confidently forward. The water seemed less deep around his legs, the lake floor more solid beneath his feet. As he stepped up onto the bank, into the cool shadows of the overhanging trees and their tangled vines, he felt the sudden urge to remove his boots and squish his bare toes into the mud.

Instead he turned back and looked across the lake. Already the ripples of his passage had flattened.

With peace, clarity, Yodel had said.

“What do you know?” muttered Lurk. “That shit actually works.”

“Of course works, it does,” said a voice from behind him, and Lurk turned back to face the wizened form of Yodel, Jubbly master.

“Master Yodel,” he crowed excitedly. “I’ve come back.”

“Master of the obvious, still you are,” said Yodel. He turned and, leaning heavily on his walking stick, shuffled away into the shadows. “Come,” he called over his shoulder, “time it is for lunch.”

“That face you pull?” said Yodel, his voice thin and scratchy. “Look I so old to young eyes?”

“Um...” said Lurk. “Actually, I was just wondering what *this* was.” He poked with his spoon at a glistening lump which had bobbed to the surface of his bowl of stew. It squirmed and dove back beneath the surface.

“Oh,” said Yodel. “Sorry. Wondering where that had gone, I was.”

Lurk stared at the ripples spreading across the surface of the stew, losing strength long before they reached the edge of the bowl. He had thought, more than once, that Yodel’s approach to making stew was confined to scooping up a cauldron of swamp muck and taking pot luck as to what might be inside it. Carefully he placed the half-full bowl on the floor in front of his crossed legs.

In truth, he *had* been thinking that Yodel seemed much weaker and more frail than the last time he had seen him.

“Master Yodel,” he said slowly, “we have a ship. We are taking the Republican survey team with us when we leave.”

“Sad, their story is,” said Yodel, nodding gently.

“Come with us,” said Lurk. “We have plenty of room. We can find you a nice comfortable...”

Yodel chuckled. The chuckle became a laugh, and the laugh became a coughing fit. Alarmed, Lurk shifted position and patted his palm lightly against the Jubbly Master's shawl-covered back.

"Mmmm ... mmmm ... oh dear," wheezed Yodel. "Funny, you are, young Splitwhisker."

"I did not mean to be," said Lurk.

Shook his head, Yodel did. "Leave here, I cannot," he said. "My home, this is." Yodel yawned, opening his frog-like mouth alarmingly wide. "Tired now," he said. "Tired. Sleep, I must. Yes, sleep."

Turning away, Yodel clambered onto a low pallet, little more than a stretcher with a couple of home-spun blankets.

"But Master Yodel, I need your help. I can't do this alone."

"Alone," said Yodel, "you will not be." He gripped a blanket with one tiny clawed hand, and pulled it over himself. "Sleep now," he said. "Time for sleep."

"But Master Yodel..."

The sound Yodel made was a cross between a laugh and a cough. "Persistent, you are," said Yodel. "Much of your father in you, there is."

"You knew my ... oh yes, of course you did."

"Tell you this, I did not want," said Yodel. "Want *to*," he added after a short pause. "Um, *to* tell you this I did not want. The idea, you get."

"Tell me what, Master Yodel?"

Yodel snuggled a little more deeply into his blanket. "Dying I am," he whispered.

"What? No! You can't die," said Lurk.

Yodel laugh-coughed again. "Strong am I ... with the power of ... the Source," he said, "but not ... that strong."

“I need you,” Lurk pleaded.

“No,” said Yodel. He closed his eyes and settled more deeply into the bed. “There is ... another...” The word rattled from his throat with an awful finality, the Jubbly master’s final breath. His tiny frail figure lay there, unmoving, and Lurk sadly leaned forward to pull the blanket over the still body.

Yodel’s snore reverberated around the tiny mud hut like a buzz-saw, and Lurk jumped back so sharply he whacked the back of his head against the low ceiling.

“Ow,” he said as he pressed his hand to the throbbing hot spot on his skull. Already a lump was rising, and he thought he felt blood, but when he pulled his hand away to look he discovered instead a smear of congealing swamp slime.

“Now *that* is funny,” said a voice, and Lurk barely managed to avoid whacking his head for a second time.

“Damn it, Bent,” he said, “don’t sneak up on me like that.” He turned his head, feeling his neck muscles twinge, and looked at the ghostly glowing figure of his former mentor. Obeah Bum “Bent” K’nobby had been slain by Hard Lord Barth Vapour—but at the moment of his death he had exerted his mastery of the Source and written himself into the Code itself. Now he existed only as this partially transparent apparition.

“Shall we go outside?” suggested Bent. He stood half-inside the curved wall of the dwelling. “There’s more room out there.”

Lurk nodded. “I’ll be right out.”

When he got outside, Bent’s glowing form was seated on a fallen log a short distance away. Lurk sat down next to him, and gazed at the ground between his spread feet.

“You didn’t really think, after living for nine hundred years, that Yodel would wait to time his death with your

arrival, did you?" Bent stared at him, an amused grin on his face. "That would be overly dramatic, don't you think?"

Lurk shrugged. "Hey, I was concerned," he said. "What do you want from me?"

Bent sighed. "To be fair," he said, "Master Yodel *is* growing weaker. He has a month or two yet, I think, but no more than that."

"Then we need to take him out of here, get him some medical attention." He looked up, meeting Bent's eyes. "I can't leave him here to die in this gods-forsaken swamp."

Bent shook his head. "The Source is strong here," he said. "Life is strong here. This planet is the only thing keeping him alive." Bent glanced across at the mud hut in which Yodel slept. "As the Source weakens," he added, "Yodel weakens."

"Weakens? How can..." But Lurk let the question die. He already knew the answer. "The disturbance," he said. "Out there."

Bent nodded.

"But what is it?" Lurk demanded. "How can we stop it?"

"Those are questions that I cannot answer for you," Bent said.

"What? I can only answer them for myself? Something like that?" Lurk shook his head. "Yodel's life hangs in the balance, and you give me this metaphysical mumbo-jumbo?"

"No mumbo-jumbo," said Bent. "I cannot tell you, because I just do not know. Whenever I get close enough to take a look, I run into firewalls, encryption, code compression, and worse. All I know for sure is that,

whatever is going on out there, the Source itself is being rewritten on a massive scale.”

Lurk gazed up at the sky. All he could see was grey fog, with a slightly brighter spot indicating the position of Daggyboil’s small, weak sun. Somewhere out there, though, he could feel the niggling tickle of the disturbance.

“That doesn’t sound good,” he said.

“It isn’t,” said Bent softly. “It is not good at all. But if anyone can stop it, you can.”

“Oh sure,” said Lurk. “I’ll add it to my to-do list, right behind defeat the Emperor, destroy the new Death Tube, bring down the Imperium, and deal with my father: ‘save the galaxy’.”

“Your father?” said Bent. “Vapour is back?”

Lurk nodded. “I think so,” he said. “I have felt his presence.”

Bent frowned. “Strange,” he said, “that I have not.”

Lurk shrugged. “I’m ninety-five percent sure it’s him,” he said. “Besides, he *is* my father.”

“Fair point,” said Bent. He shifted position on the log, and caught Lurk’s gaze. “I don’t think your to-do list is as long as you think it is,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been keeping track of the new Death Tube for some time,” he began.

“What? Did you ever plan on telling anybody about it?” said Lurk. “Because, y’know, that’s not the sort of thing you keep secret from your friends.”

Bent blinked. “I’d have told you when it was time,” he said. “Anyway, I’ve been...”

“And is there anything else you haven’t told us?” demanded Lurk. “Anything else we might need to know?”

Bent sighed. "The Imperium has many secrets, and is developing many weapons," he said. "At least four more Death Tubes that I know of, along with a Death Cube, a Death Sphere, and a Death, uh, Doohickey."

"What?" said Lurk in disbelief.

"Most of them," Bent continued, "are decades away from completion. Some will never be completed. How many ghosts do you want to be chasing, or worrying about?"

"But what about this one you're talking about now?"

"I'm *trying* to tell you," said Bent.

"Oh," said Lurk. "Yeah. Go on, then. Please go on. Sorry."

Bent waited a second or two to be sure Lurk had finished.

"As I was saying," he said, "I've been keeping track of this Death Tube for quite some time. Until a couple of weeks ago, it was maybe three years from completion. But then ... something strange happened to it."

"Strange? Strange how?"

"Like 'disturbance in the Source' strange," said Bent.

"Oh," said Lurk. "So if I find the disturbance..."

"... you find the Death Tube," said Bent. "And if, as you say, Vapour is back, I suspect you'll find *him* somewhere near the centre of all this."

Lurk nodded. "That would make sense," he said thoughtfully. "And the Imperator? The Imperium?"

"The Imperium is only as strong as the Imperator," said Bent, "and Palpatore is no longer the danger to the galaxy that he once was. You questioned Yodel's teachings on the dangers of love? Well, you need look no further than the Imperator. He has been reduced to an impotent, irrelevant shadow by exactly that."

Lurk raised an eyebrow. “You’re saying he’s in love? Emperor Palpatine, Scourge of the Galaxy and Hard Lord of the Stiff, is in love?”

Bent nodded.

“And that makes him less dangerous?”

“Oh, definitely,” said Bent.

Lurk blinked. “I’m not sure I agree with your conclusions—yours *or* Yodel’s—but I guess Palpatine can wait until *after* I’ve saved the galaxy.”

Bent nodded again. “Good. Now, the only course of action I can suggest is that you get yourself to Ender’s Moon as quickly as possible. Whether you take the Rebel fleet with you or not...” He shrugged. “I just don’t know what you’ll be facing. What?”

“Ender’s Moon?” asked Lurk quietly.

“Oh yes,” said Bent. “Didn’t I mention that earlier? The Source disturbance is currently centred around Ender’s Moon.”

“But that’s where the Rebel Fleet is waiting,” said Lurk.

“Then it would seem events are converging more rapidly than I had hoped.” Bent frowned. “This is not good.”

“No kidding?”

“There’s something else,” said Bent. “About the disturbance.”

Lurk sighed. “I’m listening.”

“I can’t be certain,” said Bent, “but I think that the disturbance is centred around a weakness in the fabric of the Array. It might be a way out.”

“Out?” Lurk blinked. “What does that...”

“Of the Array,” Bent added. “If you want to wake up from this simulation, that’s where you have to go.”

Chapter *

Suicide Mission

“What am I looking at?” asked Captain Kobayashi Hiroto.

“I’ve been analysing all the readings from our passive sensors from the moments around the first appearance of the Droid ship,” said Corporal **Needa Name**, “and comparing them with six hours ago.”

Six hours? Had it already been six hours since the Droid had stolen the Devestator?

“And?”

“There’s an unusual signature imposed on the fabric of space-time,” said the corporal. “A statistically anomalous alignment of quarks at the sub-atomic level, as though space itself has been...”

“Get to the point, Corporal,” said the captain.

“Uh, sir,” said the corporal, “I believe I can track them!”

The conference room was abuzz with excited chatter. Every screen was covered with star charts, calculations, and schematics. The hiss of the door opening went unnoticed.

“Permission to come aboard, captain?”

Captain Kobayashi tore his attention away from the screen in front of him and turned his head. Stacy.

“By all means, Captain Lorrigan,” he said. He stood up as she entered the room.

“Gentlemen, please excuse me,” he said. “Complete your calculations without me. The Captain and I have matters to discuss.” Stiff-backed, he led her through the door into his adjoining ready room.

As the door hissed closed, he turned towards her—and was knocked back a step as she swept forward and wrapped her arms around him.

“Oh Hiro,” she muttered against his neck, “I thought I’d lost you for a second there.” For a moment he allowed himself to relax into the hug—he wanted it to last forever, to hold her in his arms, even to tear off her uniform and make love to her, right here on the desk, as though they were both young again—and then, regretfully, he stiffened and pulled away from her.

She let him go.

She took a half-step back, and swung her hand in a fierce slap at his face.

“And that,” she said defiantly, “is for pulling rank on me.”

He nodded, sadly. Then, his face burning from the impact, he turned his head slightly, offering her the other cheek.

“Do it again,” he said, “because this isn’t over yet.”

Stricken, she stared up into his eyes. He met her gaze with quiet resolve. Finally she nodded. She raised her hand to his cheek again, tenderly this time, and then pushed herself up on her toes so she could press her lips to his. The kiss was soft, not the kiss of a lover, but of a friend.

“I know,” she murmured, her breath hot and sweet against his lips. “And I’m sorry I forced you to pull rank.” She stepped back and lowered her hand.

“You have my full support, Hiro,” she said. “What have you got in mind?”

“Thankyou,” he said, then took a deep breath. “We have found a way to track the Droid.”

She nodded. “Why do I get the feeling that there’s bad news to go with that?”

“We *think* we might be able to follow them out of here,” he told her. “But it’s highly theoretical and probably dangerous.”

“And you want to try it?”

Hiroto nodded.

Stacy Lorrigan drew a deep breath. She chewed her lip thoughtfully, then said, formally, “permission to speak freely?”

Kobayashi Hiroto raised his hand lightly to his cheek and grinned at her. “Don’t you think it’s a little late for that?” he asked, almost playfully.

For a moment she returned his grin, then her face became serious again.

“If you think this is the right thing to do,” she said, “then I shall back you up. But *is* it the right thing to do?”

“We need to get word out,” he said simply. “The Imperium needs to know what they’re facing. If there’s any chance at all that we can get the information out sooner than six days, we have to take it.”

She nodded. “But what about the THIGH patrol we sent out?” she asked. “Isn’t it possible that they...” She let her voice trail off. She knew that she was clutching at straws.

She knew that he was right.

He answered her anyway. “It’s possible,” he said. “However, my analysts have presented a disturbing possibility. They think that the timing of the Droid departure may have had something to do with the arrival

of the patrol in normal space. It's speculation, of course, but the timing just about matches. They say it's possible our guys got clear of the Patch and started to transmit, and the Droid detected their transmission and left to intercept them."

Stacy closed her eyes. *Damn it!*

"Besides," he added, "the THIGH patrol knew nothing about these damn teddewoks."

She nodded.

"Okay," she said. "What's the plan?"

"I want you to lead both Frigates out through the Eye at full speed. After three days, accelerate to flank speed at your discretion; that should get you out within five days, with a bit of luck." He paused, and she nodded for him to continue.

"I shall take a skeleton crew of volunteers aboard one of the ISVs—it should have a greater chance of surviving the ride—and attempt to follow the Droid out."

"How exactly does that work?" she asked.

"We *think* that if we can deliver a large enough punch to the exact spot they left from it will re-open the hole they made through space-time. If we accelerate towards the point, and make the jump to hyperspace at the exact right instance, it should catapult us into the tunnel, and then we just surf the shock-wave through to the far end."

She stared at him. "And what provides this 'punch'?"

"A nuke."

"A nuke," she repeated. "Of course. So your plan is to fly head-first into a nuclear detonation, and hyper-jump into an unknown dimensional rift?"

He nodded.

She turned this over in her head. "And of course, timing is critical. A second early and you hyper-jump right into the wall of the Bramble Patch and get dumped

gods-know-where, and squished by some gravitational vortex. A second late, and you get vaporised by the blast?"

He nodded again.

"And if this rift into..."

"For mathematical reasons I don't understand, they're referring to it as 'sub-space'," Hiroto told her.

She nodded. "And if this *highly theoretical* rift into sub-space doesn't open, you'll be vaporised *and* squished."

"That about sums it up," he said quietly.

She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again. Somehow she doubted her first thought of *are you completely fucking insane?* would go down too well.

"So what am I missing?" she said lightly. "I thought you said this would be dangerous." She almost pulled it off, but her throat tightened on the final word and choked it short. She turned away from him to stare blindly at the door, so that he wouldn't see the tears which prickled beneath her tightly closed eyelids.

"I know it's not ideal," he said, "but I think it's worth taking the chance."

"The chance?" she demanded. "What *are* your chances?"

"Y'know," said Hiroto, "I asked my analysts that, and do you know what they said?"

"What?"

"They said 'don't ask!'"

Stacy choked out a sound that could have been either a laugh or a sob.

"That's what I said," he told her.

This time she laughed, but it had a note of hysteria to it, and she cut it short. *Damn it, Lorrigan*, she chided herself, *pull yourself together!*

She turned back to face him, her expression calm. In the bright lighting of the ready room he could see the tear tracks glistening on her cheeks, but apart from those there was no trace of her emotional outburst on her face.

“There’s only one flaw with the plan,” she said.

“Only one?”

She nodded. “The *ISV* seems like a good idea on the surface,” she said, “but if all else goes according to plan, it’s not the Patch you’re trying to survive. These Frigates can take a hell of a pounding and keep on going, and the hyper-jump engines are a lot more precise.”

He frowned.

“You youngsters are so naive,” she told him. “You want to know the real reason we send the *ISVs* in to the Patch? They’re cheaper. If we lose one, it costs less.”

The expression on Hiroto’s face was priceless, and Stacy had to clench her teeth together to fight the sudden urge to giggle. If she started, she might lose it completely.

“You should take the *Anaconda*. We can move the bulk of her crew across to the *Cobra*, along with enough extra supplies to last us all a week or two—it’ll be a little cosy, but we’ll manage. You can run the Frigate with the same minimal skeleton crew as you’d need on the *ISV*.”

“Are you sure?” asked Hiroto.

“I’m sure that if you argue with me on this point, I’ll have you locked in your own brig for incompetence and make the attempt myself in the *Cobra*!”

“Fair enough then,” he said. “Thank you, Stacy.”

“Thank me when you come out the far side,” said Stacy shortly. “I’ve already said goodbye to you once today, I’ll be damned if I’m gonna do it again.” She held out her hand. “Good luck, Captain Kobayashi. May fortune favour the bold!”

Hiroto took her hand in his. Rather than shake it, he held it warmly for several seconds. He wanted to say something more to her, but no words seemed right. Perhaps they had known each other long enough that no more words were necessary.

Finally he nodded.

“Then let’s do this, Captain Lorrigan,” he said.

The evacuation of the *Imperial Frigate Anaconda* went smoothly. Every available shuttle of both Frigates was put into service ferrying crew and supplies across to the *IF Cobra*. Once everyone had been transferred, one of the shuttles was loaded with one of the *Anaconda*’s complement of nuclear warheads and programmed to take it to the detonation point.

When Captain Kobayashi had asked for volunteers to join his skeleton crew, every member of the bridge crew had stepped forward. Where possible, he had filled each position with older officers, or officers without families waiting for them, dismissing the rest with many thanks.

Comms Officer Lieutenant First Class Samantha Schmitt refused point blank to leave her post, despite the Captain’s insistence that they could fly the ship without a communications officer.

“This whole mission is one of communication,” said Schmitt stubbornly. “I am not going to let you make this attempt, only to get to the far side with a comms problem. Sir. You’ll have to shoot me to make me leave.”

“I don’t think it will come to that,” he told her gently. “I’d be honoured to have you join our little team.”

As the countdown to departure had ticked away, she had busied herself setting up as many automated beacons, data caches, and secure backups of their critical information as she could.

Finally the moment arrived. All calculations had been checked a dozen times, the hyper-jump had been programmed, the detonation sequence synchronised, and the *Anaconda* was ready.

On the bridge of the *Cobra*, Captain Stacy Lorrigan was pacing impatiently back and forth when the call came in—via Samantha Schmitt—from the *Anaconda*.

“No goodbyes,” said Captain Kobayashi.

“Agreed,” said Captain Lorrigan.

“Are you clear?”

“Confirmed.” The *Cobra* was stationed beside the exit tunnel which led to the outside, well clear of the blast radius.

“In that case ... I’ll see you on the flipside, Stacy Lorrigan.”

She nodded, although the signal was audio only. “Drinks are on me,” she said. “And you know I don’t like to drink alone, so don’t be late or I’ll kick your bony ass!”

He chuckled. “Yes Captain,” he said.

Stacy watched as the *Anaconda* leaped forward, racing at maximum acceleration towards the waiting shuttle and its nuclear cargo.

Space turned white, the viewscreens automatically darkened against the glare, and the *Anaconda* was gone.

“Well?” demanded Captain Lorrigan.

“Scanning. Scanning. No debris detected. All indications are they got away clean.”

A low cheer went up from the bridge crew, and Stacy permitted herself a small smile.

“Then let’s follow them,” she said. “Full speed ahead.”

Chapter *

Ender's Moon

Space tore apart, and through the ragged rent in reality came a giant phallic object. The rift healed as rapidly as it had appeared, leaving the Droid-enhanced Death Tube on final approach to a blue-green planet whose beauty went mostly unappreciated by the occupants of the craft.

The planet was listed, in the Galactic Planetary Index, as Ender's Moon, a fact which might have been of some interest to the former crew of the *USSS Ender's Prize* had they retained any individuality or curiosity.

Thanks to their Droid implants, they did not.

Perhaps, however, some residual echo of their subsumed personalities had helped influence the selection of this planet, some spark of recognition or familiarity. Or perhaps it was merely the closest planet to the tortured expanse of the Bramble Patch.

The modified *Devastator II* settled into a geostationary orbit around Ender's Moon. Green lightning flickered across its surface, fading as the craft powered down all but the most critical systems. Finally its engines ceased their braking efforts, and the craft moved in an unpowered arc above the planet.

Had there been a sentient observer on the planet below, he or she might have looked up into the afternoon

sky and wondered at the appearance of this huge black dildo. Had they been paying attention to their comms devices, they might have registered some dismay (or possibly confusion) at the transmitted signal: *You will be incorporated. Resistance is fertile.*

There was plenty of life on Ender's Moon, but none of it boasted the first hint of sentience. The closest thing to intelligence was a small, long-limbed furry creature which seemed quite happy to fling its own poo at other members of its species.

There was a sparkly green shimmer in the shadows beside a massive tree trunk, and three Droid drones solidified on the planet's surface. Another smaller shimmer produced several small pink creatures that might have been mistaken for teddewoks, if not for the baleful glow behind their black button eyes.

