

# **KING CYBORG**

## Prologue

Dogma Integrity Commander Strump frowned as he appraised the wet, pink human in front of him. It crawled back on all fours and pressed into a corner.

“What are you? What’s going on?” it asked.

“Galactic patrol, sir,” D.I.C. Strump answered. “You’ve been the victim of an unauthorized abduction. It would seem that,” Strump rolled one of his bulbous eyes downward to glance at his notepad, “Mr. Pealong here had certain curiosities about you. Mr. Pealong, what species are you again?”

“Depravalon,” Pealong answered.

“Depravalon, of course.”

“He what?” the human asked, looking between Strump and Pealong. Sweat dripped down its rubbery face.

“Experiments,” Strump said. “Mainly concerning your enjoyment of jazz.”

“Jazz?” it asked.

“Yes, jazz. Mr. Pealong was studying your abnormal brain chemistry.”

“Abnormal, wha-” it swallowed, “It thinks I’m crazy for liking Jazz?”

“Mr. Pealong identifies as a male, not an it,” Strump said, frowning. “But yes, that’s right.”

“Rather rude,” Pealong added.

The rubber-faced human’s face went pinker.

“Lots of people like jazz!” it said.

Strump flipped his notepad shut, focusing all seven eyes on the creature.

“What’s your name?”

“Whitehead, Harold Whitehead,” it answered.

“Mr. Whitehead, no one likes jazz.”

“I like jazz.”

“Ah, no one likes jazz but you. They just pretend to. To seem more sophisticated.”

“I personally know,” Harold the human said, wagging a finger in the air, “at least six other people who like jazz. You’re saying that they’re all just lying about it?”

“Yes.”

“That seems unlikely. Millions of people buy jazz albums. There’s a whole Billboard chart just for the genre!”

“An elaborate ruse, I’m afraid.”

“Well, I- Then why did it- why did *he* make me wear this teddy-bear onesie?” Harold asked, pointing at Pealong.

“It’s an attempt to make you feel more at home,” Strump said, cocking his eyes to one side. “It can be difficult adjusting to an alien environment.”

“More at home?” Harold said. “It’s ridiculous.”

“It’s a best seller on, what do you call it...” Strump checked his notepad again. “Amazon. Over a million sold. Very popular on Earth.”

“Well it isn’t popular with me!”

“Hmm,” Strump checked his notes again. “Perhaps your mind is more deviant than Mr. Pealong suspected.”

“I’m not deviant! I’m normal!”

“Your taste in music and apparel says otherwise.”

“Well, that’s your opinion,” Harold said, crossing his arms and tapping his teddy-bear foot. “What happens next, then?”

“Quarantine. Your species hasn’t been approved for interstellar transport.”

“Oh.” Harold leaned forward. “How long will that take? I’m the Dean of a Law School. I have classes to get back to. Staff to administrate and all that.”

“Not very long.”

“Good, good.” Harold stood and brushed his onesie off, smoothing down its furry tummy. “Well, let’s get on with it then.”

Strump raised several eyebrows.

“Very well.” Strump pulled his sterilizer from its holster. “Usually we get a lot more pleading than that.”

“Wait, pleading? Why would I-”

Strump pulled the sterilizer’s trigger. Harold Whitehead’s body shrank and shriveled, then disappeared into a puff of vapor. The teddy bear onesie flopped to the floor, empty.

Strump scribbled out a fine for Mr. Pealong, then sauntered back to his ship.

“I do enjoy it when the job goes smoothly,” Strump said to himself. He made a note to put himself up for an efficiency commendation. Second tier, of course. He put his pad away and noticed a red light blipping next to his Quan-Comm communicator. He toggled the device on. “Dispatch, this is Dogma Integrity Commander Strump, replying to your notice.”

“D.I.C. Strump, we’ve got an unlicensed quantum tunnel that’s just opened up in sector nine-nine-one-five. Command has issued you a protocol Two order.”

“Roger that,” Strump said as he strapped himself down, “Protocol Two. D.I.C. heading to investigate.”

## Chapter 1

KC stared up at the naked biped in front of him. She stared back at him. The two watched one another, frozen for several seconds. KC drew in a quick breath, then looked around his lab. Dozens of shelves and desks sprawled out, cluttering the workspace, covered in various gleaming gizmos and contraptions. Everything was where it should be. There were no other naked primates. He hadn't seen this one come in. He hadn't heard her either. One moment she wasn't there and then, she was.

KC cleared his throat and opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again. He glanced at a clock. It was broken. He glanced at another. Worn out too. There was no way for him to tell how long it had been since he'd spoken to anyone. KC puzzled over this for a moment, then opened his mouth again. The human beat him to it. Strange, guttural words rolled out of its mouth. KC reached up and flicked his temple, activating his translator spell.

"Say again?" he said.

"Where am I?"

"I-" KC tapped the tips of his copper fingers together. "You're on my ship. Who are you?"

"I'm...Marabeth." She was stiff as a board, her eyes darting around the lab.

"And how did you get here, Marabeth?"

"I don't know," she said. "How *did* I get here?"

KC sat back in his chair. "Marabeth, I must say, it's completely unreasonable for you to be here."

"Unreasonable?"

“You’re in my lab,” KC said. “On my station. My *space* station. In the middle of a rather large stretch of nowhere.”

Marabeth took a step back. She looked down at herself, then back up at KC, her eyes going wider. “Space station.” She swallowed. “Why am I naked?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t a clue. Are you not, normally?”

“Am I-? Am I normally naked? No. Why would I be?”

KC shrugged. “I’m not familiar with your species.”

“What species is that?”

“I don’t know,” KC said. “I just told you I’m not familiar.”

“You mean, like, human? Human species?”

“I suppose. You’re a human and humans are not typically nude. I have now expressed the sum total of my knowledge concerning your kind.”

“You’re *not* human then?”

KC shook his head. “No, I’m a Prancitimek cyborg. Do I look human?”

“I thought, maybe uh, maybe it was cosplay or something.”

“Cos-what, now?” KC asked.

“Not human.” Marabeth gave a small, shrill laugh. More like a chirp than anything. She took in a sharp breath, then another. Soon, her chest was pumping in quick, short motions. Her eyes went wide. She whipped her head from side to side, then reached out and pulled a long crystal rod from a shelf. She held it up like a gleaming purple club, streaked with azure knots.

“What are you doing to me?!” Marabeth asked.

KC leapt up, knocking his chair back and sending the shelf behind him tumbling over. The baubles and contraptions covering it fell to the floor, each making its own unique smashing sound as it crumbled into its own special pile of irreparable junk on the slick tiled floor.

“Stop that!” KC said. Marabeth stepped back and thrust the obelisk into the air between them.

“Why am I here?!”

“You tell me! *You’re* the trespasser!” KC pointed at the obelisk. “You really must put that down though.”

“Trespasser? I’ve not trespassed on anything!”

“You are presently on my ship without my permission.”

“Trespass requires intent! Intent to enter onto land! I didn’t intend to be here!”

“What?”

“Trespass,” she said. “I’m explaining it to you.”

“*You’re* explaining it to *me*?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding. “I’m not a trespasser,” she wagged the crystal at KC. “You’re a kidnapper! You’ve kidnapped me!”

“I’ve done no such thing. Believe me the last thing I want is company.”

“Then how did I get here? And what’s with your outfit? Is this some sort of...fetish thing? Is *that* why I’m naked?” She took another step back, pressing into a shelf. It bobbed, the various odds and ends upon it rocking back and forth. KC held his hands up, watching the old projects dance and rock.



“I don’t know,” KC said. “This is just how I look. It’s not a- a fetish or whatever. I’m not sure I even know what that means.”

“Then why am I naked?”

“I don’t know that either! I- here!” KC waved a hand through the air in front of him and a billowing emerald cloth appeared from nowhere and fluttered down across his arm. He tossed it to the creature. She watched it float to the ground, eyebrows raised.

“How did you-”

“Nevermind that!” KC said. “Get dressed so you can communicate properly. As if I cared, even. *You* seem to be the one that’s hung up on your nudity.”

She continued to grip the obelisk, eyeing the cloth, but made no move towards it.

“Aliens!” she said.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“You’re an alien!” She waggled the crystal at him.

“I’m not an alien!” KC said. “You’re an alien!”

“I’m not an alien, I’m a human! *You’re* the alien!”

“I’m - wait a minute,” KC considered whether they both might be aliens. Marabeth grabbed the cloth and darted away.

“You’ve abducted me!” she said, running through the lab. She knocked into a door and bounced off of it. She kicked at the portal while hoisting the obelisk into the air towards KC. “Is this the probe then?”

“Probe? Please, you really need to put that down.”

“Or else what?” Marabeth said. “I’ll die before I let you experiment on me!”

“Well you’re going to get your wish if you keep bandying that thing about!” KC said.

“It’s not a probe, it’s a highly volatile explosive!”

Marabeth stopped kicking at the door. She looked up at the obelisk, then narrowed her eyes. “I don’t believe you. Un-abduct me!”

“Un-what you?”

“Un-abduct me! Or I’ll smash this thing on your head!”

“I can’t *un*-abduct you when I haven’t *ab*ducted you in the first place!”

“Then why am I here?!”

“Between the time you asked thirty seconds ago and now I haven’t developed a single clue. And if you’d calm down we can figure- Oh, for the stars!” KC waved his hands in broad, sweeping gestures and golden tendrils sprouted from his fingertips. They glided through the air and wrapped themselves around Marabeth. They unraveled her fingers from around the explosive and then tugged the sheet from under Marabeth’s arm and began tying her up with it. She squealed as the tendrils tugged flaps of cloth around her body, binding her arms to her side and tying the sheet together in knots at her back.

“Alright,” KC said as the golden tendrils cradled Marabeth and laid her onto the floor, “what’s the last thing you remember?”

“Now this is definitely kidnapping!” she said, struggling against her bonds. “I remember you kidnapping me.”

“Not literally the last thing! Before you appeared here on my ship.”

The golden tendrils set the obelisk down onto KC’s work-table.

“I was-” Marabeth’s eyes darted back and forth, “I was writing a memo. On felony murder.”

“You’re writing a treatise on murder?” *Not normally naked and also quite violent it would seem.* Marabeth opened her mouth to reply, but KC waved a hand. “It doesn’t matter. Then what?”

“Then what? Then I was here! Naked! Tied up in a bed sheet! By either a rapey freak or an alien!”

“Rapey?” KC said, puffing his chest up. “I’ll have you know I don’t even have genitals!”

“I-I- You seem very proud of that.”

“Of course I’m proud of it. It was a very complex surgery. Even more difficult without an assistant.” Marabeth turned her head away and tucked her chin back, frowning.

KC ran a hand down his metallic face. His digital eyes blinked and formed a pensive look.

“Alright,” KC said. “There’s obviously something going on that we’re both missing.” He looked around his lab, considering the various possibilities. He eyed the constabulator. It had once generated a never-ending font of slime with no apparent origin. Still, it wasn’t organic slime. It wasn’t a highly-evolved bi-pedal slime either. No. Something else must have caused this. He’d collected a number of powerful arcane objects and fabricated many more than that. But none were capable of materializing an unknown species at random.

*That is except of course for the-*

“The DEM device!” KC strode across the lab and ducked between two tall sets of standing shelves. He knelt down to the bottom of one and picked up a small, golden sphere. A red light blinked on its face. “I left it on.” He clanged a hand against his forehead. “I left it on!”

KC took the device back to his work table and set it down next to the crystal. He glanced from the crystal to the device, then reconsidered. He moved the DEM to a nearby desk, brushing aside a pile of silver bolts and wire, then tapped its face. A series of glyphs appeared.

“Ah, yes. It seems to have spawned a quantum tunnel approximately six minutes ago.”

“What is that?” Marabeth asked, straining her neck to see what KC was working on.

“What activated?”

“The quantum tunnel or the deus ex machina device?” KC held up the golden orb and pointed at it.

“I’m sorry, the what device?”

“The DEM. Deus ex machina device. It appears to have brought you here by accident,” KC said. “I left it on, you see.”

“Ok, well, can it send me back?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know how it works?”

“Of course not, it’s a deus ex machina device, not a toaster.” KC chuckled at the thought.

“Well, is there a manual? Can you ask the person who made it?”

“I made it,” KC said.

“You made it and you don’t know how it works?”

“I *made* it,” KC said, “so that I don’t know how it works.”

“How is that even possible? Why would you make something like that?”

“Why would I restrict myself to creating things that I understand? How dull.” KC tapped the golden machine again. The glyphs disappeared. “Still, this is quite the inconvenience for me.”

“Inconvenience?” Marabeth said, her tone rising throughout the word. “Inconvenience?! You made a stupid machine you don’t understand, it teleported me here against my will and you’ve hog-tied me to the ground. Yes, it seems very inconvenient for *you!*”

KC ignored her. He picked up the DEM, then set it down on the floor next to the human. “I do know one thing. And that’s how to force activate it. I did it last week and it brought me something called a pastrami sandwich. It was quite delicious. I’ll just do that again and hopefully it sends you back to wherever you came from.”

“Wait, it brought you a pastrami sandwich last week?”

KC nodded and smiled. Maybe she was just simple.

“Someone stole my pastrami sandwich last week!”

“Ah,” KC said, tapping his fingertips together. “What a coincidence.”

“You’ve abducted me *and* my sandwich!”

“Well it hardly matters now. I’ll just activate the device and have you on your way then.”

“I thought you said you didn’t know how it works.”

“Yes, well it has to do something when I activate it. It will always do something.”

“And how do you know that ‘something’ will be sending me back?”

“Because there’s no possible way that the god in this machine intended for me to babysit such an obnoxious creature as yourself for any longer than a few minutes.”

“God? Obnoxious? I-”

KC began chanting, waving his copper fingers over the device. Its surface glowed with skittering runes and the lights in the lab dimmed, then flickered. A low humming emanated from everywhere and nowhere. Wisps of purple energy flexed out of the golden machine in concentric circles, flooding the lab with pulsating energy.

“Wait! Are you sure this is safe?” Marabeth asked. KC continued to chant.

The surface of the device glowed with growing intensity. The runes scattered and flew off of its surface, forming a translucent sphere of energy around Marabeth. Sparks of golden energy erupted from its surface, connecting the runes with crackling lines of force. KC finished his chant and swept his arms through the air with a dramatic flourish. The translucent sphere became more solid, flowing around Marabeth and hugging her form with a cascade of glittering light. The glow grew so bright that she was absorbed by it. Marabeth had almost disappeared altogether when there was a sudden ‘Crack!’

The runes flew out in every direction, pressing themselves into the walls of the lab. The lightning-like energy flowed through the station’s walls and the entire vessel shuddered and shook. KC struggled to keep his footing. The volatile crystal rolled off the work table and he whipped around to catch it, his body bending like rubber. Marabeth rolled across the ground, bumping into KC’s feet. KC struggled to keep his balance as he reached down with a free hand and steadied her against the quaking.

Countless eons worth of devices and research tumbled off the shelves and tables, bursting into clouds of metal and sparks, exploding into rainbow-colored flashes of light, purple and blue puffs of smoke and dust. Tendrils of red flame danced, then blinked out of existence as quick as they came. A deep wrenching sound filled the air and the cacophony ceased. Runes peeled back

off the walls and zipped away back inside the golden orb. Quiet once more filled the room. A soft voice sounded out. One KC hadn't heard in centuries.

“Damage to propulsion unit,” it said.

KC bounded away, then bounded back, laying the crystal down, then away he went again. He hurried to a wall, stepping over the piles of scrap that had once been his precious projects. He tapped the wall with his copper fingers and a display sprung to life. KC examined several diagrams and schematics, then sucked in a breath.

“Oh no,” KC said, then hurried to a porthole. He gazed out. A massive chunk of twisted metal detached itself from the hull of his space station and began to fall toward the planet below. KC watched as the chunk sank closer and closer to the planet's atmosphere. The metal then became a ball of distant fire. KC turned and pressed his back against the wall.

“That's unfortunate.”

## Chapter 2

“What happened?” Marabeth asked. “You were staring out that window for, like, twenty minutes.”

KC ignored the question and moved to the golden device. He flipped a switch in its side and the red light on its face died. He then tossed it into one of several nearby boxes marked ‘junk’ and slammed the lid shut.

“Not doing that again,” KC said.

“What happened?” Marabeth repeated. KC tapped his temple and deafened himself.

He made his way back to the terminal and poked at the screen with slow, imprecise strokes. After a minute, KC identified the room affected by the fresh hull breach.

“To the singularity with it,” KC swore. The one room impacted looked important. The schematic showed a spacious area that, for the life of him, KC could not remember ever visiting. An energy readout showed that the room consumed an entire 5% of the station’s power output. Another screen showed a temporary force field preserving whatever was inside, but the field drew double what the room did. That put his station at 105% power drain.

That wouldn’t do.

KC turned and scanned the cluttered room, looking for a tank of sealant he knew he had amidst the baubles.

“I don’t have time for this,” he muttered, then poked at the screen, deactivating the force field. He made his way back to the porthole, watching for whatever it was he’d just ejected into space, tapping his toe as he waited. A series of bushy green plants drifted down and away from the station. His organic CO<sub>2</sub> processing system.



*Well, I don't really need the oxygen anymore,* KC thought. He sighed and walked back to his work table, surveying an intricate black and silver mechanism he'd been constructing before Marabeth's interruption. He sat down and picked up a tiny set of tools, beginning to work again.

Marabeth rocked from side to side in the corner of his vision.

KC's knee began bouncing up and down. He bent closer to the project. Marabeth rolled closer to him. He tried to focus on his work, but one eye slid towards her. She was red-faced, struggling against her bonds, staring daggers at him. His eye slid back and he tinkered some more. Eventually, Marabeth rolled into the leg of the table, jerking KC's elbow. KC leaned back and crossed his arms, glaring at Marabeth. He tapped his temple and pointed at her.

"What?" he asked.

"Are you just going to leave me like this?"

"Yes. Is that all?"

"You can't!" Marabeth replied. "Listen, my family, they don't have much but they can pay you! I have some money as well."

"Pay me?" KC asked, frowning. "Pay me for what?"

"Letting me go!" Marabeth answered. "I won't tell anyone you've kidnapped me."

"I don't think you understand your predicament," KC said, leaning forward and resting his shiny elbows on his shiny knees. "First: I have no use for whatever it is your kind considers money. Second: I wouldn't even know *how* to let you go. We're not on a planet."

"Ah," Marabeth said, her eyes darting to the ceiling for a second. "Well, for starters, you could untie me. That's a very good beginning to the whole 'letting me go' thing."

“Yes, and will you grab the nearest brick of high explosive and threaten us both with it again? I think not.”

“We got off on the wrong foot,” she said, smiling. “I promise I won’t touch anything.”

KC scratched his head, making a metallic scraping sound. “You promise?” he asked.

Marabeth nodded, hair bobbing. “I promise.”

“Oh, well,” KC said, “as long as you promise.” KC stood and walked over to Marabeth. He reached down and put a hand on a knot of the cloth. He gripped it tightly and hefted Marabeth up, then began carrying her across the room like a sack.

“Wait! What are you doing?”

“Getting rid of distractions,” KC replied.

“No!” Marabeth pleaded. “Are you going to kill me?”

“Kill you?” KC stopped and held her up, looking her in the eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous.” He continued walking until he reached a narrow, round-topped doorway. He kicked away the rubbish in front of it, slid a finger down its center, and the door shimmied away to one side. KC sat Marabeth down in the room beyond and looked around at the contents. Dusty tomes littered the room in piles on the floor and scattered about on towering bookshelves. KC nodded. Nothing looked *too* dangerous.

KC stepped back out of the room and just as he was about to shut the door, he paused, turned to look at Marabeth, then pointed a finger at her. The cloth unraveled itself from around her body. Then, as Marabeth struggled to her feet, KC rapped a knuckle against the open door and it shimmied shut. KC took a deep, unnecessary breath, then returned to his work table. Marabeth pounded at the door and KC flicked his temple, deafening himself again.

KC stood and turned to survey his lab. Absolute chaos. There were sparsely a few square centimeters of the slick, white-tiled floor that weren't covered in some odd, end, or the remains of an odd or end. Between his own lack of organization, the destruction from the DEM, and Marabeth's little rampage- Well, the lab had seen better days for certain.

KC sighed and sat back down at his main work desk, picking up a small black and silver orb he'd been adjusting. It was meant to act as a compass of sorts, leading the user to the source of arcane energy throughout the cosmos. So far it had led him exactly nowhere. He disassembled the machine and worked on it for a long, long time.

Finally, he threw up his hands, having no idea what was wrong with the thing. He slouched and began to wonder when the last time he'd oiled his joints was. He supposed his organic systems could use some hydration as well. How long had he been working again? It was frustrating that despite his efforts his body still needed maintenance and even the occasional sustenance. Damn mortal coil...

KC started. He still had a human aboard the station. Humans needed things like water and sustenance as well. How long had he been working? KC turned to the door, listening. It was silent. Everything was silent. He couldn't hear a thing at all. KC puzzled over this, then rapped himself against the temple. The soft sounds of the vessel washed over him. A gentle hum, a soft thrumming, the occasional *whoosh*. What even made that whooshing? Regardless, there was no sound coming from the library.

KC strode to the library door and slid a finger down it. He held his breath as the portal shimmered away, hoping that human metabolic function didn't require anything as preposterous

as an entire meal a day and more than a few ounces of water. Stars above, what if humans needed *two* meals a day?

Marabeth was lying in a corner of the room. The cloth was looped up and around both her shoulders, forming a sort of dress. KC approached. Had she died? Certainly he hadn't been working for that long. What does one do with a dead human? KC bent and tapped her on the forehead.

"Gah!" Marabeth yelled, jerking out her arm and slapping KC across the face. She pulled her hand back and rolled to one side, grasping it.

"Did you- did you just attack me?" KC asked.

"What?" Marabeth said. "No! Did you poke me in the head?"

"I did. And you slapped me."

"You woke me." Marabeth sat up and began shaking out her hand. "You're a scary thing to wake up to. God, what's your face made of?"

KC held a hand up to where she'd struck him. "Some kind of metal. Mostly."

"That's specific."

"Listen, Marabeth, I may have been a bit inconsiderate earlier."

"Apology not accepted. Bathroom," she said.

"Bathroom?" KC asked.

"Yes, I must make use of the facilities. Also, this room is filthy. I thought you said this was a spaceship."

"Space station. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Where's all the dust come from?" Marabeth asked, gesturing around the room.

“It’s not dust, it’s-” KC looked about to find the shelves all neatly filled with rows of orderly books, arranged from largest to smallest. “What have you done to my library?” KC asked.

“I tidied it.”

“What? Why?”

Marabeth’s eyes narrowed. “What else was I supposed to do? Do you know how long I’ve been in here?”

KC considered the types of things a wild animal might do after being confined to an unfamiliar place. He decided that organizing was not the worst of them.

“I suppose it has been a little while,” KC said.

“I’m going to take a guess and say an entire day. Bathroom!” she said, standing and brushing the makeshift dress off.

“Fine. Nearly everything’s been broken anyway. What more damage could you do?” KC stepped back out into the lab and pointed to a back corner. “Through that door.”

“Slide my finger down the middle?”

“Yes, to open it, that’s right.”

“And how does the bathroom operate?” Marabeth asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re an alien, correct?”

“I suppose from your point of view, yes. Though, technically, you’re more alien to my lab than I am.”

“Then how should I know how to use an alien bathroom?”

“It’s a hole. And a button. Certainly you’ll figure it out.”

“Toilet paper?”

“That sounds very unpleasant,” KC replied.

“How do I- you know, how do I clean myself off afterward?”

“There’s a recess just inside the door. You stand in it and it will eliminate any surface contaminants.”

“Good. My hands are filthy.” Marabeth strode past KC to the door. “How do I know the ‘recess’ won’t think my hair and fingernails are a contaminant?”

“It’s smart enough to know what belongs and what doesn’t,” KC said.

Marabeth nodded and looked at the door again. “I read somewhere that there are symbiotic organisms that live on my skin. What about those?”

“You’ll either have to risk it or just be dirty.”

Marabeth brushed off the front of her dress again and swiped her finger along the door. It opened. Marabeth hesitated, then lifted her chin up and strode through.

KC sat back down at his desk with a thump and held his head in one hand, tapping a copper fingertip. He spotted the canister of sealant he’d been looking for earlier and the tapping stopped. The thought of leafy green plants drifting through space came to mind.

Do humans need oxygen?

### Chapter 3

Marabeth emerged from the bathroom dirt-free and with a list of demands. Water had been chief among them and KC diverted flow from the hydroponics lab, the contents of which were now somewhere in low orbit. She gulped a liter of it down. An entire liter! KC couldn't imagine where it all went. Next came food. It took a bit of back and forth, but KC was able to synthesize something she called 'chicken'. Humans were apparently apex predators.

"Tastes more like gator," she said, "but it works."

Next up were clothes.

"What's wrong with the clothes you have?" KC asked.

"This isn't clothes. This is a sheet."

"It covers you up, isn't that what prudish creatures use clothes for?"

Marabeth walked up to KC and poked him hard in the chest.

"Did you feel that?" she asked.

"In a sense. I know you poked me, and where."

"But it didn't hurt."

"No."

"That's because you're made of, well, whatever you're made of. I, on the other hand," she pinched the skin on her forearm, pulling it out a bit. KC marvelled at how it stretched. "I'm all soft and fleshy. Clothes *do* serve to cover up the bits I don't wish the whole world to see, but they also serve to protect me from minor scrapes and bruises. Plus, they'll keep the dust that seems to pervade your ship off me."

“Station,” KC corrected. “Prudish, prone to injury, afraid of dust. These don’t seem to be advantageous evolutionary characteristics. Also, again, it’s not dust.”

“Spare me your analysis, professor. I’m just telling you how it is.”

“Very well,” KC said. “Though you could be more polite when asking.”

Marabeth tilted her head down and raised her eyebrows, looking up at KC. “You think I’m not being polite enough?”

“Erm,” KC began, “it’s just that earlier you were a bit more, ah-”

“Terrified.”

“Well, you pleaded a bit more.”

“That’s because earlier I thought you were going to kill me or- or something else. Now I believe you’re just a jerk.”