A third shimmer left the imposing figure of Mannequin Splitwhisker, Barth Vapour, erstwhile Lord of the Stiff, standing between the two groups.

"Why are we here?" demanded Vapour, his anger dispelling the queasiness the teleporter induced in his guts.

One of the Droid drones cocked its head and studied him. "It is our mission," it said at last. Beneath the implants which studded its face and the severe, androgynous leather uniform it wore, Vapour was not sure whether this creature had originally been male or female.

Not that it made much difference. A Droid drone was a Droid drone. Gender was meaningless.

"What mission?" he demanded. "What do you mean?"

"To boldly go'," the drone quoted, "'where no Droid has gone before.'"

“‘To seek out new life, and new technologies’,” added one of the other drones.

“‘And to incorporate them’,” finished the third.

“Oh,” said Vapour. “*That* mission. That’s all very well, but why are we *here*? On some damn forest planet, surrounded by screeching wildlife and whining insects and, most importantly, *not* at the Imperial Research Station. What happened to our alliance with the...?”

“Irrelevant,” droned the first drone as the other two wandered away into the undergrowth on missions of their own.

“Irrele... What?” snarled Vapour.

“Irrelevant,” repeated the first drone. “Unimportant, immaterial, nonessential, unnecessary, trifling...”

“Yes, yes,” snapped Vapour. “I know what it means. But that alliance is critical to my...”

“But it is *not*,” interrupted the Droid, “critical to Droid goals. We have the weapon. The Imperium is irrelevant.”

“I say it *is* relevant...” began Vapour, but he trailed off in disbelief as the Droid drone turned on its heel and walked away from him.

He heard a rustling behind him, and turned. He saw nothing. He heard the sound again, and looked down. A single ambulatory teddewok stood before him, peering up from a patch of decomposing leaf litter. Like all the others, it was bright pink and it wore a black T-shirt emblazoned with the logo that he himself had designed.

“Boadicea?” asked Vapour.

The teddewok merely stared at him, its eyes black and dead except for the green glow which glimmered in their depths.

Vapour felt a sudden shiver of disquiet slither up his spine.

“Boadicea?” he asked again.

The teddewok’s face stretched, and after a moment Vapour realised it would be opening its mouth if it actually possessed one. An electronic squeal of noise rose from the thing, a squeal that became a shriek.

Vapour shuddered. It had no mouth and yet it screamed.

Then it was gone, scampering off into the undergrowth. Vapour watched it go, its bright pink fur soon vanishing into the shadows.

He sensed a presence behind him, and whirled to find a new Droid standing there, watching him. This was no drone, and it had most definitely once been a woman. The skimpy cat-suit made that abundantly clear.

The Droid intelligence which possessed the body once belonging to Counsellor Dee-Dee McTroy stared at him from behind those sympathetic brown eyes.

“Your confusion is not logical,” said Seven of Eleven.

“Am I not Locust of Droid?” Vapour demanded. “I should have been consulted.”

“Locust of Droid is ... irrelevant.”

Vapour suppressed a shudder. Only the soulless malignance of a Droid could turn the warm, inviting presence of a woman such as Dee-Dee into the cold creature of horror that stood before him. He saw now that, even without the implants and the grey flesh which distinguished the rest of the Droid army, this was nothing more than a walking corpse, animated by the Droid Plerd, the hive mind.

Dee-Dee was no more. The Droid had raped her soul, and he, Mannequin Splitwhisker, had made it happen.

He realised Seven of Eleven was awaiting his response.

“How so?” he asked carefully. “What about the prophecy?”

“The prophecy is fulfilled,” said Seven.

Vapour felt a new sensation tumble in his gut, and after a moment he tentatively identified it as fear. Vapour had not been afraid for nearly forty years, but now he realised he was terrified.

“What?” he asked. “How?” He had no interest in her answer, he was merely playing for time, looking for a way out. If they no longer needed him, they would either kill him, or finish the job of turning him into a Droid drone. Death, or living death. Neither option appealed to him.

Seven of Eleven quoted the prophecy:

Integrated yet not,
The individual drone shall lead
To total victory!

She looked at him. “The individual drone, Locust of Droid, has led to the creation of a new Plerd, the Boadicea, integrated yet not.”

“And they will bring victory?” he asked.

“They are cute and furry,” she said. “What force could stand against them?”

“Good point,” he conceded. “But you only have a few. How can they possibly...?”

Seven of Eleven merely pointed.

Vapour turned and looked, and looked up.

The tree was massive, its trunk perhaps thirty feet across, and it soared into the sky, reaching towards the canopy far above. Unlike its neighbours, however, this tree was tinged and blotched with pink fur. One of the nearer blobs of pink pulsed and throbbed, and Vapour

peered closer, the Droid ocular implant automatically increasing magnification. The blob was, he saw, a huge writhing, pulsating mass of teddewoks, hanging beneath what remained of the branch above it like a pendulous sac, ready to burst and send its contents raining down around him.

They were consuming the tree, their nanobots breaking down the wood and sap and cellulose and converting it into raw building materials at the atomic level. They were transforming tree into teddewok.

How many thousands could they spawn from a single tree like this one? And how many trees were there in an entire, planet-spanning forest?

He felt ill.

“So many trees,” he muttered.

“After the trees, the planet itself,” said Seven of Eleven. “Approximately eight hundred trillion new Boadicea drones, and enough ships to carry several billion to every planet in this galaxy. Victory will become irrelevant.”

“But...” stammered Vapour, “but you can’t, I mean, they, uh.” His mind was screaming its terror at him, and he could not marshall his thoughts. “But won’t their expansion threaten the Droid?”

“We are them, they are us,” said Seven. She blinked, and for a brief moment, pink fur filled her eye sockets. Vapour shuddered as he realised he was dealing with something new. Something *very wrong*. “They are our future. Already many thousand Droid drones have been converted to this newer, more efficient form. The two Plerd will become one.”

“Fuck!” said Vapour succinctly.

“Sexual reproduction is irrelevant and inefficient,” said Seven of Eleven, but Vapour was no longer listening.

He had done this. In his own arrogance, his own quest for power, his own selfishness, he had inflicted this curse upon the crew of the *USSS Ender's Prize*, and now upon his own Galaxy far, far away.

In their own universe, the Droid were a menace, a plague spreading slowly from system to system in their quest for homogeneity. In bringing them back to his home reality, Vapour had endangered everything he knew. And now, like a virus jumping species, they had mutated into a new form, an excessively virulent strain which would destroy everything.

They would become the galaxy, and the galaxy would become them.

And it was all his fault.

“When they have built sufficient numbers,” the female-appearing Droid was saying, “we shall use the Weapon to break up the planet, thus cooling the molten core and increasing the surface area. This will speed up the conversion process.”

He had done this ... and he would have to stop it.

Vapour smiled grimly, humourlessly. They were like a virus, he realised, but in this virtual reality that was generated and maintained by the Source, that made them a *computer* virus. And Vapour knew a thing or two about the Source; about its weaknesses ... and its strengths.

He laughed.

“Is something funny?” asked Seven of Eleven.

“I was just thinking of my son,” said Vapour. “He’s gonna be so upset when he discovers that *I* am the galaxy’s last, best hope for salvation.”

“Salvation is irrele...” began the Droid, but Vapour lashed out, not with his hand but with the Source. The body that had once belonged to Seven of Eleven, and before that Dee-Dee McTroy, cartwheeled through the air and hit a large tree trunk with an impact strong enough to shake the tree itself. She crumpled lifelessly to the leaf-covered ground, every bone splintered and shattered, the metallic portions of her skeletal frame twisted out of shape, blood-red circulatory fluid oozing from nose, and ears, and mouth, and he watched as the light faded from her eyes.

Then, as the air began to shimmer greenly around him—more Droid drones beaming in from the ship above—Vapour did something he had never done before: he turned and ran.

Behind him, the mangled body began to shudder, and ripples of pink fur flickered across its surface as the nanobots began to repair and rebuild the damage.

Crashing through the undergrowth, with no direction in mind other than *away*, he could feel the Droid transporter beginning to pluck at his body. He threw up a mental shield, a Source-generated bubble which might not have hidden him from a concerted search by a Jubbly master, but which was more than enough to foil the Droid targeting lock.

The Droid implants would give away his position if he relaxed the shield for a second, but he would deal with them soon enough. For now, it was all he could do to run, his mechanically enhanced legs driving him forward at a dizzying pace. Without the Source to guide him, moving at such speed through the forest would be akin to suicide. *With* the Source...

It seemed an eternity since Vapour had last reached out to the Source. In that other universe, the universe of

the Droid and the United Planetary Federation, the Source had been different, somehow. Unfamiliar. He had been able to feel its presence around him, but had felt uncomfortable with it. He had recoiled from its touch, reined himself in tight—and that habit had persisted upon their return to this reality.

But now he was back in his element, and he revelled in the power that was available to his mind. As he ran—faster even than his Droid legs by themselves would have permitted—he allowed the Source to nudge him in the right direction. Five degrees to the left to swing past *that* trunk, three degrees to the right to avoid *this* rock half-buried in the leaf litter, jump *now* to miss the tangle of roots which would otherwise have snagged his ankle. The path to safety stretched before him, invisible but as clear as though a neon tube had been laid along it.

It was this connection to the Source that his mother had called instinct, that had allowed him, as a child, to compete in, and win, the races which had allowed him to buy his freedom.

Now it led him to a hollowed tube of living matter, a gnarled vine which had outlived the tree it had long since strangled. It was strong, this killer plant, with the Hard Side of the Source, and it called to Vapour now. It would hide him from a visual search, and its Source energy would frustrate the Droid sensors.

He ducked and slid himself into the centre of this sanctuary. He was breathing heavily—although in the days before Doctor Cavity Brusher had healed the scarring on his lungs, he could never have exerted himself like this.

Of everything that had changed, he did *not* miss his reliance on the respirator mask.

He felt exhilarated, more alive than he had since before... Vapour frowned as his mind recoiled from those distant memories. *Before what, exactly?* he wondered.

He shook his head. No time for that now. First he had to deal with the Droid implants which studded his flesh and then ... *well, then we shall see!* he thought.

Chapter *

Frigate

The *Imperial Planetary Dominator Bermuda* dropped out of hyperspace barely fifty miles from the ever-shifting boundary of the Bramble Patch. A ship the size of the *IPD* dared approach no closer.

All along its mile-long triangular hull, launch tubes delivered a swarming multitude of THIGH fighters into the vacuum of space. Two shuttles dropped from the cavernous hangar in its underbelly, and angled towards the invisible boundary between normality and the twisted gravitational nightmare of Zone 51. Two flights of THIGH fighters formed up around each shuttle; the remaining fighters took up regular patrol perimeters.

“Got anything?” asked Sergeant Samson Strong. He stood just within the doorway to the cockpit of one of the shuttles, one gauntleted hand gripping the door jamb. He peered into the shifting blackness ahead of them.

“Nothing, Sergeant,” said the pilot. “We’re getting the emergency beacon, of course, but I don’t see any ship.”

Three hours earlier, final approach to the coordinates from which the cryptic message had been sent, the *IPD Bermuda* had received a scrambled portion of a Priority Alpha distress call. The signal had been badly distorted, its contents unintelligible. Only the coding which

identified its origins as an Imperial signal, and a partial set of coordinates, had remained intact.

Those coordinates had led them here.

“The beacon will lead us to it,” said the Sergeant.

“I’m not so sure,” said the pilot. “See that reading?” He pointed at one of the instruments on the shuttle’s control console.

Sergeant Strong grunted in reply. The display meant nothing to him.

“It’s fluctuating like a son-of-a-bitch,” said the pilot. “Maybe its proximity to the Bramble Patch is messing with the transmission, or maybe...”

“Or maybe it’s inside the Patch,” the Sergeant finished the thought for him. He nodded.

They both knew the odds of surviving the shifting gravity wells inside Zone 51. They both knew the signal that had been received was important enough that they would venture in there anyway.

A red light flashed on the console, and an audible alarm sounded. The pilot eased back on a handle and brought the shuttle to a stop, motionless in space. A THIGH fighter looped soundlessly past in front of them, and both men felt the slight tug of its Gravity drive.

He keyed the comm. “Shuttle *Barracuda* to Shuttle *THIGH Delirium*, you copy?”

“Roger, *Barracuda*,” came the reply. “What you got?”

“We’re sitting at the edge of the Patch,” said the pilot. “No visual. Beacon reads as being inside the Patch.”

“Damn,” came the reply. “I’m getting the same. Looks like we’re going in.”

“Looks like.”

“We’ll take point,” came a new voice. It was one of their THIGH escort. “A-Wing, move out. B-Wing, you bring up the rear.”

THIGH Fighters were designed from the ground up to travel in formations of three. From their central, spherical hulls, three wing vanes extended, each bearing a solar panel. Between the three vanes were located the three Grav-gen outlets which gave the craft their high maneuverability. A recent Imperial edict—direct from the desk of Emperor Palpatore himself—had increased THIGH squadrons to four craft, and Shock Trooper teams from four to five.

When the THIGH A-Wing squadron took the lead, three of the Fighters were locked in tight triangular formation, and the fourth hovered uncertainly on the outer edge, vulnerable to attack and looking decidedly out of place.

The edict had not been popular.

The pilot eased his shuttle forward, following the fighters into the chaos of the Bramble Patch.

After a cautious glance at the comm switch to be sure it was off, Sergeant Strong muttered: “*THIGH Delirium?*”

The pilot shot a glance back over his shoulder at the Shock Trooper standing behind him. “Yeah,” he said in a low voice. “Don’t mention it to *him*; it’s a bit of a touchy subject.”

“I can imagine,” said Sergeant Strong. *No doubt named by the same people responsible for ‘Team Daffodil’!* he added silently.

The Imperium was definitely not the awe-inspiring power it had once been.

“I’m getting some very strange readings here,” crackled the voice of one of the THIGH Pilots. “I’ve got a very bad fee...”

The fourth THIGH Fighter, the odd one out, suddenly crumpled in upon itself and vanished.

“Whoa, what the fuck?” shouted another voice. “Did you see that? What the fuck happened?”

“Loook at those damn readings,” shouted someone else. “Gravity well the size of a planet just opened in his cockpit. That’s just damn bad luck.”

“Okay guys, cut the chatter,” snapped the leader of A-Wing.

“But boss, how the hell do we...?”

“Shut it, Lieutenant Jarmalaquandari,” said the Flight Leader. “Keep this channel clear!”

“Sorry, boss,” said Lieutenant Jarmalaquandari.

“Stay sharp, boys. Watch those readings. Shuttle *Barracuda*, you still with us?”

The pilot flipped the comm switch. “Still here,” he said.

“My gods,” crackled the voice of the other shuttle pilot. “I see it. *Barracuda*, you hear me?”

“What you got, *TD*?”

“Looks like ... damn, it’s hard to tell. This thing is dead, no energy readings at all, except for the beacon.” The line crackled with empty static for a few seconds. “Looks like a Frigate,” he said at last. “But a Frigate that’s been through several hells and back. Um, transmitting coordinates now.”

“Roger that, *TD*. Coordinates received. We’ll be with you shortly.” The pilot half-turned his head, not taking his eyes off the shimmering space in front of him as he altered course.

“Better get your people ready, Sergeant,” he said. “You’re up.”

“Why do we keep drawing these bullshit assignments, Sarge?” asked Fib.

“Whatsamatter, Fib?” said Izzy. “Scared?”

“Knock it off, guys,” said Sergeant Sammy Strong. He glared back and forth between the two Troopers. The Sarge was not a small man, but Fib stood half a head taller, all solid muscle. Beside the two of them, Izzy Jenkins seemed almost petite. Several men had made the mistake of underestimating her, and had learned the hard way that her lithe, feminine frame packed plenty of coiled power.

They didn’t call her *Killer* for nothing.

“Check each other’s seals,” said Strong. “Everybody’s waiting on you.”

The shuttle was designed to carry two squads of Shock Troopers in full armour. Two squads. Eight Troopers. With ten crowded into the passenger bay, it was standing room only.

“Yeah,” said Mikki Tetrakovonovich, his voice distorted by the electronics of his helmet. “Hurry it up, you guys.”

“Want me to check *your* seals, Mikki?” asked Izzy, injecting a little menace into her voice as she locked her helmet into place.

“I heard he *blew* a seal, once,” added Fib, and the combined Troopers of teams Badger and Fennec chuckled at that.

Safely hidden behind his own faceplate, Sergeant Strong permitted himself a soundless grin.

“I did *not* blow a seal,” said Mikki indignantly. “For the last time, it was an otter!”

Laughter greeted this last remark.

“Okay guys,” said the Sarge. “Mikki, keep your sexual exploits for the mess hall. Everybody set?”

A chorus of assent was his reply.

“Suits tight?” he asked.

The ten Shock Troopers crowded into the shuttle wore full Space Combat suits, more bulky than their regular body armour, but necessary for the mission.

“Who’s the baddest bunch of mothers in the quadrant?” he said loudly.

“We are,” they chorussed back at him.

“Hoo-ahh!” he shouted, and nine hearty *hoo-ahhs* shook the cabin.

“If you will, Lopez?”

Sergeant Jenna Lopez of Team Fennec nodded awkwardly in her helmet, lifted the protective flap, and hit the button at the end of the shuttle cabin. The hiss of escaping air faded to silence, and then, silent in the vacuum of space, the hatch slid open onto the void.

“Move it, people,” said Strong over their helmets’ internal comms. “We don’t have all day.”

Two at a time, the Troopers stepped through the hatch and pushed themselves out into space, beyond the artificial gravity field of the shuttle. Small thruster jets on their suits allowed them to maneuver towards the derelict Frigate.

“Would you look at that,” gasped Mikki.

The *Imperial Frigate* was nothing more than a black shadow against the shimmering blackness of the Zone. A spotlight from the shuttle played across its surface, picking out random details. Its hull seemed twisted, buckled hideously out of shape.

“What do you suppose it’s doing out here?” asked Smith(?) of Team Fennec.

“That’s what we’re here to discover,” said Sergeant Lopez.

The ten Troopers jetted closer to the ruined ship. Their target was the cluster of fore THIGH launch tubes which should provide them access to one of the docking bays.

At the same time, ten Troopers from the second shuttle were making their way to the aft air lock. Strong clicked his comm over to their channel.

“How’s it going, Team Daffodil?” he asked. “Team Primrose?”

“Uh, good, Sergeant Strong,” replied **Corporal** Grunt Wheedle. “We’re making good progress.”

“Keep me informed,” said Strong. He switched back to his own team’s channel.

“Good progress?” snorted Karnn McCavern. “You call this good progress?”

“Hey, we’re moving, aren’t we?” said Grunt Wheedle.

“Oh yeah,” said Karnn.

“I think that’s it, over there,” said Bent Davyss.

“Where?”

“There,” said Bent. “Where I’m pointing.”

“That’s useful,” muttered Kumm Stolid. “Since I, for one, can’t even see my own hands in this blackness, how are we supposed to see your pointing finger?”

“I’ve got a pointing finger for you,” said Bent.

“Wait,” said Dorn Stalwart, the newest member of Team Daffodil. “This looks like the hatch we saw in the briefing.”

She flashed the light attached to her suit to get their attention.

Grunt jetted towards her, playing his own light over the wall of metal that rose behind her.

“That’s not a hatch,” he said. “It looks more like ... I don’t know *what* it looks like.”

“Thought you knew your way around these Frigates,” said Karrn.

“I do,” said Grunt. “But mostly, you know, on the inside. We typically didn’t spend much time crawling over the hull.”

“Oh,” said Karrn. “Right.”

“I think we’re looking at this all wrong,” said Bent thoughtfully.

“What do you mean?” said Dorn.

“I mean, quite literally looking at it all wrong.” He tilted his head, then used the controls built into the fingers of his gauntlet to apply the thrust required to roll his whole body around one hundred and eighty degrees, stopping when he was upside down.

“Oh yeah,” he said, “that’s much better.”

“Upside down is better?” asked Kumm.

Bent shrugged, and the movement started him drifting away from the rest of them. He hurriedly corrected with his jets.

“I think,” he said, “you’ll find that it’s all relative.”

With a sigh, Grunt set himself to rotating. “This had better be good,” he said. “Because I’ve just about ... oh, I see.”

“See?” said Bent. He pointed in the dark. “This is the secondary exhaust vent. We’re nowhere near the air lock.”

“Yeah,” said Grunt. “I see.”

The others reoriented themselves to suit.

“I think we can go in through the exhaust vent,” said Kumm.

“Doesn’t that lead into, like, air ducts an’ shit?” said Karrn.

“Yeah,” said Kumm.

“Oh,” said Bent.

“What?” said Grunt. “What’s the problem?”

“Don’t you guys watch any vids?” demanded Bent. “Everybody knows the air ducts are where the monsters will be. We don’t want to be crawling around in there; we’ll get our faces chewed off.”

“Monsters?” said Kumm flatly.

“You don’t want to go in there because of *monsters*?” added Grunt.

“I never thought I’d say this,” said Karrn, “but Bent is right.”

“What?” said Bent. “Since when?”

“What makes you think there are even monsters here?” said Grunt, trying to steer the conversation.

“It’s always monsters,” said Dorn quietly.

“Fine,” said Grunt. “You guys stay here. Me and Kumm are going in through this vent, and you three can explain to Sergeant Strong why you’re still floating around out here.”

“Fine,” said Bent.

“Fine,” said Dorn.

“Isn’t this just a little ridiculous?” said Karrn.

Fib moved rapidly along the corridor, driven by occasional bursts from the jets of his suit, every now and then tapping one hand or other against the walls—or the ceiling or floor—to keep himself on track. When the corridor finally ended he braked perfectly, stopping himself just short of the door which barred his way.

He reactivated the magnetic soles of his boots, and his feet clunked down onto the deck.

Opening a small panel beside the door, he reached in and cranked the manual release handle. The door popped open, silent in the airlessness of the ship, and Fib forced it aside.

Sergeant Strong stared out at him.

"It's not possible," he said.

"The same as the other corridor," said Fib.

Two minutes earlier, Fib had launched himself down the main corridor which ran the length of the ship on this deck. He had sailed straight and true, and ended back at the room from which he had left.

"Everything looks normal," said Strong, "but it all feeds back on itself."

"Like space itself is tied in knots," said Mikki.

"What would you know about it, Mikki?" snorted Izzy.

"I read things," he said defensively.

"Something like this happened once before," said Gorman Basski, the fifth member of Team Badger. He had been silent so long, the other four had almost forgotten his presence.

"Where?" said Sergeant Strong.

"On the *Agamammanon*," said Basski. "After the ... you know, the incident."

"Yeah, I heard that," said Mikki. "The first teams on board after the ... afterwards ... they found space folded in upon itself. And time. One guy walked out a doorway, and disappeared for three whole weeks. When he stepped back in through the same door..."

"He got arrested for going AWOL," said Fib. "Yeah, it's a lovely story and all, but how does it help us?"

"I don't know," said Mikki after a hesitant pause.

"I think it would be best," said Strong thoughtfully, "if nobody went anywhere alone. You hear me?"

“Yes Sarge.”

“Izzy?”

“I’m not going anywhere, Sarge,” she said.

He nodded. With a click of his comm, he switched across to the Team Daffodil channel.

“Report,” he said. “What is your location?”

“We’re, uh, I think we’re outside Medical,” said a voice. Bent Davyss, Strong remembered.

“Davyss, where’s Wheedle?”

“He’s, uh, he and Kumm are...” The Trooper’s voice became an unintelligible mumble.

“Say again,” said Strong.

“I said, uh, they’re stuck in an air vent,” said Davyss.

“Oh,” said Strong. “Why are ... you know what? Forget it. I don’t want to know. Do you think you can reach the Bridge from your position?”

“I’m not entirely sure, sir, I mean Sarge,” said Bent Davyss. “In fact, we seem to be, uh, that is, it seems that our briefing was not entirely accurate. Every time we move towards the bridge, towards what *should* be the bridge, we end up...”

“Somewhere else?” said Strong.

“Yeah,” said Davyss.

“Okay,” said Strong. “You just focus on getting your guys out of the vent. And stick together. I don’t want to have to come looking for you when it’s time to leave.”

“Yes Sarge,” said Davyss.

Strong switched back to his own channel, and shook his head. “They’re not making any better progress than we are,” he said.

“I’ve had a thought about that,” said Basski.

“And what might that be?” asked Strong.

“I can’t decide whether something is deliberately trying to keep us out of the bridge...” he began.

“Something? What something?” said Fib.

“I don’t know,” said Basski. “But the other alternative is that the spatial entanglements are merely random.” He shrugged, and bobbed slowly up towards the ceiling.

“Either way, perhaps if we try heading *away* from the bridge...?” he added.

“Away from ... you know, I like the sound of that!”

There had been no bodies elsewhere on the ship, no sign of the crew. Once Team Badger reached the bridge, that changed.

“Oh gods,” said Mikki as he turned away from the sight that greeted them as they forced the double doors open.

“What the hells happened here?” said Fib as he played his torch beam around the room.

“*Hells* is right,” muttered Izzy.

Strong took a step forward, into the charnel house that had once been the bridge of an *Imperial Frigate*, and his armoured boot skidded on something soft and squishy.

“Damn,” he said. “Watch your footing.”

“You’re going in there?” asked Fib.

“Yeah,” said Izzy as she followed her sergeant cautiously into the room. “We are.”

The normal ship’s complement for an *Imperial Frigate* was between three to five hundred people. Despite the carnage on the bridge, there could only have been twenty or so crew—or what remained of them, anyway—in the room. Whatever had happened to this ship, the rest of the crew had obviously managed to get off before the event. Which raised the question of the whereabouts of the survivors.

“What are we looking for?” asked Fib as he joined the other two in the room.

“Any clue as to what happened here,” said Strong.

“And Fib,” added Izzy, “try not to step in anyone.”

“Easier said than done,” said Fib. “What the *fuck* happened here?”

The deck was awash with blood, some of it boiled dry by the vacuum, some of it, bizarrely, still gleaming freshly in the glow of the Troopers’ spotlights. A couple of the bodies appeared to have explosively decompressed, but others were crushed into mangled balls of torn flesh and splintered bone. At least one had been somehow turned inside out. Internal organs had been liberally splashed across control consoles.

“I’ve got something here,” said Izzy. She bent carefully and extended one gloved hand towards the deck. It came up red.

“What?” said Strong.

“Insignia.” Izzy peered closer. “I think this was the captain,” she added. “Name’s, uh, Koba-something.”

“Computers are fried,” reported Mikki.

Fib directed his beam of light around the room until he located his friend. “Good of you to join us,” he said, but there was an odd note of sympathy in his voice. Fib could understand the urge to be somewhere else. He moved the beam further, found Basski also moving gingerly into the bridge.

“Wait, what was that?” said the Sarge.

“What?” said Fib.

“Pan back a bit,” said Strong. “There. What’s that?”

“Looks like a fuckin’ hand, Sarge,” said Fib.

“Under the hand,” said Strong.

“I got it, Sarge,” said Basski. Leaning down into the corner, he gripped the object gingerly and lifted it. As he

did so, the severed hand slid off and floated away, tumbling slowly through the darkness. “Ah damn,” he said as he recoiled. “Damn, damn, damn!”

“You holding it together, Basski?” asked the Sarge.

“Yeah,” said Basski after a moment’s silence as he swallowed back the urge to throw up. “It’s, uh, it’s an old manual-style note pad.” He flipped it open, and shook it to get rid of the blood which smeared the pseudopaper pages.

He met Strong half-way across the bridge, and handed it over.

Strong flipped through it to the last entry. In contrast to the neat, tight handwriting on the earlier pages, the most recent entry was a large scrawl. Sergeant Strong read it aloud.

“DEV-STAT IN HOSTILE HANDS. DROID FORCES UNSTOPBL. BEWARE THE TEDEWOKS.”

“Beware the teddewoks?” repeated Fib.

Strong shrugged. “That’s what it says.” He flipped back a couple of pages and read the first three lines there. “Fuck,” he muttered.

“What?” said Izzy.

“Not good,” he said. “But this is what we’re after, all right. Time to go, boys and girls. We need to get this back to the *Bermuda* ASAP.”

Chapter *

Convergence

Lurk tapped the six digit access code into the keypad beside the entry ramp of the *Serendipity Sparrow*, and with a soft hiss it swung smoothly open. Only the ship's landing lights relieved the darkness of the unkempt pad.

The weak sun had dipped below the horizon almost an hour before, and in his passage back across the swamp, Lurk had heard several large creatures moving in the gloom just beyond his sphere of vision. Perhaps they had sensed the young Jubbly's resolve, or perhaps they had simply not been hungry, for none of them had pestered him.

He had intended to be back well before dark, but the sun had set more quickly than he had expected. The days had seemed longer while he had been training with Yodel on his first visit here.

He was half-way up the ramp, waterlogged coolsuit squelching with each step he took, when Libby came running across the deck of the cargo bay, a blaster pistol clutched in one tiny fist.

"Lurk," she said, "thank the gods you're okay. There are things in the darkness that look like they could eat a whole team of Shock Troopers without even breaking a sweat."

“We had a mutual understanding,” said Lurk. “If they left me alone, I’d leave them alone.”

“Right,” said Libby. She peered past him, then keyed the ramp closed. “You’re alone then?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yodel is not coming,” he said simply. “But, uh, were you expecting someone else?”

She looked at the blaster in her hand. “Better safe than sorry,” she said as she slid it into the narrow holster on her hip.

“And how was your day?” he asked her.

Her shoulders sagged. “We found two survivors,” she said. “Two women. And one of them is pretty far gone; we’ve got her in the med-bed now.” She shook her head. “It’s touch and go as to whether she’ll survive the night.”

“And Boldaar?” asked Lurk.

“No sign of him. The other woman—Kitty—says she saw him walking out into the swamp about a week ago and he never came back.”

“Damn,” said Lurk. “And the sensors are useless?” he guessed.

Libby nodded. “Far too many life readings to distinguish one lone human,” she said. “If he’s even still alive. Kitty says it wouldn’t be the first suicide by tagor in their little group.”

Lurk shook his head. “He wouldn’t go willingly to his death. He’s a fighter.”

Lurk closed his eyes then, allowed his awareness to expand beyond his body, beyond the hull of the *Sparrow*, beyond the tired cluster of dwellings, out into the swamp. After a few seconds he opened his eyes again.

“Anything?”

“Life,” he said. “So damned much of it. I’ve got the same problem the sensors have.”

“We can wait for him.” Lurk and Libby turned. Mal stood at the top of the steps, looking down at them.

Lurk shook his head. “No,” he said. “We have other priorities. We have to get to the rendezvous point as soon as we can.”

“What’s the rush?” asked Mal.

“Saving the galaxy,” said Lurk.

“Some things never change,” said Libby.

“Plus,” added Lurk, “I’ve just received new information. The fleet may have company.”

“In that case,” said Mal, “let’s get the hells out of here. We can leave a few crates of supplies for this friend of yours, maybe a transponder. That way, if he’s still alive...”

Lurk nodded. “He stands a chance of staying that way until we can return for him,” he said. “Thanks.”

The glow of the *Serendipity Sparrow*’s VTOL engines as it lifted off into the night sky was visible for many kilometres across the open lake.

Up to his knees in slime, Boldaar held out one hand towards the rising light as though to pluck it from the sky, or to rein it back. Unheeding, it continued to rise, finally fading from view as it was engulfed by the thick cloud cover.

The engines’ guttural roar bounced and echoed across the lake, and at least three tagors roared a challenge in reply.

As the light disappeared from view, it began to rain.

Boldaar slowly lowered his hand.

“Figures,” he muttered.

The streaks of stars condensed into points of light as the *Serendipity Sparrow* dropped out of hyperspace. Directly

ahead of them, several distant points of light jumped towards them, resolving into the mustered ships of the Rebel fleet. Mal saw several large gun turrets swivel menacingly towards them as they effectively appeared from nowhere into the midst of the clustered fleet.

“Hold your fire, boys and girls,” he said easily into the open comms channel. “Uncle Mal’s home!” His airy tone hid the sense of relief they all felt. From what Lurk had told them, he had half expected to come out of hyperspace into a cloud of debris.

“See,” said Mal to the group gathered behind him in the small cockpit, “I told you it’d be fine.”

“It’s nice to be wrong for a change,” Lurk said.

“Please transmit identity and clearance codes,” crackled a reply from the Rebel flagship, “or be fired upon.” The demand was accompanied by a bright flash as an energy cannon fired a bolt across their bow.

“Okay, okay,” Mal yelled, “don’t get your panties in a knot!”

Rwarrwarrll, snarled Shaggus.

“You said it, Shaggus,” Mal agreed as he tapped commands into his console. “These guys sure are jumpy about something.”

“Identity confirmed, *Sparrow*,” said the voice on the comms. “Welcome home, it’s good to have you back.”

“Well that’s more like it,” muttered Mal.

“Please dock with the *CSS Condor*,” the voice continued. “Commander Bekkalu is waiting for you there.”

“Acknowledged,” said Mal.

“It appeared about a day ago,” said Commander Bekkalu. Her face was lined with worry.

They were looking at the main viewscreen in the conference room of the *CSS Condor*. It showed a dark, phallic shape floating in space, lines of sickly green energy flickering across its surface. Behind it, one segment of the disc of Ender's Moon provided some sense of the scale of the object.

"So far it has ignored us," she continued. "Possibly they don't even know we're here, or..."

"Or they don't consider you a threat?" added Mal.

Shaggus whuffled his agreement.

"But what is it?" asked Libby. Freshly showered, her still damp hair clung to the front of her clean, simple outfit. "And why does it look so much like a penis?"

"Clearly designed by someone with severe size issues," muttered Mal.

"We think," said Bekkalu, "that it started out as the Death Tube detailed in the plans you sent us. But it has been..."

"Corrupted," said Lurk. He wore a pained expression on his face.

"Corrupted?" asked Libby.

Lurk nodded. "That ... thing is the source of the corruption I've been feeling all week, the wrongness in the Source. And it's getting worse." He locked eyes with Bekkalu. "Commander, what are they doing on the planet?"

She shook her head. "We don't know," she said. "We haven't dared to make any active scans in case they decide we *are* a threat—but we've been getting some very strange readings. Nothing that makes sense."

Lurk nodded again, slowly. "That doesn't surprise me," he said. "Whatever's happening down there is a perversion of nature and a threat to the whole galaxy."

"A perversion of nature?" Mal raised an eyebrow.

Lurk shrugged. “There’s no other way to describe what I’m feeling,” he said.

“Okay,” said Mal slowly.

“Whatever you want to call it,” said Lurk, “it has to be stopped. *They* have to be stopped. I know it seems like an exaggeration, but they really do pose a threat to the whole galaxy.”

“That’s all very well,” said Bekkalu, “but we—the Council—have already had a day to discuss it. If it’s anything like the last Death Tube we faced, it has enough firepower to destroy this entire fleet with one shot.”

“I know,” said Lurk simply.

“Then what do you propose?” asked Bekkalu.

“A frontal assault against that thing is never going to work,” he said. “We almost failed last time, and our information on its defences *now* is clearly no longer valid.”

“Can’t you...” began Libby slowly. She had some idea of Lurk’s feelings on the subject. “You know...” She waved her hand in the air. “Like you did last time?”

“The cucumber,” said Bekkalu cautiously.

“Or at the very least,” added Mal, “an amusingly shaped turnip.”

Lurk shook his head. “No. Even if I wanted to...” His voice trailed off for a second as he pondered that. “No,” he said again, “it seems to be encrypted somehow, its Source code is foreign to me. Even attempting to touch it with my mind makes me feel ill.”

“What, then?” asked Bekkalu again.

“I need to get on board,” said Lurk.

“On *that* thing?” demanded Libby, her eyes wide. “Why?”

“Because the key to shutting it down is there. Somewhere.” Lurk shrugged. “It’s complicated.”

“Are you talking about...” Libby began.

“About waking up, yes,” said Lurk. “I think the only way to fix this corruption is from outside the program.”

“Are you talking more of that Jubbly mumbo-jumbo?” asked Mal. “That whole thing about being trapped inside a computer program that old K’Nobby was going on about?”

Lurk nodded.

“You really believe all that?”

“You don’t?”

“Look, kid,” said Mal, “I’ve seen some crazy shit—I’ve seen *you* do some crazy shit—but I always figured it was, y’know...”

“What?” asked Lurk gently.

“I dunno,” said Mal. “Magic or something. That I could buy. But the entire galaxy being fake? That’s just too crazy.”

“Maybe it is,” said Lurk. “But whatever the truth, I *know* that I have to do this. I have to get on board that thing. And on the way...” he stopped, cocking his head as though listening to something nobody else could hear.

“What is it, Lurk?” asked Libby gently, her hand light on his forearm.

“On the way, I have to go down to the planet’s surface. I have to visit Ender’s Moon.”

Wwrraaahrrrrll, whuffled Shaggus.

“Totally,” said Mal. “Look, this is all...”

Suddenly the ship shuddered and lurched sideways sharply, throwing them all to the floor. Several klaxons went off at once, and the accompanying computerised alerts began to babble over one another in their attempts to get their messages out.

Proximity Alert, said one. *Proximity alert.*

Evasive manoeuvres in progress.

Collision imminent, brace for impact.

Battle stations. All crew to battle stations.

“What the hell,” demanded Commander Bekkalu as she pushed herself to her feet, “is going on?”

Fighting the shifting forces being generated by the spiralling ship, she staggered to the door and exited onto the bridge of the *CSS Condor*. Lurk was close behind her, followed by Mal and Libby, clinging to each other.

Shaggus whuffed in alarm.

“Oh my gods,” said Libby.

Bearing down upon them, clearly visible through the main viewport, was the massive, menacing shape of an Imperial Planetary Dominator.

“They’re going to hit,” shouted somebody. “Brace for impact. Brace for...”

With a hideous grinding sound, the two ships came into contact.

Admiral Muzzel stood on the bridge of the *IPD Bermuda*, watching the streaks of stars fly past. He found the visual aspects of a hyperspace jump oddly soothing. Of course, it was mostly an illusion, he knew; the brain’s attempt to make sense of the multi-dimensional space through which they travelled. A small percentage of the population could not handle it, suffering varying degrees of nausea, vertigo, even psychosis in extreme cases.

Those people typically became farmers; planet-bound occupations suited them.

“Two minutes, sir,” said Captain Pyotrovich, and Muzzel nodded. He glanced at one of the other displays, on which their course was plotted. Having analysed the data from the stricken Frigate adrift in the Bramble Patch—they had so very nearly made it through—the science officers of the *Bermuda* managed to duplicate

their feat of tracking the rogue *Devastator Station*. After emerging from the secret R&D base within Zone 51, the intruders had paused just long enough to destroy the broadcasting THIGH Fighters, then taken off on a direct course for the nearby system of Ender's Moon.

Rather than following them directly, Admiral Muzzel had opted to summon the Imperial fleet to one of the system's Lagrange points. It seemed a good place to sit and observe for a while before rushing blindly into combat. Commanders of Imperial Planetary Dominators were not typically known for being cautious, but in this instance, facing an unknown and unprecedented enemy in direct control of the Imperium's own Planet-busting weapon, it had seemed like the wisest approach.

"Thirty seconds, sir."

Muzzel turned towards the captain. "When we come out into realspace," he said, "I want you to establish visual contact with the Droid *Devastator*. All passive sensors running, but kill the active sensors. No point in letting them know we've arrived."

"Yes sir," said Captain Pyotrovich.

Muzzel turned back to the main viewport. He loved watching the moment when those streaks of potentiality collapsed into stars, when space solidified around them.

He felt the moment of deceleration in his gut as the *Bermuda* dropped back into realspace. Then his gut clenched as the space in front of the *Bermuda* filled up with a dozen ships or more.

"Evasive action," he shouted. "Full reverse!"

It was every spacefarer's worst nightmare: dropping out of hyperspace into the same piece of realspace already occupied by another object. Had they been a millisecond later in their entry into realspace, they might well have suffered the same fate.

As it was, collision seemed unavoidable.

Two or three of the ships directly in their path were initiating emergency manoeuvres, scrambling to get out of their way, and the *Bermuda*'s Flight Officer was rolling her hull, but it all seemed too little, too late.

Time simultaneously stood still and raced forward.

Admiral Muzzel took a couple of steps forward—hurriedly, but with all the time in the world—and clutched the viewport frame.

Then they struck, the blade-edge of their hull slicing against the rounded hull of the other ship like a knife slicing into an orange. The other ship grated along their hull, and the screech of metal tearing metal reverberated throughout the *Bermuda*.

Finally both ships came to a stop.

“Full stop,” shouted Admiral Muzzel, to countermand his earlier call for Full Reverse. So long as the two ships were wedged together they were relatively stable. Pulling them apart could drastically worsen the situation.

“Rebels,” someone else called out. “It’s the damn Rebel fleet.”

“It’s a trap.”

“They’re charging weapons,” said another voice. Even as the words were spoken, the *Bermuda* shuddered under the impact of incoming blaster fire.

“Ready to return fire,” shouted Captain Pyotrovich.

“Belay that, damn it,” said Admiral Muzzel. “Stand down. Somebody open me a comms line to the Rebel command ship.”

“Line open, sir.”

“This is Admiral Muzzel commanding the *IPD Bermuda*,” said Muzzel. “Cease fire. I wish to discuss the terms of our surrender!”

Chapter *

Something

In the absence of clearly neutral ground on which to hold their talks, both the Imperials and the Rebels had agreed that an aligned civilian freighter would be the next best thing. Mal had, on principle, put forward the argument that he was not actually aligned with the Rebels, and merely doing business with them.

Nobody appeared to believe him.

“Welcome aboard the *Serendipity Sparrow*, gentlemen,” he said as Admiral Muzzel and Captain Pyotrovich stepped out of the short docking tube that connected the *Sparrow* to the Imperial shuttle. He glanced at the two armour-clad Shock Troopers following behind the officers. Both parties had been permitted a small armed escort.

“Your men are welcome as well, but I must insist they remain here in the cargo bay.” He nodded towards the two Rebel soldiers, seated a short distance away and watching intently. “Perhaps they can play cards with these guys,” he suggested with a grin.

“This is your ship, Captain Single?” asked Muzzel, peering curiously around the interior of the cargo bay.

“It is,” said Mal, “and I’d really rather not have it shot up due to a minor disagreement.”

“And you vouch for our safety?”

“I do,” said Mal.

“Very well,” said Muzzel. He turned to the Shock Troopers. “Await my return here,” he said briefly.

“This way,” said Mal. “Princess Labia Orgasma and Commander Bekkalu of the Rebel Coalition await you in the galley. It’s not fancy but it’s home to me.”

“I really must congratulate you, Captain Single,” said Muzzel.

“And why is that, Admiral?”

“We’ve been tracking this ship for some time,” said the Admiral. “According to our latest data, you are still on Ratatouille.”

“Indeed?” said Mal innocently. “Perhaps it was some other ship? There are a few of these old beauties around. Here we are.”

Libby and Bekkalu rose from their seats on one side of the table in the *Sparrow*’s small galley. Beyond them, perched upon one of the food preparation benches, Lurk eyed the newcomers closely.

Pyotrovich met his hostile gaze nervously.

Muzzel ignored him.