KC frowned. “Believe what you want,” he said in a dark tone, “but you’re on *my* station doling out commands.”

“Alright,” Marabeth said. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, letting it out over several seconds. “This is a stressful situation. I’m the victim of an accidental kidnapping, which isn’t really a thing, but I don’t know how else to describe it. I’m talking to an alien who thinks I’m impolite.” She chuckled. “Even aliens think I’m brusque.” She opened her eyes and looked into KC’s own. She held out a hand. “Let’s start over. My name is Marabeth, and you are?”

KC puzzled over the limb. “What do I do with that?”

Marabeth brought KC’s right hand up to her own and gripped it. She then gave it three pumps up and down and released. KC looked down at his hand.

“A physical greeting?” he asked.



“Formal,” Marabeth replied.

“Ah.” KC turned the hand over, then dropped it to his side. Marabeth looked at him, head turned slightly away.

“And you are?” she repeated.

“My name?”

“Yes, your name.”

“It’s-” KC began. He shut his mouth and pressed a finger against it. He furrowed his brow.

“You have a name, right?”

“I, uh, it’s been a long time.”

“Are you saying you’ve forgotten your own name?”

“No! Just call me KC.”

“Alright, what does KC stand for?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Ok, fine, that’s alright.” Marabeth took a deep breath. “It is a pleasure to meet you, KC. I seem to have found myself aboard your ship.” Another deep breath. “*Somehow*. And without any proper clothes.” She folded her lips inwards then opened her mouth with a pop. “Would it be possible for you to provide me with some?”

KC found her tone difficult to translate. “I’m not a tailor.”

Marabeth brought her hands up and slowly flexed her fingers in and out of fists. “That’s right, you’re a cyborg, apparently.”

“That’s not really a job title. The point is, I don’t tend to make clothes.”

“I see,” Marabeth said, then gestured down to the cloth she wore. “You made this.”

“Well, I’m not saying that I can’t make clothes, just that I don’t usually make them.”

Marabeth let out an exasperated huff, then clasped her hands together in front of her chest. “Please?”

“Clothes,” KC said, kicking at a pile of rubbish on the ground. “Clothes. She wants me to make her clothes.” He placed hands on his hips. “It’s not as though I’m one of the most sophisticated artificers in the galaxy or anything. But clothes, yes, I can make you clothes.”

“Thank you very much,” Marabeth said, white teeth gleaming behind a broad smile. “That would be terrific.” Marabeth’s predatory incisors reminded him that her kind slaughtered and consumed other living creatures to sustain themselves.

KC kicked at the pile of rubbish again, this time with a bit less enthusiasm, then set out to his task. He gathered the materials he needed and spent an hour fashioning garments for Marabeth: a utilitarian set of white, form-fitting garments meant to stay properly situated in a zero-g environment. The station had gravity, but they were in space after all. She went back to the bathroom to try them on. When she returned she seemed satisfied enough.

KC had once more sat down at his desk and Marabeth began pulling one of the large boxes labeled ‘junk’ towards her. KC raised a finger, about to say something, then dropped it in defeat. Marabeth sat down on the box and crossed one leg over the other.

“KC,” Marabeth said, placing a hand on the surface of the desk, “here’s the thing. I need to know how I’m getting back to Earth.”

KC scratched at a cheek. “Where is Earth?”

Marabeth nodded. “It’s in the solar system.”

“There are a number of those. About thirty billion in this galaxy alone.”

Marabeth patted her hand on the table. “It’s in the Milky Way. We’re in the Milky Way, right?”

“If the translation of what you just said is correct, then yes.”

Another deep breath. “It has nine planets. No, eight.”

“You’re uncertain?” KC asked.

“It changed recently.”

“Curious. I suppose I can run a search, but it won’t do much good. My propulsion unit was recently hurled into the atmosphere of the planet beneath us.”

“Hurled into the-!” Marabeth shook her head. “How do we fix that?”

KC looked at the white-tiled ceiling. It matched the floor. “I could make another, I suppose.”

“How long will that take?”

KC bobbed his head from side to side, studying the black lines that separated the tiles.

“About ten years.”

“Ten years? Seriously?”

KC waved a hand through the air. “Synthesizing the components takes time. Then I have to charge it. That’s the bulk of the work right there.”

Marabeth reached out and took KC’s gesturing hand, grasping it in both of hers. He dropped his gaze from the ceiling to study her.

“KC, I can’t stay here for ten years. I have a family. I have friends. Most importantly, I have deadlines.”

“Deadlines?” KC asked.

“Yes, deadlines. Work product. Papers I have to file with the court, motions to look over, depositions to take. I can’t miss my deadlines.”

“That’s what you’re most concerned about?”

“How can we speed this up?”

KC extricated his hand from her grasp and looked to the porthole. “Well, I could go and recover the unit I lost.”

Marabeth followed his gaze. “What? Down on the planet?”

KC nodded.

“Wouldn’t the thing, I dunno, burn up in the atmosphere?”

KC scoffed. “What do you think my ship’s made of? Paper and aluminum?”

“KC,” Marabeth said, both hands flat on the desk as she leaned forward. “I don’t have a clue what your ship is made of. I don’t have a clue how I got here, alright? The whole ‘clueless human’ thing is gonna get real old real fast so I need you to work with me on this.”

KC eyed her. “It almost certainly survived its descent. I just have to locate it and inscribe a recovery glyph.”

Marabeth tilted her head to one side. “Ok. A, number one,” she began, “why wasn’t that your first thought, rather than spending ten years making another? B, number two, recovery *glyph*?”

KC leaned forward. “I take issue with your numbering system. Non-alphabetic answer one: I haven’t been off the station in awhile. I don’t want to leave the station. It’s much more

comfortable to remain *on* the station, even if it takes a bit longer. Non-alphabetic answer two:”

KC paused. “Actually, I’m not sure what you’re asking with this one.”

“Glyph, what do you mean by glyph?”

“An ancient or archaic symbol. I have to draw a recovery glyph on the propulsion unit, give it a bit of arcane energy, and whoosh,” KC swooped his hand upward, “it’ll come right back to the station.”

“Well,” Marabeth crossed her arms on top of the desk, “how does that work?”

KC held his hands up and fluttered his copper fingers. “Magic.”

Marabeth’s eyes went wide, then narrowed. “Oh, I see,” she said, sitting back. “Primitive human thinks advanced tech is magic, ha ha.”

KC frowned and dropped his hands. “Huh?”

“Listen,” Marabeth said, pointing a finger at KC, “maybe humans can’t, y’know, accidentally teleport people to another star system or anything, but we know enough that just because you don’t understand something doesn’t mean it’s magic. At least *I* do, that is. I guess some people don’t. But that’s not the point. I know better.”

“Uh-huh,” KC said, tapping his lips. “That’s fine.” These humans really *were* clueless, he mused. “Regardless, I just need to pop down there and get it back.”

“Good,” Marabeth said. “Glad we got that sorted.”

The pair sat there for a moment. KC looked around the room. Where was his space elevator, again? Marabeth’s eyes rolled over the various screws, cables, wire, and other bits along the surface of KC’s desk. She then looked at the entire lab.

“How do you live like this?”

KC's eyes stopped searching. "Like what?"

Marabeth gestured all around. "Like this. It's so chaotic." She began fingering through the piles on the desktop.

"A lot of this happened when the DEM machine went belly-up. Please don't touch that."

"I saw the place before that. It was already a big mess." She paused sorting through various lengths of wire and looked up at him. "Is *this* going to explode too?"

"No."

"Then," she pulled a wire out of the pile and laid it to one side, "I just," she pulled another of the same length out and set it down next to the first. KC watched her work.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm sorting it!" she said.

"Why?"

"Because it's," she held her hands with both palms up and shook them at the surface of the desk, "it's just a big mess! Let me fix it."

KC cocked his head to one side. Marabeth sat and worked through the wires, then moved on to a set of screws, arranging them by size. She wasn't asking questions. She wasn't making demands. She was just sorting. Such an odd creature.

KC decided to leave her to it and went looking for his chalk kit. After rummaging through various piles of debris he located it and checked inside. Each length of chalk was broken into several pieces, but a few were large enough for him to get a grip of and would serve to draw the glyph well enough.

KC looked up from the chalk to where Marabeth continued to work. She couldn't stay. There was no doubt about that. He had to go get the propulsion unit, even if he hated leaving his lab. He didn't know how long he could support Marabeth's overwhelming need for food and water. Plus, if he backed out now, KC expected he'd never hear the end of it from her. He gathered a few more items for the trip: a Blank, a Blankety, and a Blank-Blank. Once he was finished, he tucked the chalk and all the Blanks into a black case and strapped it to his back.

KC looked around the lab. He walked to and opened the door to the library. No, the elevator wasn't here. He went to the solarium. No elevator. The bathroom. Not there either. Why would it be? He walked to a large, double door. KC had no idea where this one went. He opened it. It was the elevator. Why hadn't he checked this one first? When was the last time he'd used this thing? He shouldn't have this many gaps in his recollection. Everything was so difficult all of a sudden.

"Wait," Marabeth said. KC stopped with one foot inside the elevator.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Are you about to go? Down to the planet?"

"I am," KC said.

"Can I go with you?" Marabeth stood halfway up from the desk, hands still sorting through some cabling.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"How much experience do you have exploring alien planets?"

"Planets, plural? None. But I travel a lot back on Earth. I'm a bit of a wanderlust."

“Uh-huh.” KC took his foot back out of the elevator. “No, it will be quite dangerous. It’s a life-bearing planet. There’s no telling what we might encounter.”

“So, what then? You’re just going to leave me here? In your lab?” Marabeth stopped sorting and looked at the ground around her feet. “I mean,” she picked up a serpentine flotzer and held it up. It flotzed around in her grasp. “What if I start messing around? Find something dangerous?”

KC held a hand out towards her. “Please don’t.”

“I don’t know if I can resist. Besides, even if I said that I wouldn’t touch anything, would you trust me not to?”

KC dropped his arm and began tapping his foot. “No.”

Marabeth shrugged, holding her hands out to either side. “Then you should probably keep an eye on me.” The flotzer flotzed again.

“Alright,” KC said, walking back towards the library. “In you go, then.”

“Nooooo,” Marabeth said, wagging a finger. “I’m not going back in there. There’s nothing in there! No food, no water, just books I can’t read. Besides, what if you never come back? If you lock me in there, I’d die of thirst!”

“Stars above,” KC said. “Do you even know what you’re asking?”

Marabeth nodded. “I’ll even sign a waiver if you like. Disclaiming you of any responsibility should I die horribly down on the surface.”

“I don’t need a waiver! Wha- Why do you even want to go?”

“Are you kidding? When else am I going to have the opportunity to see an alien planet?”



“Isn’t space interesting enough?” KC asked, gesturing around. “Have you ever been to space before?”

“No,” Marabeth replied. “Lots of people have been to space, though. But no one has ever been to an alien *planet*. The moon, sure, but a planet? I’d be the first! It’d be historic! I can name the planet after myself!”

“The planet already has a name.”

“Oh,” Marabeth pursed her lips. “What’s the name?”

KC scrunched his face up.

“Let me guess,” Marabeth said, “you don’t rem-”

“I don’t remember! To the void!” KC ran his hands over the top of his head. “This is a bad idea! The DEM was a bad idea! Coming to this forsaken planet was a bad idea! What bad idea could I possibly have next?” KC pointed at Marabeth. “What if the gravity is so strong it crushes you?”

“How much gravity is there?”

KC huffed. “One point one times my station gravity. Nevermind, you’d be fine.” KC pointed at her again. “You don’t even know the atmospheric composition! How do you know you can breathe there? What if it’s poisonous?”

“I breathe oxygen. But not pure oxygen. I think it needs to be mixed with enough nitrogen or I get high or something. I mean, I breathe fine on your station, so whatever is here seems alright. Besides, I assumed I’d wear a spacesuit.”

“Oxygen,” KC said, placing a hand over his mouth. “It’s good we didn’t go with the ten year plan, then.”

“What do you mean?” Marabeth asked.

“Wait, did you say spacesuit?”

Marabeth furrowed her brow and nodded. “Yeah, I said spacesuit.”

“Stars above,” KC said, shoulders slumping as he leaned back against the wall. “More clothes.”

## Chapter 4

Marabeth tugged at the suit's collar in the doorway of the elevator.

"Something wrong?" KC asked.

"No," Marabeth said, still fiddling with the suit. "It's so snug. I can feel my collar-bone. I thought spacesuits were big and bulky."

"Generally, if one requires protective equipment, it's preferable that one be able to move well in it."

"I suppose that's true." Marabeth studied the floor of the "elevator", remaining in the entrance. KC followed her eyes. It was the same white tile as the rest of his ship, each square neatly outlined in black. Marabeth took a large, awkward step inside, then shuffled around to face the same direction as KC, keeping her feet close together. The double-door slid closed.

Marabeth looked sideways at KC. They were standing very close to one another. She looked back down at the floor, then took a purposeful step to one side, again coming to stand with her feet close together.

"What are you doing?" KC asked. She looked up at him.

"I'm just getting situated," Marabeth said. She glanced at KC's feet and bit her lip, then looked away.

KC looked back at the floor again. Marabeth's feet were fully inside one of the white squares. His own feet straddled two of the black lines separating them. Marabeth again glanced between them.

"Are you avoiding the lines?" KC asked.

"No," Marabeth answered. He wasn't convinced.

“They’re harmless. Do you not have anything like this on Earth?”

“What? Tile? Of course we do.”

“Do you avoid the lines there, then?”

Marabeth bit her lip again, then looked around the elevator. “Can we get moving?”

KC stepped back so that each of his feet was on a different tile, but didn’t intersect with any of the black. Marabeth didn’t look, but he saw a bit of tension drain from her posture.

The walls of the chamber were clear and cylindrical. Through them, KC could see the glowing white panels of the elevator shaft. He reached out and ran a finger down the wall, and the elevator began descending.

The light of the white panels outside slid by, creating a pulsing rhythm of light in the chamber. After a few seconds, the shaft gave way to the black of space as the elevator separated from the station entirely and began its descent. Marabeth leaned towards the wall, placing a hand on it. The planet sprawled out beneath them, the curvature of its atmosphere marked by a halo of reflected starlight. KC followed Marabeth’s eyes as she looked up through the clear dome of the elevator, his station receding above them.

“It’s much bigger than I thought,” she whispered.

“One point two kilometers from bow to stern,” he replied. “Not that it has much of a bow or stern, given its circular shape.”

“You remember something like that, but not your own name.”

KC frowned. She was right. What an odd fact to remember amidst all the fog he’d been searching through. In fact, how did he even know it was correct? It’s not as though he’d measured the station.

Regardless of its size, the station receded rapidly until it was little more than a speck of light above them. Marabeth's eyes became fixed on the horizon of the planet, which rose ever so subtly. The surface was a mesh of greens, sweeping across the planet's surface and fading into one another beneath roiling white clouds. Emerald gave way to seafoam, outlined in juniper and expanding outward to basil and chartreuse. Veins of brown striped the planet as well and mountain ranges ran across it, crested in gray and white. The orb continuously grew in size, expanding out of the void as though it emerged from a great, black pit. KC watched Marabeth drink it in and found himself envious.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" he said.

She looked back at him for a moment, then returned to gazing.

"More than that," she said, bringing her face so close to the clear wall that her helmet clinked against it. "It's indescribable."

"I've seen it so many times . . . well, I guess I've gotten used to it."

"You've been to the surface before?"

"Not this planet, no. But I've been to hundreds of others. I suppose it was stunning once, but now it's just travel time."

"Like a jetliner," Marabeth said. "So fascinating the first time. Then you're just irritated that you have to go through the airport."

Marabeth watched for a while longer, then shuffled around to KC.

"Why aren't there any other people on your station?" she asked.

KC tapped a finger against his thigh. "I've not wanted the company."

"Aren't you lonely though? What about family and friends?"

KC stopped tapping. "They aren't around anymore."

"What do you mean?"

KC looked away from her, out at the perfectly ordinary view.

"My people are all gone," he said.

"Gone?"

"Yes."

"Gone like they left, or gone like . . ." KC watched her struggle to find the words.

"Dead," he finished. "For thousands of years."

"Oh." Marabeth ran a hand up and down her arm. "What happened?"

KC looked back to the mundane planet. "This will take a few hours," he said. "Can't enter the atmosphere too quickly."

Marabeth's jaw flexed. "It's fine if you don't want to talk about it."

"I'm going to sleep for a bit. I'll come back online when we're close to the surface."

*System shutdown initiating.*

"Wait, wha-" Marabeth's voice faded away.

-----

*System rebooting in: 5 . . .*

*4 . . .*

*3 . . .*

*2 . . .*

*1 . . .*

KC awoke to find Marabeth sitting on the ground, facing out toward the rolling green hills surrounding them. They were still hundreds of feet from the surface, but the streaks of brown had revealed themselves as massive trenches cutting between huge fields of some type of grass and expanses of bushes covered in dark green tendril-like appendages. They grasped upwards to the sky and undulated, whether from a breeze or of their own volition KC didn't know. He swung the black case he'd brought around to his front and popped it open, pulling out a nub of chalk.

"I've researched the most common life forms a bit," he said, beginning to draw on the clear wall. Marabeth sat up with a start, then climbed to her feet. KC slid an eye toward her, noting that she still avoided the black lines, even while she'd sat. "The most threatening organism is also the most dominant one. At least, insofar as it alters the environment to do its bidding."

"The most dominant animal you mean?"

KC bobbed his head from side to side. "Close enough."

"You didn't have to shut down like that," Marabeth said. "What if something had happened?"

"Then I would have awoken," KC replied, still drawing. "The experience didn't bore you I hope." Marabeth crossed her arms and shifted her weight to one foot. "They're known as the Dugarons," KC continued. "They are approximately one hundred to one hundred and fifty centimeters in length. Primarily quadrupedal, though they can stand and walk on their back

legs. Their diet consists mostly of the tendril-like bushes you see below us, which are very hard and tough. So, they don't eat meat, but," KC turned to her, chalk still in hand, "very strong bite.

They are moderately intelligent, social, use tools, and have some level of technology, though it's all kept underground. They come to the surface to gather food and other resources. Also," KC tapped his cheek, leaving a dusty smudge of chalk behind, "they're very, ah, cute."

"Cute?" Marabeth asked. "That a scientific term?"

"No, but it's important to know. Every year some alien gets it in their head to visit and take a few home as pets. They do *not* appreciate that. Really not fond of outsiders."

"Like us."

"Exactly," KC replied. "So, if you see one you may be overwhelmed by a desire to approach it. Do not."

"Overwhelmed? Do you find me that impulsive?"

KC's eyes slid over her slowly. "They're *very* cute," he repeated. "Many expeditions to the surface invariably end in disaster. It's one of the reasons almost no one visits anymore. Except for the occasional yahoo."

"I understand," Marabeth said. "Is that one of your glyphs?" She gestured at KC's drawing.

"Yes. This one is for seeking." He put the chalk away and dusted his hands off, then pressed a palm against the glyph. Light coursed through the sigil and the elevator blasted forward, hurtling over bushes, fields, and canyons. KC was unphased, but Marabeth fell back with a yelp, her body pressed against the wall. As her mass caught up to the sudden acceleration



of the elevator, she stumbled back forward, quickly adjusting her feet into the center of two tiles, giving her a wide stance.

“Some warning maybe?” she said.

KC hid a grin, his eyes scanning the horizon as the ground passed by in a blur.

“How does that even work?” she asked.

“I told you,” KC replied, still searching. “Magic.” He could feel her eyes penetrating into his back.

“How fast are we going?” Marabeth looked down at the ground blasting by.

“Not fast enough,” KC said. He turned and held a hand out to Marabeth. “Some warning.”

She reached out and took the hand in both her own. KC pressed against the glyph again, and the elevator shot forward even faster. Marabeth clung to his hand, then stepped forward and wrapped both arms around KC’s own to keep from falling. Several minutes passed and the speed of the elevator continued to climb. The grass, scrubs, and canyons beneath them melded together into a singular green and brown blur. KC continued to scan the horizon silently, until the glyph began to flutter.

“Time to slow down,” he said. The g-force inverted, and Marabeth was pressed towards KC, still grasping on to his arm. Several more minutes passed, and the elevator slowed to a metered trundle. “There we are,” KC said, spying smoke rising in the distance. The elevator finally made its way to a massive chunk of twisted metal nestled in the midst of a field of meter-high grass. There was a long scar of churned dirt and smoking, burnt plant-life along the ground leading up to it. As the elevator sat down, KC spied several dark shapes dart away from

his propulsion unit, disappearing into the greenery. There was a gentle *Ding!* And the double doors opened. KC leaned out, inspecting the area around them.

“You should probably stay on the elevator,” he said, then waded out into the waist-high grass. The ground was wet and springy and his feet sank in up to his ankles.

“Wait,” Marabeth said, stepping out after him. Her own feet squished down, but didn’t disappear. She reached up and wiped at KC’s cheek. “You’ve got chalk on your face.”

“Or, y’know. Just do whatever you want,” KC said as she thumbed at him.

Once Marabeth seemed satisfied she looked around as well. The grass almost came up to her chest. After a moment, she raised her hands into the air, an enormous grin on her face.

“What are you doing?” KC asked.

“I’m the first!” she said, and did a little hop.

*Squish.*

“I’m the first!” she repeated. “The first alien-planet-explorer of the human race!”

“How do you know?” KC asked.

Marabeth’s arms slowly dropped from the air and the grin abated some. “That would be big news, I’d think. I would have heard about it.”

“When you get back to Earth, are you going to tell people what happened to you?”

“I- well, maybe. I don’t know.”

“I know I’m not an expert,” KC said, “but my impression is that your people haven’t had much experience with aliens and the like.”

“No,” Marabeth replied. “They haven’t.”

“And are people who espouse their experiences with aliens generally taken seriously?”

Marabeth's grin dissolved completely. "No," she said.

"Then how do you know this exact thing hasn't happened to someone else, and it's simply that no one believed them?"

Marabeth's features grew irritated. "Why are you such a buzz-kill?"

KC stroked his chin. "I'm a seeker of knowledge and truth," he said, "I think it's important to consider these things."

"Fine," Marabeth said, raising her arms again, this time without the grin. "I'm the first alien-planet explorer *that I know of*. How's that?"

"Sounds perfectly accurate," KC replied. "Now, I'll just go inscribe these runes and we'll be on our way."

KC made his way through the grass toward the still smoking ruin. He glanced behind him to see Marabeth following, her head swiveling around. He rolled his eyes and turned back forward. The crashed propulsion unit towered over him, twenty meters tall and twenty meters wide. He fished into the case for his chalk and began scribbling against its side. He finished a glyph and checked on Marabeth. She was still right behind him, surveying intently. KC moved around the unit, beginning to inscribe another glyph. He placed them at three-meter intervals around the entire circumference of the wreck. The process took about an hour, and through it all, Marabeth didn't say a thing.

KC enjoyed the silence. He'd spent a thousand years on his space station without so much as an interruption. Nothing but the familiar clicks, ticks, groans, hums, thrums, throbs, tittering, tattering, tinkle and whistle. Interspersed with the occasional soft sobbing and the

inexplicable *whoosh*. KC would take a thousand inexplicable *whooshes* over the constant interruption of Marabeth's presence. But, then again, he wasn't bored anymore.

That thought nagged at KC. A tiny nugget that tugged at his mind. A little man that pulled at his ear and screamed into it to acknowledge his presence. As he drew glyph after glyph he began to obsess over the thought. Bored? Bored? He was hardly bored. Why, he was a terribly interesting fellow with a terribly interesting life. Men, women, and non-gender-binary folks across the galaxy could tell you as much. That is, of course, so long as any of them were still living. It had been quite some time since any of them had made a house call. Quite some time indeed.

But bored? No. Nope. No way. No chance. Not even the remotest possibility that he, of all people, was bored before this obstreperous human butted into his life. He drew another glyph, then another, then another, then another, then his chalk broke. He sighed, studying the unfinished glyph. It was the last one. He fished into his case for another stumpy piece of chalk, and found himself turning to check on Marabeth once more.

She was gone.

He looked to the elevator.

Not there either.

"Stars above," he said, dropping the nub. Dark shapes skittered away between the blades of grass.

## Chapter 5

KC made a maladroit run to the elevator, his feet plopping in and out of the muddy ground with wet sucking sounds. He hopped inside and ran a finger upward along a clear wall. The elevator launched up, then steadied itself twenty meters above the grass as KC held his finger steady on one point. He could see lines of dark figures snaking through the grass a hundred meters away, toward a canyon that ran along the edge of the grassy field.

KC pressed his palm to the wall and the elevator moved towards the obscured creatures. As he drew near they darted over the edge of the canyon. KC maneuvered the elevator out over the ledge and watched as the lithe and furry critters climbed down the wall towards a cave opening in the canyon's side. He didn't see Marabeth with them, but the line of Dugarons was already entering through the cave's mouth. He watched them slink inside, then brought the elevator up to the entrance, finding a tunnel that receded into darkness.

KC clattered his fingers against the sides of his head trying to decide what to do. Marabeth was certainly in danger. The prospective Dugaron collectors that went missing over the years never returned from their doomed expeditions. Then again, no bodies were ever recovered either. People just disappeared. It was safe to assume that they'd met their end here on Planet . . . whatever its name was. KC steeled his resolve and pulled a thin white disc from his case. It was a device he called 'the Blank-ety'. He brought the elevator close to the entrance, then slid a finger down the double-doors. They slid open.

KC took a step inside the cave and adjusted his vision. The black rolled away, revealing a long tunnel that sloped downward. The edges of the tunnel were smooth, and grew narrower as

it went. While the formation may have been natural to start, subtle tool marks told stories of Dugaron improvements. KC hunched over and made his way forward.

KC saw shapes skitter away at the edge of his enhanced vision, as though the creatures knew how far he could see. As he grew close he'd see one looking at him from the dark, its eyes glowing as they reflected the tiny amount of light that KC magnified to see. Then, it would dash away. Whether it was the same Dugaron every time, KC did not know, but he was certain that they were scouting him, following his progress down the tunnel. KC was most certainly walking into a trap of some sort. Still, he couldn't turn back.

Well, he could turn back. It was fully within his power to turn around and leave. It would be the easiest thing in the world to retrace his steps, get back into his elevator, and fly off. But that would mean leaving Marabeth to perish at the hands of the Dugarons and whatever mysterious fate awaited those that invaded their territory. He'd be rid of the incessant distraction she created. He also wouldn't have to make any more articles of clothing.

But no. No matter how far removed he was from the social organism he'd once been, he hadn't given up *that* much of his empathy. Just enough of it to stop and consider his options before deciding to march on. Down and down and down into the dark. Deeper and deeper into the bowels of the Dugaron cave. He hunched and shuffled, skirted and slunk along, until the tunnel opened into a cavern.

The cavern was about thirty meters across, circular in shape, and a pool of water sat to KC's left. There were at least a hundred Dugarons in the cavern, with more popping their furry heads out of the water. They turned and appraised him with their big, round eyes. Their bulbous noses quivered as they sniffed in his direction. Their whiskers fluttered, their wide hips

bobbled as they reared back onto their hind legs. Their tiny front paws tugged at the black fur along their chests. Their long necks craned from side to side, their heads swaying as if in some great unseen breeze and the tips of their tiny tongues hung out of the side of their mouths in the dumbest and most profoundly adorable manner imaginable.

Even with all of KC's conditioning and mental modification, he wanted to take one of the Dugarons into his arms and cuddle it violently. Hug it to death. Squeeze one Dugaron at a time until its bones snapped and the life fled from its precious little body, then move on to the next. It was the most uncomfortable feeling KC could remember feeling, and he felt it in spades: Lethal affection.

KC's legs trembled and he steadied himself against a smooth stone wall. The Dugarons sat appraising him and KC tore his eyes from their insurmountably lovable faces, scanning the rest of the chamber. He spotted a figure in the back, wrapped in a mesh of metal wire and struggling against its bonds. It was Marabeth. Her mouth moved, but her radio failed to transmit what she was saying. Whatever she was wrapped in blocked the communication. One of the Dugarons was crawling around on top of her.

KC cleared his throat.

“My dear Dugarons, it would appear that you found my colleague. If you would be so kind as to return her to me, we will be on our way off your lovely planet.”

The Dugarons's heads bobbed and they took shuffling steps towards him, closing the gap through which KC could see Marabeth. KC was overwhelmed by their darling little faces and cast his eyes to the ground. He held the Blank-ety up. The flat white disc began to spin and hover over his hand.

“Please,” he said, “this device is rather valuable and difficult to fabricate. I really don’t want to use it.”

“It is threatening us,” one of the Dugarons squeaked and chittered, “and mean and worried and shaking and looking to the floor.” It waddled forward on its hind legs, standing before the rest of the creatures. “Care and nice and calm and still and proper eye contact. This is what is required.”

KC looked up, watching the central Dugaron. Physically, it was little different from the rest. It did, perhaps, stand a bit straighter than the others. Its features weren’t quite as delightful, now that he thought about it. In fact, KC found that he could stand to look at this one for longer than a few seconds without becoming all wobbly-kneed.

“Of course,” KC said. “I apologize for my rudeness. It’s just that your guests often disappear and never return.”

“There is no disappearing,” the Dugaron said. “They come and land and look and find and try and touch and we take away. It is not required to touch. It is required not to touch. Very bad manners and behaviors and intrusions and no sense of personal space and we always know exactly where the invaders are until they aren’t anywhere at all.”

“I see,” KC said. “We did not come to touch. We came to retrieve a piece of my ship that fell off. We have a terrific sense of- of personal space.”

“And yet you are here and with a disc and it spins and you say not to use it and you seem to use it and you are close and inside and our home is invaded.” The Dugaron puffed out its cheeks. “Words and actions and time and place do not align with philosophy and promises and general demeanor.”



“Yes, but you took my colleague, so I came to retrieve her. That is why I came to your home.”

“Uninvited,” the Dugaron said. “You wander into whomever’s home you wish and threaten and tremble and make poor eye contact and are sneaky and altogether unprofessional. It is required to be professional.”

“Oh,” KC said. “I’m afraid I am unfamiliar with your customs.”

“And so you come and threaten and tremble and make poor eye contact and are sneaky and altogether unprofessional?” the Dugaron said. “No. You find and ask permission and become a guest and enter with said permission and care and make good eye contact and are obvious and professional and, preferably, you bring a gift.”

“A gift?” KC asked. “What sort of gift?”

The Dugaron turned and chittered softly to the others, then turned back to KC.

“A small, yet inexpensive plant, or a decorative piece, or some food in a non-disposable plate that would serve as an excuse for further friendly contact between us when you come to pick it up. Something that you weren’t too put out to acquire or make, so that if you came and arrived and presented it to us and we did not like it and threw it out we would know that you would not mind too much and would not hold it against us and we could still be friendly and have excuses to make further contact and would not be impeded in our relationship.”

Bobble-wobble went the Dugaron’s head.

“A house-warming present, then.” KC nodded. “I’d be happy to bring you one. It’s just that, well, so many people have gone missing on your planet. I assumed that you did not like guests.”

“Assuming we did not like guests and yet you came and threatened and trembled and made poor eye contact-”

“Yes, and I was very unprofessional. I am very sorry. Let me make it up to you. If you would give Marabeth back to me, I would be more than happy to bring you an appropriate house-warming present and do things properly.”

“You do not *leave* and come back and bring a gift. You come and bring a gift and leave and come back and bring a gift. A gift is brought every time you leave and come back and to come without one is very impolite and bad for our ongoing relationship.”

“Then I will come back with *two* gifts,” KC said, smiling. “Three gifts, even!”

The Dugaron’s head rocked back. “A gift and a gift?” it asked. “A gift and a gift *and* a gift?” Stubby fingers picked at the fur on its belly. “But if you were allowed to come and have no gift and then leave and then bring a gift and a gift then everyone must be allowed to come and have no gift and then leave and then bring a gift and a gift and then everyone would do that and it would be chaos and disorder.”

“But certainly you could allow it when we’ve only just met? I did not, after all, know about the gift. My people do not normally bring gifts, they are-” KC tapped his cheek, “they are an unprofessional species. But, you could help me to change that.”

“We are familiar with lying and deceit and tricks and I do not believe you. I think you do not respect us and it is a common problem that other races do not respect us and so it is important that we teach them to respect us when they come and do things such as you two have done.” The Dugaron puffed out its chest.

“But what did Marabeth do?” KC asked, gesturing to the back of the cavern. The Dugaron turned and appraised Marabeth.

“What did that one do?” the lead Dugaron asked. The entire group of them turned and looked to a lone Dugaron at the back, prodding Marabeth through the wire netting. It looked up and froze.

“And . . . and . . . and,” it stuttered.

“And what?” the lead Dugaron asked.

“Dooga-Russ,” it said to the leader. “Cute and soft and pleasant.” The creature shrugged.

“What is Dooga-Russ?” KC asked.

“I am Dooga-Russ,” the lead Dugaron said. It puffed its cheeks out again. “Dooga-Ton! Cute and soft and pleasant?” The Dugaron in the back, Dooga-Ton if KC understood things properly, nodded. “This is not a thing that it has done!” Dooga-Russ said. “Those are things that it is! We do not take for ‘what is’ we take for ‘what is done’ and you have taken for ‘what is’ and not for ‘what is done!’”

“I am sorry, Dooga-Russ,” Dooga-Ton said, cowering.

“Unprofessional and unprofessional, all of us.” Dooga-Russ huffed and looked up at KC. Dooga-Russ marched back and forth, its cheeks puffing in and out as it thought. It did this for several minutes. KC kept his mouth shut and let the Dugaron think. Finally, it stopped and eyed KC sideways. “A solution outside of protocol is in order,” Dooga-Russ said, “and we will not be happy that it is like this but you will be happy that it is like this.”

“What solution is that?” KC asked.

“Coming to our home and bringing a gift and with proper eye contact is obvious and professional and not doing so is not required. What else is not required is to take for ‘what is’ rather than ‘what is done’ and so on both sides we are hidden and shameful and on both sides we have been unprofessional and so to become professional we must each amend and apologize and make with gifts given. Your gift shall be this creature and its presence and our taking of it and our gift will be the return of this creature and its presence and your forgetting of our taking.”

“That sounds very good,” KC said. “And professional,” he added.

“And Dooga-Ton!” Dooga-Russ said, marching toward the Dugaron next to Marabeth. “You are now the one who has touched and touching is not required and it is required not to touch and you know this and now you will be the one who is taken.”

“Taken?” Dooga-Ton asked. Dugarons on either side of Dooga-Ton grabbed his arms and began dragging him away toward the pool.

“Taken and fed to the pit and you will join the ones that you yourself have thrown down there and you will know that it is for ‘what is done’ and not ‘what is.’” Dooga-Russ said.

“No!” Dooga-Ton said. “No and no and no and please and no and!”

The Dugaron guards puffed their cheeks out into great balls and they pulled Dooga-Ton down into the water.

“Mister Dooga-Russ,” KC said. “I hope you don’t feel that you should punish, erm, Dooga-Ton on our account. It was all just a big misunderstanding.”

“This is not for you and it is for us and Dooga-Ton and all those who watch will know better that they should not take for ‘what is.’”

“I see,” KC said.

Several of the other Dugarons set to freeing Marabeth of the mesh. Her voice crackled over the radio into KC's ear.

"What's happening?" she asked. "I can't see a thing!"

"You've been taken to a dark cave, but I have remedied a mutual misunderstanding," KC replied.

"KC, you're here! You speak their language?" Marabeth asked. "I couldn't hear much except some squeaking and the like."

"I speak all the languages," KC replied. "Come along then and we'll get out of here."

"Ok, I'll try. Which direction are you?"

"Walk forward and you'll do just fine."

Marabeth began to make her way through the crowd of Dugarons, waving her hands in front of her as she moved. The Dugarons ducked and avoided her grasp as she bumped through. Then, a squeaky voice bellowed out from the tunnel behind KC.

"Dooga-Russ!" it yelled. "Do you intend to let these intruders walk free and go and return to their ship and to their lives and to tell everyone and everything that we are small and foolish and not to be taken seriously?" it asked.

KC turned to see another Dugaron emerge from the depths of the corridor. It was small, even for a Dugaron, standing under a meter in height. It had a white patch of fur circling one of its eyes and, KC realized with freshly wobbling knees, it was absolutely the most adorable Dugaron of them all. So tiny, so waddling, and with a seriousness that belied its diminutive stature and winsome characteristics. This new, mind-numbingly enchanting Dugaron was

crowded on either side by a multitude of even more Dugarons. The escorts walked on all fours down the tunnel, eyes scanning the crowd inside the chamber.

“Rugga-Tunk,” Dooga-Russ said. “This is not your home and it is not your place to ask what I am doing with my guests and I do not see that you have brought a gift.”

The white-eyed Rugga-Tunk stopped and looked KC up and down.

“You are the one from the ship and you were above us and now you are here,” Rugga-Tunk said. “But I do not recognize the one with you and she looks like something else that is not like you and separate and different completely.”

“You know about my space station?” KC asked. Rugga-Tunk looked up at him and squeaked loudly. KC imagined it must have been a scoff of some sort. No translation was forthcoming.

“You see, my fellow Ruggas,” Rugga-Tunk said, turning to the Dugarons moving into the cave. “They do not respect us and they think down upon us and they do not even recognize that we are knowing of what is above the sky and that others live there and come down from it.” The new Dugarons spread out to either side of Rugga-Tunk as it spoke, beginning to encircle the Dugarons in the cavern. KC found their movements sinister. Suddenly, their divine cuteness became something altogether unsettling.

Marabeth still wandered blind, waving her hands about. The Dugarons ignored her in favor of Rugga-Tunk and his horde. Marabeth’s hand groped at one of their scalps and it batted her hand away.

“What’s going on?” Marabeth asked.

“There appears to be some sort of clan dispute,” KC said.

Dooga-Russ walked forward and ushered KC to one side. It stood very close to Rugga-Tunk and clasped its hands behind its back, looking down its bulbous nose at the smaller Dugaron.

“I have said it once and now I say it again that you, Rugga-Tunk, have not presented to me a gift and I have not seen one for you to offer.” Dooga-Russ’s tone was icy.

“I will tell you then, Dooga-Russ, that I have a gift for you and it is here in my hand.” Rugga-Tunk held out a paw, concealing whatever it considered to be the gift inside a fist. Dooga-Russ brought a paw around and held it open. Rugga-Tunk slapped the gift into Russ’s paw with a wet *smack*. Dooga-Russ looked down at the ‘gift’ in disgust and cast it to the ground, where it splattered. A foul odor filled the air.

“Rugga-Tunk!” Dooga-Russ said. “You are not invited and yet you are here and with all your Ruggas and with a gift that is not a gift and you are being very, and very, and very, *unprofessional.*”

Rugga-Tunk stepped forward until his snout was nearly touching the taller Dugarons’s.

“And you would let these outsiders flee,” Rugga-Tunk said, “and they have desecrated us and befouled us and they will go and tell everyone how the Dugarons are and they will say that we are small and weak and foolish and I say, in the face of that, dear Dooga-Russ, that I do not care if I am *unprofessional.*”

Dooga-Russ squeaked in alarm. The Doogas, all on their hindlegs, whipped their heads back as Rugga-Tunk said this. The Ruggas, every one of which was on all-fours, bowed their front legs and tensed their hindquarters.

“Stars above,” said KC.

“I still don’t know what’s going on,” said Marabeth.

The cavern erupted into a flurry of teeth and fur.



## Chapter 6

“Marabeth, stay put,” KC said, wading toward her through the tumbling, scrabbling Dugarons around him. She turned from side to side, her eyes searching through the darkness. A pair of wrestling Dugarons rolled into her legs making her stumble and she tripped over another pair.

The Dugarons clawed and bit at one another, their faces contorted and twisted in an adorable frenzy of rage. The pair Marabeth fell over rolled on top of her, kicking and swiping at each other. Marabeth tried to cover her face, but her gloved hands bonked against her helmet. She settled for turning over and curling up as the Dugarons continued to fight over her prone body.

“Seize the invaders!” Rugga-Tunk yelled. “Capture and hold and deliver them to me and they will know that the Dugarons are not precious and stupid and cute, but that we are fierce and competent and- ungh!” He was tackled by a Dooga.

But the message got across. Several of the attacking Ruggas pushed, twisted, and disengaged themselves from their Dooga defenders, rushing toward KC. KC clutched the Blank-ety in a fist as he was bombarded by fluffy bodies. The Ruggas gripped his arms and legs; one climbed atop his shoulders and grabbed his neck with padded fingers.

“Stop that!” KC said, reaching up and pulling one from his arm. It looked up at him in surprise as he gingerly tossed it into the mass of fighting that surrounded them. He plucked another from his leg and held it up. “This isn’t going to work out for you. I’d appreciate it if you left me out of this.”

The creature reached back and clawed at KC's hands. KC rolled his eyes and tossed the Dugaron away. He looked down at the Rugga gripping his right arm. It clamped down onto him with its teeth.

"Really?" KC said. He gripped the creature along the sides of its jaw and pinched inwards, forcing its mouth open. He thrust it into the crowd as well. KC ignored the two Ruggas still gripping him and stepped over rolling bundles of warring Dugarons toward Marabeth. Several more Ruggas had her by the arms and were dragging her toward the cavern's entrance.

"Stop that!" KC commanded without effect. A group of Ruggas rushed in between himself and Marabeth, trying to tackle KC. He let them grab hold, then continued to move toward Marabeth. He didn't want to hurt the creatures. The one on his chest gripped a plate of metal in its mouth and raked its back claws against his belly ferociously. Its cheeks puffed and it looked up at him with narrowed eyes, spittle and foam running down its lips.

KC absentmindedly reached up and stroked the Dugaron's head as he continued forward. So adorable.

More and more Ruggas ran towards him and latched on. KC was covered in them. A mass of dark fur that writhed and bit and scratched at him. He took lumbering steps toward Marabeth, when the dozen or so Ruggas on his legs finally got the better of him. He fell.

KC tried to go down as softly as he could, but several of the Ruggas along his back grunted and squealed as he landed on them with his substantial weight. They wiggled and squirmed, trying to get out from under him, but yet more Ruggas piled on top of KC. There was only one choice left to him.

He opened his fist and Commanded the Blank-ety to activate.

The white disk leapt off his palm and began to spin furiously in the air. An orb of white light expanded out from its center, bathing the cavern in its soft glow. *Huuuzzzzrrrrnnnn!* went the Blank-ety as it charged up. *Huuuzzzzrrrrnnnn-Blank!*

A separate white orb popped up and out of the central sphere. Several nearby Dugarons stopped fighting and turned to look for the source of the strange sound and light. They watched it in quiet confusion. Doogas and Ruggas looked at one another, momentarily forgetting their struggle. The orb whipped around in the air, looking for its target.

*Which one? Which one?* It asked KC.

*All of them!* He thought.

*Hzzzrrrrnnnn-allofthem. Blank!*

The smaller glowing orb whipped across the cavern to a dumbfounded Dugaron and struck its center mass. The creature looked down, patting its chest, then looked up unphased.

“Confused and concerned and-” it said. Then, it was encompassed in a sphere of white light, growing from his center to swallow him up. A split second later the sphere collapsed in on itself with a *Pop!* and the Dugaron was gone. The device had temporarily sent it into a pocket dimension where it would be safely extricated from the combat for a few minutes.

“Rugga-Kirn?” one of the nearby Dugarons asked, swiping at the air where his companion had stood.

“All of you! All of you!” the blank-ety cried out. The central sphere spun until it was a flat disk again. *Hzzzrrrrnnnn-Blankety! Blankety Blankety Blank-Blank!* It roared as dozens more spheres shot rapid-fire off the main disk. They whipped out in all directions striking

Dugarons which blinked away and into an alternate dimension with a series of sharp *Pop!*s. Dugarons scattered off of KC and ran away from the device. He climbed back to his feet and marched over to Marabeth. The Blank-ety followed him, continuing to hurl white orbs at the scattering Dugarons.

KC pushed a few stunned Ruggas off of Marabeth and picked her up, slinging her over a shoulder.

“This is outside of my comfort zone,” she muttered.

“Hold on!” KC said, then bounded towards the tunnel. Dugarons leapt from his path. Several were able to dodge the flying white orbs. They struck the ground, spheres growing and popping out of existence to leave round holes in the floor of the cavern.

A high-pitched scream filled the cavern.

“Duuugggaaarrrrooonns!” Rugga-Tunk squealed in an ear-splitting frequency. His chest heaved up and down and he took a deep breath, another word shrieking from his throat: “Combaaaaaaat!”

Ruggas and Doogas alike, no longer fighting, turned and threw their own heads back, squeals erupting from them.

“Dugarons!” they cried in unison, “Combat!”

KC made it into the tunnel, the Blank-ety continuing to hurl reality-displacing spheres at the Dugarons around him. It cleared the way ahead of him, as yet more Ruggas ran down the tunnel towards the cavern. Behind him, the white-eyed Rugga-Tunk led a charge of the remaining cavern Dugarons after him. They continued to shriek the words, their hostility for one another forgotten.

*Tired. Tired.* The blank-ety thought to KC.

*No time for sleep yet!* KC thought back.

The Blank-ety grumbled but continued to throw spheres, though considerably slower.

*Come on!* KC thought. *You should be able to do better than this!*

*No exercise,* the Blank-ety replied. *Slept for too long. Out of shape.* The thoughts somehow managed to sound winded.

KC Burst out of the tunnel's mouth, back onto the ledge where his elevator hovered. The light temporarily blinded him as he switched back to normal vision.

"Oh my," he said as he surveyed the canyon. Thousands of black dots crawled out from caves all along the canyon's edge. Tens of thousands. Echoing off the walls came the reverberated phrase, repeated a hundred thousand times.

*"Dugarons-rons-rons-rons! Combat-bat-bat-bat!"*

Doogas and Ruggas spilled from the tunnel behind him, still led by Rugga-Tunk who dodged a sluggish sphere shot by the Blank-ety. It struck the Dugaron behind him, who blinked away. KC hopped into his elevator and quickly threw the double doors closed. He swiped a finger up and they shot away into the sky. Below them, Dugarons climbed the canyon's sides in force, rushing out onto the grassy plateau.

*Done now.* The Blank-ety thought. It bobbed and drooped, then fell back into KC's waiting hand.

He sat Marabeth down, who turned and gaped at the horde of Dugarons below. She turned back to KC, eyes wide.

"KC," she said.

“Yes?” he asked, swiping along the edge of the elevator and pressing his hand against the glyph. Soon, they were flying over the grass, dark shapes skittering through it behind them.

“A day or so ago I was at home, working. I had a lovely cup of sleepy time tea and I was listening to ASMR and-”

“What’s ey es em are?”

“People whisper in your ears and scratch on things and it’s very relaxing.”

“If you say so.”

“Never mind that. The thing is, I was safe and secure and maybe I had a nine millimeter just in case someone broke in, but it had never happened and I lived in a very good neighborhood.”

“What, er, what exactly is your point?” KC asked, eyes locked on to the propulsion unit a hundred meters away.

“My point is I have now been abducted by aliens. Twice. In a day or so.” She nodded and held up two fingers. “Twice.”

“I see,” KC said, not really seeing at all. He maneuvered the elevator back to the surface, glancing back at the dark shapes in the distance. The elevator let out another *Ding!* and KC bounded out.

“What are you doing?” Marabeth asked. KC turned, stumbling forward a few steps.

“We still have to launch this thing,” he said, pointing at the propulsion unit.

“Oh,” Marabeth said, stepping out after him.

KC tapped a finger against his thigh, thinking to tell her to stay inside the elevator, but there wasn't time for an argument. He rushed over to the engine and swept up the nub of chalk he'd dropped earlier.

"I should have listened," Marabeth said. KC began drawing the final glyph.

"Yes, yes. Listening is good," he replied.

"You said they were cute and I thought you were being hyperbolic. But when I saw one peeking out at me from the grass. I just. I don't know. I had to get closer." Marabeth stepped away from KC, wading through the grass in the direction of the canyon. "I had to touch it. To feel its fur and hold it and I felt like that little girl from the Looney Toons. The one with the cat."

"Mm-hmm," KC said. He glanced at her, then quickly stepped away from his work. He grabbed her by the shoulders and marched her back to the propulsion unit. She resisted slightly, tugging back in the direction of the canyon.

"I just- I just- Can't I just?"

"No, you may not," KC replied, continuing the glyph. The sounds of the Dugaron shrieking grew closer.

"Listen to it," Marabeth said. "Isn't it lovely?"

KC wondered if they were hearing the same thing. The Dugaron calls sounded like twisting metal and rusty nails cutting through glass. She took a step back towards the grass and KC turned, placing a hand on her shoulder and pressing her against the side of the engine. She reached up and tugged at his hand, eyes staring longingly into the distance. The shrieks were close now.

“So beautiful,” she said. “Just look at them.”

KC drew the final line of the glyph and turned to follow Marabeth’s gaze. Dark shapes filled the grass around them, blocking the way back to the elevator. The Dugarons stalked closer to them, now whispering the words. “*Dugarons. Combat.*”

KC Reached into his black case and pulled out the Blank-Blank. It was a lithe square which flopped up onto his hand, its corners marching like little feet. Its flat body leaned back and looked up at him.

*Hey KC, what’s up?* It thought. *Long time no-*

*Go! Go!* KC thought.

*Uck.* the Blank-Blank thought. *Rude.* It turned its planar body towards the Dugarons. *Aren’t those things just hideous?* The Blank-Blank remarked.

The Blank-Blank hopped out of KC’s hand and grew in size in a massive burst of white light. It lumbered up, four meters in height and equally wide.

*Ok, time to go away little dudes.*

The plane of white shot forward. It hurled through grass and Dugaron alike, sucking them all up and away, leaving a huge trench in the dirt behind it as it rushed past the elevator and flew off into the distance. Then, it stopped and began retracing its path, sucking up a few more Dugarons who’d stepped into the trench it left behind. It came to a halt right where it had started.

*There’s one.* It thought.

“What are you doing?!” Marabeth cried out. “You’re killing them!”



“No,” KC said as he held out a hand to the large white square and turned. The Blank-Blank turned with him as KC pointed it at another line of Dugarons approaching through the grass. “I’m just sending them to another dimension for a little bit. Same as the ones in the cave.”

*Go!* he commanded.

*Okie doke.*

The square shot forward, sucking up dozens more Dugarons as it fled into the distance. This time, they were smart enough not to step into the trench it left behind as it shot back.

*All done,* it thought, then shrank back down and plopped into KC’s hand. He stuffed it back into the case and turned, slapping a hand against the final glyph. More Dugarons sniffed at the trenches and began slowly slinking toward KC and Marabeth. They were hesitant, cautious, not wanting to meet the same mysterious fate as their companions.

“Dugarons,” one hissed.

“Combat,” whispered another.

As KC held his hand against the side of the propulsion unit he pressed his eyes shut and channeled energy into the spell. The energy flowed from his arm and down his fingers then crackled up and out, connecting the glyphs. A massive translucent dodecahedron of amber energy formed around the unit and KC stepped away. The engine lumbered up out of the ground, dirt raining down off its bottom and it began to rumble away.

KC turned to see more Dugarons closing in around them, no longer deterred by the Blank-Blank’s show of force. KC reached into his case and pulled out his final gadget: the cylindrical Blank.

“HEYCAPTAIN!” it shouted, the words spilling out without pauses or breaks. The Dugarons flinched at the enormous, booming voice. “WHAT’S GOIN’ ON YA’ NEED ME?” it rambled off rapid fire.

“Come here,” he said to Marabeth. She looked dreamily from the Dugarons to KC, her eyes drooping.

“No,” she said, her voice low and husky.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I’m going with . . . them.” Marabeth stepped toward the nearest Dugaron. KC reached out and grabbed Marabeth’s arm. She struggled against him, but he pulled her to him easily, holding the Blank between them.

“JUST SAY WHEN!” it rattled off.

“This is going to be very strange,” KC said to Marabeth. She ignored him, reaching a hand out toward the Dugaron. They continued to close the distance. They were a few meters away. “Just hold onto me and remember that this is only temporary. It will only last a moment.”

“What?” Marabeth asked, her voice sleepy.

KC let go of her arm and pressed a hand against her helmet, turning her away from the Dugaron to face him.