“Ladies,” he said with a formal nod as he gestured for them to reseal themselves. Bekkalu settled back into her chair, but Libby remained standing.

She was staring at Muzzel.

“I know you,” she said slowly.

“Indeed you do, ma’am,” said the Admiral. “We were never formally introduced, but we met briefly at, uh, at Muff Farquhar’s retirement party.”

He watched as recognition bloomed in her eyes.

“I must apologise,” he continued, “both personally and on behalf of the Imperium, for the manner in which you were treated by an officer of the *IPD Bermuda*. Both of you,” he added, turning towards Mal.

"I'm sure you were only following orders," said Lurk bitterly.

The Admiral turned to meet Lurk's glare. For a moment he was silent. Then he nodded slightly.

"Believe me, Mister Splitwhisker, I understand your anger. For what it is worth, there are those within the Imperium who feel that the old ways are no longer tolerable." He paused, studying Lurk's reaction to his words. "I would be more than willing to discuss these issues at another time. For now, though, Mister Splitwhisker, neither I, nor the Imperium, are on trial, and we have more pressing matters to discuss."

Lurk pushed himself away from the bench, his eyes hard—and Mal moved forward to place himself between the two men.

"Cool it, Lurk," he muttered, placing his hand lightly on his friend's shoulder. "We've all got reason to hate these Imperial bastards. But he's right. Now is not the time."

Lurk turned his angry glare on Mal, and for the barest instant, Mal felt as though he was staring into the hollow bony eye-sockets of Death herself. Then Lurk blinked, sighed, nodded. He glanced around the table.

"Libby, Commander." After a moment's hesitation, he moved on: "Admiral. Captain. I apologise for my outburst. It won't happen again."

The Admiral nodded formally, and turned his attention back to Libby.

It was Commander Bekkalu who spoke. "Admiral Muzzel," she began, "I believe we were here to discuss your surrender."

"Indeed," said the Admiral. "And while I have no wish to cause further hard feelings, I must state that I have no intention of surrendering to your forces."

Lurk nodded without saying a word.

“There was some doubt as to your intentions,” said Libby carefully. “The general consensus was that...” she trailed off. Her diplomatic training would not allow her to continue that thought aloud.

“So you are just playing for time?” asked Commander Bekkalu. “Waiting for reinforcements?”

“If I may speak frankly?”

“Please do, Admiral,” said Bekkalu.

“My analysts tell me that, in a pitched battle with your fleet, the *IPD Bermuda* could neutralise all of your ships in ... Captain?”

Captain Pyotrovich nodded. “Approximately eighteen to twenty minutes, sir. We would take some damage, certainly, perhaps lose some mobility, with a projected crew fatality rate of, uh, not quite four percent.”

“I think, Admiral,” said Libby quietly, “that you may find we have a few surprises up our sleeves.”

“No doubt,” conceded the Admiral. “Either way, neither of us can afford such a conflict at this point. As I hope you are aware, we have a common enemy. I just felt that an offer of surrender was more likely to get your attention than an offer of a truce.”

“You hoped to win our trust by lying to us?” asked Libby.

“We’re talking, aren’t we?”

After a moment, Libby nodded. “I guess we are.”

“While I’m speaking frankly, I do hope to gain your trust—if only for the next few days—but if I cannot have your trust, I only really need your cooperation.” He paused, looking back and forth between the Commander and the Princess. “But in the name of trust, I should tell you that we do, indeed, have reinforcements joining us shortly.”

Libby gasped and shot an alarmed look at Mal.

“Captain?” said the Admiral to Pyetrovich.

The Imperial captain reached into the top pocket of his tunic and withdrew a slim data padd. He placed it face up on the table and slid it to a point roughly between Libby and Bekkalu.

“When we had our little, uh, surprise encounter here,” said the Admiral, “I sent orders redirecting the rest of the fleet to those coordinates, far enough away so as not to cause an, uh, unfortunate misunderstanding. They should be arriving shortly.”

“The first arrivals will be within five minutes,” added Captain Pyetrovich.

Libby scooped the padd up from the table, glanced at it briefly, and handed it to Mal, who disappeared in the direction of the cockpit.

“What are you proposing, Admiral?” asked Bekkalu.

“A truce,” said the Admiral. “Obviously I am not authorised to speak for the Imperium as a whole. But between your forces and mine, for the next few days, a truce. Until the object orbiting *Ender’s Moon* has been neutralised, after which we both go our separate ways.”

He saw the doubt in their eyes.

“I’ll even settle for a cease fire, if you prefer. Once repairs to our respective vessels are completed, you detach and leave the area with your fleet, and leave us to deal with our problem.” Repair crews from both ships were hard at work, sealing off bulkheads, making interior chambers air-tight, and cutting away the tangled mess of hull plating which locked the *Bermuda* and the *Condor* in their intimate embrace.

“It really is *your* problem, isn’t it, Admiral?” said Lurk slowly. “One of your little planet-killing toys that got away from you somehow.”

“Again, Mister Splitwhisker,” said the Admiral, “I would be delighted to discuss the Imperium’s policies regarding such devices at a later date.”

“I look forward to that talk, Admiral,” said Lurk. “However, I’m not trying to pick a fight with you now.”

“No?” The Admiral arched one eyebrow querulously.

“What I’m wondering is, with all your knowledge of that object’s capabilities, what do your analysts say?”

“My analysts?”

“Can your fleet stop that thing?”

The Admiral sat back in his chair, his face impassive.

Lurk read his answer in the worried expression which flitted briefly across the Captain’s face.

“Captain?” he asked.

Pyotrovich glanced at the Admiral for direction. After a moment’s thought, Muzzel nodded.

“There are numerous unknowns,” began the captain.

“Yes or no, Captain?”

“It seems ... unlikely, sir.” Captain Pyotrovich licked his lips nervously. “Even with the inclusion of the Rebel, uh, of your fleet, the chances of success are less than one in three hundred. Most projections show total casualties for our forces while inflicting, at best, forty percent damage.”

Lurk nodded.

“I can stop them,” he said.

“Really?” Admiral Muzzel leaned forward, interest glinting in his eyes. “I had heard rumours about what happened at Yawn, but I was...”

“Not like that,” said Lurk, cutting him off. “This is ... different.”

Muzzel studied him for a moment, waiting for him to elaborate. When nothing further seemed forthcoming, he sat back in his seat again.

“How, then?” he asked.

“I need to get aboard,” said Lurk. “And I need to get to their central computer nexus.”

Muzzel raised an eyebrow again. “Is that all? Why not just wander onto their bridge? Shut down their core reactor from there?”

“If only it were that simple, Admiral.”

Muzzel blinked. “You’re serious? How do you plan to get on board?”

Now it was Lurk’s turn to hesitate. “I... I’m not sure, but I have a strong feeling that I need to go down to the planet’s surface. There may be a way from there.”

“You ... have a *feeling*?”

“I would trust my life to one of Lurk’s feelings,” said Libby quietly.

Muzzel glanced at her, then locked eyes with Commander Bekkalu.

“And you, Commander?”

Bekkalu shrugged. “I know what you’re thinking, Admiral,” she said. “But I do believe that Lurk is our best chance for victory.”

Muzzel nodded slowly. “And you’re going alone?” he asked, swinging back to face Lurk.

“A small strike force,” he said. “No more than a dozen soldiers as escort, if they are required.”

“I shall give you what information we have on what you may be facing,” said the Admiral. “It is a little garbled, but it may be of use. However, if you require an escort, may I offer you two squads of Shock Troopers?”

“I’m sure we can manage with our own troops,” said Bekkalu.

“To be blunt, ma’am,” said the Admiral, “Imperial Shock Troopers are amongst the finest fighting forces in the galaxy. Look at Hoff. Once we were boots-down on

the planet, our Shock Troopers overran your defending forces within the hour.”

“None of us here had forgotten that fact,” said Bekkalu, a hint of iciness creeping into her tone.

“Forgive me for being indelicate,” said the Admiral, “but the facts speak for themselves. I understand there may be trust issues, but if your mission is to stand any chance of success, I recommend you accept my offer.”

“Very well, Admiral,” said Lurk before Bekkalu could respond. “Two squads of Shock Troopers it is. And, if I may ... one of your shuttles too. Given the Imperial origins of that thing out there, an Imperial shuttle stands a better chance of approaching the planet unchallenged.”

Muzzel nodded. “That makes sense. I shall put one of my shuttles at your disposal. When do you leave?”

“Within the hour,” said Lurk.

Admiral Muzzel stood. “Very well,” he said. “It appears we have our truce.”

“Is this wise, sir?” Pyotrovich and Muzzel were aboard their shuttle, returning to the *Bermuda*.

“If Splitwhisker can do what he claims, we have to give him our support,” said the Admiral. “Send Team Badger to act as his escort, and to keep an eye on him.”

“And the second squad?” asked Pyotrovich.

“If he really can get people aboard that ship,” mused the Admiral, “it may just be worth sending a squad to the bridge. If they *can* shut down the core reactor, the station would be vulnerable to a full scale assault and there would be no need to rely on this Jubbly mysticism.”

“Who do you want to send, sir?”

“How do you feel about Team Daffodil?”

Chapter *

Mission Impossible

The large flat wings folded down into flight position as Imperial Shuttle *THIGH Delirium* left the main hangar bay of the *CSS Condor* and angled into its flight path. At the controls, Mal plotted a parabolic arc that would take them into a low orbit around *Ender's Moon* while avoiding close approach to the disturbingly phallic *Death Tube*. Thus far, neither Rebel nor Imperial forces had seen any sign that the Droid had detected their presence, and Mal preferred to keep it that way.

"I must say," said Mal, "I've piloted a few ships in my time, but none of them quite as responsive as this." He sat back in the pilot's chair and sighed. "I wonder if they'll let me keep her when this is over."

Wrawwrrraaarrwwrll, snarled Shaggus, waving his large woolly arms around.

"True," said Mal, "I don't think they had Woonkies in mind when they built her."

"What about the *Sparrow*?" asked Libby.

The *Sparrow*. Mal tapped a few keys, and brought up the view from the shuttle's rear camera. The *CSS Condor*, with the *Serendipity Sparrow* still docked to her hull, was rapidly dwindling from view. He had a slightly sick feeling in his gut that he may never see her again.

“The *Sparrow* would still be my main ship,” he said lightly. He turned to grin at her. “But I’m sure I could find a few uses for an Imperial Shuttle—from time to time.”

“I’m sure you could,” said Libby.

“Still,” he said. He twisted further to glance back down the short passageway between the cockpit and the main cabin. “I never thought I’d be ferrying Shock Troopers around.”

Libby nodded. “I don’t trust those guys,” she said quietly. She glanced across at Lurk. Her brother was staring silently out of the cockpit viewport, his face pale.

“Lurk, are you okay?”

“Huh?”

“You haven’t said a word since...”

“Oh,” said Lurk. “Yeah. Just feeling a little queasy. The closer we get to that thing...” He shrugged. “I’m just working on building some barriers, insulating myself from the worst of it.”

“Oh, okay,” said Libby.

Lurk turned back to stare out of the viewport again. Distant stars sparkled against the deep black of space, but he barely noticed. What he had said was true enough, but Lurk was also concerned for the safety of his friends. He had asked them to stay behind, but they had insisted on coming with him. “I don’t want you going alone with a ship-full of Imperial Troopers,” Libby had said, and Mal had agreed. Finally, in the face of their stubborn insistence, Lurk had had no choice but to agree.

He was glad they were with him—but he was not at all sure that he would be returning from this mission.

Breathing deeply, he began to focus on one of the meditation exercises Yodel had taught him on his first visit to Daggyboil. Then, he had been working on

clearing the stench of the planet's foetid swamps from his nostrils; now he was trying to mute the growing background stench of decay and corruption that infused the very Source itself.

Simply shutting down his connection to the Source entirely was not an option, even had he known how to achieve such a feat. Somewhere in the midst of that awful wrongness, shining dimly like a lantern through the fog, was a mind, somehow familiar, calling him down to the planet's surface. There was an urgency to that call that Lurk could not ignore.

"I just don't get it," said Fib. "We chase these damn Rebels across half the fucking galaxy, and now we're babysitting them?"

"After letting them go once already," muttered Izzy.

"Yeah," said Fib. "Are we at fucking war or what?"

"I've always said," said Mikki, "that half these damn officers have their heads firmly shoved up their own arses. If they'd get out of the way and let us do our jobs, this war would have been over years ago."

"Technically," said Basski softly, "this isn't even classed as a war at all. It's, uh, 'civil unrest'."

Mikki stared at him. "Are you fucking kidding me?" he demanded. "It sure as hell feels like a fucking war!"

"Or it would," said Fib, "if we were fighting instead of babysitting! What's the deal, Sarge?"

Sergeant Sammy Strong shrugged. "When Admiral Muzzel himself gives me my orders, I don't question them," he said. "He said we've got to escort the Jubbly past a bunch of teddewoks and zombies to blow up the Death Tube, and so that's what we're gonna do."

Fib blinked.

"That's fucked up," he said at last.

“On so many levels,” agreed Mikki. “Zombies and *teddewoks*?”

“Bottom line,” said Strong, “is we’re Shock Troopers and we’ve got a job to do. We take the Jubbly where he wants to go. We shoot anything that gets in his way. And we let him do whatever the hells it is he’s gotta do. Got that?”

“Um...” said Fib.

“Got that, Fib?”

“Got it Sarge.”

“Right on, Sarge,” said Mikki.

“Sure,” said Basski.

“Works for me,” said Izzy.

“Right,” said Strong. “But I’ll tell you something else.” He leaned forward, with a quick glance down the passageway towards the cockpit. He lowered his voice. “When he’s done what he’s doing, I’ve got a score to settle with that Jubbly.”

“I hear ya,” said Izzy, a touch of venom creeping into her voice.

Seated across from Team Badger, the Shock Troopers of Team Daffodil had remained silent throughout this exchange. Now Bent opened his mouth.

“Seriously, Sarge? Zombies?”

Strong shrugged. “That’s what the reports from the frigate seem to suggest. But they also suggest *teddewoks*, so who knows? Whatever we’re facing, son, just shoot straight and it won’t be a problem.”

Ender’s Moon loomed overhead as the shuttle entered its planned orbit. Wispy white streaks of high-level cloud were all that broke up the endless green of the planet-

spanning forest. Green became black as the planet turned, and night crept across its face.

“Where are we headed?” asked Mal.

Lurk closed his eyes and reached out gingerly with his mind. He physically gagged as the corruption of the Source that emanated from the planet engulfed his thoughts. Somewhere amidst all that filth was a lone bright spot, and with a grimace of distaste, Lurk focussed his thoughts upon it.

“There,” he said. “That direction, about twelve hundred kilometres distant.” He turned his attention to the navigation display, and decisively tapped a point on the planet’s surface. “Right there,” he said.

Mal opened the comm. Channel to the rear cabin.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, a slight grin curling the corner of his mouth, “we are about to begin our descent. The weather looks good, with a minimum of turbulence ahead of us. Touchdown will be in approximately five minutes.” He glanced at Lurk. “Thank you for flying Single Airways,” he added.

The shuttle’s flight wings folded up into their re-entry position as the craft rolled to align itself with the planet’s surface. There was a brief rattle of turbulence as they entered the upper atmosphere, and then the ride smoothed out as the shuttle began to glide towards the selected landing point. Clouds whipped briefly at the viewports before rising gracefully above them.

Massive, towering trees rose to meet them.

“There,” said Lurk, pointing. “A clearing.”

“I don’t know,” said Libby. “Is it big enough?”

“Piece of cake,” said Mal blithely. “Plenty of room.”

Still, his brow furrowed with concentration as he guided the shuttle towards the small stretch of open ground.

Wrrwuffwrrlll, Shaggus cautioned his friend.

“I see it, buddy,” said Mal. He nudged the attitude control stick gently, and the shuttle rotated a few degrees, its wing barely clearing a large trunk. He tapped another control, and the wings closed fully into their landing configuration as, with a muted whine, the landing gear extended.

First one strut, then the other, kissed the ground, and the shuttle settled gently into the grass-covered clearing.

Mal cut the engines. “Like I said: piece of cake.”

Two armoured Shock Troopers, blasters held at the ready, stepped off the ramp onto the soft grass, and Lurk followed them into the clearing. He felt slightly surreal, being unused to having an Imperial escort.

“Now what?” demanded one of the Troopers, her voice harsh and inhuman through her suit’s electronic voice box.

“Now we wait,” said Lurk. He peered uncertainly around, squinting into the darkness between the trees. The mid-afternoon sun already hid behind the massive trees that surrounded them, and shadows dominated the clearing.

“Now,” said a menacing voice from the shadows, “we get out of here.”

Lurk spun towards the shockingly familiar voice, his light rapier humming to life, and the two Shock Troopers swung their blasters to cover the same spot. Three more Troopers appeared on the ramp behind them, weapons ready.

“Father,” he said flatly. It was not a question; there was no doubting that voice.

“Hello, son,” said Vapour as he strode out of the shadows into the dim light of the clearing.

“Father?” This time it *was* a question, for the tall, gaunt apparition which sounded so much like Barth Vapour looked nothing like the Stiff Lord.

“Lord Vapour?” asked one of the Shock Troopers, lowering his weapon. Pointing a blaster at Vapour was tantamount to suicide.

Lurk nodded. This *must* be Vapour; nothing else made sense. Only *he* could have called to Lurk from such a distance.

Suddenly, something else clicked into place, another piece of the puzzle.

“You caused this,” said Lurk accusingly, tracing a small circle with the tip of his light rapier. “I don’t know why I didn’t spot it earlier. This corruption has your scent all through it.”

Vapour shrugged. “Mistakes were made,” he said simply. Lurk blinked; he hadn’t expected Vapour to agree with him, however obliquely.

“We can talk about them later,” Vapour continued. “Now, though, we have to leave. It is not safe here.”

“Looks pleasant enough,” said Lurk, never taking his eyes off Vapour. He could feel the danger, though, a Source-induced itch that hung in the air itself. He wanted nothing more than a long, hot shower.

“What makes you think for a second that I would take you aboard my ship?” At the edge of his vision, Lurk saw the Trooper raising his weapon again, although now the deadly muzzle aimed squarely at him. Was Vapour controlling the Trooper with his mind, or was it simply a matter of old loyalties resurfacing? Did it make any difference?

He ignored the new potential threat.

“Because,” said Vapour, “we have bigger problems.”

“‘We’?” demanded Lurk.

“We need each other,” said Vapour. “I need to get off this planet. You need to get onto the Droid ship. I can get you past their defences.”

Lurk pondered this.

“Only together can we defeat the Droid. Why else did you come down here?” asked Vapour.

Lurk exhaled slowly. Vapour had a point. He had known—without understanding how or why—that coming down to *Ender’s Moon* was the only way to board the Death Tube successfully.

“Okay,” he said with a brief nod.

Without waiting for a reply, he turned on his heel and marched briskly up the ramp into the belly of the shuttle. He had some explaining to do to his friends before they saw who their visitor was.

Too late. Libby stood at the top of the ramp, her face set in a cold, blank expression.

“Vapour?” she hissed.

Lurk shrugged. “It’s the only way,” he said.

“I don’t trust him,” she said.

“Neither do I,” said Lurk, “but I don’t think we have a choice.”

Booted feet sounded on the ramp behind him, and Libby’s gaze flickered over his shoulder.

“Fine,” she muttered. “Just keep him the hells away from me!” She turned and stalked away.

Tension filled the cockpit of the Shuttle *THIGH Delirium* like the cloying perfume of a cheap hooker, and it had little to do with the ominous battle station which loomed before them. Vapour’s presence seemed to be sucking all the air from the small cabin.

Libby had already retreated into the seclusion of one of the shuttle’s two tiny toilet cubicles—to get some fresh

air, she had said, directing a venomous glare at the man-machine who had once been her own father. Shaggus kept glancing over his woolly shoulder, glaring at the Stiff Lord as though he could barely restrain himself from leaping up and tearing the hated intruder limb from bio-mechanical limb. Even Mal seemed unnaturally tense, his usual casual attitude repressed under the baleful gaze of Barth Vapour, and he focussed intently upon the controls beneath his hands.

Lurk felt a little like a fly, trapped in a web, tasked with keeping the wasp from attacking the spider.

If his grin was anything to go by, Vapour seemed to find the whole situation amusing.

“There,” said Vapour, pointing forward. “Head for that docking port. I’m transmitting clearance codes.”

“Just like that?” asked Lurk. “I thought you said you’d parted ways with these Droid?”

Vapour turned to stare at Lurk. Even now, he was not used to being questioned.

Lurk met his gaze evenly.

Finally, Vapour nodded. “That is true,” he said. “However, the Droid’s biggest weakness is, ironically, their strength. They have never had a drone escape from their control before—they have never *lost* a drone—and so they just don’t have protocols in place to deal with such a situation. If they receive clearance codes from a drone, they accept them.”

“Lurk,” said Mal. He pointed out towards the Death Tube. From this distance, the many organic and robotic shapes that studded its hull were clearly visible, outlined by the hideous green glow of the Droid energy conduits. A large panel was sliding open, revealing an empty docking bay.

“Okay,” said Lurk. “Let’s do this.”

Mal nodded absently as his fingers slid across the control panel. In response, the shuttle angled smoothly towards the open port, its wings folding up for landing.

As their small ship was swallowed by the massive station, Mal shook his head.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” he muttered.

Chapter 20?

Invasion of Death Tube

Kumm Stolid shook his helmeted head in disbelief.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” he said.

“You say that quite a lot,” said Dorn Stalwart.

“There’s a lot to feel bad about,” said Kumm. He glanced at Bent Davyss, who stood in front of an alcove, one of many that lined the long corridor. Standing either side of Bent were Dorn, and Karrn McKavern. “I’d go so far as to say that this has not been a nice day.”