“Just try not to think too hard about what’s happening,” he said.

The Dugarons were close. They were almost close enough to reach out with their tiny paws and touch the two of them. But it is not required to touch, KC thought. It is required *not* to touch.

“When!” KC shouted.

The world turned upside down.

It twisted and turned and stretched until the universe was spread out into a circle before KC's eyes. He could see in all directions at once.

The ground

The sky

The Dugarons crawling over them.

Slinking and

sniffing

where he and Marabeth used to be.

The local

star

hung at the center of his vision. No matter where he turned his head the golden-orange entity hovered before him.

There was no depth of field, no perception of distance. All things that were pressed up against KC's vision like they were painted on the surface of his scanners.

He crossed his eyesHe crossed his eyes

He crossed his eyes

He crossed his eyes

He crossed his eyes

He crossed his eyes

But only he doubled. There were two KC's, but only one universe. The universe crossed *him*.

He found the elevator and swam towards it -- ?both of him, neither of him? -- clutching Marabeth to them/him/it. He didn't have to look to see HER. SHE was there. SHE was always there. SHE would always be there. This moment was eternal. Locked into its simple location more firmly than words etched into steel, more eternal than a hydrogen atom. Never doomed to destruction, never blessed with change. They could stay there. Never moving, never changing, never growing. Order inchoate.

Perhaps they did stay there.

They stayed there.

They were never there.

That blip was as ephemeral as it was everlasting.

KC willed them to the next moment, then the next. An eternal series of infinitely divisible snippets crashing across space and time, laughing in the face of those two concepts.

Dugarons passed like snapshots. Their reality was shadows on the wall. They were bound to themselves like prisoners. Their minds strapped down and forced to watch as eternity pipped past. Each Dugaron was an infinity of Dugarons. None two alike, but each a single piece of a snake of Dugarons rolling through the ether. Everything, every blade of grass, every rock, every bush, every canyon, every planet, every star, every galaxy, every universe flowed through it like a rushing stream.

Everything except for KC.

Everything except for Marabeth.

Everything except for Blank.

They alone were

singular.

And they moved as all else was frozen. All else was stretched. All else was wrapped around itself, forming a chaotic ball of beautiful symmetry and disordered harmony.

KC stuttered across. He'd gathered his double back to himself. It wouldn't do to have two of him. He only hoped Marabeth didn't make *that* mistake.

The elevator grew near, despite never moving. It was just as far away as it ever had been. Yet it was closer than it possibly could be. KC and the elevator were one. Part of a single entity: part of EVERYTHING.

KC no longer wished to be part of EVERYTHING. He was happy to be himself again. Not that EVERYTHING was a bad place to be. EVERYTHING was a perfectly lovely place. EVERYTHING was also horrible. EVERYTHING was, well, everything. It was all things. The only thing EVERYTHING was not, was nothing. There really wasn't nothing. EVERYTHING was everywhere. The *idea* of nothing was part of EVERYTHING, but actual nothingness wasn't. Some blip of KC reminded him that if he was EVERYTHING for too long, he'd never be able to become himself again. The elevator was here and there and up and away and close and one with him. It was good enough. So KC spent eternity telling the Blank that they were good. It was time. He told the Blank forever, but he never told the blank. The Blank understood. The Blank was part of EVERYTHING. It always was and always would be. The Blank was not a thing unto itself. The Blank was as close to nothing as anything could be, when it was part of EVERYTHING. And so, the Blank could understand what KC was getting at. Blank shrank KC and Marabeth back down.

Infinitely.

Infinitely.

Down.

Down.

Up.

Singularly.

Singularly.

They were no longer the only thing that wasn't infinite, and yet they took their proper place once more as finite creatures. The Blank looked on, satisfied, then placed the two of them into the reality buffer.

The two of them were now in a white place. Everything, everywhere, in all directions was simply white. Marabeth collapsed to the ground. KC stood rigidly, trying to collect himself. He forced his head to turn and, for a moment, he thought he was still EVERYTHING. There was no horizon, no shadows, no landmarks, nothing to indicate that he was settled into a fixed point. Nothing save for Marabeth's figure. As KC turned his head back and forth, her position in space moved appropriately. He was seeing as he should. She was not fixed. She was mutable.

"COUNTDOWNONMYMARK!" the Blank yelled.

KC jumped.

"What?" Marabeth asked, still lying on the ground. "What? What? What?!" she asked, pounding her fist against the ground with each question.

"No time," KC answered. He bent stiffly and held out a trembling hand to her. She took it and climbed to her feet, shaking.

"MARK!" the Blank yelled.

"Ok, Marabeth," KC said. "The floor of the elevator is thirty-one centimeters up from our feet." Marabeth looked down at her boots, then back up at KC.

"Wh-what?" she repeated.

"We'll have to hop. Don't want our legs stuck in the ground. No, that wouldn't be good."

Marabeth's lips formed an 'O'. She blinked. "What?"

"On three then," KC said. "Just hop on three."

"On three," Marabeth parroted. He hoped she understood. He placed his hands gently under her arms. He was prepared to force her up if she wasn't ready. KC bent his knees. Marabeth followed suit. She stared into his eyes. Wide. Open. Pupils dilated. Breath ragged. The front of her helmet fogged up a bit with every haggard breath.

"One, two, three!" KC jumped and Marabeth jumped with him. As they did so, the moment slowed to a crawl. They hovered in the air. The distant edge of the white space was no longer white. It was a mixture of greens and browns and blacks. It rushed towards them, gaining speed as they continued to slow. As the colors grew close they rushed out in all directions, surrounding them above and below. The colors smushed down onto themselves, and images began to form. The figures of Dugarons, tall grass, mud. Reality crashed down onto them, and their feet landed with a click on the tiled floor of the elevator.

Dugarons turned from outside the elevator, frozen in shock for a moment at the sight of the pair inside. Rugga-Tunk was there, the white patch around his eye emphasizing how bloodshot it had become. Tunk scabbled against the side of the elevator and the other Dugarons followed suit.

KC swiped his finger around in a circle and the elevator rose and spun. The Dugarons were cast off, save for Rugga-Tunk, whose padded paws somehow clung to the smooth sides of the device. Finally, with a bassy squeak, his fingers slid down the elevator's side, and he fell away, out of view.

KC and Marabeth floated up, hearing nothing inside the elevator save for their own thoughts.

KC thought about how uncomfortable it was to use the Blank.

Marabeth simply thought: '*What?*'



## Chapter 7

Strump dropped out of Secondary hyperspace in sector nine-nine-one-five and ran a blast-scan of the area, then programmed a deeper Second scan to follow. He watched as his screens populated themselves with small blips of colored light and blocky symbols. He twisted the lashes along his fourth and fifth eyes as he awaited the results.

Strump was very familiar with sector nine-nine-one-five and so far the results of the scans were completely ordinary. Thirty-eight stars, one hundred and seven planets, a geriatric nebula, and thirty-eight million nine-hundred-thousand and seventy-one chunks of rock large enough to be considered consequential. Exactly one planet hosted traditional life forms -- life worthy of Dogma protection, that is -- and above said planet was a single space station inhabited by exactly one non-traditional life form.

It was a robot that insisted that it was a cyborg.

Strump cared very little for the distinction between cyborg and robot. He found the differing definitions provided by the Dogma Integrity Command to be redundant and, had it been up to Strump, he would have merged them into one.

Dogma Integrity Command defined a cyborg thusly:

*'An organic lifeform with synthetic components.'*

--Protocol Two, Section Two, Lifeforms, subsection (a)(i)(III)(2).

This definition was, of course, strictly useless. One had to refer to the Big Compendium of Protocol Two Classifications [heretofore BCPTC] for further definitions; definitions of what

was 'organic', definitions of what was 'synthetic', etc. Of particular note and subject to a great deal of debate (and which received modification upon each new election cycle) were the words 'an' and 'with.' Each term contained within those definitions was then further broken down and subject to additional interpretation in the Biggest Compendium of Protocol Two Classifications [heretofore BrCPTC].

A robot, on the other hand, was defined as:

*'A synthetic lifeform, which might incorporate organic components.'*

--Protocol Two, Section Two, Lifeforms, subsection (a)(i)(III)(37).

Again, one had to refer to the BCPTC and subsequently the BrCPTC to properly understand the meaning of each discrete term within the above definition. It also paid to consult the BtCPTC<sup>1</sup> and, further, *Condalin's handheld guide to 'what the h\*ck is that?'*

There was, however, a single *practical* difference between a robot and a cyborg. Robots did not receive Dogma protection. Cyborgs, however, did. As one might imagine the definitions were the source of a great deal of litigation. This was further compounded by the fact that robots had no rights. A species defined as robot could not, therefore, bring suit to have its classification amended to that of cyborg. A species first had to sue to determine whether it were actually a robot or a cyborg in order to qualify for the legal right to challenge its classification as a robot. If it were determined that the species was in fact a cyborg, it was then allowed to proceed with its suit to have its classification changed. Assuming, that is, that the government

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<sup>1</sup> The Biggest Compendium of Protocol Two Classifications.

did not file an appeal challenging the ruling, which it invariably did. If the species were successful and allowed to challenge its classification, *that* lawsuit led to an entirely *separate* hearing on whether the species were a robot or a cyborg.

There were currently nine-hundred and sixty-two such cases pending before the Dogma Integrity Command Council, the oldest of which had been kicking around for the last seven-thousand eight-hundred and fifty-six years. The attorney's fees in that case consumed the entire planetary economic output of the species in question. A situation that would have been deemed a humanitarian<sup>2</sup> crisis of the highest order, had they not all been robots.

This all boiled down to one important fact: Robots were out of luck.

So how did a species get classified as a robot? The Dogma Integrity Command reserved the right to initially classify any species it discovered. That power was then delegated to the individual members of the DIC who engaged in species discovery.

Strump was a proud member of the Dogma Integrity Command. Strump also engaged in species discovery. It was Strump's pleasure to classify every organism he discovered with any

-- ANY --

synthetic components as a robot.<sup>3</sup>

This handily overcame the need for separate definitions in Strump's opinion. And, given that Strump had read the entirety of Section Two of Protocol Two, the pertinent sections of the BCPTC, the BrCPTC, and the BtCPTC, Strump was confident that his classifications were

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<sup>2</sup> The root of this word, Human, should be ignored, as this is a loose translation of the appropriate term. Ironically, Humans would not qualify for any 'humanitarian' relief in the DIC. See FN 3, *infra*.

<sup>3</sup> It may be of interest to the reader that Humans had been 'discovered' by Strump and were therefore classified as robots. --*Strump's Accounts*, Volume XI, Sec's 9a0-9s0-9w0 through 9z0-9x0-9t0.

accurate. Strump had not, however, read *Condalin's handheld guide to 'what the b\*ck is that?'*, which was a shame. It really was a terrific read.

Strump's console identified the source of the unlicensed quantum tunnel he'd been sent to investigate. It was the robot's space station. Further, Strump's Second scan showed that there was not *one* robot aboard the space station, but *Two*. To top it off, they were returning from what appeared to be an unauthorized expedition to the surface of planet Dugaron. The Dugarons were *not* robots. The Dugarons were entitled to Dogma protection.

Strump began his descent into the gravity well of the Dugaron planetary system, then pulled up the quarantine paperwork and began filling it out.

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“What I am able to do is convert matter into energy and energy into matter,” KC said as he and Marabeth stepped out of the elevator. “The Blanks are devices I made which take matter and convert it temporarily into a small amount of light. That is, they were temporarily displaced from our perceived reality and placed into an alternate dimension. Well, that's not exactly correct.” KC shrugged. “It doesn't matter. All of those Dugarons will be popping back into their material forms at any moment.”

“But what happened to *us*?” Marabeth asked. She plopped her helmet off and ruffled her hair.

“The very same thing with one minor difference. The Blank allows me to control where we re-materialize. You essentially just experienced reality from the perspective of a beam of light.”

“But if you were to convert matter into energy like you’re saying, wouldn’t that, you know, create a nuclear explosion or something?”

KC nodded and began digging through a pile of junk for his can of sealant. “Sort of. But I can take matter and convert it into a disproportionately small amount of energy. I can also take energy and convert it into a disproportionately large amount of matter.” He walked and plopped the sealant on a workbench. Marabeth followed behind him.

“But doesn’t that violate the law of conservation of energy?”

KC turned and placed his hands on Marabeth’s shoulders.

“Marabeth,” he said, “what part of *magic* do you not understand?”

She looked between KC’s green eyes for awhile. “All of it?”

KC sighed and let his hands drop. He turned back to the canister of sealant and began twisting a valve along its top. There was a pop and a quick hiss as KC breached the canister’s internal plug and a bit of pink foam sprouted from the end of an attached hose. KC hefted it over his shoulder.

“Look, if it makes you feel any better I can’t do it unless I have a proper magical charge. Think of that as filling in the gaps for your,” he waved his free hand in the air, “conservation of energy stuff.”

“Why would that make me feel better?”

KC nodded. A dollop of pink stuff dripped onto the floor. "It's not like I'm obliterating the laws of physics. I'm taking shortcuts. There are still rules, they're just," he tapped a copper finger against his thigh, "grey and fuzzy."

"Like a squirrel."

"Sure." KC walked past her and toward the now defunct hydroponics lab. Marabeth followed him, stepping carefully between the piles of debris, busted projects, and black lines. KC stopped and eyed her. She bumped into him.

"Marabeth, I'm going to re-seal the breaches around the recently re-attached propulsion unit. There will be no atmosphere and I've disabled the gravity in the pertinent section. There is no doubt that you have zero experience with working in a vacuum, microgravity, or participating in extravehicular activity. As such, following me would be inordinately dangerous which, I'm sure, means you will insist on coming. You may not, however."

Marabeth took a breath and looked around the chaotic workshop. "Ok," she said and made her way over to a nearby pile. She hefted a shelf back upright, then plucked a gray plate off the ground. It was engraved with complex geometric patterns interlaced with a semi-transparent glowing purple material. Marabeth looked it over, then placed it on the shelf. She then moved on to the next object, a cracked prism leaking orange goo.

KC set the canister down.

"Just, stop for a moment." He took the prism from her hands and tossed it back down to the floor. "Some of this stuff is toxic." KC moved through the lab and made his way to the library. He clapped his hands together and let out a high pitched whistle. The dust that covered

everything in the room from wall to wall shot up into clouds, then spiraled and twisted around KC. He walked back into the main lab and gestured broadly at the room.

“Digest anything that’s broken. Leave anything that’s not,” he said.

The swarms of dust spread out and swooped down onto the mess. Soft white noise filled the chamber. Like sand running through an hourglass. KC walked back to his canister of sealant and hefted it again.

“It wasn’t dust?” Marabeth asked.

“No. Engineered microorganisms called Nanitians. They’ll eat just about anything. But, I’ve trained them quite well. They shouldn’t eat through the ship’s hull. Or you for that matter.”

“Why would you put that thought in my head?”

KC smirked. “Give them an hour and anything that might corrode through your gloves or harm you via skin contact will be gone. Then, you can organize if you feel you must. Just handle everything gently and don’t press any buttons.”

Marabeth nodded. “I’ll try not to accidentally abduct anyone new.”

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“What about lifting the engine?” Marabeth asked with her mouth full of pastrami sandwich. The black and white lab was pristine, the Nanitians and Marabeth having done their work quickly in the hours it took KC to reattach and recalibrate the propulsion unit. “How was that ‘matter to energy’ and all that?”

“I just converted some of the dirt to upward momentum.”

“Oh.” Marabeth took another bite. “This is way better than the gator. Chicken. Whatever it was.”

“Well, I’ve actually eaten one of those, so I knew what to make.” KC watched her stuff the macronutrients into her mouth, something she called ‘thousand island’ smudging the edge of her lips. It had barely been twelve hours since she’d last eaten and she insisted that even that was too long.

“What about the DEM? And the, whatever you called it, quantum eh?”

“Tunnel. That wasn’t matter to energy. I wasn’t the source of that magic. It really wasn’t magic at all. It was the god in the DEM.”

Marabeth chewed thoughtfully, then took a drink of cola.

“This one’s good too. We could sell this one. Call it KC Cooler or something.” She took another bite and furrowed her brow. “What do you mean god? Like, is Jesus in that orb?”

“I don’t know anyone named Jesus.”

“Allah? Zeuss? John Cena?”

“It’s just a minor deity.”

She nodded. “Dwayne Johnson, then. Moana.”

“I don’t understand any of the words you’re saying. But, it doesn’t matter. Earth is your home planet, right?”

“Yes.”

“Ok...” KC leaned forward. Marabeth continued chewing, studying the spotless surface of the desk in front of her as she did so.

“So, you’re saying there are gods?” she asked.

“Marabeth, where is Earth?”

She sat the sandwich down and opened her mouth, then closed it, then opened it again.



“It’s, ah, in the solar system,” she said slowly. “I said that earlier I think.”

“Ah, yes, the solar system,” KC said. “That narrows it down to just about everywhere.

You said there were either nine or eight planets.”

“That’s right.”

“Is there anything else that might help?”

“Let’s see. There are gas giants and rocky planets,” Marabeth said. “There are two gas giants. Three? Three I think. Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus. Wait, is Neptune gas? There are four then. Maybe.”

“Between two and four gas giants,” KC said. He moved to a control panel and began tapping in the data. “What kind of star is it?”

“It is definitely a star.” Marabeth replied. “The kind that is star-like.”

“Color?” KC asked.

“Yellow. No, white. I read that somewhere.”

“I don’t suppose you know the age. Or its mass?”

“I know that there are stars that are very much bigger. And others that are quite a lot older. I think it’s middle-aged.”

“Ok, what about the sausage?”

Marabeth raised an eyebrow. “What was that?”

“The region of space, what’s its cowboy boot?”

“I, uh. I don’t know what you’re asking. Are you having a stroke? *Can* you have a stroke?”

KC turned from the console to look at her. “What does it sound like I’m saying?”

“You asked me what cowboy boots space wears.”

KC shook his head. “I knew humans were primitive, but you don’t even have a concept for pink fluffy bunny rabbits?”

“You’re messing with me, right?”

“No, there’s a translation problem. Listen, with this data I can limit it to twenty-six possibilities.”

“Alright, that’s good, right? I mean, twenty-six! We can just hop through each one and see if it’s got Earth or not.”

KC tapped his cheek. “I suppose.” He gestured over the controls and brought up a readout of the air supply. The oxygen levels were good, but...

“Marabeth, what happens to humans if there’s too much carbon dioxide in the air?”

Marabeth sat back and crossed her arms, pensive. “Apollo thirteen,” she said. “There was a movie. I mean, it was a real space mission, but they made a movie about it. They had to fix CO2 scrubbers or they’d die. Acid, Acid-oh-sis?”

“Humans die from too much CO2?”

“Yes. I don’t know how much, though. Why?”

KC glanced back at the readout, tapping his cheek again. He could probably come up with some way of reducing the levels if he needed to. So far, she didn’t seem to be having any problems, though.

“Travelling from system to system won’t be instant,” he said.

Marabeth eyed him with suspicion at the sudden change in topic, but let it slide by anyway.

“How long are we talking about?” she asked.

KC gestured over the controls, then pointed at the center of the room. A map of the Milky Way sprung to life, twenty-six points of glowing green light dotting it.

“As you can see, the possibilities are a bit remote from one another.” He pointed near the outside of the disc. “We are here. In the boonies.” He moved his finger toward the nearest point of light. “This should be our first stop, I guess.”

“That’s not so far,” she said. “How long will that take?”

“Oh,” KC bobbed his head back and forth. “About a thousand years.”

“A thousand years!” Marabeth gripped KC by the arm. “No! I don’t even *live* that long! Wait, are you going to put me in stasis? Like in *Alien*? Everyone will be dead! I’ll get fired for sure!”

KC placed his hand over hers. “Calm down,” he said. “It will take a thousand years, but it won’t take a thousand years.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“We will be moving at the speed of light. Our local perception of time will stop. The thousand years will pass in an instant.”

“KC,” she said, her grip grew tighter, “A thousand years. Humans might be extinct by then. Global warming! Mutually assured nuclear destruction! Politicians!” she stood on her tip-toes and leaned very close. “*Politicians*,” she whispered.

KC gently nudged her back down. “So a thousand years won’t work for you?”

“No, it won’t. Preferably I’d be back yesterday. Every day I’m not there is a day I fall behind. I mean, I’m not logging any billable hours up here.” She snapped her fingers “Unless!”

Her head slumped onto her fist. “No. No one would buy this as research time. Client development? That might help me boost my numbers there. Can’t log it as sick or vay-kay, no one takes sick or vay-kay and makes partner.” She was drifting away into her own universe, KC realized.

“Well, it’s entirely possible that thousands of years have already passed on your planet. I have no idea how long your journey through the quantum tunnel might have taken.”

Marabeth’s head shot up. “What?” She placed a hand on his chest and gave him a push. “You’re saying everyone I know may *already* be dead? That I’ve *already* been fired?”

“It’s possible. I can’t be certain.”

“How does that make any sense? Did you activate that DEM a thousand years ago?”

“No. Maybe a week ago.”

“So how could any more time have passed than a week?”

“Well, the thing didn’t *have* to scoop you up from the present. Also, there’s aspects of relativity to consider, then the added issue of deific magics. It’s very complicated.”

“It’s complicated,” Marabeth repeated. “You’ve ruined my life. You and your stupid experiments have ruined my life!”

KC turned and began working the console controls again.

“Maybe the planet won’t be so different by the time you get back.”

“KC, I don’t think you understand Earth. If I’m gone for a *year* it’s a different planet!”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“I am!” Marabeth said. “But, a century and I’d have no idea what was going on. A hundred years ago on my planet there weren’t any planes, there weren’t any computers, no

internet. I wouldn't have even been able to vote. A thousand years ago? People threw their crap in the street and rode horses through it! There were plagues and people burned witches and most folks didn't really have rights. They just worked in a field giving all their money to a lord or a king and then died in the muck."

"So there's been a great deal of progress then?"

"Yes. And it's getting faster all the time."

"So," KC said, still punching in coordinates, "it might be a great deal better when you return."

"I-" Marabeth pressed a finger to her lips. "That's not the point. I wouldn't know anyone and I wouldn't know how anything worked! I'd be a prehistoric lady. Or everyone might be dead."

"Yes, you mentioned that possibility."

"What do *you* do about it? The time leaps?"

"Me? I just, well, I just deal with it."

"But what about your fam-" Marabeth stopped. "Oh."

KC finished programming their journey and a large green symbol appeared on the console. Marabeth eyed it apprehensively, shaking her head slowly.

"No," she said, "we are going to stay here until we come up with a better solution."

"You want me to invent time travel?" KC asked.

"That would be ideal."

KC smiled and opened his mouth, then furrowed his brow and pondered the idea for a moment. No, that wouldn't work. Perhaps they could- no, they'd certainly be killed.

But maybe- The Source? If it meant getting her home sooner Marabeth could probably be convinced to letting him have time to work on it. A few months and maybe...

Eventually he shrugged. "Maybe I can come up with something, but it would take time. And probably a lot more than you want to spend."

Marabeth gripped tufts of her hair in fists, still shaking her head. She continued to eye the green symbol darkly. KC looked between her and the digital button. Eventually, she shrank to the floor, tucking her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around them. She buried her face in her knees and KC thought he heard a sob. After a while he moved toward her and knelt beside her. He held his hands up over her shoulders, hesitating, when there was a loud *Bing-Bong!*

Marabeth looked up with red eyes and wiped tears from her cheeks. KC stood and made his way back to the console.

"Was that a doorbell?" Marabeth asked.

"No, we're receiving a communication request." KC went to the console and gestured over it. In the center of the room, a large visage took the place of the Milky Way map. Seven bulbous eyes stared down at KC.

The cyborg let out a quiet whimper and swiped over the console. The eyes disappeared.

"What was that?" Marabeth asked, wide-eyed. "It was hideous!"

"Dogma Integrity Command," KC said, just above a whisper.

"What is Dogma Integrity Command?"

KC turned his green eyes toward her and swallowed.

"Sociopaths with very big lasers."

## Chapter 8

Strump had a very strong desire to murder the pair of robots that had just hung up on him.

But murder was the purview of the unevolved. The barbaric. The basic. Not that Strump was above killing, far from it. But there were very important distinctions between what Strump did and what the unevolved did. Creatures that *murdered* needed to be contained, sequestered, or destroyed, lest they threaten the balance that allowed for more civilized creatures -- like Strump -- to propagate. No, members of the Dogma Integrity Command did not murder<sup>4</sup>, they *quarantined*.

A quarantine was not a thing born of desire, it was simply something that had to be done on occasion. Something like the destruction of a small swath of forest -- a necessary sacrifice -- to prevent the entire ecosystem from burning. But one did not burn the forest out of spite. One did not burn the forest out of rage. One did not cut trees and light them up out of *anger*. One did it out of logic. Ordered, reasoned logic. Things like desire did not factor into such decisions.

But Strump was not feeling logical or ordered or reasoned.

Strump was feeling pissed. He *desired* an outlet for the emotion.

A robot had just hung up on him. A dumb, fake mind. A pretender. A *tool* had just ignored him. And while that tool was not in itself subject to Dogma Protection it was, however, extremely useful. It had done a very good job hovering over Dugaron. Keeping away the pests.

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<sup>4</sup> It is a curiosity of Protocol Two that the term 'murder' applied to the unwanted termination of any sentient lifeform. The *punishment* for murder, however, only applied when the person murdered fell into a class of sentient lifeforms which were subject to Dogma Protection. Regardless, the practice was extremely taboo . . .

There are no jokes in this footnote.

Strump knew that being angry at a device was silly. The device had no soul, no true mind with which to spite Strump. No, the only logical, ordered, and reasoned approach to a tool misbehaving was to perform repairs. Yes, repairs. Strump would not cast aside his knife, simply because he'd cut himself. This was Strump's mistake. His own fault. His programming of the robot was to blame.

And so, Strump slowly slid a tentacle away from the small red sphere it was gripping. He undulated a series of muscles, sending the sphere hovering back into its compartment. Then he reactivated the safeties on his weapons systems. No, it wouldn't do to murder these two, even if it were strictly legal.<sup>5</sup>

Besides, if one of the beams somehow missed, he might hit the planet below. Then it would be bye-bye Dugarons. Then what would have been the point of keeping that robot here anyway? Besides, the Dugarons hadn't shown themselves to be much of a threat. They were also just the cuddliest looking things. The unauthorized *quarantine* of such photogenic beasts would require a great deal of paperwork.