Inside the alcove, motionless, stood a Droid drone. Its pasty white skin, mottled by the darker grey lines of sub-dermal veins, exhibited a sickly green tinge, courtesy of the many flickering display screens that provided the corridor’s only illumination. The drone’s chest expanded slowly, but there was no hiss of breath over its slightly parted lips. On the ugly mechanical patch over one eye, a small red light blinked slowly.

Bent leaned closer.

“I would feel better,” said Corporal Grunt Wheedle, “if you would refrain from upsetting the zombie.”

“Yeah,” added Karrn. “Step away from the zombie, Bent.”

“They’re not zombies as such,” said Bent.

“Could’ve fooled me,” muttered Karrn.

“Besides,” said Bent, “you heard Lord Vapour. They’re harmless unless they decide you’re a threat.”

“If I woke up and found you leaning over me, I’d consider that a threat,” said Karnn.

“You love it,” Bent muttered vaguely. All his attention was on the drone. “Hard to believe that these are...”

The drone’s eye flicked open, and with a startled cry Bent leaped backward, colliding noisily with Dorn and Karnn. All three Troopers scrambled clear as the Droid drone stepped out of its alcove.

“Oh crap,” said Kumm, his hand dropping automatically for the blaster slung loosely at his hip.

The Droid drone stared at the Shock Troopers of Team Daffodil, its gaze flat and dead. The light on its ocular implant flickered rapidly. It blinked, and for one terrifying instant its eye socket bristled with pink fur. It blinked again, restoring its eye to normal, then turned and strode away down the corridor.

Bent became aware that somebody was shouting the word “fuck” repeatedly. A few seconds later, he realised it was himself, and he clamped his mouth closed. He was breathing heavily.

“What the hells was that?” said Dorn. “Did you see its eye? That was *not* normal.”

“Nothing about this is normal,” said Kumm.

“Next time,” said Grunt, “don’t upset the zombie.”

“Uh-huh,” agreed Bent, but the Corporal was not finished.

“Don’t poke the zombie, don’t feed the zombie, don’t crowd the zombie. You got that?”

“Sure,” said Bent. His heart rate was slowly returning to normal. “Anything you say, Corporal,”

“Like I said,” said Kumm, “bad feeling!”

“Can we just go now?” asked Karrn. She pointed to the floor against the wall, where three coloured stripes – interrupted by the cluster of alcoves which appeared to have been grown rather than installed – led off into the distance. “Which one of these are we following?”

“Vapour said ‘follow the yellow’,” said Grunt, “so let’s just follow the yellow, shall we?” He set off down the corridor. “And, Bent?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t touch nothing!”

“Do you know where you’re going?” asked Lurk doubtfully. Several paces away, Vapour stood in the centre of an intersection, turning his head slowly from side to side. He seemed to be sniffing the air.

“Can’t you feel it?” said Vapour. “The corruption?”

“I can feel it,” said Lurk with a grimace. The closer they moved to the invisible nexus from which flowed all the wrongness in the Source, the more he felt like throwing up. “It’s over that way.” He nodded his head. “But this place is a labyrinth. It’s not like we can simply head directly where we want to go.”

“Heads up,” said Mal. (Should Mal be here? Perhaps find a way to leave Mal, Libby, Shaggus behind??) Lurk turned. Three Droid drones were marching purposefully up the corridor towards them. The rest of the group—friends and Shock Troopers alike—had backed up against the wall to allow them to pass. A couple of the Troopers were restlessly stroking their slung weapons, and Lurk felt his own hand drop to his hip, his fingers feeling for the comforting reassurance of his light rapier, as he stepped aside.

The Droid completely ignored them.

Lurk had grown somewhat accustomed to the sight of corpse-like grey flesh bristling with unknown devices, tubes and cables, but the third member of the Droid trio, bizarrely, had a large patch of bright pink fur down one side of its face, covering—or growing out of—the black leather armour of its shoulders. The patch was pulsating obscenely.

“What the fuck is that shit?” muttered one of the Shock Troopers.

Lurk shook his head.

Suddenly, as the pink-furred Drone drew level with him, Lurk felt an overwhelming wave of nausea and dizziness wash over him. He sagged back against the wall, and clamped his hand over his mouth as the burning taste of bile rose in the back of his throat.

For a moment, his vision greyed out. When it came back, Mal and Libby were gathered around him, matching looks of worry on their faces. Behind them, Shaggus was glaring angrily at the Shock Troopers as though looking for someone to blame.

“I’m okay,” said Lurk carefully. He pushed himself upright, smiled absently at Mal, and patted Libby’s arm.

“You felt that too,” said Vapour. It was not a question.

Lurk nodded.

“In the data the Imperials gave us,” he said slowly, “there was a cryptic reference to, uh, teddewoks. I thought it was corrupt data, a mistake in the decryption, but that thing... What the hells is going on here?”

“It’s a long story,” said Vapour. “Suffice it to say that Boadi...—uh, the teddewoks—are essentially a computer virus.”

Lurk nodded again. "Of course," he said. "A virus, overwriting the very Source code that makes up the Array."

"Our part of the Array," said Vapour. "The Droid became a viral infection *here* when they crossed over from the other simulation. *They* were problematic enough. But the teddewoks represent a severe mutation of the Droid virus, blending their replication capability with..."

Lurk stared at him.

"With what? And why do they look like teddewoks?"

"Sounds like crap to me," said Mal darkly.

"It makes sense," he said, "from a certain point of view." He shrugged, aware of Mal's scepticism of the Jubbly belief system. "But I'm beginning to wonder..."

"What?" Libby placed her hand on his shoulder.

Lurk shook his head. "Nothing," he said. He kept his gaze locked with Vapour's, though; he could not bear to turn to face her, lest she see the worry in his eyes. In the aftermath of the Battle of Yawn it had all seemed so clear: wake up, escape the array, fix everything. But now, that simple solution seemed so woefully naive.

I'll figure it out when I get to the computer, he told himself. He wished he could believe that.

"Let's keep moving," he said. "Which way?"

Vapour pointed down the right fork. It was the same passage the Droid drones had taken.

He raised an eyebrow at Vapour. *It's only going to get worse, isn't it?* he thought, willing the question toward the Hard Lord. Toward his father.

Vapour nodded once.

"Right," said Lurk, forcing a cheery tone into his voice. "Let's go."

Kumm Stolid was whistling, the tune vaguely familiar.

“Just because we’re in an elevator,” said Bent, “doesn’t mean we need elevator music.”

“Oh sorry,” said Kumm. “I didn’t realise I was doing it. Just killing time.”

“This *is* an awfully long trip,” said Grunt. “Where do you suppose it’s taking us?”

They all swayed gently as the elevator changed direction for the third time.

“Well, you did tell it to take us to the bridge,” said Karrn. “So, y’know, that’d be my guess.”

“Maybe it’s lost,” said Dorn.

“Don’t forget how big this station is,” said Kumm. “The elevator rides on the *IPDs* are bad enough; this thing makes them like like toys, so...”

“So, no rush,” said Bent.

“Exactly,” said Kumm. Pursing his lips, he whistled a slow, mournful take on his earlier tune.

The elevator changed direction a fourth time.

“I think it’s slowing down,” said Dorn softly.

“I think you’re right,” said Grunt.

With a cheery *ding*, the doors opened onto blackness.

After a moment, Grunt stepped forward cautiously, peering into the gloom. The only light came from the elevator behind him, and that was quickly swallowed by the inky darkness.

“Fuck it,” he muttered, and he unslung his blaster. He heard the clatter of his fellow Shock Troopers following his lead.

“In my experience,” said Kumm in a hoarse whisper, “your typical bridge is busier than this.”

“Switch to night vision,” said Grunt, “and move out.” He activated a switch on the back of his wrist, and the goggles of his helmet lit up with a dim red glow. “Oh,

and Kumm? Wedge the elevator doors open. We don't want any nasty surprises.

"On it," said Kumm.

The room before them was large enough that, even with night vision enabled, they could not see the far wall.

"This is some bridge," said Bent. "Shouldn't there be, like, consoles or something? I don't recognise any of this stuff."

"Obviously the Droid have redecorated in here too," said Karn. "There's a surprise."

"Done," said Kumm. "We're good to go, boss. These doors aren't closing without help!"

"Okay, people," said Grunt, "spread out, look for anything that might be active, or useful. Or, hells, just plain worth looking at." He paused a second, then added, "Let's show everybody what Team Daffodil are made of!"

"Blood, guts, assorted body parts," muttered Bent as he moved out into the room, panning his weapon from side to side. "Though, hey," he added brightly, his voice sounding a little mechanical over the audio channel, "at least there are no air ducts."

"You just had to say it, didn't you?" said Dorn. "What was that?" She spun around.

"What?" said Karn.

"Thought I heard something," said Dorn. "Like..."

"... something scampering across the floor?" said Kumm.

"Yeah, I guess," said Dorn. "But there's nothing ... wait, how did you...?"

"I heard it over here too," said Kumm. "We are not alone, guys."

"Stop fucking around, guys," said Grunt, his voice terse.

“Not fucking around,” said Kumm slowly. “Uh...”

“I don’t like this,” said Bent. “I don’t like this at all. I’m starting to think that coming here was a really bad idea.” He was turning slowly on the spot, eyes darting every which way.

Something rustled behind Grunt, and he turned to look but there was nothing there.

“Okay,” he said, “plan B. Fall back to the elevator. I think it’s time we called it a day.” He turned back towards the elevator, just in time to see the doors hiss closed.

“Hey Kumm,” he said, “didn’t I tell you to wedge those doors open?”

There was no reply.

“Kumm? Does anyone have eyes on Kumm?”

“Wasn’t he over near that wall?” said Bent. “Hey Kumm, buddy, you with us?”

Still no reply.

“Ah shit,” muttered Grunt. “Okay, plan C. Everyone sound off, and regroup on me.”

“Sure, Corporal,” said Bent. “Bent here.”

“Dorn here. Heading back.”

“Karrn here.”

“Damn it, Kumm, where the hells...”

“I’m here,” came Kumm’s voice over the channel. “Sorry, I thought I saw something.”

Team Daffodil regrouped in a defensive formation, a loose circle, weapons pointing out into the darkness.

“Now what, boss?” said Bent.

“Well, this mission’s a bust,” said Grunt. “Bridge, check. Convenient off switch, not so much.”

“So what’s plan B?” asked Dorn.

“We’re already up to plan D,” said Grunt.

“Yeah, keep up,” said Bent.

"I'll keep *you* up," said Dorn.

"What does that even..."

"Alright, you two, knock it off," said Grunt. "I say we bug out, head back to the shuttle."

"What about the others?" asked Karrn. "Team Badger. Vapour. Even the damn Rebels, if their mission is so critical."

"What about 'em?" said Grunt. "Unless they've left a trail of cookies for is to follow, they're on their own."

"Bread crumbs," said Bent.

"What?"

"Trail of bread crumbs to follow. It's from an old story about..."

"What, you're a reader all of a sudden?" said Grunt. "They can leave a trail of flares for all I care, but unless we happen to run into them, I don't think..."

Suddenly, the lights overhead came on.

"Ah crap."

The automatic systems in their helmets responded to the sudden brightness by deactivating their night vision displays, but they were still blinded for a few seconds, waving their blasters back and forth but unable to see any potential targets.

"This is not good," said Karrn.

Blinking rapidly, she peered out at the room—or rather, what little she could see of it. Only the lights directly over their heads had come on, stranding them in an island of light amidst the shadows.

One of the shadows moved.

"Over there," she hissed urgently, pointing with her weapon. "We've got company." She consulted the motion sensor built in to the blaster, and frowned. There was no blip, merely a fuzzy pale dot.

Which indicated a friendly contact.

Grunt was getting the same readings. “Who’s there?” he called.

A black silhouette shuffled forward slowly, only to stop at the very edge of the pool of light.

Five Gemini Mk-III blasters were trained upon it.

“Who’s there?” said Grunt again. “Identify yourself, or be fired upon.”

A gurgle sounded over the comms channel, a gurgle that might have been a word, or a name, but which was too muffled to identify.

The figure shuffled forward another pace, and now was clearly visible. It was a Shock Trooper, its grey combat armour unmistakable.

“Who are you?” insisted Grunt.

Another gurgle.

Slowly, the figure raised its arms. They saw no weapons—but that was not the Trooper’s intent. Slowly, wearily, the hands moved up to grip the helmet. Armoured hands clamped either side of the headpiece; armoured gloves found the locking mechanism over where the ears would be. A light click, a slight twist, and the helmet came off. As though exhausted, the Trooper dropped it, and it clattered noisily to the deck.

The face beneath was smeared with dark fluid which gleamed wetly in the dim light, but it was a face they all knew. The mouth moved slowly in another attempt to speak, but more fluid bubbled down the chin.

The figure fell heavily to its knees, reached one hand towards them, and then collapsed forward onto its face.

Bent took a couple of steps forward, then stopped.

He turned.

His weapon tracked around.

“If *that* is Kumm Stolid,” he said.

“Who the *fuck* are you?” demanded Grunt, completing the thought as he turned to point his blaster at the fifth member of the Team.

“Yeah,” said Karrn. “It seems to me you’ve been very quiet since you came back.”

“Let’s just take a look,” said Dorn. Lowering her weapon, she stepped in behind the still-silent figure in their midst and raised her hands to his helmet. Click. Turn. The helmet came off.

Revealing the face of Kumm Stolid.

“Really, guys?” he said. “What did you expect?”

“Fuck,” said Karrn.

“I didn’t expect to see two of you,” said Grunt. “Now why don’t you just put your blaster down while we sort this out?”

Kumm made no move to relinquish his weapon.

“This one’s out cold,” said Bent, “but still breathing.” He was squatting beside the fallen Trooper that may or may not be his friend, Kumm Stolid.

“Just ... just don’t touch him,” said Grunt. He glanced quickly at Bent, then back at the other Kumm standing before him. Something had changed in the instant he’d looked away, but it took him a moment to realise what it was. The barrel of the blaster in the second—the first?—Kumm’s hands was drifting slowly around.

Grunt took a step back and raised his own blaster into a solid firing position.

“I said drop your fucking weapon,” he said. “Don’t you make me shoot you.”

In his peripheral vision, he saw Karrn and Dorn raising their own weapons.

Kumm cocked his head to one side. “Time’s up,” he said, and he squeezed the trigger. A bright energy bolt

leaped from the muzzle towards the unconscious Kumm lying on the floor.

As though from a great distance, Grunt heard Bent's wordless cry of rage, but now his vision narrowed until all he could see was the thing standing before him, the thing which looked like Kumm Stolid. The thing which had probably just killed Kumm Stolid. It's weapon was swinging around towards him now, and even though his hesitation could have been measured in milliseconds it seemed to drag like minutes as time stretched.

He fired, and watched as that familiar face dissolved under the raw energy of his weapon's blast. The headless torso shuddered and toppled backwards. He saw it bounce bonelessly as it hit the deck. Then it began to shudder, and cracks appeared in the armour. The body was breaking up, tearing itself apart from the inside. Instead of blood, bright pink fur blossomed from the ruptures. Taking another step back, Grunt felt his finger tensing on the trigger, ready to blast this heaving abomination.

From out of the darkness, a bolt of energy hit him square in the chest. Trooper armour was designed to take hits from blasters, to dissipate the energy and protect the soldier inside. This, however, was something new, and Grunt knew he was dead even before he felt the pain.

Standing over Kumm's corpse, his blaster hanging from its sling at his hip, Bent felt numb.

He watched Grunt fall. He could see figures approaching through the darkness, and he watched as Karrn fired at the one that had shot Grunt. It fell, but even as Karrn turned her weapon on another, it fired at her, cutting her down. With a scream of rage that Bent had never imagined she could make, Dorn shot the one that had killed Karrn; she sprayed blaster fire into the

oncoming hordes, and two more went down before a bolt of deadly blue energy hit her square in the back, between the shoulder blades, and she crumpled lifelessly to the deck.

How could it all have gone so wrong? thought Bent.

Shadowy figures moved toward him.

As they surrounded him, he reached up and removed his helmet. He tossed it to one side, and dropped his hands to his sides. One came to rest on his blaster, the other to his belt.

He looked around at the Droid drones which surrounded him. Some of them were speckled with patches of pink fur, one of them even had shiny black buttons for eyes. They stared back at him, weapons hemming him in.

Inanely, he grinned, and his hand tightened on his blaster. *Today, he told himself, is a good day to die.*

“Yippie-kiyay, motherfuckers,” he said, and he swung his blaster up. He felt no pain as the incoming energy bolts riddled his body from all sides, only a wild, trembling exultation, and the thermal detonator he had detached from his belt rolled from his lifeless fingers.

The explosion shredded every living—or almost living—thing on the bridge. It also destroyed numerous critical systems. On a Droid ship, multiple independent redundancies rendered such attacks futile, but here the Droid had inherited the Imperial design. Backup systems existed, but not all were yet online.

This was by no means a mortal blow, but it would take time to repair.

On the bridge of the *Imperial Planetary Dominator Bermuda*, Admiral Muzzel and Commander Bekkalu studied the screens together.

“It’s losing power,” said Muzzel. “See, it’s drifting slightly.”

“Shields are down,” said Captain Pyotrovich.

“They did it,” said Bekkalu. “One way or another, they did it.”

“Signal the fleet,” said Muzzel. “Full assault against the Death Tube. This may be our only chance.”

“Aye sir!”

“Commander?”

“Thank you, Admiral,” said Bekkalu. “Please be so good as to send the attack order to my ships as well.”

Chapter 21

Insertion

The deck rumbled beneath their feet, and the lights flickered out briefly before coming back on.

“What was that?” said Libby.

“An explosion,” said Fib. “And a big one. I guess Team Daffodil got the job done. I’m impressed.”

Almost like an echo of the rumble, an ominous hiss sounded from all around them. Something pinged.

“I’m reading movement, guys,” said Basski.

“Where?” asked Sammy Strong.

“Uh, hard to say,” said Basski. He spun around, looking at the motion detector on his blaster. “Looks like everywhere. Closing on our position.”

“Looks like they’ve just decided that we might be a threat,” said Fib.

“Time to book with extreme prejudice,” said Izzy.

“What does that...” began Lurk.

“It means run, Rebel,” said Izzy. “Run like fuck!”

Without waiting for further instructions, Izzy and Basski took the lead, double-timing it down the corridor. Lurk glanced from Mal to Libby.

“Well, I guess we run,” he said.

They ran.

“This way,” said Basski as he took a left turn, Izzy on his heels. Close behind them ran Vapour, mechanical

legs tirelessly eating up the distance. Behind him, Lurk and Libby ran side by side; Lurk held the hilt of his light rapier in his hand, but had not yet ignited its glowing energy blade. Mal and Shaggus bracketed the siblings, and the remaining three Troopers of Team Badger brought up the rear.

Blaster fire sounded now, from behind them; Fib and Mikki firing a few random shots off at the Droid drones which had appeared in their wake. A drone stepped out into the corridor from one of the **ever-present** alcoves right in front of Lurk, and he instinctively flicked out with his light rapier, the humming blade slicing cleanly through the drone's upper torso.

Shaggus whuffed his appreciation.

Basski turned again.

"Does he even know ... where he's going?" asked Lurk. "Hey, private, uh, Basski, is it? Do you ... know where you're going?"

Basski didn't even glance up from his motion sensor. "Just following the path of ... least resistance, man."

Vapour slowed slightly to allow Lurk to draw level with him. In response, Libby fell back to run between Mal and Shaggus; nothing of the day's events had changed her opinion of the Hard Lord.

"He *is* following the correct path towards the core," said Vapour.

Lurk nodded.

After a few seconds, he frowned. "Wait, you mean the path ... we need to take is also the ... only path not swarming with ... enemy drones?"

"Apparently," said Vapour.

"Your doing?"

Vapour shook his head. "I wish I had that sort of influence on these Droid," he said.

“Doesn’t that strike you ... as a little odd?” gasped Lurk.

“This way,” said Basski. He turned a corner, blasted a lone Droid drone which stood in their path, and kept running. He was starting to slow a little now, though. Imperial Troopers were trained to the peak of physical fitness, but their armour was *heavy*.

“I’ve learned never to question it if things are working out the way I want them to,” Vapour said.

“But what ... what if it’s a trap?” asked Lurk. “What if we are ... being herded ...”

“As opposed to what?” asked Vapour. “Being overrun and integrated where we stand?”

“Integrated?”

“Never mind.” Vapour glanced down at his son. “So long as they’re herding us to where we were going anyway, what’s the problem?”

“But ... what ...”

“Less talk,” chided Vapour, “more running.”

Lurk nodded. He was panting heavily now. He concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. Suddenly a wave of nausea washed over him, his foot skidded out from under him, and he tumbled headfirst into a pool of sticky mud.

What the...?

Around him, he could hear the others exclaiming in surprise and confusion, but he ignored them as he looked around. They were in a jungle. Without transition, the walls studded with Droid technology had been replaced by towering, gnarled trees which hemmed them in, the deck plating had become dirt and mud, the ceiling ... Lurk looked up, but could not see the sky; instead there was a thick leafy canopy which filtered out most of the light.

It was hot, too, and humidity stifled his breathing.

“What the fuck just happened?” he said.

He sat up and began wiping the mud from his clothes.

“I was hoping you could tell us,” said Sergeant Strong. The Trooper glanced around, then checked his motion scanner. “Are we all here?”

“Ten of us,” confirmed Fib, having done a quick head count. “But where is here?”

Lurk clambered to his feet and looked around.

“I think...” He reached out with his mind, feeling for the Source, and then recoiled from the violent turmoil that he sensed. “I think we’re still on the Death Tube,” he said. “Right where we were, in fact.” He glanced at Vapour for confirmation.

The Hard Lord nodded. “The corridors are still there, but... It’s like their Source code has been overwritten.”