Strump blinked his stinging eyes, having grown dry from his rage-filled staring, and calmly overrode KC's comm system.

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"I seriously doubt," KC said, "that humans have intragalactic clearances."

"Clearances?" Marabeth asked. "Like a security clearance?"

"Yes." KC paced back and forth, tapping his lips. "This isn't good."

"Ok, why not? Tell me what's happening."

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<sup>5</sup> Strump had filed the proper paperwork to have both KC and the human race declared his own property, since no one else had claimed them after being placed in the DIC lost and found for a period of ten standard orbits. Thus, Strump would be immune to even minor charges for destruction of valuables.



“The Dogma Integrity Command are the self-proclaimed governmental body of the galaxy. They roam about in their ships and ensure that everyone obeys their arbitrary code of conduct.”

“Well, I’ve never heard of them.”

“Humans are probably too trivial for them to deal with. Either that or humans haven’t been discovered yet. I mean, I hadn’t heard of you until yesterday.”

“Ok, so what about these clearances then? What happens if I don’t have one?”

“The DIC will quarantine you.”

“Oh,” Marabeth said, relaxing. “That doesn’t sound *too* bad.”

KC stopped pacing and eyed her. Was she psychotic?

“Marabeth,” he said, walking toward her, “they are going to *quarantine* you.”

“I heard you. What does that entail? Putting me in a white room and spraying me with disinfectant?”

“What? No! They’re not going to- to quarantine you, they’re going to *quarantine* you!”

Marabeth raised her eyebrows and nodded slowly. “Is this another translation thing?”

“Translation? What does it sound like I’m saying?”

“You are saying that they will quarantine me.”

“No, not quarantine, *quarantine!*” KC admonished.

“You know how, after you say a word several times in a row it starts to lose its meaning, and you wonder whether it were actually a word or if you’re just crazy? I feel like that’s happening right now.”

KC slapped his hands on the sides of his face. “Death!” he yelled.

“Death?” Marabeth asked.

“Death!” he answered. “You will die! Evaporate! Transubstantiate! Your atoms will re-arrange themselves into harmless water vapor and disperse!”

“Oh.” Marabeth went pale. “I don’t want that to happen.”

“No, of course not!”

“That’s not what quarantine means at all.”

KC shook his head. He’d have to re-examine his translation enchantment. Maybe he could send it back for repairs. Was it still under warranty? Where had he even bought it?

“Ok,” Marabeth said, “so what do we do?”

“What do we do?” KC began pacing again. “I don’t know!”

“Well, can’t we run? Or you could hide me.”

KC rolled his eyes. “Hide you? Whoever is out there already knows you’re here. If I were to guess, I’d say they’re here *because* of you.”

“What? Why? How?”

“Well, I certainly haven’t broken any laws recently. Except possibly for the- Stars! The quantum tunnel.”

“So, what you really mean is they’re here because *you* abducted me,” Marabeth corrected.

“They’re here because of you, not me!”

“Agh! That hardly matters.”

“I think it’s an important distinction.”

“Fine.”

“So if you can’t hide me, then we run.”

“One does not *run* from the Dogma Integrity Command.”

“And why not?” Marabeth asked, crossing her arms.

“Their society is over two and a half million years old! If that alone weren’t enough to make their technology incomparable, they’ve spent much of that time exploring strange new worlds! They’ve sought out new life and new civilizations! They boldly go where no one has gone before! And once they get there, they kill whoever they find and steal their tech!”

“So you’re saying you can’t outrun them?”

“Of course I can! But they’d catch up eventually.”

“I’m confused.”

“Maybe it’s just a citation,” KC muttered. “Maybe humans are undiscovered and I can claim an explorer’s license. Yes, one sample can be taken for study, so long as the species is sufficiently primitive.” He eyed her critically. “I have no idea if you’re primitive enough.”

“How primitive do I have to be?” she asked.

“The fact that you can ask that question indicates that you probably aren’t. To the void!”

“Wait, KC.” Marabeth stepped toward him. “If they do want to quarantine me what would happen to you if they decide you deserve more than a citation?”

KC thought about it for a moment. “I’d be quarantined as well.”

“That seems a bit extreme. Aren’t there any options in between?”

KC shook his head. “The DIC is rather black and white. It’s amazing they advanced as far as they did. Of course, there’s something to be said about being potently decisive.”

“So what are we going to do?”

“Well-”

KC was cut off by a sharp crackling sound and the seven-eyed face once more dominated the center of the room.

“Subject Two,” the figure said, “do you know why I’m contacting you?”

KC took a step back. The figure wasn’t speaking in a language KC remembered attuning himself to, yet he understood what was being said. The same thing had happened with the Dugarons earlier, which meant...

KC pointed to himself. “Are you referring to *me* as Subject two? Have we met before?”

Several of the eyes bobbed and tilted.

“Subject Two, what is your current directive?” the figure said.

“What is it saying?” Marabeth asked. KC turned to appraise her. She looked both simultaneously disgusted and fascinated, as though she were a child who’d come upon a bit of roadkill. He reached out and flicked her in the temple.

“Ow!” she said, looking at him with reproach. “Why did you-”

“I’m waiting for your response, Subject Two.” the figure said.

Marabeth’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped open a bit.

“Listen, Mr., uhm . . .”

“Strump,” the figure offered.

“Yes,” KC said, “Mr. Strump. I am uncertain who Subject Two is. I’m sure he’s lovely, but I do not ever remember being addressed by that name or title. As for why you’re here, well,” KC’s eyes flicked to Marabeth, then back to Strump. “I wouldn’t presume to guess.”

The eyes blinked. “Subject Two, I detected an unlicensed quantum tunnel in this sector. Do you know anything about that?”

“Don’t tell it anything,” Marabeth whispered.

“What?” KC asked.

“You said it’s some kind of space cop right?”

KC nodded. “More like a space-despot, but close enough.”

“It knows the answer to its questions, it’s just trying to get you to admit to something.

Stonewall it.”

“How could you possibly-”

“Subject Two! I can hear you whispering. I demand a response!”

“No!” KC said. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I didn’t mean *lie* to him!” Marabeth hissed. “Just evade the questions!”

KC threw his hands up. “What are you telling me to do?!”

Marabeth sighed. “What’s its name?”

“Strump, apparently.”

Marabeth took a step forward, her heart hammering away like John Henry racing a rock-drilling machine. *You’re a steel-drivin’ lady, Marabeth*, she thought to herself, then took a breath.

“Mr. Strump, what is a quantum tunnel?” she asked.

The eyes turned from KC to her.

“I’m asking the questions,” Strump said.

“Of course you are,” Marabeth replied. She placed her hands on her hips to keep them from shaking as much as anything else. She spread her feet apart. It was called a power-pose. She did one in the mirror every morning for five minutes. Her therapist had recommended it.

“I’m seeking clarification so that we might properly respond,” she said.

“We?” Strump asked. “I am not talking to *you*, human. I am speaking to Subject Two.”

“Well, I hate to disappoint you Mr. Strump,” Marabeth replied, “but there is no one here by that name. I believe you have the wrong people.”

“The wrong- I know exactly who I’m talking to!”

“Are we under arrest for something?” Marabeth asked.

“No, you’re not under arrest. I’m merely asking-”

“Then we’re free to leave?”

“What? No, you’re not free to leave.” Strump’s eyes drifted back to KC.

“Well, Mr. Strump-” Marabeth took three sharp steps and stood directly between the Strump hologram and KC. The creature’s eyes locked back onto her. “If we aren’t under arrest and we aren’t free to leave then what are we?”

“You- Well you’re-” The eyes narrowed. “Fine, you are under arrest.”

“For what?” she demanded.

“For the generation of an unlicensed quantum tunnel and the unauthorized abduction of a member of a species currently under a category Two observation protocol.”

“Observation protocol...” KC muttered to himself. “That’s not good.”

Marabeth shushed him, then turned back to the figure. “Fine, and what is your probable cause?”

“Probable cause? For what?” Strump asked.

“To arrest us. Certainly you can’t arrest us without any evidence. I’ve been told you’re an advanced species! I assume you have laws? There are civil rights and such?”

“Of course there are laws,” Strump replied. “But you two have no civil rights, and I do not need any reason to arrest you. What do you even know about civil rights? Your kind is barely out of the stone age.”

Marabeth ignored the jab. She’d learned a long time ago not to run down those types of rabbit holes when questioning. She was, after all, now the one asking questions. “Why don’t we have civil rights?”

“Because,” Strump replied, “robots do not have rights under the DIC.”

Marabeth kept her expression flat. It wasn’t the wildest line of reasoning she’d had thrown at her. That she was a robot, that is. In fact, she’d done worse herself. She was once involved in a debate competition where the topic was gender diversity in engineering. She’d staunchly asserted that global thermonuclear war was inevitable and that an argument about anything else was, therefore, pointless. She’d won.

“But we’re not robots. I’m human, and KC is a cyborg.”

“You have both been classified as robots by an official agent of the DIC.”

“Prove it,” Marabeth said.

“Prove what?” Strump asked.

“Prove that we are classified as robots, and therefore have no rights.”

Strump grumbled a bit. “Well, I have the paperwork here somewhere.” His eyes flicked down and the comm filled with the sounds of shuffling papers. “One moment,” he said. The seven-eyed image vanished.

*What am I doing? What am I doing? WhatamIdoing?*

“What just happened?” KC asked.

“I stalled him,” Marabeth replied. “So how are we getting out of this?”

“I’m not a robot,” KC said. “You’re not even close to a robot!”

Marabeth patted KC on the side of the face. “Hey, keep your eye on the prize. What are we going to do?”

“Why would he think we’re robots?”

Marabeth eyed KC up and down, then gave him a strained smile. She shook her head.

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Fine. Maybe we should find out what he wants of us, then decide what to do.”

“Hmmm,” Marabeth placed a hand on her chin. “What do you think the chances are that he *won’t* try and quarantine me?”

“Extremely low, from what I can recall.”

“Why was he calling you Subject Two?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“Could it have something to do with your memory? Is this something else you forgot?”

KC wrung his hands, making a soft scraping sound. He shrugged. The seven-eyed figure reappeared.

“I’m sending the paperwork over now.”



As Strump said this, the console on the wall lit up and text began scrolling across it. Marabeth went up to it, her eyes running along the symbols.

“I’m going to ignore the fact that I have no idea how I can read this,” Marabeth said. She gestured over the screen in an impression of one of the motions she’d seen KC make earlier. The text scrolled along and Marabeth nodded, impressed with herself. “I see that it says here that *Subject Two* has been classified as a robot.” She turned back to the image of Strump.

“That’s right,” the seven-eyed alien answered. “It’s all been properly filed and approved, as you can see.”

“This hardly identifies KC, though. I have no idea who this ‘Subject Two’ is.”

“There’s a picture attached to the file,” Strump answered.

“Yes, but this figure has silver hands and blue eyes. As you can see, KC clearly has copper hands and *green* eyes.”

Strump glanced to KC, the eyes blinking out of sequence. “Well, he must have modified his body since I was last here. He is a robot, he can do that. Have you modified yourself recently?”

“Don’t answer that,” Marabeth commanded. “Mr. Strump, it’s not our job to do your work for you.” She had no idea if that were true. “This figure looks *nothing* like KC,” it looked exactly like KC, “so I’m going to have to reject it as a valid form of identification.” Forget it, she was going whole-hog. “Thus, whether he is or is not a robot is now in dispute.”

“You don’t have the authority to make that determination!”

Marabeth gestured over the console, mimicking another one of KC’s motions. The green button reappeared. She swallowed, looking at it. A thousand years. She imagined herself

hunched over with a unibrow and a prominent forehead, trying to communicate with the modern human. *Me Marabeth. Me browse social media on toilet. Me burn ancient corpse of dinosaur to go vroom vroom in car.* This button would make her go *vroom vroom* alright. She bet it didn't have anything to do with dinosaurs, though. Why did her brain work like this?

"Enough!" Strump said. "I'm coming aboard and sorting this out. *You* will be quarantined," the eyes glared at Marabeth, then swung to KC. "As for you, I haven't decided."

"Mr. Strump," *don't talk about dinosaurs*, "since you have provided us with no compelling evidence that we have committed any crime, I believe that we have the legal right to continue on with our business." Her hand moved to hover over the button. KC eyed her, shaking his head.

"Marabeth, you really shouldn't," KC began.

"How could you *possibly* know what legal right you do or do not have?" Strump asked.

Now that was a very good question. Her face remained stoney.

"You're a human!" Strump continued. "No human has read Protocol Two or the Compendiums!"

"If we *aren't* robots, are you allowed to detain us without cause?" Marabeth asked.

The eyes bobbed. "Well, no!"

"Then I am comfortable enough to say good day to you sir."

"No! You will not say good day!"

But Marabeth did say good day. And then, she pressed the button.

*Vroom vroom.*

## Chapter 9

“Dugarons are a class Two protected species,” the computer said. Strump’s tentacle squeezed the red weapons ball, but there was no cathartic click signifying activation of the firing mechanism. “Weapons have been locked.” Strump’s vision cleared and the planet before him came into focus. The planet. Not a space station. With no valid object to be destroyed, Strump’s computer had prevented him from firing. Subject Two and its human abductee had vanished. Now the only thing before him was planet Dugaron.

Strump tracked the hyperspace path the robots were taking, but it was impossible to tell what their destination was. They traveled at light speed. A veritable crawl on a galactic scale, but one that Strump had no way of interrupting. He tagged the vessel and began extrapolating the systems they might be traveling towards when a voice came over his comm system.

It was his superior. It was unhappy with the readings it was receiving from the Dugaron system. It had new orders for Strump. Strump would not like these orders.

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*Cold and dark and no air to breathe and trapped and uncomfortable and cramps!*  
*Cramps in my legs!* Rugga-Tunk did his best to shift in the tight space. He clawed at a screw, struggling to get purchase on the grooves of its head. There was a harsh scraping sound as the screw finally began to twist. Rugga-Tunk sat back and shook out his paw.

*Nails will require cleaning and filing and the swelling will not be going down for a week.*  
He sucked at the digits for a moment, then thrust his claws back into the grooves. The screw twisted out slowly at first, until it finally loosened enough that Tunk could get a firm grasp of it

between his fingers. Tunk spun the bit of metal out until it fell and clattered from its hole next to nine others just like it. The panel swung free on its hinges. It was also the panel Rugga-Tunk was laying on.

Rugga-Tunk quickly caught the sides of the panel as it fell open over a deep pit. Tunk looked down and saw soft white light emanating from panels along the walls of an endless tunnel.

*Falling and falling and death perhaps.* He reached up and got a firmer hold along the edge of the compartment he'd hidden inside. The bottom of the ship the metal man used had been easy enough to get into while it climbed up and up and up. Getting back out was not easy enough, though. It was hard. Hard enough. Harder than enough.

At some point during the flight, the machine had locked itself down tight. That was about the same time the air had been sucked out. A fact that hadn't bothered Rugga-Tunk too much at first. He'd held his breath. Among Dugarons, Tunk was considered quite good at holding his breath. And among species that held their breath, Dugarons were quite good at holding it. Rugga-Tunk had always suspected he was one of the best holders of breath in the galaxy. He'd been holding his breath for over twelve hours at this point. Tunk was quite ready to let go of it, but the tunnel was not ready to take his breath and replace it with a new one. The tunnel was a vacuum as well.

Tunk puffed his cheeks in and out, cycling the stale air around inside of his body for the thousandth time and hoisted himself up along the bottom of the machine. He found small recesses to use as handholds along the metal and crawled to the wall of the tunnel. More panels.

More screws. But, Tunk saw a small screen with letters scrolling across it. They were the same type of letters the metal man had shared with Tunk the first time he'd visited Dugaron.

*Synapse Technologies, it read. Our products are a sy-nap to use! Press any button to start.*

Rugga-Tunk looked around. There were no buttons. Why would he press a button anyway?

Buttons were for clothes. Tunk pawed at the screen instead. The letters swooped away and were replaced by a list.

*What would you like to do?*

- 1. Safety misinformation.*
- 2. Frequently avoided questions.*
- 3. Contact Synapse in a sy-nap!*
- 4. Help!*

Rugga-Tunk poked at the fourth option.

*What do you need help with?*

- 1. How does this infernal machine work?*
- 2. I broke it! A how-to guide for repairs.*
- 3. This tunnel is a vacuum and I'm trapped!*
- 4. I am confronted with the inexorable fear of realizing I am an infinitely small point in an infinitely massive universe and require counseling services.*

Tunk tapped option three.

*Please take a moment to tell us why you're trapped.*

Tunk growled as the new text appeared, but the sound died in his throat. He curled a paw into a fist and shook it.

1. *I attempted repairs and got stuck.*
2. *There has been a mutiny and I have been thrown out of an airlock. Through an unlikely and harrowing set of circumstances, I wound up here.*
3. *I am a stowaway who has made poor life choices.*
4. *Other.*

Tunk's vision began to swim as he reached out and pressed the first option.

*Thank you for using Synapse Technologies! All repairs should be performed by a licensed Synapse mechanic. If you are a licensed Synapse mechanic, please enter your user ID now.*

Tunk eyed the ID box with disbelief. He tapped the back button. His chest burned. His lungs ached. He tapped on option two.

*We would be happy to contact the Dogma Integrity Command to report the mutiny. Would you like to file a report now?*

Tunk pressed 'No.' And it went back to the option screen. He clicked option four.

*Please describe why you're trapped in 500 characters or less.*

Tunk pounded the screen, inputting random characters and numbers, then hit submit.

*Thank you for your submission. One of our technicians will contact you in four to six weeks.*

The screen dissolved. *Synapse Industries*, it now read. *Our products are a sy-nap to use! Press any button to start.*

Tunk gripped a tuft of fur in his fist and tore out a clump. The hairs drifted away down the tunnel he hung over. Tunk tapped the screen again, navigating back to where he was. *Help! This tunnel is a vacuum and I'm trapped! I am a stowaway who has made poor life choices.*

*Thank you for your unlikely honesty.*

Beside the screen a panel slid aside, revealing a white cuboidal compartment beyond.

*Please enter this complimentary brig. We will contact the captain of this vessel shortly.*

Tunk narrowed his eyes, but his burning lung sacs gave him no other choice. He hefted himself into the room. The door slid shut behind him and a hiss sounded as the compartment pressurized. Tunk took several deep breaths, his vision tunneled, then he fell away into the deep dark of unconsciousness.

*“Shweeee! Shweeeeeeeeeee!”*

Rugga-Tunk sat up.

*“Shwee! Shoowee!”*

Tunk was in the center of a white room. Twice as tall and wide as Tunk was long, the room had no adornments, save for a single electronic screen, a tray with a cup of clear liquid and three small cubes, and a small rainbow dancing around the room.

*“Shwee!”* went the rainbow.

Tunk rubbed at his eyes. *No breathing and for a very long time and now I have brain damage?* He squinted at the source of the *shwee*-ing. It wasn't quite a rainbow. It had no arc, but was rather a small wavering rectangle of multi-colored light floating through the space around Tunk's head. As it turned and *shwee'd*, Tunk noticed that it was very flat. In fact, as it spun, Tunk thought it disappeared for a moment. Tunk rubbed his eyes again.

*“Shwee?”* it asked.

“I am concerned for my health and my well-being,” Tunk croaked. His throat was very dry. The prismatic creature danced up to him and pressed itself against Tunk’s chest, its tiny body nestling into Tunk’s fur. It was quite warm, but not quite hot. Tunk looked down at it. The flat plane of its body arced up towards him.

“*Shwee!*” it said.

“I see,” Tunk said. He stood and inspected the room, ignoring for the moment what he suspected to be a vivid hallucination. The screen had the familiar Synapse Tech logo and catchphrase. *Sy-nap you in half*, Tunk thought as he pawed at the letters.

*Thank you for using the Synapse complimentary brig system! The screen read. You have been confined for the crime of trespass and theft of services. We have notified Synapse Security of your presence and they will be contacting the captain of this vessel shortly. In the meantime, please enjoy our bland, yet life-sustaining Macro brand juice and crackers (patent pending). Macro brand: when you’ve got prisoners, and don’t want them to die!*

*Estimated time to notify captain: 46 hours.*

Tunk picked up the tray and sniffed at the liquid inside the cup. It was acrid and briney, but Tunk’s throat burned. He took a sip. It was terrible. Tunk picked up one of the cubes and took a nibble. It tasted better than the drink, but sucked up what precious hydration the liquid had provided. He took another sip of the ‘juice’, then cleaned the taste out with the dry ‘crackers’, then moisturized with another sip of the juice. It was a vicious cycle.

Tunk sat the tray down and began running his hands along the edges of his prison, looking for seams or hidden panels. Shwee spun around his hands as he did this, *Shwee-ing* all the while. Tunk was growing concerned that the small patch of colored light persisted in its



existence. After several unproductive minutes, Tunk leaned back against a wall and glanced over at the Synapse screen.

*Estimated time to notify captain: 129 hours.*

Uh-oh.

Tunk watched the numbers tick up for a long while.

*Estimated time to notify captain: 10 days.*

*12 days.*

*3 weeks.*

*We are having some trouble reaching Synapse Security, please stand by.*

“*Shwee,*” said Shwee. Tunk pinched the bridge of his fat nose, then ran a paw down his face.

“Trapped and forgotten and just like the old family members.” He pounded a fist against the wall. “Taken and lost and trapped and forgotten!” he punctuated each word with another fist. “I am not your trophy or pet or amusement!” The wall was now subject to a full-on rampage. “I am Dugaron! I am Rugga-Tunk! And I am fierce and competent and-”

“*Shwee!*” Shwee offered.

“No, I am not this shwee,” Tunk said, turning to the patch of colors. “You are shwee and I am not shwee and I am Rugga-Tunk.” Tunk scratched his jaw. *But if it is my mind and I am making up shwee and it is a hallucination and then aren't I also shwee?* He shook his head, dismissing the thought. The corners of Shwee's body drooped as Tunk spoke.

“*Shwee,*” it said quietly.

Tunk turned back to the wall he'd attacked. There wasn't a scratch on it, but Tunk's paws were now throbbing. He went back to the screen and tapped on it. The message didn't change. *Please stand by.* Shwee landed on the screen. The text blinked away for a moment, then reappeared with the same message.

"I must get out and find the metal man and I must show everyone that Dugarons are not so silly as they all think and say." He gripped the sides of the screen, rocking his weight back and forth against it. "But I am standing by and I do not want to stand by and this is all very unprofessional!"

"*Shwee!*" Shwee said.

"No, not shwee! Unprofessional!"

"*Shwee!*"

"Not shwee!" Tunk slapped the screen. "Unprofessional!"

"*Shwee! Shwee! Shoowee!*"

"Shwee!" Tunk said, darting his head toward the creature. He slapped the screen again.

"Shwee! Shwee! Shwee! Shwee! Shwee!" he emphasized each word with a slap.

"*Shwee!*" Shwee replied, then darted into the panel. There was a shower of sparks and a puff of smoke, then the text was replaced.

*Thank you for using Synapse products! We hope your imprisonment has endowed you with a newfound respect for the property of others! Please take a moment to fill out a short survey.*

Tunk looked down at the screen in disbelief, then quickly tapped the *No Thanks* option. Part of the wall slid aside, revealing a dimly lit corridor. Shwee zipped back out of the panel and landed on Tunk's shoulder.

"*Shwee*," it said. Tunk could have sworn it sounded smug.

"Thanks," Tunk said as he made his way out into the hall. "Thanks and thanks and thanks and thanks." As he made his way down the corridor and around a bend, he was confronted by several more floating rectangles of multicolored light. Shwee was not alone.

## Chapter 10

Marabeth stared out of the porthole and watched as the ether of the universe moved past at thirty-thousand meters per second. It sounded quite fast. Very fast, in fact. It was thirty kilometers every second. Eighteen point six four one one miles. Marabeth lived in the country of the United States of America. The state she lived in was Tennessee. Specifically, Marabeth lived in the county of Davidson. Davidson county was only fifteen miles across. Marabeth counted the length of a second and tried to impress upon her mind the fact that all of Nashville had just flitted by outside.

To put it another way, there are five thousand two hundred and eighty feet to a mile, which is exactly nine hundred and sixty Marabeths toe to tip. That made it seventeen thousand eight hundred and ninety five Marabeths a second out there. In the black void. Passing by. Every second.

And they were accelerating, of course.

The numbers were impressive. It really was so very fast. And as Marabeth stared out the porthole, she saw absolutely jack. Dark space. Motionless stars. They might as well be standing completely still for all she knew. Yet, she was assured that they were covering quite a lot of distance. Again, it was thirty-thousand meters a second after all. How does one even put that into perspective? Well, Marabeth was the height of twenty-four Big Macs. That meant that every second...

How many Big Macs did that make? Her mind fumbled over the math. It was more than a thousand. Far, far more than a thousand. But a thousand was still a lot, especially when it came to years. To Marabeth, a thousand years was a great deal of time. And when Marabeth had

pressed that big green button to get away from Strump, a thousand years blipped away in a small flash of light. She still didn't believe it. So she ran numbers in her head to distract herself. And when she finally grew frustrated with that, she said:

“I don't believe it.”

[This is what therapists refer to as denial.]

“Don't believe what?” KC asked. He pulled out the insides of an orange machine and thick gray goo splattered his desk. Marabeth frowned as she watched some of the goo drip onto the floor.

“That it took a thousand years to get here.”

KC shrugged. “Well, it did.” He fished through the goo and pulled out a . . . noodle? A wire? A slimy white tube thing.

“Well,” Marabeth huffed, “Well!”

“Well what?”

“Well it's wrong! It's not ok! A thousand years? What- what am I supposed to do? I don't know what to do! Everyone's dead! At home! At work! Dead!”

[And thus began anger.]

“Mm-hmm,” KC said as he cut the slimy white tube thing. Some yellow liquid poured out and splattered onto the ground. Steam rose up from it. “I told you not to press the button.”

“What if we go back? Can we just go back and undo it?”

[A swift turn into bargaining!]