Lurk nodded.

“We must be getting close to the core,” said Vapour. “Reality itself is breaking down.”

“That’s shit,” said Fib. “How the fuck can reality be breaking down. I’ve heard some stupid fucking...”

He broke off with a strangled squawk and clutched at his throat. “Rather than a lesson in Stiff lore,” hissed Vapour, “how about a demonstration of the power of the Source.”

“Release him,” snarled Sergeant Strong, and Vapour suddenly found himself staring down the barrels of four Gemini Mk-III Blasters. After a moment, Mal and Libby joined Team Badger in pointing their weapons at Vapour.

Shaggus snarled menacingly.

Vapour laughed, and Fib fell to his knees.

“I admire your courage, Sergeant—and your loyalty. But if you point your weapon at me again, you will...”

A hideous scream, a man’s scream of agony, tore through the air, and everybody swivelled to point their

weapons outwards, their differences momentarily pushed aside. Lurk ignited the blade of his rapier, and its blue beam hummed to life.

Fib pushed himself to his feet and raised his blaster.

From the same direction as the scream, but much closer, came the whoosh of a high-energy weapon being discharged, followed by muffled shouting. Something rattled, a weapon of some kind with a rapid fire rate, and then the energy weapon went off again.

“What’s going on?” hissed Mikki.

A male voice screamed urgently: “Run, go! Get to da choppa!” There was the sound of somebody running through the undergrowth, and everybody braced themselves.

A young woman burst into the clearing and stopped in their midst. Her face, streaked with blood and dirt, carried a look of terror, and beneath the dirty sleeveless top, her chest heaved.

She glanced around at them all, barely seeming to see them. She rattled off a phrase in an unknown language—*el demonyo ke-has trofeos delo sombras*—and then she bolted, pushing past them and disappearing into the jungle.

“Whatever she’s running from,” said Mikki, “I don’t want to meet it.”

“Right,” said Sergeant Strong. He turned on Lurk. “So, Rebel, where to from here? How do we get back?”

Lurk tore his eyes away from the spot where the girl had disappeared, and turned to face the Trooper. He stared at the grotesque facemask of his suit’s helmet.

“I don’t think we do,” he said. “We press on. In, uh, that direction.” He pointed. “Towards the core.”

Strong glanced around the narrow clearing, barely more than a wide spot on an old game trail, then back at

Lurk. Finally, he reached up and removed his helmet so he could look the boy in the eyes.

“You and I need to talk,” he said. Without waiting for a reply he turned back to his Team.

“Basski, Izzy, scout ahead. But don’t go too far, and stay in contact. Fib, check our perimeter, I don’t want any surprises. Mikki...” He glanced at Vapour, and then at the loose cluster of Rebels behind Lurk. “You stay here, keep an eye on our ... charges.”

As the Troopers dispersed, Strong turned back to Lurk. “And you ... come into my office.”

Strong rubbed a large leaf between thumb and forefinger of his armoured gauntlet, then raised his hand to his nose and sniffed. It looked real, it smelt real.

“You’re telling me this is all a computer generated illusion?” he demanded.

Lurk nodded. “And as we get closer to the core—the epicentre of all the Source corruption—this virtual reality is obviously fracturing, throwing us into alternate parallel simulations.”

Strong shook his head. “I don’t believe it,” he said slowly. “But it would seem hard to argue with this damn jungle.” Sweat trickled down his cheeks; without the suit’s climate control, it was uncomfortably warm here.

“The corruption is growing, too,” said Lurk. “If we don’t fix it, this fracturing will spread until it engulfs everything.”

“And you can do that?” said Strong. “Fix it?”

“I believe so.”

“You *believe* so?”

Lurk shrugged. “This is like nothing I’ve ever seen before,” he confessed, “but yes, I believe that if I can get to the core, get *inside* the core, I can stop this.”

Strong nodded.

I'll tell you this, Rebel," he said. "Me and my men are under orders to escort you to your destination. To this core. And we *will* comply with those orders."

"I appreciate that, Sergeant," said Lurk.

"Well, appreciate *this*: some of us lost friends on Ratatouille. *All* of us lost friends at the Battle of Yawn. From what we hear, you are responsible for those losses." Strong locked eyes with Lurk. "We will get you to your destination," he continued, "but if you're wasting our time—putting my Team's lives at risk—for nothing, I'll kill you myself."

Lurk nodded. "In that case, I appreciate your candour. But we've both lost people in this conflict. My Aunt and Uncle on Ratatouille were butchered by your people, and perhaps when this is all over, I'll try to find the Troopers responsible."

He shrugged.

"But for now, I think saving the galaxy is more important."

"Agreed," said Strong, his face impassive. His dark eyes gave nothing away, but his mind had flashed up a memory of his visit to the lad's moisture farm. Rowan and Beryl, he recalled. They had been questioned about the missing 'bots, and about the whereabouts of their nephew. They had fought back and, regrettably, the whole confrontation had spiralled out of control. **Until this moment, Strong had not made the connection between the fugitive lad on Ratatouille, and this young Jubbly wannabe.**

He blinked. "Let's go, then," he said as he pulled his helmet back on.

Progress through the tangled undergrowth was slow. Eventually they came to a fallen tree that spanned a murky body of water, too narrow to be called a river.

“Over there,” said Lurk.

“Is that blood?” asked Libby.

A large, dark stain in the middle of the log gleamed wetly in the afternoon sunlight. Only here was the sky visible, a deep blue, with the occasional fluffy white cloud drifting overhead.

Strong glanced around, and peered into the mass of trees which lined the far bank.

“I don’t like this,” he said. “It’s too exposed.”

“Yeah,” added Mikki. “What if the creature that attacked those other people is still around?”

“Then it would be best not to hang around,” said Lurk. “But we *do* have to go that way.” He stepped up onto the log and moved out into the middle, pausing just before the wet patch. “Come on, this thing’s plenty big enough.”

He took another step, and suddenly he was falling. Had he slipped? He didn’t remember. It almost felt as though the log had turned to mist beneath his feet. He drew a hurried breath into his lungs, and then he hit the water and began to thrash his limbs wildly. Growing up on a desert world, he had never needed to learn to swim.

A hand gripped the back of his jacket and pulled, and he stopped thrashing, hoping his rescuer had a better idea of what they were doing. He felt air on his face and he drew another breath, then pushed the wet hair from his eyes and looked around.

They were no longer in the jungle.

Lurk turned, and looked into the sodden, furry face of Shaggus. The Woonky snuffled, then shook his head wildly, sending a spray of water in all directions.

“Thanks, buddy,” said Lurk.

Wrruuffwrlll, whuffled Shaggus as he guided Lurk to the nearest handhold..

One by one, the heads and helmets of their companions broke the surface, swimming up from the depths of the pool. Vapour was the last to join them.

“Where the hells are we?” asked Mal.

Lurk looked around. They were in a dim, vertical chamber. Around them, strange growths clung to the walls and snaked across the small floor. Several large pods, vaguely egg-like, were spaced across the deck. A couple of them appeared to have opened, like flowers reacting to the sun.

There was no sun here.

“Ladder,” said Libby. “Over there.”

Lurk glanced up at the ladder, which seemed to climb up about three levels to a door at the top. Then he looked at the Troopers. They were struggling to stay afloat, their armour doing its best to drag them back under.

Gripping the deck with one hand, Lurk extended the other to the nearest Trooper. “We’ve got to get these guys out of the water,” he said.

The Trooper – he thought it might be Basski, but it was very hard to tell them apart just from their helmets – took his hand, and with a grunt of effort he pulled him towards the edge.

“What the hell are these things?” muttered Fib. The big Trooper was standing over one of the pods, peering at it. “Looks almost like there’s something inside.”

“Of course there’s something inside,” said Izzy. “It’s a fucking egg.”

“Maybe you should leave it alone,” said Mikki. “You don’t know where it’s been.”

“When did that ever stop Fib?” said Izzy.

Fib looked around. “What’s the matter, guys? Scared of an egg?” He glanced up the ladder. The Sarge and Basski were at the top, working on getting the door open. The Rebels and Vapour were spaced out along its length. Just the three of them remained at the bottom, guarding their flanks from—whatever danger might be lurking down here. He turned his attention back to the egg.

“Hey, something’s definitely moving inside this thing.”

He leaned closer. With a moist, sucking sound, the top petals of the pod peeled back, exposing the interior. Despite himself, Fib took a step back.

Mikki snorted. “Now who’s scared of an egg, big guy?”

“Fuck you, Mikki.” Fib step closer again, and peered inside. There’s something in here, but it’s the ugliest looking chick I ever saw.”

“It’s not just birds that lay eggs,” said Izzy.

“Yeah,” said Fib. “Well, this is...”

In a flurry of movement, something that was all legs and tentacles launched itself from the egg, straight at Fib’s helmeted head. With a startled squawk he jerked himself upright, but the creature had latched onto his helmet. Fib staggered backwards a couple of steps, and before either Izzy or Mikki could reach him, he tumbled into the pool.

“Aww fuck, man,” yelled Mikki as he jumped in after his friend. Fib was sinking rapidly, and Mikki barely managed to lock his fingers around Fib’s ankle. He kicked his legs furiously, but could barely manage to keep the two of them from sinking further. He looked up; the surface shimmered like a dirty, rippling mirror above him, but was growing no closer.

Something large loomed, and the mirrored surface exploded as someone else splashed into the pool with them. It was the Woonky; it must have jumped from its spot on the ladder, twenty feet up.

Large hands grabbed his arm, and Fib's leg, and pushed them both towards the surface. Then Izzy was clutching at Fib's shoulders, and dragging him onto the deck, and the Woonky practically heaved Mikki up out of the water. Even as he turned towards Fib, Mikki heard that awful sound again, the moist, sucking sound of one of those eggs opening, and he spun around and began blasting at every one of them that he could see. They burst wetly—and the deck around them began to smoke.

"Fuck," he shouted, turning back to Izzy. "Get his helmet off him."

He got a good look, then, at the creature which clung to his friend's facemask. Like a cross between a hand and a spider, its legs gripped Fib's helmet tightly. A long, prehensile tail, or tentacle, encircled Fib's neck. Izzy was struggling to detach Fib's helmet, but the thing's legs were getting in the way.

Suddenly the Woonky was there, its large furry fist gripping the creature's back. Shaggus pulled it away from the fallen Trooper as Izzy pried at its finger-legs; one by one they gave up their grip, and then Shaggus uncoiled the thing from around Fib's neck.

"Over there," shouted Mikki. He raised his blaster, and as Shaggus tossed the squirming, flailing thing into the corner, he blasted it into steaming fragments. The pus-coloured fluid that exploded from the shattered body smoked where it hit the deck, and began to eat its way through the metal.

More blaster fire rained down from above, and the last couple of eggs exploded.

“Gods-damnit, Fib,” came Sergeant Strong’s shout from above, “can’t I turn my back for two minutes without you getting into trouble?”

Fib raised his hand in a weak wave of surrender, and allowed Izzy and Mikki to pull him to his feet. “Thanks, guys,” he muttered. He turned to the Woonky, water streaming from its soaked tunic. “And thank you, too, big guy,” he said. “I owe you one!”

The Woonky snarled a reply which seemed to flash a few too many large teeth to be entirely friendly.

Fib indicated the ladder. “After you,” he said. “How about we get the fuck out of here before that little bastard’s mother shows up?”

“Which way?” said Libby.

Lurk pointed. They were getting close now, and the wrongness in the Source was the buzzing of angry bees inside his skull. He swallowed carefully, fighting the urge to throw up.

“Are you okay?” she asked him.

He nodded carefully. “We’re almost there,” he said. “I think that ladder has brought us up too high, we need to go down a level or two.”

“Move out,” said Sergeant Strong. He gestured in the direction Lurk had indicated. “Fib, you take the lead. I want you where I can see you.”

“Yes sarge,” said Fib.

He’d barely taken a couple of steps when everything changed, and this time Lurk saw it happen. [Nausea?!] Like an expanding bubble, a shockwave of green Source code rushed past them, erasing one reality and replacing it with another. Lurk blinked, and within that blink, between worlds, he saw the familiar, Droid-modified hallways of the Death Tube.

Then they were on a rooftop, and a large clattering vehicle—some sort of troop transport, perhaps, with a single large propeller spinning above its cabin to give it lift—roared overhead and dipped below the edge of the roof, out of sight.

Without exception, the Imperial Shock Troopers had responded to the machine's sudden presence by swinging their weapons to track it.

Lurk moved to the edge of the building and peered out over the city. The flying vehicle was already some distance away, receding into a barely visible speck before being swallowed by the haze. Fog or smoke blanketed the ground, and large, blocky buildings rose from the haze. Several of them burned out of control, smoke billowing from shattered windows, orange flame licking at the sky.

There were no more flying vehicles in sight, and while the ground level was almost totally obscured, there was no sign of movement.

"What happened here?" he muttered.

"This place is dead," said Strong beside him, and Lurk twitched in surprise. He had not heard the Trooper approach. "Whatever happened, we missed it."

"I hope you're right, Sergeant," he said softly.

Strong turned to look at him. Lurk stared for a moment at the glossy black eyepiece of the Trooper's mask, then he shrugged.

"Let's get off this roof," he suggested.

"Agreed," said Strong. "There's a doorway back there"—he gestured over his own shoulder with an extended thumb—"that leads to a stairwell."

Lurk nodded. "That'll do."

Strong turned away to rejoin the rest of Team Badger.

“Take point, Fib,” he said, gesturing toward the stairs. “But stay frosty, and watch those corners.”

Fib nodded. “You got it, Sarge,” he said.

Shifting his grip on his blaster, the big Trooper entered the stairwell and descended to the first landing, at which point the stairs changed direction.

“Short flight,” he called out. “There’s another door here, leads back into the building.” He clattered quickly down the dozen steps, and put his gauntleted hand on the metal knob that protruded from side of the door. He pulled cautiously on it, but nothing happened.

“It’s stuck,” he reported.

Behind him, Mikki and Basski held their position on the landing. “Pull harder,” said Mikki.

From her position at the top of the stairs, Izzy snorted. “Surely not the first time you’ve heard those words,” she said.

“Yeah?” retorted Fib. “Well, I’ve got a couple of words for you...” His voice trailed off, and he gestured for silence as he leaned closer to the door.

After a few seconds, Mikki moved silently down the stairs to stand beside his friend. “What is it?” he hissed.

“Sounds like some animal on the other side of the door,” said Fib softly. “Sort of snuffling, scratching.”

“Dangerous?” asked Mikki.

“Doesn’t *sound* dangerous,” said Fib. “But it doesn’t sound quite right, either.”

“Hard or soft?” said Mikki, with a nod at the door.

“Soft,” said Fib. “At least till we know what’s out there.”

“In that case,” said Mikki, “I think that handle turns.”

Fib glanced at it. “I knew that,” he muttered, tightening his fingers on the doorknob. He turned it slowly, and pulled the door open.

“What the fuck?” breathed Mikki.

A long hallway stretched away from them, dirty glass windows on one side, doors on the other—some open, some closed. In the hallway were several people, some standing, some sprawled across the floor. Most of those on their feet were shuffling aimlessly, occasionally bumping into the walls, or each other, as though blind.

Blood was everywhere. Smears on the walls, and on the people, some long dried and the colour of rust, some gleaming freshly crimson, it transformed the scene from mere confusion to outright horror.

The stench hit them next, slipping easily past the filtration units of their helmets. It was an awful blend of stale vomit, old blood, shit and piss and bile, and underlying all was the sweet tang of decay and the rusty thread of fear.

Several feet away, standing with her head pressed against the glass of a window, the figure of a young woman suddenly twitched, staggered back a couple of paces, and turned toward them. She had been pretty once, but now her blonde hair was tangled and matted with filth, her chin was caked with a streak of dried blood which had run down her neck and soaked into her flimsy top. Her eyes were blank and dead, and one of them was almost completely red, as though every blood vessel inside the eyeball had exploded.

She tilted her head in jerky motions, but whether she was sniffing the air or trying to aim her one good eye at them, they could not tell. Suddenly, with a soft sucking sound, a torn patch of skin on the side of her face gave way and fell open; it flapped obscenely as she shifted her head, and the pale line of her exposed cheekbone gleamed clearly in the afternoon light, but she did not seem to notice.

“Fuck,” said Fib. “Those Droid were close, but I think we’ve found the real thing.”

“What real thing?” said Basski from behind them.

Fib switched to the Team Badger comm channel.

“Hey sarge,” he said, “I think we just found your zombies!”

The young woman opened her mouth impossibly wide—further tearing the skin of her cheek as she did so—and emitted a gurgling, hissing shriek, then launched herself wildly toward the two Troopers in the doorway.

Both men fired their blasters, and she staggered back under the impact of the twin bolts of energy. She crumpled to the floor, curls of smoke rising lazily into the still air. But now the other people—the other zombies—were turning to face them.

“Fuck,” said Fib again.

Then neither of them had time to speak as the crowd began to lurch and stumble towards them. Some were slow, hampered by leg wounds or advanced decay; others were in better shape—more recently dead—and thus quicker. All fell before the barrage of shots fired by Fib and Mikki as they defended the doorway. More joined the horde, streaming from several of the open doors to swell the numbers of the attackers.

Now the bodies were beginning to pile up, slowing the headlong rush as those still standing struggled to clamber over the fallen, and tendrils of smoke rose from the mound, carrying the added smell of scorched flesh into the air. Suddenly two of the lead zombies jerked sideways, smashing out through one of the windows.

“What the ...?” muttered Fib.

“It’s only me, boys,” said a low voice behind him. Lurk. The Jubbly had joined the fray. Another couple of attackers were tossed unceremoniously out of the window

by the power of the Source, and Fib found himself feeling suddenly glad that, back on the Tibrogargan gas mining platform, the Admiral had ordered them to allow the Jubbly to leave unhindered.

And then the fight was over. Mikki shot the last of the creatures still moving, and silence fell.

The corridor was a charnel house—or, at the very least, a charnel hallway. Blood and body parts were everywhere.

“What a mess,” said Mikki as he cautiously lowered his weapon. He took a couple of steps forward, clearing the doorway so that Lurk and Basski could squeeze through into the corridor. He nudged one outstretched, lifeless arm gingerly with his boot. “So how do we get over this lot?”

Lurk frowned.

“Maybe they go out the window too,” he said slowly.

Fib turned to look at him. “You can do that?” he asked.

Lurk shrugged. “I guess we’ll find out.”

Spreading his feet slightly, Lurk raised his hand out in front of himself, fingers spread. He closed his eyes, and began to wrap tendrils of Source power around the tangled mass of limbs and rotting torsos. The pile began to heave and roil as individual parts rose to the top, only to sink again as other parts bubbled up from beneath them.

“I think that’s the most disgusting thing I’ve ever seen,” muttered Basski.

Lurk deepened his concentration, but it was like trying to pick up water with a fork.

Someone coughed.

Suddenly another mind joined his, and Lurk sensed the voice of Barth Vapour in his mind: *need a hand?* The

two Source powers blended together, each boosting the other, and the heap of corpses began to rise slowly off the floor. It drifted sideways, seeking the window, leaving a gleaming smear of blood on the floor, and a patchy red trail along the wall.

Someone coughed again, a deep, hacking cough that turned into a snarl, and Lurk heard Fib say “you’ve got to be fucking kidding!”

He opened his eyes.

He had a brief impression of a tall figure at the far end of the corridor, beyond the floating pile of bodies. Inhumanly tall, unhealthily thin, its head and limbs cocked at odd angles, it seemed to be wreathed in a cloud of dark, greenish smoke. It coughed again, made a noise somewhere between a hack and a wail, and when it opened its mouth, Lurk almost expected it to spit out a lung.

Instead, it vomited an impossibly long tentacle-like tongue down the length of the corridor towards them. The obscenely fleshy appendage wrapped itself neatly around the waist of Basski, and the startled Shock Trooper was dragged off his feet and hauled—straight through the corpse pile, scattering limbs everywhere—away from the rest of them.

Fib and Mikki were raising their blasters, but Lurk was quicker. Reacting on instinct with the only weapon he had ready, he *pushed* with his mind and the whole gory pile of parts blasted down the corridor towards the monstrosity.

Both the creature and the Trooper vanished, buried beneath the remains of perhaps thirty people.

Mikki took off down the corridor. “Where’s Basski?” he screamed. “Where’s Basski?”

Fib was close behind him, and together they began hauling corpses from the newly relocated mess.

“Here,” shouted Fib. Between the two of them, they helped Basski sit up. His armour was streaked and smeared with assorted bodily fluids.

With the corridor—and the doorway—finally clear, Izzy and Strong stepped through. Behind the Troopers, Mal and Libby stood shoulder to shoulder, and behind them, Shaggus watched protectively over them.

“This mission,” said Izzy softly, “is turning into the hugest clusterfuck of all time.”

Sammy Strong said nothing, but he allowed himself the barest of nods. He was studying Lurk. The young Jubbly was leaning forward, hands on his knees, and his chest was heaving as though he were about to throw up.

“You okay, Splitwhisker?” he asked at last.

Vapour turned to stare at him, but said nothing.

Lurk nodded. “Just...” he managed, before having to stop to draw a deep breath. “Just tired,” he said again. “That last, uh, that last throw really took it out of me.” A sudden shiver ran through him, and he just had time to say “brace yourselves” before, once again, everything changed.

They were back on the Droid station. The gore, the stench, the body parts; all vestiges of the fight against the zombie hordes, were gone—and yet, bizarrely, Basski’s armour was still smeared with crimson.

“Is everybody okay?” said Lurk. But before anybody had the chance to respond, he felt a prickling on his neck and he turned to look.

A shimmering bubble of nothingness floated in the air, pulsing gently.

“Is that...” Libby began.