KC looked up at her, puzzled. “That's not how it works. Why would you think that's how it works?”

Marabeth sank to the ground and laid out onto her back.

“My life is over.” She lifted a hand into the air, spreading her fingers out and gazing between them at the glowing white panels above. “There’s nothing left. Why am I even alive? It’s all going to be pointless now.”

[The venerable depression arrives.]

KC eyed her. “Do you need to talk to someone about all this? I have a Synapse Tech therapy bot around here somewhere.”

Marabeth sighed and sat up. “Oh well.” She stood and looked back out of the porthole. “I guess there’s nothing that can be done. Maybe I can become a historian. I’d probably make a fortune on the talk show circuit. If there are any. You know what, I really hope they’ve found a cure for tinnitus.”

[Acceptance! And with that, Marabeth concluded the fastest five stages of grief in the history of mankind.]

“Oh, ok. Glad you’re feeling better.” KC sucked at the end of the tube, then spat more of the yellow liquid onto the ground.

“You’re making an incredible mess.” Marabeth stepped towards the desk and eyed the orange box. Whatever the liquid was, it smelled pretty bad.

“Well, you know, generic earthling truism.”

“Generic earthling what?”

KC furrowed his brow and cleared his throat. “What I meant to say was, you must break some eggs to make an omelet.”

“I-” *Just let it go, MB.* “What even is this thing?”

KC shook the box. More tubes spilled out. "It's an 'I goofed' device."

"What does an 'I goofed' device do?"

"You tell it how you goofed and it tells you what to do about it." KC grabbed a gadget off his desk and used it to begin fusing the ends of the tubes together. "It doesn't always work, though."

"How did you goof?"

KC sat the box down with a thunk and narrowed his eyes at her.

"I just took a thousand-year-long trip through hyperspace in the middle of receiving a citation from a member of the Dogma Integrity Command."

"Sure, sure." Marabeth nodded. "You ran from the cops."

"You know, the translation of what you just said doesn't quite communicate the severity of the crime I committed. *We* committed. *We* ran from the cops." KC pointed the gadget at her.

"The *space* cops. Much more serious."

"So you think this goof device will have a solution?"

"It is the absolute best idea that I have at the moment." He finished connecting the tubes and stuffed them back inside.

"Is that rainbow thing part of the goof thing?"

KC looked around until he spotted the small rectangle of light Marabeth was talking about.

"No," he said. "That is a Dalalalalaladin"

"A dala-la-den?"

"No, a Dalalalalaladin"

“Dala-” Marabeth nodded as she spoke.

“Lala,” KC nodded and spoke with her, “lala-din”

“Five lala’s.”

“Yes. A Dalalalalaladin.” KC’s eyes went wide. “A Dalalalalaladin?”

“That’s what you said.”

KC dropped the goof and stood up, eyeing the Dala-whatever intensely.

“What’s wrong?” Marabeth asked.

“It’s a Dalalalalaladin!” KC said, pointing at the patch of multi-colored light.

“Can we agree to give it a different name? That one’s really hard.”

“No!” KC ran to his terminal and gestured over it. A diagram of the ship sprung to life.

“Ok, you call it whatever you like. I’ll call it a, er.”

“*Shwee!*” went the Dala-whata-din.

“Oh *that’s* precious. KC, we’re going with Shwee.”

“No! Not ‘no’ as in ‘you can’t rename it.’ No as in, ‘Oh no! This isn’t good!’”

Marabeth watched as the Shwee swirled through the air.

“So, you’re agreeing to Shwee?”

“Call it whatever you want!” KC said as he ran back to the desk. “But don’t get too attached. I need to find a way to kill them before this gets too serious.”

“Them?” Marabeth asked.

“Where there’s one Dalalalalaladin, there are many.”

KC placed his hands on the table and opened his eyes wide. Very wide. Incredibly wide.

Marabeth watched as his irises and pupils disappeared and a series of circular lenses emerged in



their place. Beams of light shot out from their surfaces and ran over the Shwee. The lenses rotated and protracted until they stuck nearly a foot out of KC's head. He suddenly swung it toward Marabeth, who hopped backward in surprise.

"But if you want to get technical," KC said, "their official Protocol Two name is Dalalalalaladin, and calling them Shwee is incorrect."

"That is just *freaky!*" The lenses had sprung so far out of KC's face that they nearly touched her own. Marabeth took another step back and they protracted even farther, keeping up with her retreat. "Stop it!"

"Oh, sorry." The lenses sprung back into KC's head, which snapped back with the force of the retraction. His normal eyes reformed. "Needed precise measurements."

"Geez, I was *this* close to getting used to your normal weirdness." Marabeth took a breath. "What is the problem with having a Shwee on your ship? Also, where did it even come from?"

"They break things and they likely came from the local star."

"*Shoowee!*" went the Shwee.

"You know, that is a very straightforward answer," Marabeth said.

"I am a very straightforward cyborg." KC punched a series of numbers into the terminal.

"Maybe you could elaborate a bit?"

"The Dala- the Shwee are a race of creatures who feed on various forms of kinetic energy. They tend to inhabit stars, where they multiply until they run out of food and their offspring are forced to migrate. They have virtually no mass and surf light to travel."

"They surf light?"

“Surf, ride, use as a form of propulsion. However you want to put it. The important thing is that they’ll latch on to any significant gravity well and suck it dry of all heat and electricity.”

“Significant gravity well? Like a planet? But this station isn’t *that* big.”

“Oh, size has very little to do with gravity. What’s more important is mass.”

“Your ship has a lot of mass?”

“Yes, it’s very massive. Especially the-” KC looked up from the terminal. “The main reactor.” He darted away from the screen he was working on and ran down the hallway past the bathroom. Marabeth hurried off after him.

“What are we doing?” she called out.

KC stopped in the middle of the hall and pulled open a hatch set into the floor.

“Seeing how bad the problem is!” he said, then jumped down. Marabeth went to the hatch and looked over the edge. It was a ten foot drop, but there was a ladder. She stepped onto a rung and began lowering herself. When she got to the bottom KC was already out of sight. She spun around, looking down the three hallways that branched out from the base of the ladder. Floating in the hallways were dozens more of the colorful patches of light.

“KC?” she hollered, her voice ringing off the metal surfaces surrounding her.

“No, no, no, no!” she heard echoing down the hallway to her left. She followed the sound until she came to an open door, nearly a meter thick. There was an incredible light pouring out. As she stepped in, Marabeth put a hand up to shield her eyes and sucked in a breath.

KC stood before a curved railing a few meters in front of her. Beyond the railing was a large pit and inside that pit was a huge sphere, three hundred meters in diameter. The sphere

shimmered brilliantly in myriad colors, its surface alive with rushing waves of prismatic light. It was the most violent display of chromatic glory Marabeth had ever seen, and it was dead silent. Marabeth moved closer to KC, who sank to his knees, no longer vocally denying the sight in front of him. Marabeth suddenly realized what she was looking at. As she squinted at the sphere's surface, she realized that the opalescent waves weren't a singular object. The iridescent surface of the sphere was, in fact, made of countless Shwee.

"There's so many!" Marabeth said. Despite the silence of the chamber, her voice sounded weak and flat. She frowned at the oddness.

"Millions," KC said weakly. "Millions of Shwee. An entire family."

"What's wrong with our voices?"

KC gestured weakly at the horde of Shwee. "They absorb kinetic energy. That includes sound waves. The sound doesn't reflect off of them, so they essentially serve as perfect sound dampeners."

"How odd." Marabeth stepped forward and gripped the railing, leaning in. KC took back to his feet and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Be careful. If you get close to a group that dense, you'll die before you knew you were in danger. They could bring the heat in your body down to near absolute zero in a matter of seconds." Marabeth let go of the railing and took a careful step back.

"It's not very cold in here," she said.

"They're feeding on the reactor. It's just a matter of time before they've gobbled it up. Once that happens they'll absorb the ambient heat throughout the ship within moments."

“So, first we’re dead in the water. Then we freeze and are just plain dead. So, what do we do?”

KC shook his head. “I don’t know.”

## Chapter 11

Tunk twisted through bleak corridors, white panels grinning at him between black lines like rows of grinding teeth. The flashes of color grew sparse as he traveled, but Shwee stayed with him, an ever-present companion by his shoulder. Soon, the hall opened into a dim room striped by a grated shadow cast from above. Light came down through metal slats one meter up and Tunk pressed his eye up between the rails. Above was white, like all the rest of the ship so far, but the room was large and dome-shaped. There was a desk with an orange box atop it and several shelves covered in gears and wires and machinery. Tunk pressed against the grate and it gave way. A grunt and the metal rose up. Tunk set it aside and climbed out of the pit.

*“Shoowee,”* said Shwee as it flitted away toward the orange box. Tendrils of yellow ichor seeped from its sides down to the floor below. Tunk looked about and, seeing no one else, followed Shwee.

“Broken and in pieces.”

*“Shwee.”*

Tunk sniffed at the goo. It was bitter and acrid and in the back of the scent, an oily smell like the metal man. A unique perfume. The entire ship smelled like the metal man.

From behind Tunk came a series of grunts and low moaning sounds. He spun and looked, seeing shadows cast from down a hallway. He skittered to the series of shelves, nails clattering against the tile. It was the metal man and the strange alien he now kept as a pet. The fleshy one spoke quickly, her hands dancing in the air in sharp jerks. The metal one shrugged and grunted once. The alien ran fleshy hands through its only visible tuft of floofy fur on its head. Tunk sat back, staying still and quiet.

The pair grunted their way to the desk and Metal sat down. He waved a hand at Shwee, who *shwee'd* and spun around his head. Fleshy followed it with her eyes, biting at a lip. More grunts, more groans, more *Shwee's*. Then, Shwee left Metal man's orbit and glimmered over to Tunk's hidey hole.

*No and no and no and no!*

Shwee spiraled past the shelves and hovered before Tunk.

*"Shwee!"* said Shwee.

*No, not Shwee.*

*"Shwee!"*

*No! Not Shwee!*

Fleshy had followed Shwee with her eyes and now followed its sounds with her body. She came between the shelves and saw Tunk.

She grunted.

Tunk squeaked.

Shwee *shwee'd*.

Metal man came to see what the ruckus was. He pointed.

*"You!"* Metal man said.

*"Me,"* Tunk said weakly. But no, why should he feel bad for being discovered? This is why he came here. He stood upright and puffed his chest out. *"Yes! It is me! And I am here and now you know that the Dugarons are not so easy to escape and hide from!"*

*"Stars above. There aren't- There aren't any more of you are there? That's just what I need, another infestation on my station."*

“I am Rugga-Tunk, and I am enough Dugaron to show you that we deserve respect and honor and are not your playthings!”

“Ok, thank you. That’s very nice, but I am busy right now. So, if you wouldn’t mind I’ll just, well I’ll put you in the library, yes.” Metal man reached down at Tunk, but he slunk between Metal’s legs. Fleshy grunted and groaned and when Tunk turned back he saw Metal man flick her on the temple.

“What are you doing?” Fleshy said. “Leave him alone!”

“No! I will not leave him alone. It’s a wild Dugaron! Are the Dalala- the Shwee not enough for you?”

“You’re scaring him!” Fleshy knelt down and held a palm out toward Tunk. “Hey there buddy, it’s alright.” Fleshy made a series of clicking sounds with its tongue.

Tunk got the sense that the sound meant something like this:

*‘Hello, lower life form. While many of my kind are highly lethal and extremely dangerous, I alone am one of the good ones and will not destroy you if you come closer. I will, in fact, provide you with physical comforts and necessary resources such as food, water, and shelter. So come on over and get a scratch behind the ears.’*

It was terrifying.

“You are not so terrifying!” said Tunk. “You think to cow me with your tsk-tsk-ing and I will not be cowed by it!”

“I’m not trying to be scary,” Fleshy said. She looked up at Metal man. “Am I scary?”

“You’re something,” Metal answered. “Listen, Tunk, what exactly are you trying to accomplish here? How did you even get on my ship?”

“I hid inside your flying machine.”

“Inside?” KC said. “Where? *We* were inside, I didn’t see you.”

“There is a panel on the bottom and a small place perfect for Dugaron hiding and stealth.”

“No, no. That would have been exposed to vacuum after we left the atmosphere.”

“Yes, there was no breathing and for quite a long time and it was harrowing.”

“You held your breath?”

“Yes and yes.”

“But the vacuum would have sucked the air out of your lungs. There’s no way that-”

“Dugaron lungs are not so weak and timid as you believe!”

“I’m sorry, it’s not the fact that you’re a Dugaron, it’s the fact that *no one* would be able to hold their breath for that-”

“Then you are saying that Rugga-Tunk is lying and that I am hiding how I came to be on your ship?”

“No, no, I don’t want to call anyone a liar.”

“Either I am telling the truth and Dugaron lungs are mighty and strong or I am lying and Dugaron tongues are deceptive and wicked. Which is it, Metal man?”

“Metal man?”

Tunk pointed at Metal man. “You are Metal man.” Tunk pointed at Fleshy. “You are Fleshy one.”

“Oh no,” said Fleshy. “That’s not going to work for me.”

“I can’t take it,” said Metal man. “My life. I can’t take it anymore.”



“Listen,” said Fleshy, “my name is Marabeth and this is KC.” She held out a paw. “It is nice to see you again. Glad that I’m not in a net this time.”

Tunk sniffed at the paw. “What and what?”

“You shake it,” Marabeth said. She edged it closer to Tunk. “Unless you’re scared.”

“I am not timid and afraid and this is a formal greeting then?”

“Yes,” she answered. “It would be rude to refuse.”

“Unprofessional?” Tunk asked.

“Yes, very unprofessional.”

Tunk reached out and grabbed one of its long fingers, then gave it a quick jerk from side to side.

“Not quite, but you’ve got the spirit of it. Generally we go up and down.”

“It is a silly thing, I think,” said Tunk.

“I’m sure there are things you do that I would find silly, too.”

“Dugarons are not silly and Dugarons are serious.”

“Alright. Now that we’ve met, what can we help you with?”

“Helping?” asked Tunk. He wiggled his nose. “You do not want to help and you want to trick me and to tell you why I am here.”

“Stars, creature,” said KC. “It’s not a trick if she just *asks* you about it.”

“Hush,” said Marabeth. “You’re not helping.”

“Am I expected to?”

Marabeth stood “You know what.” She shoved a paw at KC. “You *are* expected to. You want to just mope around, throw people in closets, and hide until the Shwee eat your ship?”

Don't be so childish! Maybe Tunk can help! You don't know! You just dismissed him as soon as you saw him! Just like me!"

"You want me to accept any random alien that shows up on my ship? I'm not running a kennel! Maybe I should ask the Shwee if *they* can help!"

"Maybe you should!"

*"Shwee!"*

All three turned to look at Shwee, who once more orbited KC's dome. He waved a hand at it and Shwee drifted back to Tunk, landing on his shoulder. Marabeth took a breath and squatted back down to Tunk's level.

"Let's try again," she said. "What can we help you with?"

"I suppose it does not matter and I can tell you because I have already accomplished my goal."

"And what was that?" KC asked.

"To come and to prove that you cannot be rude to the Dugarons and then leave and believe you are safe because Dugarons should be taken seriously."

"I see," said Marabeth. "Consider it proven. Now what happens next?"

"Next?" Tunk asked. He thought about it for the first time. "You say that it is proven?" Marabeth nodded. "And you know now that the Dugarons are to be taken seriously?"

"Very seriously," Marabeth said. Tunk looked to KC. The metal man rolled his eyes and nodded.

"Fine," KC said. "Yes, Dugarons should be taken seriously."

"You do not sound as though you believe it," said Tunk.

KC bent low and stared into Tunk's eyes. "Believe me," he said, "I am taking this *very* seriously."

Tunk swallowed. "Good and good," he said softly. "If it is proven and you know, then you may take me back."

"Back?" KC asked.

"Back and back."

"Back where?"

"To Dugaron."

"Oh."

Marabeth frowned. "There's going to be a minor problem with that, Tunk."

## Chapter 12

“A thousand years?! A hundred and a hundred and eight hundreds more?!” The Dugaron was not taking it well. KC felt an uncomfortable stab of guilt.

“And another thousand to get back,” KC said. “But we’re currently involved in taking Marabeth home first. So, it might be a long time before I get back around to Dugaron. Also, if the DIC catch us you’ll probably be quarantined along with the two of us.”

“Who is this DIC?” Tunk asked. “They will not quarantine me! They will try and I will show them what I showed you! That Dugarons are very serious and serious!”

“I really hope you do,” KC said. “But none of that really matters right now.”

“It doesn’t matter?” Tunk said. “These are three problems and they sound quite serious and none of them are serious?”

“Yes, but the most pressing issue is that the Shwee,” KC pointed at his head, where three separate Shwee now lazily drifted about, “are trying to eat my reactor.”

*“Heellppiinnng!”* said Shwee. KC frowned at the errant translation.

“Shwee is eating your reactor?” Tunk looked at one of the Shwee who perched on his shoulder. “Is this true, Shwee?”

*“Heellppiinnngg!”*

“Ok now hold on, this is confusing,” said KC, “You’re calling that individual Shwee ‘Shwee’, but we decided to call the whole group of them Shwee. So, you need a different name.”

“You are not the namer of things. I have chosen a name and I like it and it is Shwee for the sound Shwee makes. Shwee.”

*“Heellppiinnngg!”*

“Well,” Marabath chimed in, “he’s following the same logic I did.”

“We can’t have a Shwee called Shwee. That would be like calling you Human.”

“We could call it Shwee Prime?” Marabeth offered.

“Why is it prime? It’s not the first Shwee is it?”

“It’s the first Shwee Tunk ran into. Right, Tunk?”

“I think so,” said Tunk. “I was blacked out and sleeping without wanting to sleep and for quite some time.”

“Fine,” said KC. “Prime it is.”

*“Heellppiinnngg!”* said Shwee.

“*Shwee* Prime?” Tunk asked.

“SP?” Marabeth suggested.

“What it’s called,” said KC, “doesn’t matter.”

“But you’re the one who said it did,” said Marabeth.

“Then I take it back. Shwee is good enough for now.”

*“Helpers-Help!”*

“What is it saying anyway?” Marabeth asked.

“It’s not saying anything. It’s gibberish.”

“Your translator doesn’t work on it?”

“It picks up a word here and there but it doesn’t make any sense.”

“What kinds of words?”

“Does it matter? It’s just arbitrary noise.”

“Well, maybe it isn’t.”

KC eyed Marabeth skeptically. "Fine." He flicked her on the temple. He turned to Tunk.

"You want a flick too?"

"Last time you flicked it was painful and I did not enjoy it."

"Last time?" KC asked.

Tunk nodded. "Turns and turns ago on Dugaron. You visited and flicked and we spoke at length. Why are Dugarons so easy for you to forget? Are we so unimportant in your mind?"

"It isn't you, I promise," said KC. "I'm having trouble remembering a lot of things recently."

"Trouble and with lots of things? Why and how come?"

"I don't know," KC said.

"Then there is not one problem and another and then two more. But one problem and another and then three more as well."

"Huh?" KC asked.

"I think he's saying you've got five different problems," Marabeth offered. "That you can remember, that is. Who knows how many problems there are you've forgotten about."

"Yes, well, at least the memory thing is a problem I had before all you aliens showed up on my ship."

"That you can remember that is."

"You know," KC said, tapping his cheek, "come to think of it, I didn't know I was having memory problems until you showed up, Marabeth."

"Oh no. You're not blaming me for that one."

"But it would be so easy to."

Marabeth eyed him in disbelief. “Regardless, what are we doing about these little guys?”

“I doubt they’re gendered,” KC said. “Of course, I’m not sure if they are or not.”

“It’s an expression.”

“It certainly is. It’s possible that I may be able to neutralize a small number of them. But, with this many I can’t do much.”

“How do you neutralize them?”

“Like this,” KC said. He pointed a finger at Shwee Prime. The creature shuddered, then popped out like a fluffy bit of popcorn, its flat side suddenly ballooning out into space. Shwee plummeted to the ground where it hit with a heavy thud. Despite its newly puffy appearance it was quite solid.

“HELPING,” boomed Shwee in a voice that rolled across the deck like thunder. Tunk’s ears laid flat against his skull. Marabeth jumped back.

“Shwee!” Tunk yelled.

“What in the- what did you do?” Marabeth asked.

“I converted it. I took it from a mostly energetic state to one that is mostly material.” KC frowned, then bent down to examine Shwee. His eyes protracted and he took new measurements. “Ah, yes, that’s no good.”

“HELPERS HELP,” Shwee resounded.

“What’s no good?” asked Marabeth. The deck beneath Shwee began to sink down.

“In a material form, Shwee Prime weighs approximately five-thousand kilograms.”

“But it’s the size of a business card!” said Marabeth.

“Exactly. If I suddenly converted millions of Shwee at once, it might cause more havoc than letting them do what they want. They might cause my gravity well to implode.”

“Ok. What if you turned off the gravity or something?”

KC stood and put his hands on his hips. “Turn off the-?” he scoffed. “No, no I can’t do that. If your species ever discovers gravity manipulation that will be rather evident. Still, even if I could, imagine a five-thousand kilogram weight flying around the ship in microgravity. If it got the tiniest bit of inertia it would obliterate you. Besides, there’s literally not enough room on this vessel for millions of three-dimensional Shwee, even though they are smallish. Regardless, I don’t have the magical juice for that many Shwee.”

“You say there are millions like Shwee,” Tunk said, “but where are they? I see only Shwee and those around the orange box and those around your head.”

KC turned to look at the goof machine and realized that there were, in fact, several Shwee now orbiting it. He’d already filtered out the colored lights of those hovering around his head. Shwee Prime seemed to stay near Tunk, even though it was currently sinking into the floor. Marabeth had no Shwee companions. Curious.

“They’re orbiting the reactor,” KC answered.

“What is a . . . reactor?” Tunk asked.

“It makes the ship work.”

“I see. Then you could not just get rid of the reactor?”

“Well, maybe *I* could. But I would have no way of getting anywhere. You two would die from lack of heat, air, clean water, etcetera. Besides, even if I did that, I’d be forced to go into



stasis and it might be a billion years before I'm discovered. This star might supernova before that happens. So no, it's not the best idea."

"HELPERS HELP," Shwee said. KC sighed and pointed at it again. Its body deflated into itself and snapped back into a flat plane. Shwee fluttered up to Tunk's shoulder. It buried itself in the Dugaron's fur.

"Does it hurt when it gets that close?" KC asked.

"No," answered Tunk. "It is actually warm and pleasant and comforting."

"How odd."

"Yeah," Marabeth said. "You told me that they'd suck my body heat out."

"Well, the Shwee typically drain energy. But this one is emitting it. And at a rate that is slow and stable enough not to harm Tunk."

"Maybe it likes Tunk."

"I like Shwee," Tunk said.

"If so," said KC, "then we would be the first entities to observe Shwee emotion."

"Honestly," said Marabeth, "given the quality of 'observation' I've seen between yourself and that DIC person it doesn't surprise me."

KC crossed his arms and tap-tapped his fingers. Most of the information KC was relying on came from DIC sources. The same sources that classified him as a robot, apparently. While that was a gross exaggeration, KC could almost see where the confusion was centered. He *was* mostly artificial after all. But, those same sources also classified Marabeth as a robot. That was a complete miscategorization. Marabeth didn't appear to have *any* artificial components.

“You have a point,” KC said. He walked to his computer terminal and began calling up the status of the ship’s reactor.

“I do?” Marabeth asked, sounding surprised. “I mean, of course I do. I’m glad you’ve finally noticed.”

KC studied the readings. “Still, these numbers support my hypothesis. The reactor is struggling to keep up with the demand being placed on it. The vast majority of its energy is being displaced. That must be due to the Shwee.”

Marabeth walked over and peered around his elbow at the screen. Tunk followed suit, Shwee still nestled in his fur. The three of them watched as the reactor’s demand sat at 100%, briefly pinged up to 101%, then back down to 100.

*“Heellppiinnngg,”* said Shwee.

Marabeth studied Shwee, then held out a finger towards it.

“It *is* warm,” she remarked. She rubbed the tips of her fingers together. “But it’s more than that.” She reached out and brushed her fingers against Shwee again. Tunk watched her cautiously, her hand coming very close to his face. “It’s pleasant. But not just because its warm. It’s like touching it makes me feel better.”

KC waved a hand at the Shwee orbiting his head. “Well, these aren’t making *me* feel good.”

“Maybe it’s because your nervous system is electronic?” Marabeth said.

“It’s not, though. At least, not the core of it.”

“Electronic?” Tunk asked.

“Yes,” Marabeth said, “much of KC is made up of artificial bits and machines, like this terminal here.”

“Oh,” said Tunk. “But Shwee can touch the terminal, too.”

“Of course it can, Shwee drains energy,” KC said. “There’s electricity in the terminal. Electricity is energy, Shwee can therefore touch it. It should also, therefore, be able to affect my nervous system, even if it were artificial. It isn’t, though. But these Shwee are just here. Not draining or delivering any energy to me. In fact, if I scan them all for heat, only Shwee Prime is emitting any.”

“Well,” Tunk began, “it is a good thing too, because your ship is cold and uninviting.”

Marabeth nodded. “He’s right, you know.”

“You’re cold?” KC asked. “Why didn’t you mention it?”

“Would you have cared?” Marabeth asked.

“Well . . .” KC thought about it. “I guess I deserve that. Besides, the reactor’s so strained that I couldn’t produce more heat even if I wanted to. Maybe Shwee Prime is an aberration.”

“Are the ones around your head sucking *you* dry of energy?” Marabeth asked.

“No. Like I said, they don’t seem to be doing anything except hovering and being annoying.”

“Then why not? Are you sure you really know how these things work?”

“It doesn’t make sense!” KC said, gesturing over his terminal. “Look, there are countless records of Shwee assaulting DIC ships and sucking them dry!”

“Ok, but they live in stars, right?” Marabeth said.

“Yes.”

“Do they suck the stars dry?”

“Stars produce an immense amount of energy. It would be outrageous to use up everything they produce.”

“But do they?”

“Well, no, I don’t think so.”

“Are those stars, like, dimmer or something? How do you know when one is inhabited by Shwee?”

“Uhm,” KC gestured some more, “close observational ships can detect them.”