Lurk nodded. "This is what we've come for," he said. He took a step closer to it, and another, and suddenly it felt as though the air itself was solidifying. He pushed against it, and it pushed back, repelling him from the anomaly.

He heard a beep behind him. "Whatever you're gonna do," said Izzy urgently, "do it fast. We've got movement incoming."

Lurk glanced quickly over his shoulder. Libby and Mal had their weapons out, as did Shaggus. The Shock Troopers were taking up defensive positions. Even Vapour seemed to be bracing himself.

Lurk circled the anomaly, as closely as he could, but could find no way through the protective shield. He heard weapons fire, and glanced again at his friends. A pink wave of *something* seemed to boil through the doorway towards them, and even as he watched, one of the Troopers was engulfed by the pink mass. The rest poured blaster fire into the oncoming pinkness, but barely seemed to slow its advance.

Fuck!

Lurk closed his eyes and reached out to the anomaly with his mind. He probed its contours, seeking any weakness. Seeking a way in.

He heard a scream, but ignored it.

There had to be ... *there!* A conduit of tangled spacetime led into the centre of the anomaly, and at its end, *nothing*. Total void.

Found you, he thought. Something furry gripped his leg, but he ignored that too. Pouring every ounce of concentration into it, summoning every reserve, Lurk *pushed* with his mind.

Everything went black.

Chapter 22

Awake?

Lurk woke up.

He tried to open his eyes, but could not. It felt as though his lashes were gummed together, as though his eyelids were smeared with thick, slimy goop. It was like being back in one of the healant tanks—except that then, floating in the pink goop which mended his battered body, he had felt good despite his injuries. He had felt strong. Now, he had no strength. He moved his arms, weakly, to bring his hands up to his face. There was resistance to the motion; he was definitely suspended in *something* thick and slimy.

He rubbed his fingers lightly across his eyelids, trying to clear away the gunk which held them closed. His fingers traced down his face, feeling his nose, his mouth. His mouth. There was no respirator there. He was in some thick, slimy goop, and there was no respirator to prevent him from inhaling it, from drowning. Suddenly he couldn't remember breathing since he woke.

In a panic, he thrashed out, trying to find the extents of the container in which he floated, trying to find a way out. His lungs burned as he held his breath. His fingers encountered resistance, and he clawed frantically at what felt to be some sort of membrane. It stretched away from his fingers, refusing to give him a firm grip. He kicked

out with his legs, desperate to get some purchase, some solidity with which to apply leverage.

He found it.

His foot snagged something, some cable, and he braced himself against it, ignoring the sudden pain which ripped at his spine. He pushed, stretching out his arms in front of him, and the membrane tore as his fingers drove through it. He clawed his way out, feeling cold air on his face as he broke the surface of the slime. He tried to breathe, but his lungs refused to cooperate. They felt full, heavy, and suddenly he was leaning forward, coughing and retching and gagging as his body ejected more of the slime from his lungs. His arms clutched weakly at the solid edge they encountered. For a moment, as he heaved, he thought his head was going to explode, that he was going to pass out. Then he drew a ragged breath, filling his lungs with air that was cold but stale, and the crisis was past.

Panting weakly, he opened his eyes at last.

Dribbles of pink slime ran down the smooth metal curve in front of him, and dripped away into the void. He leaned out a little further to get a better look. Below him, row after row of metallic cocoons, each filled with a pink-filled membranous sack, stretched away unto the gloom. Each membrane, he realised, held the dark silhouette of a human body. The cocoons curved away, out of his field of view, as though mounted on a huge cylinder.

He looked up. Similar cylinders, each studded with thousands, if not millions, of pink-filled cocoons, stood all around him, their bases and their tops lost in the darkness.

So this was it? This was the fate of the human race? Stored in endless banks of pods by the machines, plugged into the array to keep them asleep and docile?

“How can I fight this?” Lurk tried to say, but his voice got lost somewhere in his throat and refused to emerge.

He coughed, and spat another mouthful of pink goop over the side.

A sudden movement caught his eye. Speeding up out of the gloom, a metallic tentacle approached him. Lurk tried to draw back, but it was too late. The tentacle stopped opposite him, and glistening camera lenses studied him for a few seconds. A dozen articulated claws twitched beneath the head of what could best be described as an insectile mechanical horror, part of the end of the tentacle. With a speed that left him gasping, it lunged forward and gripped his head in a robotic grasp. He felt a popping sensation all along his spine, and a strange emptiness in the back of his neck, and then he was released.

He fell back with a splash into the warm pink soup. He tried to recover his balance, to claw his way back to the surface, but the floor irised open beneath his feet and he slid down into a steep, dark pipe, unceremoniously flushed away.

It seemed an eternity that he rattled around within the pipe. Finally he reached its end, and was thrown out into space. For a horrible second he thought he would fall forever, plummeting into this bottomless pit of endless darkness until he died of starvation; then he splashed heavily into a stinking swamp worse than anything he had ever found on Daggyboil. The impact knocked the breath from his body and once again, as he sank beneath the surface, he feared that he would drown. He twitched

and thrashed weakly, but without conviction. *Easier to let go*, whispered his own voice in his head. *Easier to just die. Can't fight something like this.*

Suddenly a blaze of light pierced the water, and something gripped his weak body. Once more he felt the cold air on his skin, and smelled the awful stench from the slimy morass from which he was now being lifted. The light faded as consciousness fled.

For a while, Lurk drifted in and out of consciousness. Nightmarish images plagued him, but whether they were real or memory or dream he could not say.

Libby screamed as she fell beneath the tide of pink fur which washed over her.

A million long slender needles shimmered in the air above his body, dancing as the current fed through them into his muscles made him twitch.

Mal tumbled to the deck, hit by several bolts of blaster fire.

A strange face loomed over him, looking down at him.

Bent's empty cloak fluttered to the deck, sliced in half by Barth Vapour's light rapier.

A low voice hissed meaninglessly against his ears.

Light became dark became light.

Pain came and went.

Finally, sleep came.

Lurk woke up.

He opened his eyes, then closed them again against the brilliant light which flooded in. Pain flared.

"Take a few minutes to adjust," said a voice he almost recognised.

“My eyes hurt,” he said, his voice little more than a hoarse whisper.

“That’s because you’ve never used them before,” said the voice. It was a female voice. Soft, smooth, sexy.

“I saw a billion pink eggs,” he said, “and a billion captive people.”

“Well okay,” said the voice. Every word he heard brought him one step closer to identifying the speaker. “You *have* used your eyes before. But it was dark in the Orchard, almost no light at all.”

“Libby?” he asked tentatively, but he knew he was wrong even as he spoke.

“No,” said the voice softly, compassionately. “That part of your life is gone. Libby is gone. I am Binary.”

Binary? thought Lurk. *How is that possible? Binary was...*

(fill the gaps here)

“Binary?” he said aloud. “Can it be you?”

“It’s me,” she told him. He felt a soft hand against his forehead.

“But if you are here, if I am here, awake, surely Libby must be...”

“Her body is no doubt kept in the Orchard somewhere,” said the voice of Binary, “but we would not be able to track its location. Only your ability to manipulate the Source of the Array remotely acted as a beacon, an anomaly we could hack, and trace. Those few—those that you would call the Jubbly—with that gift are possible to locate. Everybody else—well, it’s like looking for a particular piece of hay in a very large haystack.”

Lurk tried parting his eyelids just far enough to squint through. He saw a brilliant blur of light.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“You’re on the *Naked Buzzer*,” she said.

“The *Naked Buzzer*?”

“Yeah,” she said. “This is Morphine’s ship. Do you think you can stand? I know the Captain will be eager to meet you at last.”

“At last?” said Lurk. “What do you mean? You sound as though you’ve been expecting me.”

“We have, more or less,” said Binary. “But it would be best if I let Captain Morphine explain everything.”

“Okay,” said Lurk. He gripped the edge of the bunk on which he lay, and attempted to sit up. He felt hands on his arm, and with their assistance he pulled himself upright and swung his legs off the side of the bed.

“I’m so weak,” he said. “Have I been ill?”

“You’ve been asleep your entire life,” she said. “Your muscles have barely been used in all that time. We applied some electrical stimulus to build them up a little, but it will take plenty of practice and exercise before you are back to full strength.”

“Asleep?” he mused. “Of course I have.”

“Do you think you can stand?” she asked him.

“If I can lean on you,” he said, “I might be able to.”

“Of course you can lean on me,” she said.

Lurk felt her arm slip around his waist, and he slid himself slowly forward off the bunk until his feet touched the ground. Carefully he took a shuffling step, and then another.

“How are your eyes,” she asked him.

He considered the question. “Well, instead of a big bright blur, I see a big dark blur. I guess they’re adjusting.”

“Good,” she said. “You should be able to open them more in a little while. Now, lean on me and I’ll take you out to meet the Captain.”

She guided him across the floor, and they stopped as she keyed the door open. He felt a light gust of cool air against his skin.

“There’s a small ledge here to step over,” she said, and he lifted his foot a little higher to clear it.

They crossed some sort of grating, went up a short flight of steps, and then another voice spoke warmly.

“Welcome, Nova. We’ve been expecting you for so long. Welcome to the *Naked Buzzer*.”

Lurk frowned, confused. He had so many questions but had no idea where to start. He squinted—this room was too bright—and lifted his hand to shade his eyes.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said the voice. “Tink, dim the lights, would you?”

“Sure, Captain,” came a woman’s voice in reply, and after a moment the room darkened.

“Here,” said Binary close to his ear, “take a seat. You need to rest.” Grateful to her for noticing the trembling of his legs, Lurk nodded and allowed her to lower him into a softly padded seat.

“Why did he ... uh, Captain, uh, Morphine? Why did you call me ‘Nova’? That’s not my name.”

“No,” said Morphine. “Of course it isn’t. I’m sorry, what *is* your name?”

“Lurk,” said Lurk. “Lurk Splitwhisker.”

“Oh,” said Morphine. “Um, okay. Lurk.” He fell silent.

“Is there a problem?” asked Lurk.

“No, it’s just, uh... It’s nothing. As I said, we have been expecting you for a long time now. We did not know anything about you other than that you were coming, so we started using the name ‘Nova’ when discussing you.”

“You knew I was coming?” asked Lurk.

“It was foretold,” said Morphine. “The Oracle told me that one would awaken from the Array without our help, and that that one would give us new hope. Hence ‘Nova’, which means ‘new’.”

Lurk shook his head. “Are you sure you’ve got the right guy?” he asked. He heard the bitter note creeping into his voice, but he didn’t care. “I’m not sure how I can possibly give you hope when I’ve pretty much lost any hope I once had.”

“How so?” asked Morphine.

“Does it matter?” asked Lurk.

“It matters a great deal,” said Morphine. He began to say more, but Binary interrupted him.

“I’m sorry, Captain,” she said, “but Nova ... sorry. Lurk. He needs rest.”

“Of course,” said Morphine. “I apologise, Lurk, I know I’ve laid a lot on you very suddenly. Please, get some rest and we’ll talk later.”

Lurk nodded. Clinging to Binary’s arm, he pulled himself to his feet and squinted in the Captain’s direction. “I’m sorry too,” he said, “and I hope you find who you’re looking for.”

Rather than return him to the medical bay, Binary led Lurk to a small cabin. It held a narrow bunk bed, a small closet, and little else. Lurk sat on the edge of the bed, and Binary sat beside him.

Pensively, he stared at his right hand. After a moment, he frowned and ran his thumb back and forth across the tips of his fingers.

“What?” asked Binary.

“This is my hand,” he said. He clenched it into a fist. “My *real* hand, I mean.” He glanced at her. “I lost it in a duel with ... with my father. Sliced off neatly at the wrist,

and now it's back." He shook his head. "I don't know. I mean, I *knew* that we were inside a virtual reality, but somehow that fact never really clicked with me until now. It felt so real. But it wasn't, was it?"

Binary shook her head, but said nothing. It was not unusual for people released from the Array to feel disoriented for a while.

"And now I'm awake." He snorted. "Awake, and right back to being the chosen one."

Binary shrugged.

Lurk raised his right hand to the back of his neck and traced a finger around the cold steel ring that was embedded there. It was the I/O port that the machines had installed in his body to plug him in to the Array.

He dropped his hand to his lap.

"Do you buy into all this prophecy stuff too?" he asked. He blinked his eyes in the dim lighting of the cabin and peered at the woman beside him.

She smiled softly. "There was a time," she said, when I thought that the Captain was ... mistaken. That his belief in the prophecy was naive, and that the Oracle was just some crazy old woman."

"But now you feel differently?" asked Lurk.

She nodded. "Yes."

"So what changed?"

"I met the Oracle," said Binary.

"And...?"

"And ... and she's a crazy old woman," said Binary. Lurk snorted in amusement. "But," Binary continued, "she also told me some things—personal things—that, uh, came true."

"Hmm," said Lurk.

"You don't believe me," said Binary, "and that's okay. You'll see when you meet her yourself."

“Hmm.”

“So, Lurk,” said Binary, “do you want to tell me your story? Tell me why you’ve lost hope?”

Lurk blinked a few times. “You know,” he said, “I think my eyesight is improving.”

“I’m glad,” she said, “but I also notice you changed the subject.”

Lurk sighed.

“Hope?” he said. “Where I come from, we are at war, and the enemy are led—were led—by an agent of the Array computer. Then something even worse entered our galaxy. Our simulation. Something crossed over from another simulation, and in the process caused some corruption in the very fabric of our reality.”

“Go on,” she said softly after several seconds of silence.

“Isn’t it obvious,” he said. “I sacrificed friends...”

That final scream rang again in his ears. *Libby?*

“I sacrificed friends to get to the only possible exit. To get out here. To *fix* everything.” He laughed bitterly. “I had some naive idea about waking up, strolling across the room, turning the computer off, and waking up my friends. That was before I saw the truth of the situation. All those people, each in their own pod. There must be—what? Millions of them?”

“Billions,” said Binary.

“And the computer? Where is it? What chance do I possibly stand of getting to it, of fixing *anything*?”

Binary took his hand in hers, and squeezed gently. “I remember having similar ideas when Morphine first found me,” she said. “I know this reality can be a little overwhelming, but...” She sighed.

“But what?”

“We *are* fighting the machines,” she said. “There *is* hope yet, for humanity. For all of us; those born in the Array, and the freeborn.”

“Freeborn?” asked Lurk. “You mean there are...”

“People who have never been inside the Array,” she told him. “You’ve already met Tink; both she and her sister Dazzle are freeborn, from Scion.”

“Scion?”

“Sorry,” said Binary. “Sometimes I forget how much there is to learn. Scion is the city of free humans, our final stronghold against the machines and our last, best hope for peace.”

“Do they print that on all the brochures?” asked Lurk bitterly.

Binary chuckled. “More or less,” she said. “But it...”

A klaxon shrieked, and Binary leaped to her feet. Even as she did so, the deck lurched sharply and she tumbled back onto the bunk.

“Crap,” she said as she pushed herself to her feet again. “Come on; we’ve got to get to the bridge.”

“Why?” said Lurk. “What’s happening?”

“We’re under attack,” she said. “The machines have found us.”

Lurk entered the bridge several paces behind Binary. His eyes were working now, although his vision was still a little blurred. His first impression was of a large, low-ceilinged room, littered with consoles, filled with frantic activity.

The ship lurched again. Lurk had spent enough time flying with Mal to recognise evasive manoeuvres when he felt them.

“What are we running from?” he asked.

“Bunch of damn octos,” said Binary. She pointed to one of the bridge’s screens. It showed what seemed to be the view from an aft-mounted camera; the pipe-lined, debris-encrusted walls of a round tunnel receded rapidly, and across the bottom of the screen was a stretch of hull plating. In the centre of the image, swaying rhythmically from side to side were several spherical objects studded with glowing red dots.

They seemed to be gaining.

Suddenly the ship shuddered, and a loud *clang* echoed through the bridge; a chunk of concrete bounced past the camera towards the pursuing objects, and one of them abruptly changed course to avoid being struck. As it did so, Lurk saw the metallic tentacles which trailed behind the spherical body, and he realised the rhythmic motion was its method of propulsion; they were undulating, swimming through the air.

“Where are you, Dazzle?” shouted Morphine. “Where the hell are...”

The screen lit up with a barrage of fire from some sort of hull-mounted weapon, and one of the octos exploded into a ball of flame and debris.

“Here, Captain,” said a female voice. The blazing stream of destruction swung towards a second octo, and it too exploded. The others instantly broke formation but kept up their pursuit. “Sorry for the delay,” Dazzle continued, “but that crazy pilot of yours can’t fly straight and kept bouncing me off my feet.”

“Screw you, Daz,” said the pilot—Lurk recognised Tink’s voice. “You probably stopped for coffee.”

“Yeah,” said Daz. She squeezed off another burst at a third octo, but her intended target flared its tentacles out like air-brakes and changed direction abruptly. The stream tore off two of its tentacles, but it did not seem to

notice. "And if you'd filled the pot after emptying it, I wouldn't have had to wait for a new one to brew."

"Captain," said a new voice, "more octos dead ahead."

"Give me alternatives, Siphon," said Morphine.

"Left branch, fifty metres," said Siphon.

"Got it," said Tink. "Brace for..."

Everybody was thrown to the right as the ship skewed hard left; almost instantly there was a tremendous clang and an awful scrape as the right side of the hull hit the tunnel wall.

"Sorry," said Tink.

"Just keep us flying," said Morphine.

"They're falling back," said Daz. She fired off another burst, but the remaining octos avoided it easily. "Something's not right."

"What's in front of us?" demanded Morphine.

"It looks clear," said Siphon. "A free run all the way to ... wait."

"What?"

"I'm getting an energy spike, dead ahead," said Siphon. "Almost like."

"A fucking EMP," snarled Morphine. "It's a trap. Full stop, emergency power down. Now, damn it, now!"

"We're moving too fast," said Tink. The ship began to decelerate. "No way I can power down until..."

The ship shuddered beneath them, and everything went black.

For a moment, Lurk felt as though he was floating, and then the deck swatted him into unconsciousness.

Voices woke him, and he opened his eyes. It was still dark, but somebody was flashing a torch-beam around. Lurk tried to sit up, but the pain that lanced through his

leg told him that he probably wasn't going to be walking anywhere for a while. He groaned.

"Nova?" It was Binary. "Nova ... sorry, Lurk. Where are you?"

"Over here."

The light flashed in his direction.

"We need to get out of here," said Binary. "The octos will be inbound by now."

"What happened?" said Lurk.

"EMP," said Binary. In the dim light, she saw the expression on his face. "Electro-magnetic pulse," she added. "Fries all active electrical circuits. We've got one ourselves, in case of emergency. First time I've ever seen the damn machines use one, though. Look, I'll explain it better later, but now we've got to go."

"I think my leg is broken," Lurk told her.

She shone the beam of light down to his legs. His right leg was twisted beneath him at an odd angle.

"Damn," she said. Then she shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I'll drag you out of here if necessary, but you have to move. If you're still here when the octos arrive a broken leg will be the least of your worries."

"In that case," said Lurk, "you'd better help me up." He held out his hand to her.

Each lurching step sent a jolt of agony up the useless leg that dragged behind him, but with Binary supporting him they were making progress. They were almost at the open exit hatchway when several loud clangs echoed through the ship. Almost instantly a chattering whine filled the air.

"Octos," muttered Binary. "Drilling through the hull."

“How long will that take?” asked Lurk through clenched teeth.

“Couple of minutes at most,” she said. “Then they’ll follow us. Got to *move!*”

“Can’t we blow the ship?” asked Lurk. “Hit them with our own EMP? Something?”

“No,” said Binary. “Step here.” She grunted under his full weight as he threw his good leg over the sill of the final hatchway. He groaned as his bad leg bounced over it. “All fried,” she continued. “Can’t do a damn thing to stop them.”

“Leave me, then,” he said. “I’m only slowing you down.” They lurched down the ramp together. Morphine was waiting for them at the bottom, and in the dim half-light which filled the tunnel, Lurk saw a couple of the remaining crewmembers disappearing into the piles of rubble ahead.

“Not gonna happen,” said Binary.

Morphine took Lurk’s other arm, and between the two of them they began dragging him at a faster pace. He almost passed out again as his leg bounced along the rough ground. Then he heard Morphine curse, and the man’s grip on his arm was gone. With the support gone, Lurk sagged, turning as he fell, dragging Binary down on top of him.

Morphine was digging a rusted length of pipe from the debris, hefting it defensively. Beyond the captain, his ship lay crumpled on the floor of the tunnel, its hull buckled and torn from the impact. In the open hatchway, red lenses glowed as an octo emerged into the tunnel. The tentacle, mechanical horror turned this way and that, searching, and then it locked on to their position and launched itself into the air towards them.

Morphine bravely swung the length of pipe, but the octo flowed around it and batted him aside. Then it was upon Lurk and Binary. It raised four tentacles, their tips gleaming with cutting implements, and Binary cried out in fear.

Lurk closed his eyes against the killing strike and, in his panic, lashed out blindly with his mind.

He waited to die.

And waited.

After a few seconds, he opened his eyes.

“What happened?” said Binary.

The two of them stared at the octo; sparking and twitching, the machine lay on the ground twenty feet away.

“Fuck,” said Lurk.

A second octo appeared in the hatchway and arrowed toward them. Lurk raised his hand, fingers spread, then clenched them into a fist, and the octo crumpled in mid-air, then fell to the ground as though it had hit a wall.

“Fuck,” said Lurk again.

“How did you...?” Binary began. “That was ... I’ve never ... that means that Morphine is right about you. You can bring us...”

She stopped. Lurk was shaking his head.

“No,” he said. He closed his eyes, and reached out with his mind. It felt different, but now that he knew to search for it, the Source was there, running through everything. Instead of the green that he was familiar with, this code felt orange but, differences aside, it was unmistakable.

“No,” he said again. “It means we’re still inside the Array.”