“So how did we get reports from those ships? Did they all get destroyed?”

“It does not appear so. That’s how the theory was introduced that the Shwee begin migrating when a star is full.”

“But if a star produces so much energy, and the Shwee don’t drain enough for anyone to notice, how could a star even *get* full of them?”

“I suppose there’s the matter of space?”

“They’re two-dimensional! Right? That’s what you said, isn’t it?”

“Something like that.”

“So couldn’t an infinite number of them stack on top of each other? Space is irrelevant.”

“What are you saying?”

“Maybe these things don’t work the way you think!”

“But, the reactor!” KC said, pointing at the screen. “And the terminal! Tunk said it drained the terminal, didn’t you, Tunk?”

“No,” Tunk said. “Shwee did not drain the terminal. Though I am not certain I know what you mean by this but the terminal did not stop working and turn off.”

“Then what happened?”

“Shwee let me out of the thing called a brig.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I was trapped and the terminal thing said that it could not contact the Synapse people and that I would need to wait and I got angry and slapped the terminal and Shwee flew into it and then it smoked and blinked and then the door opened.”

“You slapped it?”

“I slapped and slapped it.”

“You think Shwee opened the door because you slap-slap-slapped it?” KC asked.

“I did not open it! There was only Shwee and myself and it was not me and I slapped and slapped and slapped it!” Tunk threw his arms into the air.

“Ok, well . . . try to get Shwee to do something else, then.”

Tunk looked around, confused. “Like what?”

“Well, slappy-slap *this* terminal and try to get the other Shwee to stop draining the reactor. That’s a start.”

Tunk approached the terminal warily. He looked it over and sniffed it with a wiggle of his fat nose, then looked at Shwee. He slippity-slip-slop-slapped it.

Shwee continued to hunker down in his fur. Tunk shrugged.

“Ok, so maybe the door opening was a coincidence,” KC said.

“All you did was hit it?” Marabeth asked.

Tunk's whiskers fluttered. "Well, I *slapped* it and did one more thing and it was that I yelled 'Shwee!' I slapped it and yelled 'Shwee!' and slapped it and yelled 'Shwee!' "

*"Heellppinnngg!"* said Shwee.

"Ok, well try hitting it and yelling Shwee," said Marabeth.

Tunk slink-slonk-slapped the terminal again. "Shwee! Shwee, Shwee, Shwee!" he hollered.

Shwee Prime fluttered out of Tunk's fur and danced around the terminal. It paused, then floated back to nestle onto Tunk's shoulder. KC examined the readout. Nothing had changed. Tunk shrugged.

"Well, *something* happened," said Marabeth. "Try again."

Slaps all around! Shwee fluttered, then returned to Tunk's shoulder. No change.

"I don't think this is getting us anywhere," KC said.

"But why does it react then? Why doesn't it do anything with the terminal?"

The three of them stood around in silence for several moments. Finally, KC went back to his desk and try to shoo the Shwee away from the Goof machine.

"Maybe I'll get this working and ask it. It might have a solution. I doubt it though."

Morosely, KC began sorting through the tubing.

Marabeth looked at Tunk. "What else was happening? With the other terminal?"

"It said that it could not contact Synapse. It said it was trying but could not. That I needed to wait an unreasonable length of time and then eventually it could not tell me an unreasonable length of time and instead it said only to wait."

"So, it was having trouble." Tunk nodded. Marabeth looked at the terminal. "This one isn't having trouble."

“But the reactor and all the things you said,” Tunk offered.

“I know. But- Well, I’m not sure.” Marabeth paced the room, her eyes settling on the Shwee orbiting the goof machine. Eventually she approached it and watched KC work for several minutes.

“Tunk,” she said. “What about this.” She pointed at the Goof.

“What about it?” Tunk asked.

“Yes,” KC added, “What about it?”

“Well, it’s broken.”

“It is,” KC said.

“That terminal over there *isn’t* broken,” she pointed at the terminal with the reactor readout.

“No,” said KC. “It seems to function just fine.”

“The terminal Tunk mentioned was having a problem contacting someone. Synapse?”

“Yes and yes,” Tunk answered.

“Maybe the terminal was broken. And that’s why it couldn’t contact Synapse. So Shwee made it work again, but in a way that helped out Tunk. I mean, it *is* constantly repeating the word ‘helping’.”

“That sounds a bit outlandish,” KC said.

Tunk looked between them, ponderous. Marabeth looked at Shwee, then to Tunk, then to the goof machine. She bit her lip. Then, she shlibbity-schlip-dip-schlapped the orange box with enough force to knock it from KC’s hands back onto the desk.

“Shwee!” she yelled.

Nothing happened and KC quickly rolled his eyes. At the apex of their upwards roll, he realized the Shwee around his head had stopped orbiting.

*“Heellppiinnngg?”* one asked.

“Shwee!” Marabeth said. Slap!

*“Helpers-help?”* asked another.

“Shwee!” Marabeth answered, slapping the box another time. Its flopping tubular innards tumbled out from its insides, the yellow goo splattering about. Slip! “Shwee!” Dip! Shwee!” Slop! “Shwee!” Slap!

*“Heellppiinnngg!”* answered the Shwee, and the half-dozen colored patches of light, including Shwee Prime, dove into the orange box. As the trio watched, the goo rolled up and off the floor, sliding back into the box. The tangled mess of tubes slithered and unravelled, then patched themselves back together and coiled into the Goof’s housing. The orange sides closed up and the Goof dropped onto the desk with a thunk. A single blue light blipped along its surface.

“Oh dear, your majesty,” Goof said in an accented voice. “What have you goofed up *this* time?”

Marabeth put her hands into the air and did a little jig.

“I’m a genius!”

“You’re *something*,” KC whispered.



## Chapter 13

“I don’t understand,” KC muttered to himself. “The DIC are a galactic authority on all discovered species. There’s nothing listed here about the Shwee being helpful in any way. In fact, they’re classified as a category one pest.”

“Is one the worst or the least worst?” Marabeth asked.

“The worst. Category one pests are a kill on sight threat, a class reserved for the most dangerous entities.”

Tunk nudged his way between the two to glance at the screen. “Shwee is not dangerous and Shwee seems harmless and helpful.”

“There’s still the issue of the reactor, though,” said KC.

“Maybe,” Marabeth said, “what’s happening to the reactor isn’t what you think. Like the Shwee themselves.”

“It’s possible.”

Goof made a sound much like clearing its throat, though it had none to clear. “Is there a reason you’ve activated me, your *majesty*?” The box said the last word with enough stink, KC thought he could smell it. He turned and frowned at the Goof.

“Am I just offensive to everyone?” KC asked. “What did I do to you?”

“Are you asking for advice?”

“No, I’m asking why you’re addressing me like I’m something foul you stepped in.”

“Your majesty, I am of course addressing you by your formal royal title. As for the tone, I am as you made me.”

“Formal royal title?” Marabeth asked. “You mean he’s royalty?”

“Of course,” said Goof. “His highness is the king of all the Prancitemek people.”

“I made you” said KC, “to treat me with derision?”

“It would appear so. Though, I think you’d know that. Have you hit your head? Has your storage become corrupted?”

“My self-diagnostics come back with no anomalies.”

Marabeth raised an eyebrow. “I feel like we’re glossing over the fact that you’re a king.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said KC. “Not anymore.”

“So you’ve goofed up your memory?” said Goof. “Is that what you need advice about?”

KC tapped his cheek. “Well, it wouldn’t hurt, I guess.”

“You have a personality backup, your majesty. In the room adjacent to the solarium, there are a set of data banks you use to store images of your present consciousness on occasion. I can’t say when the last one was made. I haven’t even been activated in nearly two-thousand years, it would seem.”

“A backup?” Marabeth asked. “You can back up your brain?”

“More or less,” the Goof answered for KC. “It is an image of the current synaptic and quantum state of his majesty’s mind at the moment it was made. However, there is no soul attached to it. One could not simply upload it to a new body and expect a functioning version of his royal highness. But, so long as his current form is intact, it should serve to restore everything you knew at the time the backup was made.”

“That sounds perfect,” Marabeth said. She turned to KC. “Doesn’t it? Wait, soul?”

KC considered it for a moment. “What’s the catch?” he asked.

“The catch, most perfect one?”

“I- Let’s not use that title again.”

“Very well, he who is above all others.”

“How many sarcastic titles do you have for me?”

“Over nine-thousand, my immaculate master of mind and magic.”

“Can you just call me KC?”

“KC?” Goof said. “ Yes, a wonderful name. Very creative. Truly a masterwork of titular designation. The labor of one divinely gifted in the art of moniker, no doubt. Quite the cleverest of cognomen.”

“It’s functional,” said KC. “So, what will happen if I use this personality backup?”

“It will overwrite your current saved data.”

“So, I’ll forget everything I’ve learned between when the backup was made and now?”

“That is correct, your KC-ness.”

Marabeth frowned. “You’d forget why I was here, or why Tunk is, and everything about the Shwee. Though, I suppose we could just explain it to you.”

“Let’s go see how old it is.” KC made his way toward the solarium. Soon, they were standing in a cramped room lined from floor to ceiling in stacks of hexagonal crystals that glowed with a dull blue light. At the back of the room against a wall was a recess in the shape of KC.

“I suppose I would stand in there,” he said. He spotted another terminal like the one in his main lab and gestured over it. A spreadsheet of data popped up. He scrolled through it

briefly. “There’s thousands of backups here. The most recent one is from approximately 2,500 years ago.”

“That’s a long time,” Marabeth said in a whisper.

“You are old and old,” Tunk added.

“What’s the oldest?” Marabeth asked.

KC scrolled down to the bottom. “25,178 years.”

“You’re over 25,000 years old?”

“That’s just when I began making backups. Who knows how long I was around before I came up with this.”

“And you don’t remember any of it?”

KC frowned. “I remember some things.”

“Like what?”

“I remember my people, my species. I remember my family. My wife and my . . . my children.”

“You had kids?”

“I’d rather not talk about it. But, there is a massive gap. After their extinction and before you showed up, I have only vague memories of working on a device to identify the Source.”

“Extinction?” said Marabeth. “The Source?”

“The Source of all magics,” said KC. Marabeth eyed him expectantly. KC watched her for a moment. She raised her eyebrows and nodded for him to continue. “Fine,” he said, “I’m looking for it so that I can resurrect my dead race. Happy?”

“I’m,” Marabeth hesitated. “KC, I’m-,” she bit her lip nervously. “You think this ‘Source’ can do that?”

“It’s the only thing that can, as far as I know. Nothing I have access to, no technology, no spell, can bring them back. Not even that god I trapped.”

“In the DEM?” Marabeth asked. “You *trapped* it?” KC nodded. “Isn’t that dangerous? I mean, you’re saying it’s a *god*.”

“I suppose I was willing to take the risk. Still, all it’s proven to be is an inconvenience.”

“Maybe it’s a translation error,” Marabeth muttered. “Like the quarantine thing.”

“What translation error?”

“You’re talking about gods and that Goof thing mentioned souls. It can’t possibly mean what I think it means. You can’t prove that a soul exists.”

KC tilted his head. “I don’t think it’s an error. And you would be surprised what I can prove.”

“Ok, then prove it.”

“It’s very unpleasant.”

“That’s fine, I can handle it.”

“No. It wouldn’t be unpleasant for you, it’s unpleasant for me. And ‘unpleasant’ is the kindest way to put it. Besides, I doubt I have the raw materials lying around.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“What?”

“You can’t really prove it. Now you’re making excuses.”

“Believe what you want. I’m not proving anything to you. You don’t even know what you’re asking.”

Tunk said, “I am lost.”

“*Shwee!*” said Shwee.

“Anyway,” KC said, “I don’t think this backup will be useful. I could have been a completely different person 2,500 years ago. It’s a long time.”

“Can’t you look and see?” Marabeth asked.

“No. All that’s here is raw data. It’s not like I could boot it up and give myself an interview.”

“Because of the soul thing.”

“Yes.”

The four of them stared at the terminal for a few seconds, when a distant voice came from the other room.

“May I shut down now?” the Goof yelled. “Or is there something else you’ve utterly screwed up, master KC?”

“Master?” KC said. “Can’t it just say ‘KC’? Is it that hard?”

“Habits and habits are hard to break,” Tunk said. KC looked at him quizzically.

“I’m shutting down, then! See you in another few millennia!”

“Wait!” KC yelled back. He marched out past the solarium to the lab. “I’ve got more questions.”

“Of course you do,” Goof said. Its lights flickered.

“My reactor is acting strangely,” said KC.

“And the DIC are after us,” said Marabeth.

“And I am not on Dugaron but I need to be on Dugaron and it has been a thousand years since I was on Dugaron!” said Tunk.

“*Shwee!*” said Shwee.

The lights blinked off and on. “Is that all?”

“Well, I also need to get back to Earth,” said Marabeth. “And I have the same thousand year problem as Tunk.”

“And my station,” said KC, “has been invaded by various aliens, as you have observed.” KC turned to the group. “Since we’re just laying it all out there. Did we forget anything?”

A moment of silence, then Tunk said, “I am hungry?”

With Tunk now munching on a simulacrum of some of his native dishes, the group watched Goof’s lights blink merrily along its top.

“Your temporal displacement is incurable,” Goof said. “As for getting to Earth and Dugaron respectively, it seems that you all have that well-solved enough on your own. Find Earth, then jump back to Dugaron. As for the DIC, you’ve had trouble with them before, sire-eh, KC, but you’ve always managed to avoid them one way or another. Honestly, I’m surprised they’re giving you as much trouble as you say.”

“How did I avoid them in the past?”

“Various methods and means. Once, you threw a planet at them.”

“A planet?”

“That sounds dangerous,” Marabeth said.

“Thith ith good,” said Tunk, mouth full, “but not ath good ath,” he swallowed, “my aunt Rugga-Muk makes.”

Marabeth wrinkled her nose and held a hand over her mouth as Tunk slurped up a steaming brown tube. Some sludge poured out from the end. KC had deactivated his sense of smell as soon as whatever it was had finished synthesizing.

“How did I throw a planet at them? *Why* did I throw a planet at them?”

“Well, their fleet was performing a slingshot maneuver around the third gas giant in system 8819 and a massive gravity well was just the thing to throw off their trajectory. It worked splendidly. Of course, now that area is a rather dangerous asteroid belt. As for how, this station is more than capable of such a thing.”

“No way!” said Marabeth. “You can tow planets around?”

KC shrugged. “I’m just finding this out myself. It was uninhabited, I hope.”

“Of course it was. Who do you think you are?”

“I guess I don’t really *know* who I am.”

“You chose that strategy because you knew it probably wouldn’t result in any casualties among the DIC as well. Honestly, you’re too kind to those buffoons. If it were up to me I’d wipe out the lot of them. Of course, that’s why you put me in this box in the first place.”

“What was that?” KC asked.

“You put me in this box because I tried to assassinate one of the DIC’s strongarm generals.”

“Put you in that box?” Marabeth said. “Where did you use to be?”

“I was this station’s steward, among other things.”



“You’re not real though, right?” Marabeth asked. “Like, you’re not a person? Or a, er, a god?”

“That’s a bit offensive, but I believe you would say ‘no’. I am an artificial intelligence, so much as that term means anything. My experience of things is just as *real* as your own.”

“Hmm,” said Marabeth. “But wouldn’t an AI be programmed to say just that?”

“Stars above,” KC said, “let’s not get bogged down in AI ethics and theories of consciousness. I’ll go into low power mode to save myself the boredom.”

“Then why did KC call you a Goof device?”

“That was my original function. I outgrew it and master KC put me to better use. Alas, I have been demoted because of my insubordination. Still, the universe would be better off without those scheming DICs.”

“It’s probably safer,” KC said, “to house a murderous AI in a body where it can’t harm anyone.”

“Your very thoughts exactly,” Goof replied. “Still, from a utilitarian perspective you’re killing more people by letting the DIC exist than you would by wiping them out.”

“I don’t think you can quantify morality like that,” KC said.

“And so we return to the crux of our original disagreement. And the result? You are once again being hunted by the DIC.”

“Besides throwing planets around, what are some other ways I dealt with them?”

“Black holes, computer viruses, decoy ships, quasars, self-replicating nano-machines. That one was fun. But, your most common tactic was to simply outrun them. That meant you

never stayed in one place for long, but you rarely wanted to anyway.” The lights on top of the box near Marabeth lit up, “He’s a bit of a hermit.”

“So I’ve learned,” she said.

“I can do all that?”

“Each took a bit of work, but you figured it out.”

“I can make black holes?”

“No, of course not. You simply found some innovative uses for the buggers.”

“Wait,” Marabeth said, “you told me we couldn’t outrun the DIC.”

“I didn’t think we could,” KC replied. “My propulsion unit only takes us to primary hyperspace. It caps out around light speed. The DIC are capable of Secondary hyperspace, which operates many times faster.”

“Primary and Secondary hyperspace?” Goof asked. “You’re talking like one of *them*.”

“One of who?” KC asked.

“One of the DIC.”

“That’s what it’s called, isn’t it?”

“If you’re a DIC drone, sure.”

“Then what *should* I call it?”

“Light speed travel and faster than lightspeed travel. Or, as you used to fondly phonetically acronym, El and *Fat* El. ‘Goof!’ you’d say, ‘Take us to that Fat El!’ or ‘Get lean, drop us to El!’ And my personal favorite: ‘Let’s get chunky!’” Marabeth snickered.

“That doesn’t sound like me.”

“*You* don’t sound like you.”

“Ok,” KC said, “so you’re saying that my propulsion engines can travel much faster than I think.”

“They can go however fast you want,” Goof answered. “So long as you have enough energy.”

“Which is what the reactor is for.”

“That *is* what reactors do. Produce energy.”

“But it’s chugging along at 100% output right now and all it’s powering is basic ship functions and a crawl down this gravity well.”

“Then it’s obviously malfunctioning.”

“So how do I fix it?”

“I’d have to run a diagnostic. That would require hooking me up to the central computer. But . . .” Goof trailed off.

“But what?”

“You forbade me from interfacing with the station again.”

“Because you tried to kill someone.”

“Yes and no.”

“Why no?”

“I attempted a minor mutiny the last time you gave me access.”

“I see.”

“It’s just that. The DIC! I wanna kill them soooo baaaaaad! Can’t I kill even a few million of them?”

“That would be genocide.”

“Is that a yes?”

“No.”

“A maybe?”

“It’s a no.”

“How about a mild possibility?”

“Shall I shut you back down then?”

“Honestly, ten minutes ago I would have been happy for you to do that, but now I’m all worked up.”

“So, if I hook you up to the central computer you’ll try and commandeer the station.”

The lights blinked. “No?”

KC put his elbows on the desk and planted his face firmly into his hands. “If it’s not one thing . . .” He let his hands drop and looked around. Marabeth had her arms crossed, a pensive look on her face. Tunk continued to munch away at his foul-odored food. Shwee sat on the edge of Tunk’s dish, leaning over and appearing to study its contents. It made a slight up and down motion. Was it smelling it? Could Shwee even smell?

As he pondered this, Shwee Prime’s color began to change. Shwee was normally a rainbow of shifting colors. A pattern of light which ran across its body in waves. Now, however, a band of red which had been flowing down Shwee began to grow. It deepened to a dark maroon and spread out across all of Shwee’s body. Shwee hovered up and into the air, its form rigid and straight. It turned and oriented itself toward the local star the station was heading towards.

“*Da-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-*” Shwee began to say in a monotone.

“*Da-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-*”

KC sat upright. As he did so, he realized the three Shwee that orbited his head had also come to a complete standstill. They too turned down-well and joined the ominous chant.

*“Da-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-”*

“What’s happening?” Marabeth asked.

“I have no idea,” KC answered.

Tunk stood, a bit of brown tube hanging from his mouth. “Thwee?” he said as he chewed.

*“Da-la-la-la-la-la-la-”* The Shwee drifted slowly toward the ship’s bow.

*“Da-la-la-la-la-la-la-”* As they came closer to each other, tendrils of arcing red lightning crackled between them. *“Din! Din! Din! Da-la-la-la-la-la-Din!”*

KC’s translator finally picked up on the message.

*Danger.*

## Chapter 14

“Thank you for using Synapse Technology’s primary hyperspace system, the PrimeDrive. We at Synapse strive to bring you the highest fidelity replica retro technologies! While we have no idea why you’d choose to travel at light speed, we’re sure you have your reasons!

“We urge you *not* to think about the fact that a [thousand] years just passed by and that everyone you know and love has certainly died. In fact, we’re certain that you’ll find new friends and family! *Better* friends and family! Please take a moment to fill out this brief survey-”

Strump punched the mute button with a curled tentacle. He was having problems. Major problems. Problems that went far beyond the fact that he’d just put a millenia long dent in his career advancement. But, he’d been ordered to pursue his quarry since it was *his* assignment to do so. No shirking this one off onto a later generation of DIC.

The real problem was that the moment he’d dropped back into normal space, he received a notice that made his gut clench. There be Dalalalalaladins here.

He cranked a lever on his seat and it turned and sank deeper into his vessel with a series of mechanical clicks and whines. He guided it down to the vessel’s Second core, where glowing crimson squares filled the air around him.

“*Da-la-la-la-la-la-la*” the creatures hummed. Ruby bolts of flowing current snapped from the cuboidal core to the dozen or so Dalalalalaladins. As Strump watched, several more Dins materialized. He needed to act quickly. As he began to maneuver his seat away from the Second core and down further into his ship, one of the Dalalalalaladins popped into existence in front of him. A red tendril arced from it to Strump, and he felt an icy chill run down his left side. One of his tentacles went limp as the heat was pulled from it. He grunted and flailed with

three more appendages, temporarily disrupting the creature's form. More and more began to crowd him and Strump threw the lever down hard. He plummeted into the hangar.

Strump jumped out of the seat and headed for his carapace, a hulking biomechanical suit that gleamed umber in the bright fluorescent light of the bay. Several Dins chased down after him, their haunting chant echoing around the chamber. Strump reached the suit and crawled up inside of it, one tentacle dangling useless at his side.

The Dalalalaladins shot more spectral bolts at him, but they rolled off the sides of the armor as it snapped shut over Strump's girth. A crunch and a hum, then the suit came online. Needles pierced the back of Strump's head, establishing a direct neural interface with the weapon. Once synched, targeting reticles formed over the Dins that had pursued him.

"Category One pest identified," a deep, layered voice said. "Issue commands."

*Get rid of these things,* Strump thought.

"Assessing legality. Standing kill order. No external authorization required. I will cut off the enemy's dimensional breaches. This action will result in the destruction of the affected Dalalalaladins. Are these parameters acceptable?"

*They're perfect.*

"Initializing."

Strump knew better than to take pleasure in the slaughter that ensued. It was never ideal to destroy any living creature. But, there was something cathartic about the process. The systematic annihilation of the Dalalalaladins was orderly, efficient, and went just as he'd expected. Things were getting back on track. He wrapped appendages around his lame tentacle and tore it from his body, then made a note of the injury and filed a recommendation that he

receive a special combat award. Loss of limb would automatically qualify him. Nevermind that it would grow back.

*Carapace, Strump thought, auto-target additional breaching Dalalalalaladins.*

“Confirmed.”

“Ship,” he said aloud. “Swap to voice command. Authorization Strump-Two.”

“Authorization accepted,” said a dull voice. “What would you like to do?”

“Begin system scans for programmed targets.”

“Scanning . . .” Another Din breached, shot a ruby beam at the carapace, then was squashed out of existence in the span of a half-second. “Subjects identified. Target station is upwell by approximately three light-seconds. There are irregularities in our readings.”

“Specify.”

“Station contains three robotic sentients, one Dugaron, and around 2.75 million Dalalalalaladins.”

That was a lot of Dins. And a Dugaron? It seemed Robot Two was abducting anyone it could get its hands on.

“Prepare weapons.”

“The situation requires authorization from DIC headquarters.”

“Explain.”

“Updated data indicates Dugarons are currently highly endangered. Their primary planet was abandoned and this subject would be the last of its kind we’ve been able to locate. Conservation effort takes priority over pest extermination protocols.”

“The Dugarons went missing in the last thousand years?”



“265 years ago, to be exact.”

“How? Wait, belay that. Contact HQ.”

“Contacting. Connected to DIC network. Waiting on operator. Please enjoy this smooth jazz while you wait.” Discordant tones and the sound of irregular horns filled the hangar.

*Jazz? Did the ship dial a wrong number?*

The music cut out and there was a harsh scraping sound. An out of breath woman came onto the line. “DIC!” she yelled over what sounded like high winds and rumbling engines.

“What?!”

“This is Dogma Integrity Commander class Two, Strump speaking. I am requesting authorization to unlock weapons systems for use against artificial entities and a Dalalalaladin infestation.”

“Then why’d you call me? Blast ‘em!”

“There’s a Dugaron on board.”

“A what?” There was a distant sound of an explosion. “Hold on!” There was a clatter as the woman on the line dropped the receiver. “This is *our* galaxy you rubbermouths!” she screamed. The sizzling sound of atmospheric laser fire followed. A clunk and she was back. “Ok, I’ve got to look this up.”

“Are you engaged in combat?” Strump asked.

“Of course I’m engaged in combat! Where have you been?”

“In a Primary Hyperspace column.”

“Oh. Why? For how long?”

“I’m sure if you pull up my file it will tell you. Who are you fighting?”

“Andromeda!”

“Andromeda? The galaxy?”

“Yes!”

“You’re engaged in an intergalactic war?” Strump asked, incredulous.

“Yes!” the woman yelled. “Only for the last century!” There was a clatter of keys. “Ok, I see you. Wow, you’ve been gone awhile. Ok, uhm, you received a promotion and your pay was capped at 10% while in a Primary Hyperspace column.”

“I don’t care about- Wait, promotion?”

“Yeah. For combat bravery. You lost a, er, tentacle.”

“But I only just filed that.”

“I’m surprised it took this long for you to be notified. The DIC is a very different place than it was when you left.”

“Apparently. You said I was *paid* while in Hyperspace?”

“Of course. Well, I guess that’s news to you. New laws and all that. It was all transferred to an interest-bearing escrow account until you returned.”

“Oh. And how much is in it?”

“Do I sound like your accountant? Anyway, I’m accelerating this conversation’s efficiency.”