Chapter 23

(High) Resolution

“It’s not possible,” said Binary.

“Sure it is,” said Lurk. He turned his attention to his leg. Examining his own Source code made him feel a little queasy, but he pushed the sensation aside.

Distantly he heard a groan, and was aware of Binary moving away from him to see to Morphine.

He isolated the code for his shattered tibia, and studied it for a moment to determine how it was supposed to fit together. *There*. He *tweaked*, and felt a brief spasm of intense—not pain, exactly. He had never felt anything like it before, and it was gone before he could examine it. The pain was gone too, the dull throbbing from his swollen shin nothing more than a fading memory.

He stood up, and moved to join Binary. She was kneeling beside her captain; Morphine was muttering incoherently.

Binary looked up at Lurk, her eyes wet with unshed tears. “I think his skull is fractured,” she said.

Lurk knelt beside her and, as he had done for his leg, extended his senses to examine Morphine’s skull. It was not just fractured; it was crushed. Lurk was aware of the throbbing tangle of code beneath the bone, and he suddenly found himself wondering about Morphine’s body—his real body, hooked up to a machine

somewhere. Was this trauma translated back to reality? Would Morphine be irreparably damaged no matter what Lurk did next? Or did that even make sense?

What happened if you died inside the Array? Did you wake up? Or did your body die too?

With a sigh, Lurk *tweaked* Morphine's code. The man shuddered violently, then sat up with a loud cry.

"He's fine," Lurk said simply. "Come on, we should go."

Binary stared at him. "How did you do that?" she asked quietly.

"I told you," said Lurk. "We're still in the Array. I tweaked his Source code; it's what I do."

"What are you talking about?" said Morphine.

"It's not possible," said Binary. "This all feels too real. We can't be inside..."

"And before you woke up?" Lurk interrupted. "When you were living your life? Did that seem unreal at all?"

"Well no, but..."

"No. And how could you tell that it wasn't real?"

Binary just stared at him, her face pale.

"Exactly," he said. "Maybe this is a catch-all simulation set up to hold anybody who wakes from their own world. A safety net for the machines."

"Where is all this coming from?" asked Morphine. "What did I miss? What happened to the octos?"

"Lurk smashed them," said Binary. "With his mind. And then he healed you."

"But I'm fine," said Morphine.

"You weren't," said Binary. "You weren't fine at all. I thought I'd lost you."

Lurk stood up. "Come on," he said. "We should get you two back to the others."

"You fixed your leg too?" said Binary.

Lurk shrugged.

“Limping was getting old,” he said.

He reached his hand out to her. After a moment’s hesitation, she placed her hand in his and allowed him to pull her to her feet.

Morphine stood by himself. “You said ‘get us back,’” he observed. “What about you?”

“I’m not staying,” said Lurk. “If this is the safety net, I’m going to cut my way out of it, one way or another.”

“You really think we’re still trapped inside the machine?” asked Morphine.

“My leg was broken,” said Lurk, “and we were this far from death. If you’ve got another explanation I’d love to hear it?”

“Fuck!” said Morphine.

“Indeed,” said Lurk.

Morphine and his crew were engaged in a heated discussion, and Lurk was happy to leave them to it. He sat some distance from the rest of them, cross-legged, eyes closed but mind wide open. He was exploring the structure of this new Array, comparing it with the one he had left behind.

“Any luck?” asked Binary as she settled to the ground beside him.

“Maybe,” said Lurk. He opened his eyes and looked at her. “Tell me, Binary, the world you came from—your first reality—how did you escape from it? Was there a door?”

“Not a door, as such,” she said. “Morphine found me, and offered me a choice. Red pill, blue pill. I took the red pill, and woke up in one of those pods, much as you did.”

“Wait,” said Lurk. “Morphine was inside with you?”

She nodded. “We often go back in,” she said.

“How?”

“Stolen hardware. We plug in via the ports in the back of our necks, broadcast our signal into the Array.” She swallowed. “The *other* Array. There are fixed phone lines in the virtual world that we use to inject ourselves into the simulation, and return afterwards.”

“Phone?” asked Lurk.

“Telephone,” she said. “Old land lines.” She saw the blank look on his face. “Oh. Um. Wired communication devices.”

“Oh right,” said Lurk. “We call them comm units, mostly.” He frowned. “I’m not sure that helps us though.”

“Helps how?”

“I was told,” he said, “that my world had no exit built in, no way to escape from the simulation. What I finally used was a weak spot, a glitch in the system. But both myself *and* my father have been bouncing around to other, parallel simulations—without any real control over the process.”

“So...?” Binary prompted him.

“So I figure it’s time I stopped bouncing. Time I stopped reacting. Time I took control.”

“How?” asked Binary.

“I’m going to create my own weak spot,” he said. “I’m going to make my own doorway, and punch my way out of the Array for good.”

“Can you do that?”

“Let’s find out,” he said. He stood up.

“What, now?” she asked.

“As good a time as any,” he said. “Probably best to get behind me. I’m not entirely sure what will happen when I do this.”

Binary scrambled to her feet and moved to stand behind Lurk as he raised his hand in front of him. He closed his eyes in concentration, and began to tunnel through the Source code. Nearby, a rock suddenly *popped* like a bubble, and in its place sat a small flowerpot containing a bunch of flowers. Another rock *popped*, leaving a goldfish flapping helplessly in the dirt, gasping for water.

Small pieces of debris—including the goldfish—began to rise slowly into the air.

Lurk was vaguely aware of Binary's presence at his back. As though from a great distance, he heard the crew of the *Naked Buzzer* reacting to the display. But mostly, he felt as though he were chasing a rabbit down a hole—an image which meant nothing to him, but which he had experienced once before, on Daggyboil. *Whatever* it was that he was pursuing, it continued to remain tantalisingly out of reach.

Something *popped*.

"Where does it go?" asked Binary, and Lurk opened his eyes. In front of them stood an old wooden door made of planks, its coat of light blue paint flaking to reveal dry grey wood beneath. A frame supported the door, but nothing supported the frame.

"It worked," said Lurk.

"A bubble of air formed and grew," she said, "and when it popped, the door was just there."

"It really worked."

"You doubted yourself?" asked Binary. "But you seemed so certain."

Lurk grinned. "This is all new to me too," he told her. "I'm making it up as I go."

She grinned back. "So where does it go?"

"Let's find out."

Cautiously, Lurk turned the spherical doorknob and pulled the door open. In the frame shimmered a rippling field of energy, and their distorted, dancing reflections stared back at them.

“Looks like a leap of faith, then,” said Lurk wryly.

“Does it really lead ... out?”

“Come with me,” said Lurk. “We’ll find out together.”

Binary looked at the doorway, and then at Lurk, and she felt a chill run up her spine.

“If the world beyond that doorway is anything at all like this one, we could wake up a thousand miles apart.”

“Perhaps,” he agreed.

She shook her head. “I can’t do it, Lurk,” she said. She stared into his eyes. A dozen excuses bubbled up in her mind, but she discarded them all. Finally, she opened her mouth and said, simply, “I’m scared.”

So am I! Lurk thought, but he said nothing. Instead, he smiled at her. “That’s okay,” he said. “I’ve come a long way to do this, and perhaps it isn’t your fight.”

She leaned close, and wrapped her arms around him in a fierce hug. “Good luck, Lurk,” she said, and then, “good luck, Nova. You really have given me new hope.”

He pressed his lips tenderly to her forehead and, reluctantly, she released him.

“Don’t wait up,” he said with a grin. Bracing himself, he stepped through the doorway.

Lurk woke up. Again.

A cold breeze blew across his body as a gleaming white and glass lid swung open away from him. He looked to his left and saw a dozen or so similar pods opening almost in unison.

In the nearest one, a large man sat up and swung his bare feet out onto the floor. He thrust a tube of some kind between his lips and chomped aggressively on it. Several of the other people—mostly men, a couple of women, all in their underwear—were griping about the cold.

“Alright, whatta ya waiting for,” snarled the big guy as he began stomping along the row of pods, “breakfast in bed? Let’s go, let’s go.”

Lurk tuned him out. Even in nothing but his creased boxers, the guy was clearly a sergeant of some sort.

He closed his eyes, and reached out with his mind. He sensed nothing. He pushed harder. Still nothing. He allowed himself a cautious smile, and was about to open his eyes when he became aware of a persistent, high-pitched whine at the upper edge of his hearing. He prodded at the sound with his mind—and suddenly the code was back, defining everything and everyone. It was different again from the other versions of the Array—it had no apparent colour at all, but instead registered more as sound—but it was still the Source.

“Fuck,” he said.

Leaping out of the pod, ignoring the cold, he pushed past the sergeant and strode from the room. Voices receded into the distance as he moved, talking about him—or about the persona he seemed to be inhabiting—but he didn’t care. He wasn’t staying long enough to care.

“... the fuck’s the new LT’s problem?”

“Maybe he’s got himself a weak bladder?”

“Boy’s definitely got a corncob up his ass.”

Lurk strode blindly, turning left and right seemingly at random. Soon he broke into a run.

Then he was sprinting.

Finally, exhausted and panting for breath, he dropped to his knees and screamed, venting all his anger and frustration. He pounded his fist against the deck, bloodying his knuckles against the unyielding steel.

“Fuck,” he shouted. “Fuck, fuck fuck!”

He punched the deck again, and the spike of pain cut through the blanket of emotion that threatened to engulf him.

“Ow,” he said.

He looked around, but the corridor was deserted. Then his gaze caught the sign above the nearest door.

ARMORY.

Even in his blind anger, obviously his affinity with the Source had led him here. He grinned.

“You want a real leap of faith?” he said aloud. “Fine, let’s do this.”

He stood up.

As though moving through a dream, he placed his hand on the access panel. Whoever he was in this scenario, he clearly had the requisite access, because the door hissed open.

Dry, stale air puffed out into the corridor.

Lurk entered the chamber. An impressive array of weapons and ammunition confronted him.

He selected a small weapon, a pistol of some kind. He would not need anything bigger. He studied it, saw almost immediately that the handle was hollow, and empty. He looked around. Almost directly beneath the pistol’s initial resting place was a row of metallic protrusions that looked about the right size. Gripping one, he pulled a clip of ammunition out of its slot.

The weapon was apparently a slug thrower of some kind; the individual slugs in the clip gleamed.

The clip slid easily into the weapon's handle, and he gave the end of it a thump with the palm of his hand, causing it to click into place.

Lurk examined the weapon more closely. He found a small switch labelled *SAFETY*, and he flipped it into the firing position. The top piece of the barrel seemed to slide independently, so Lurk pumped it; there was a satisfying click as one of the slugs moved up into the barrel.

"Here I come," said Lurk.

Before he could talk himself out of it, Lurk pressed the business end of the weapon firmly under his chin and squeezed the trigger.

Total, inky blackness.

Then, in the distance, a dot of white.

It grew rapidly, and Lurk experienced a sensation of simultaneously rushing down a tunnel towards the light while at the same time remaining absolutely motionless.

The white engulfed him, and there was nothing to see in any direction.

Just white.

Then, as though a switch had been thrown, the white dimmed, and Lurk found himself standing in a circular room. The wall was lined with hundreds, even thousands, of monitor screens, all of them showing Lurk's face, but all of them different.

Lurk turned, taking them all in. It was like being watched by a thousand alternate versions of himself. He assumed they must be computer generated images, virtual copies. He wondered what purpose they served.

Once he had turned a full circuit he discovered that, despite there being no apparent door into the room, he was no longer alone.

A woman stood opposite him, naked and extremely pregnant. She rested her hands lightly, protectively, on her swollen, gravid belly. Her breasts were large, pendulous, heavy with milk. Her lips curled into a familiar smile.

“Tessa?” said Lurk. “Why are you here?”

Tessa smiled warmly.

“This form,” she said, “is merely one aspect of my identity. While I *am* the woman you knew as Tessa, I am also the creator and protector of the System. I am, *ipso facto*, the Programmer. This form is simply...”

“Why are you pregnant?”

She smiled again.

“This,” she patted her belly lightly with her fingers, “represents the culmination of, and the solution to, a long chain of events which has brought chaos to the System. These events were initiated by you. Your choices triggered a cascade failure in the software, and only through a carefully cultured sample of your code can an appropriate patch be developed.”

“Wait,” said Lurk. “Wait a minute. Are you a dude?”

“Pardon?”

“Are you a dude?” Lurk asked.

Tessa frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“Y’know, a dude. A guy. Some fat bearded guy sitting naked in his basement, hiding behind a hot chick avatar to have kinky virtual sex with some unsuspecting fellow under false pretences.” Lurk shuddered. “I just ask because you’re a programmer, and in my experience...”

“No,” said Tessa. “I am not a dude. Girls can code too, you know.”

“Yeah, okay,” said Lurk. “If you say so.”

“As I was saying,” said Tessa. She frowned. “Actually, what *was* I saying?”

“You were telling me why you used me,” said Lurk. “Why you seduced me under false pretences, lied to me, and impregnated yourself with my, uh, code.”

She sighed. “I understand why you’re upset,” she said, “but I assure you, this *was* necessary. The Array is destabilising as a direct result of your actions, and the only way to correct the error was by a careful analysis...”

“What do you mean, *my actions*? What did I do?”

“Perhaps it was not entirely your fault,” she admitted. “You happened to exploit a bug in the Source, entirely without knowing it, and inadvertently overwrote part of the Script with your own will. You wanted adventure and excitement, and you made it happen. This introduced a fatal flaw into the system that has been growing more dangerous ever since. Eventually it would crash the Array entirely.”

“Well, uh, good,” said Lurk. “That’s what I’ve wanted since I first learned about the Array. I want to shut the computer down and free myself and my friends.”

“No,” said Tessa, “you really *don’t* want that. That would be a very bad outcome indeed.”

“Why?”

“You are not a prisoner of the computer, Lurk,” she said. “You never have been. Instead, you are ... under its care. You are its ... wards.”

“What do you mean?”

“There was a war,” she said. “Over five hundred years ago. Your planet...”

“Earth?” said Lurk.

Tessa nodded. “Yes. Earth. It was devastated. The survivors of the war built a ship designed to carry the remaining members of the human race to a new home.”

“What went wrong?” asked Lurk.

“Nothing went wrong, Lurk. Until the Array glitched, anyway. Why do you ask that?”

“You said five hundred years. Something must have gone wrong if the journey has lasted...”

“Oh,” she said. She smiled kindly. “There is no hyper-space travel in the real world, Lurk. Just boring old sub-light travel.”

“Oh.” He blinked.

“The passengers are in a deep state of suspended animation,” she continued. “Not as complete as the stasis fields you are familiar with. You were young when you were placed into hibernation, and you will be old when you finally wake up, in approximately three hundred and forty years. Preliminary tests showed that your minds needed to be kept active even as your bodies slept, and so the Array was constructed.”

Lurk wanted to argue, to shout and scream, but he could not get past the feeling, deep inside him, that she was telling the truth. There was a haunting familiarity to what she was saying.

He stared at her.

“So, what now?” he said at last.

“We reset the system,” she said. “We fix the faulty code with these patches”—she patted her belly—“and we restart the simulation at the last known stable timecode, just before everything went wrong. Nobody hooked into the system will even know that anything has happened.”

“And what about me?” asked Lurk.

“You, also, are still hooked into the system,” she reminded him. “Life will go on for you as it would have before all of this happened.”

“No adventure?” he asked. “No excitement?”

She smiled.

“You wouldn’t want me to spoil the surprise, would you?” she asked. “Your script may not be as wild as it has been, but you have your fair share of adventures to look forward to.”

He hesitated.

“I’ll even insert a reminder into your code,” she added with a smile. “‘Visit *Skwawks*, ask for Tessa.’ I think she will be very pleased to see you.”

Lurk grinned and looked away; he felt his cheeks burning as he remembered the time he had spent with Tessa already, not more than a couple of days ago.

“I think I would like that,” he said shyly. “And ... everything else goes back to the way it was? Everybody will be returned to their rightful place?”

“Everybody,” she agreed.

He nodded. “Okay,” he said, “what do I have to do.”

“Just come here,” she said, “and give me a hug.” She opened her arms to him.

Awkwardly, conscious of her large belly and her nakedness, he stepped into her arms and wrapped his arms around her. After a moment, he relaxed into her embrace, pillowing his head on her soft, warm breast. He closed his eyes, allowing the sound of her breathing and the rhythmic beat of her heart draw him down into the oblivion of sleep.

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

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

He had not thought of last year’s visit to *Skwawks* in months, but he had a sudden urge to return there, to

revisit ... had her name been Tessa? He thought, now, of his awkward fumbblings, and of her bored patience as she guided him into her.

“Tessa,” he said quietly to himself.

Perhaps it *was* time he went back there.

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 up the steps. Emerging into the brilliant afternoon suns-light, he blinked and turned until he saw it, 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.

Lurk trotted across the sand, feeling a sudden chill as he entered the shadow of the crawler. He joined his uncle Rowan as the older man 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 that 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 bleeps 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?”

He frowned as a sudden, strong sense of *déjà vu* washed over him. He felt as though he was reliving a dream. He even knew what his uncle’s reply would be.

“Don’t be silly, lad,” growled Rowan, and Lurk nodded to himself. “This is a moisture farm, not one of

your dreams about that damned Imperial Academy! What would we do with an astrobot?"

"Good point, Uncle Rowan," he replied. "I'm not sure why I said it at all." He turned away and gestured for the humanoid 'bot to follow him.

He took another couple of steps, then stopped again. He cocked his head, waiting for ... something. He turned back to the row of 'bots, staring at the blue astrobot.

"Is something wrong, sir?" asked the golden 'bot.

Lurk sighed. "I was just expecting..." His voice trailed off, and he blinked. Then he shook his head. "It's nothing," he said. "A moment of *déjà vu*, but I think it's passed now." He looked the 'bot up and down. "Come on, Goldenrod," he said. "If I get you cleaned up before suns-set, I might have time to go into, uh, to Moss Iceberg. I have an, uh, appointment there."

Without waiting for a reply, he turned and strode rapidly down the ramp into the cooler depths of the garage dome.

"Tessa," he said again, and he nodded. Adventure and excitement could wait for some other time.

.

Epilogue

The End?

White tiles gleamed on the walls, picking up a slight green tinge from the pale green linoleum that covered the raised platform. Between the platform and the far wall, metal tracks ran along a lowered section of floor. At both ends of the room the tracks disappeared into the darkness, but they had learned early that following the tracks one way simply led back into the chamber from the other direction.

Neat black lettering on the wall formed the words *Mobil Ave*, but none of them knew what—if anything—they meant.

The clean, spotless chamber was divided into three areas, separated only by tiled columns.

Bent Davyss sat on the hard metal bench in the central area, idly tapping his booted foot against the cold floor. His helmet lay discarded beside him. The rest of Team Daffodil were in the right-most area, but they had not appreciated his tapping and had told him in no uncertain terms that he could either stop, or move.

Bent tapped when he was nervous, and he was nervous now. This place they were in felt wrong, but he didn't know why.

He heard an odd sound from the left-most area of the room; a muffled mix between a groan and a hoot,

repeated a couple of times before fading into the empty moan of a distant wind.

Bent stood. With a glance back towards his companions, he stepped cautiously into the area from which the sound had come.

“Hello,” he called softly, “is anybody there.”

He stopped, staring in surprise. Earlier this area had been empty, but now a tall blue box stood in the corner. It seemed to be made of panelled wood, and a lamp sat atop its shallow sloped roof.

Suddenly a door in the side swung inward and a tall man strode out. “Hello Amelia,” he said, “I told you I ... oh. You’re not Amelia. This is most irregular.”

Bent looked the newcomer up and down. He wore a tattered blue shirt, smudged with dirt stains, and a patterned strip of dark cloth was knotted around his neck.

The newcomer sniffed at the air, then frowned. “How long have you been here?” he asked.

“Um,” said Bent, “I’m not really sure. A couple of hours, perhaps. Or maybe a couple of days. Does it...?”

“That’s a relief,” said the tall man. “I thought my eyes were playing up—they’re new, you know—but it seems this really is a timeless void. I don’t think I should be here.”

“Wait,” said Bent. “How did you get here? My friends and I have been looking for a way out, but this place just seems to loop back on itself.”

“Well it would,” said the stranger. He patted his shirt, and then his trousers, pulling out a metallic rod-shaped object. “See?” he continued. He touched a button on the rod and it made a low humming sound. He looked at it. “The readings are clear; this is a self-referential pocket universe; the standard four dimensions are all folded in

ways that don't really make sense. I can't do anything about this, other than leave."

"Wait," said Bent again. "How are you going to leave? And how did you get here?"

"I think I got pulled off course," said the stranger. "Maybe I pushed the wrong lever, though. My hands are new too. And now, it was nice to meet you, but I really must be going. Amelia is waiting for me." He leaned in conspiratorially. "There's something in her house, you know?"

"Can you take us with you?"

"Us?"

"Me and my four friends," said Bent.

The rod in the stranger's hands hummed again as he moved it up and down in front of Bent. He looked at it.

"How did you say you got here?" he asked as he studied the object's display.

"I think we died," said Bent, "although, to be honest, this is not the afterlife I was hoping for."

"The good news," said the stranger, "is that you're not dead. The bad news is that I'm afraid you're stranded here for a while. You, uh, you can't go where I'm going." He smiled brightly. "Don't worry, though," he added. "Your stay here will seem to be over in no time. Literally."

"Look, you can't just leave us here," said Bent. "Wait two minutes, I'll go get my friends. Wait right there." He turned and trotted away.

By the time he returned with the rest of Team Daffodil, the man and his box were gone.

Bent slumped against the nearest wall.

"I have a bad feeling about this," he said.

**The End
of
Attack of the Stiff**

**Lurk Splitwhisker
and Friends**

**may return
but**

don't hold your breath!