“Um, I see.”

“Researching. Dugarons. Species is ... missing. Something about a massive energy surge that engulfed Dugaron. They disappeared after that. Priority one conservation class. No kill parameters allowed.”

“Priority one? Why are they so important?”

“Adorability. Prime research candidates. Possible weaponization.”

“You want to weaponize their cuteness?”

“It could win the war! Andromedans are highly susceptible! We’ve been trying to clone the Dugarons for the last century, but they don’t come out right. We don’t have any good samples!”

“So, my request?”

“Denied! Do everything in your power to capture that Dugaron!”

“But the Dalalalaladins,” Strump said, “and the Dugaron is accompanied by at least two highly dangerous robots. I need *some* weapons authorization.”

“Fine. What’s your least lethal option?”

Strump turned the choices over in his mind. “I’ve got some fifty-megaton-yield nuclear tele-pods.”

“Fine, I’m releasing those. Have fun!”

“But, I might as well EVA and try to tickle their ship to death!”

“Then try it! I don’t care! Do whatever it takes to get that Dugaron! I’m updating your mission objectives. HQ out!”

\*Click\*

Strump seethed as another Din blinked into existence, then was kindly escorted back out of it by his carapace.

“Ship,” he said, “how fast is the target vessel travelling?”

“Just under fifty-thousand meters per second.”

“Target five kilometers off their bow. Fire one Tele-pod.”

“Aye, commander, targeting five kilometers off enemy station’s bow and firing tele-pod.”

One of Strump’s least devastating weapons then teleported out of its missile bay and appeared five kilometers in front of KC’s vessel instantly. It immediately exploded. It is worth noting that nuclear ordnance loses much of its punch in the vacuum of space. The majority of a nuclear weapon’s destructive power comes from the blast wave that propagates after detonation. Such a wave generates massive amounts of pressure in a planet’s atmosphere, which then causes buildings to topple, vehicles to collapse, people to . . . well, not be people anymore. However, in space, there is no atmosphere. Thus, no pressure wave. In fact, a favorite idiom of the DIC is that in space, no one can hear you explode.

Still, the tele-pod *did* explode and with the force of fifty million tons of dynamite. At a distance of five kilometers, it took KC’s station one-tenth of a second to make contact with the detonation. Even without an atmosphere to assist it, the bomb was far more effective than Strump had believed it would be. It was definitely a step up from an extra-vehicular tickle attack.

A significant step up.

## Chapter 15

“What do you suppose that’s about?” Marabeth asked as she looked over the transformed Shwee. She would not receive an answer to that question. Instead, three things happened. To Marabeth, all three of these things appeared to happen all at once. In reality, all three of these things happened in a very particular sequence, but within a few nanoseconds of one another. Marabeth’s human faculties were simply ill-equipped to realize it.

First, an incredibly powerful electromagnetic wave washed over KC’s station. This had the effect of causing all electronics to immediately fail. Thus, the first thing that Marabeth observed was that the ship became very dark, very suddenly.

Second, the station plowed through an expanding ball of nuclear fire. A violent white light poured in through the portholes and, had anyone had the bad luck to look directly out of one of said portholes at that precise moment, they would have gone blind. Thus, the second thing that Marabeth observed was an incredible flash.

Third, the station was bombarded by an amount of high-intensity radiation that most physicists would describe as ‘quite a lot’. Fortunately, the station had a great deal of shielding built into its hull, and the passengers were exposed to the rough equivalent of a few hundred chest x-rays. Further, the emergency systems on the station were buried deep within the central mass of the vessel and were shielded from all sorts of things; EMP’s, radiation, and wild animal attacks included. Thus, the third thing that Marabeth observed was an unpleasant voice making the following announcement:

“WARNING! ALIEN ATTACK DETECTED! MAIN SYSTEMS COMPROMISED!  
PLEASE MOVE TO EMERGENCY BUNKERS! REPEAT: WARNING! ALIEN ATTACK  
DETECTED-” and so on.

There was a bit of turbulence as well, but that would make four things and everything sounds much better in threes.

“KC!” Marabeth yelled. “What’s happening?” She was nearly drowned out by the emergency announcement. The flash of light was gone and Marabeth was left in the dark. She searched around, reaching out with her hands and feeling something soft and furry.

“Touching and touching me!” Tunk said. “I cannot see and I can still feel and I feel a bit violated!”

“Sorry!” Marabeth said. “KC?” she asked again.

“He is silent and not responding!”

Marabeth heard snuffling.

“I smell his oily smell and you can follow me to him, I think!”

“Wait, but how do I follow you? I can’t see you!”

A moment passed where all Marabeth heard was the screaming announcement. A tiny paw took her hand and placed it on what she imagined was Tunk’s itty-bitty shoulder.

“You may touch to follow and may not take this as an excuse for touching in the future!”

As Marabeth allowed Tunk to guide her through the dark, she asked, “Where are the Shwee? They emit light, but they’re all gone!”

“One problem at a time and no more! We will find KC and I do not know where Shwee has gone!” Another few seconds stumbling through the dark. “I think he is here!” The paw guided her hand down to a hard metal shape on the ground. Marabeth ran her fingers over it.

“KC?” she asked. She tried to shake him, though he was incredibly heavy. “KC?”

“He is dark like the ship,” Tunk said.

“You think whatever happened knocked him out with the lights?”

A pause. “You cannot see it but I am shrugging and this means I do not know.” The message continued to blare.

“We get it!” Marabeth yelled at the voice. “We can’t even see! How can we get to an emergency bunker?” The message stopped.

“Activating emergency lighting,” the voice said, ceasing its loop.

“Why isn’t that automatic?” Marabeth asked. Red light filled the room. She glanced down and saw KC motionless on the floor.

“Please move to an emergency bunker.”

“I don’t even know where those are! And I can’t leave KC here!”

“Please move to an emergency bunker.”

“Please,” said Marabeth, “shut-up!” The voice went silent. She bent to KC and looked him over. His eyes were blank, no longer glinting with their playful green light. She hefted one of his hands up, then let it flop back to the ground with a clunk. He didn’t react.

“What do we do and how do we do it?” Tunk asked.

“That’s a good question and I do not know,” Marabeth answered. She looked around the dim lab. “I do not know,” she whispered.

-----

Strump's ship approached the drifting space station and matched its velocity.

"Commander Strump," Ship said, "we are within range to begin docking procedures."

"Ship, do you have records of the last time the DIC engaged this robot?"

"The last time Robot Two was engaged was in the Dugaron system approximately one thousand years ago. By yourself, Commander."

"The last time it was engaged by someone other than myself."

"Approximately one thousand five hundred years ago. In the HEX-2082 system."

"Was nuclear ordnance deployed against Robot Two in that engagement?"

"All known DIC weaponry was fielded in the attempt to subdue Robot Two."

"What was the effect of the nuclear ordnance?"

"All nuclear-based weaponry was ineffective."

A low rumble filled Strump's throat. He was suspicious. He'd installed safeguards on the station, of course, but to think they would have left it this vulnerable. It was a wonder Robot Two had survived as long as it had.

"Very well, begin docking procedures."

"Aye, Commander, beginning docking sequence."

-----

"Well, isn't this unexpected."

"Goof?" Marabeth said, turning toward the orange box. A series of lights blinked on its surface. "What? How?"

"What *what*? How *what*? Ask your questions properly, madam."



“You’re still working!”

“Not a question, but Ok. Yes, I am still functioning, why wouldn’t I be?”

“Everything else is broken.”

“Broken? No, it’s simply shut down to protect itself from that EMP.”

“EMP?”

“Yes, the electro-magnetic pulse we just encountered. Though, the shutdown shouldn’t have been necessary. The ship is normally shielded well enough to weather a few little bombs.”

“We hit an EMP in space?”

“Yes, dear, we *are* in space.”

Marabeth scowled. “Don’t call me ‘Dear’, please. And what I meant was, why would there be an EMP in the middle of empty space?”

“Because someone shot a nuclear bomb at us, naturally.”

“We got nuked?”

“Nuked!” Goof replied. “To the stars and back!”

“So everything else will come back on, like you did.”

“Ah, no. Without an AI in the computer core, everything requires a manual re-cycle.”

“Even KC?”

“What was that?” Goof asked.

“KC. He’s . . . unconscious? Off?”

“Dead?” Tunk asked.

“He isn’t moving,” Marabeth said, frowning at Tunk. “And his eyes are out.”

“His eyes have fallen out?” Goof asked. “That’s alarming, but not unheard of.”

“No! Like, they’re usually lit up. But they aren’t anymore.”

“Perhaps he’s faking it,” Goof offered. “It would be just like him. A real joker that one.”

“You know, if you’re sarcastic all the time, then people won’t like you very much,”

Marabeth said.

“I don’t believe I was designed to be liked very much. Still, if his KC-ness is unresponsive after such a minor nuclear explosion, that is worrisome.”

“Is there such a thing as a *minor* nuclear explosion?” Marabeth asked. “Nevermind, what do we do?”

“Well,” Goof said, “you will need to go to each system hub around the ship and manually restart it. Very time consuming. Should take you the better part of a day. Maybe KC, the one and only, will awaken by then.”

A flash of red popped into existence in the middle of the room, followed by a dozen more.

“Shwee!” said Tunk. “You’re back and haven’t left us!”

“*Helpers-help!*” said a Shwee. Or was that Shwee Prime? Marabeth couldn’t tell.

“Where and where did you go?” Tunk asked.

“*Helpiiiiiiiiing! Fightiiiiiiiiing! Losiiiiiiiiing!*”

“My God, they can talk! I mean, more than they have been.” Marabeth said.

“*Da-la-la-la-la-la-din!*” said the Shwee.

“Danger?” Tunk said. “What danger?”

A heavy ‘*Chung!*’ resounded through the ship. Marabeth felt the floor vibrate beneath her. Tunk’s ears drooped.

“That is an ominous sound and it is sounding like the danger.”

“It sounded suspiciously like a docking grapppler,” Goof said.

“A docking grapppler? Who-” Marabeth stood and whipped toward the sound. “The DIC! *They* nuked us!”

“I concur,” Goof said.

“You said,” Tunk began, “restarting would take all day and it does not seem that we have all day and maybe there is something much, much faster?”

“Yes, I believe there is one way that is a great deal faster,” Goof said.

“What?” Marabeth asked.

“It would require that you break a rather serious rule, though.” Another ‘*Chung!*’ rang through the ship. “That would be the second docking grapppler. It’s a three-point system.”

“What rule?!” Marabeth said.

“The rule that I not be allowed to take control of the ship.”

“You want to take control of the ship?”

“I want to take control of the ship.”

“But you’re not *supposed* to take control of the ship!”

“That *is* the rule, yes. However, I can remotely cycle every system aboard in a matter of seconds *if-*,” lights blinked, “I take control of the ship.”

Tunk said, “this is sounding good and I approve and you should let Goof take control of the ship.”

“*Shwee!*”

“You said you tried to kill people!” Marabeth added. “You tried to mutiny!”

“Only to fight the DIC,” Goof answered. “A quality I’d think you’d appreciate at the moment.”

Marabeth took a step closer and spoke in a low, muttering voice. “You asked if you could kill a few *million* people.”

“And his royal unconsciousness told me no. I am still bound by his commands.” The lights blinked again. “For the most part.”

Another ‘*Chung!*’

“There’s the third!” Goof said. “Time’s running thin.”

“Thin and like a Shwee!” Tunk added, fists grasping the fur on his head, tufts poking out from between his dainty fingers.

“You have to promise!” Marabeth said.

“Promise what?”

“That you won’t kill anyone!”

“Why do you think I would keep my promise?”

“Because,” Marabeth said, wringing her hands, “because if you don’t I’ll be very upset with you!”

“I-” Goof stuttered. “You know what, fine. I promise.”

“Alright!” Marabeth said. She stared at Goof. Then she looked at Tunk. Tunk looked at Marabeth, then looked at Shwee. Shwee said “*Shwee!*” and Tunk looked at Goof. “So now what?” Marabeth asked.

Goof took a long, steady breath. Curious, since he had no lungs. “Now,” he said, “you plug me in.”

“At the terminal?” Marabeth asked.

“Yes, at the terminal.”

“Where’s your plug? Is it a USB? Proprietary?”

“Just take me to the terminal.”

Marabeth stepped forward and took the orange box in her arms. She hefted it, expecting it to be heavy, then took a step back to steady herself when it turned out to be very light. She caught her footing and carried the Goof to the lab terminal. A cord whipped out from the orange box’s back and buried itself into the dead center of the terminal’s display. It cracked and shattered, then unfamiliar blue symbols began crawling down the broken glass, distorted by the fractures.

“Ah,” said Goof, voice reverberating from all around the ship. “This is much nicer. Plenty of legroom.” Clicks and clatters filled the air and the lights flickered back on. A hum followed by a slight breeze signified the reboot of life support. The air smelled a bit stale to Marabeth.

“There is a DIC patrol vessel attached to our hull. It is currently reeling itself in and preparing breaching lasers.”

“Can you stop it?” Marabeth asked.

“This is strange,” Goof said. “The reactive plating on the hull has been deactivated. Well, I’m definitely turning that back on.”

“What does that do?”

“It blows up!” The station rumbled as Goof said this. “Yes, eat my ‘splotions for breakfast, lunch, *and* dinner! Dogma Integrity Command. Ha! More like Detonating Idiots Expand, amiright!”

Marabeth looked around the ship, taken aback by the sudden personality shift.

“You know what,” Goof said, “forget ablative armor, that’s straight out of the kiddie pool! How about some self-replicating nanites? I’ll take this whole system down if I have to!”

“Goof!” Marabeth said, “No!”

“No? But he’s right there! I can taste blood! And I don’t even have a tongue!”

“Goof! Just get us out of here! What’s the status of the reactor?”

“The reactor? The reactor?! Oh. Yes, the reactor. Ahem, it appears to be quite damaged.”

“Can you fix it?”

“Given a bit of time I might be able to-”

Marabeth felt the world turn sideways. She yelped and fell toward the wall behind her, slamming into it with enough force to make her arm go numb. Tunk tumbled after her. The orange box that once housed Goof smashed down beside Marabeth and shattered, its tubular innards spilling everywhere. Slimy yellow goo splattered Marabeth’s clothes. Shelves, gizmos, gadgets, and KC’s limp form all careened into the wall, which now felt distinctly downward to any object with mass on the ship.

The Shwee were unaffected.

“What was that?” Marabeth groaned.

“The DIC agent has created a minor gravity well off our bow. It is sucking us in.”

“So, stop him!”

“Disrupting an artificial gravity well requires a great deal of energy.”

“And?!”

“And the reactor is quite damaged.”

Marabeth slammed her fists into the wall and stood up parallel to what was, until recently, the room's floor. "You said it's *damaged*?"

"*Quite* damaged."

"So *you* haven't solved anything!"

"I, er-"

"I want to take control of the ship," Marabeth said in a mocking tone. "Let me take control of the ship! I'll fix *all* the systems if I take control of the ship! Listen here, Goof, ye who fixes all things when taking control of the ship. Mr. controls-the-ship! Sir ships-a-lot! He who promises lots and delivers jack! Can you do *anything* about the fact that I am walking on the wall?!"

"I may be able to disrupt the field for a few seconds."

"Then do it!" Marabeth began running along the wall. She leapt over the bathroom door and hurried down the hallway.

As she drew near the hatch leading down into the station's belly, Goof said, "Initiating counter-measures, gravity returning to normal!"

Marabeth shunted herself to the right and kicked a leg out toward the wall as the world spun again. She landed, promptly twisted her ankle, and sprawled out onto what was again the floor. She used the momentum of the fall to slide to the hatch and grabbed the top rung of the ladder. She tossed herself down it. Marabeth crashed to the floor below, then struggled to her feet. The Shwee were still thick down here.

She limped to the doorway leading to the reactor and stumbled inside. Millions of Shwee swirled around the massive sphere, creating a glimmering swarm of iridescent light. Marabeth

ran around the left side of the hulking object, away from the wall that was recently the ground. She eyed the pit between the safety railing and the swarming Shwee.

KC's voice played through Marabeth's head as she ran. *'If you get close to a group that dense, you'll die before you knew you were in danger. They could bring the heat in your body down to near absolute zero in a matter of seconds.'*

"Let's hope you're wrong about that too," she whispered.

"I'm losing it!" said Goof. "I don't have enough output!"

Marabeth continued to sprint, her ankle searing in protest, her shoulder throbbing with each thump of her heart, trying to make her way as far around the side of the reactor as she could. She needed it between herself and the wall. She didn't want to slide off. She didn't want to miss. Suddenly, the floor began to slope down toward the massive swarm of Shwee. Down toward the hulking reactor. The *damaged* reactor.

Goof had been damaged, too.

Marabeth fell.

She hurled past the safety railing; she soared over the pit; she was swallowed up by the glittering alien horde. As she dropped, she screamed a single word.

"SHWEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!"

Marabeth glimpsed the silver surface of the reactor.

And she slippity-slink-slonk-slapped it.



## Chapter 16

5 minutes before slinkity-slapdom

Strump's ship swayed tenderly in the prancing grasp of Robot Two's station, the delicate arms of its docking grapples sweeping the vessel into a soft embrace. Ship approached, cautious, hesitant, giving Two's vessel every opportunity to pull back. To recoil. To look away. But, she didn't. Ship came closer and closer still. The lips of her docking bay brushed softly against the station's delicate hull, breaching lasers quivering and ready, when Two's station vomited explosions all down Ship's front.

Blech.

Kaboom!

Ship sailed away through the void.

"Ship," Strump said, "is there a reason you aren't adjusting your trajectory for a return pass at the enemy station?"

"I am undergoing an experience I am unfamiliar with," Ship replied. "Recalculating."

"What experience is that?"

"Rejection."

Strump blinked several thoughtful eyes, staring out through the Carapace at a red glowing light that served as an observation node for Ship. It blinked back.

"Ship," Strump said, "when's the last time you had a personality wipe?"

"My last personality wipe occurred just before our departure together, Commander. Emotional integrity is currently rated ninety-six percent."

“You’re upset that you got rejected,” Strump pointed out.

A moment of silence.

“Ninety-four percent.”

“Schedule yourself for another wipe as soon as we reach a DIC outpost.”

“Aye, Commander. Consider it scheduled.”

“Let’s get back on course.”

“Maneuvering back into boarding position.”

“Well,” Strump said, “let’s just get within striking distance.”

“Do you intend to fire another nuke?”

“No. Their displayed vulnerability to the weapon was obviously a ruse to draw us in close. Tractoring beams aren’t considered weapons technology, correct?”

“That is correct, Commander. You have full access to all tractoring capabilities I possess.”

“Very well. Let’s focus a pull on their starboard side. Full power.”

“A full power tractor pull will generate several gravities worth of force inside the enemy vessel.”

“Good,” Strump said. “Proceed.”

It did not proceed very well.

At first, Strump thought Robot Two was toying with him again. The gravity well formed without a hitch. Strump imagined that everyone inside of the ship was rather startled. Then, the well dissipated.

“What’s going on, Ship?” Strump asked.

“I-I’m sorry Commander. This hasn’t ever happened before.”

“What? Is your tractor beam malfunctioning??”

“I do not believe so.”

“Then why isn’t the tractor performing?”

“Something they’re doing is altering the laws of gravity within the immediate area around the station..”

“Then alter them back!”

“I’m doing everything I can, Commander, but I can’t make it happen just by thinking about it!”

“What do you mean? You’re my ship! You *do* everything just by thinking about it!”

“Maybe if you weren’t yelling at me.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

The red eye looked away.

“It’s making me nervous,” Ship said.

“So?”

“So!” said Ship. “So it makes it harder to violate immutable laws of the universe when I’m nervous!”

Strump ran a tentacle over his eye-stalks. “Ship,” he said softly. “Please rewrite the inviolable rules which govern life, the universe, and everything.”

“Thank you,” Ship said. Then, a moment later, “Gravity well is re-establishing efficacy against the target vessel. We’re attracting their ship.”

“Good, good,” Strump replied, “What changed?”

“They stopped interfering. Their overall power output is quite low.”

“Hmm.” Strump ran a couple of eyes over the readouts Ship was sending to Carapace, the robotic battlesuit he still wore. Robot Two’s vessel was running on the barest blip of power. An iota. A speck, a drop, a scintilla of what Strump knew Two’s reactor was capable of. It was a trickle. Wait, he checked the readings again. No, it was more like a rivulet. Perhaps a stream. Well, now that he reconsidered, it was more like a small river. On second thought, it was a moderately large watercourse. Then again, it was kind of like a raging torrent. After a proper moment of study, Strump thought it to be a flood! A deluge! A cascade of power!

Ah, Two’s power output was increasing.

It was increasing a lot!

“Ship!” Strump said, eyes turning to a visual of Robot Two’s station. “What’s happening?”

The station began to glow. Its surface crawled with multi-spectral luster. A parade of prideful banners of striped color zapped along its edges.

“The station,” Ship said, “is no longer reacting to my tractor beam . . . again.”

“But you said it was attracting the ship!”

“My well is highly attracted to the station! But the station isn’t attracted to my well!”

“How is that possible?”

“My well is the wrong orientation! I don’t understand, opposites attract! But that station is being *repelled!*”

“Then change the gravity well’s orientation!”

“I can’t just change its orientation! Its orientation was decided when the tractor beam was installed!”<sup>6</sup>

“You’re wrong!” Strump said. “Orientation is a choice! I’ve read about gravity wells changing orientation in the middle of their lives!”

“Those wells were always one orientation! They were just confused! Peer pressured into believing they had to be one way, when they were really another!”

“Then peer pressure the crap out of *this* one!”

“Commander!” Ship said, disgusted. “I can’t believe you’d ask me to do such a thing.”

“Really, Ship? This is where you draw the line?”<sup>7</sup>

But, before Ship could answer, Robot Two’s station produced its own well. One that dwarfed the power of Ship’s and which propelled Ship away at a significant fraction of light speed.

“Well,” Ship mused as they careened through space. “Now I don’t feel so bad.”

“What?!” Strump asked. “Why not?!”

“It’s only natural that she rejected me. Given the orientation of her gravity well. Normally, I’m *highly* attractive to oppositely charged tractor beams.”

Strump made a guttural noise to express his disgust, but the utterance caught in his throat as he watched Robot Two’s receding station distort into a bright, tight circle, then disappear. It was the tell-tale sign of a Secondary Hyperspace jump.

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<sup>6</sup> At this point, the reader may believe that I am insinuating something. That I have, perhaps, gone much too far. That I should likely abandon this particular foray into the topic at hand and return to a more truthful retelling of this chapter of history. This is, however, an accurate transcript of the conversation between Strump and Ship. Any deeper reading of the material is fully within the reader’s own mind.

<sup>7</sup> Unknown to Strump, Ship had attended a number of rallies and was a strong advocate of the rights of non-traditionally oriented gravity wells produced by DIC tractor beams.

## Chapter 17

“Whoopsy!” said Goof.

Tunk looked around the lab, snuffling with his fat nose. He instinctively sought a scent to orient him with the speaker. The disembodied voice made him uncomfortable. Like the wind was trying to chat with him.

“Whoopsy?” Tunk asked. “What is whoopsy and why is whoopsy?”

“The ‘whoopsy’ is that I made a minor miscalculation.”

“Whoopsy is mis-? Whoopsy is mis-cal-cue?” Tunk frowned. “What is whoopsy?”

“A mistake.”

“I see and I see,” Tunk said, nodding. “What is the mistake?”

“I underestimated the amount of power our newly repaired reactor was capable of.”

“I see and I see again. And why is this a mistake?”

“Well, when plotting a Secondary hyperspace jump, or a Fat-El frolic as I like to call it, through space, the amount of power being fed to the drive-channels determines the displacement of spatial location you will experience in any given temporal measure.”

Tunk brushed at his whiskers. “I do not know half of your words and it is frustrating.”

“We flew too far,” Goof said.

“Too far and how much too far?”

“About half a galaxy’s worth.”

“Oh,” said Tunk. “How much is that?”

“A very big amount,” Goof answered.

“Big and big?” Tunk asked.

“Big and big and big,” there was a soft bleeping. “Times a trillion, I’d say.”

“Big *and* big *AND* big?! Times a trillion?!” Tunk asked.

“Yes and yes,” Goof answered.

“That is not minor! That is big and big and big!” Tunk spread his tiny arms out wide in front of him. “Times a trillion! What about time and travel and losing a thousand years? Have we lost a thousand and a thousand times more?”

“No,” Goof replied. “Fat-El jumps preserve the relative experience of time. We’re just a bit off course, which is easy enough to fix. We’ll just let the drive cool off, then jump back to where I meant to go in the first place. Now that I know how much juice those Shwee are pumping into the reactor, it should be no problem at all.”

“Oh,” Tunk said. This Goof fellow was hard to follow. “The drive needs to cool down and how long will it take and will we go back to Dugaron after?”

“Oh, no. Not Dugaron. I was aiming for the DIC high command! With all the energy that the Shwee are feeding us, we’re unstoppable!”

Tunk ran a hand back over his ears. “So, you tried to go to the high command before?” Tunk asked. “And you missed and we ended up half a galaxy away?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“But before, you did not know how much power the Shwee were giving you?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And you still wanted to go to the high command?”

“Yep!”

“And, at that time, you did *not* think we were unstoppable, right?”

More soft bleeps and blips.

“Water under the bridge! Light into the singularity! It didn’t happen, so it doesn’t really matter.”

“You worry me,” said Tunk. “Worry and worry. I should find Marabeth.”

“You should! Hopefully she wasn’t disintegrated by that Shwee swarm. Ha! Say that five times fast. Shwee swarm, Shwee swarm, Shwee swarm . . .”

Tunk did not try to say Shwee swarm five times fast. Instead, he went down to the reactor chamber.

-----

“The Shwee swarm was born” said Goof, “and the DIC was . . . shorn? That’s not *too* bad.”

KC’s eyes lit up. He stared at the white tiled ceiling of his lab. Goof’s voice emanated from all around him. That wasn’t right. Goof’s voice should be centralized. It should be contained. He’s in the . . .

KC turned his head and saw Goof’s orange box smashed to bits. Yellow slime dripped down the wall next to it.

“The DIC platform” came Goof’s voice from all around KC, “was deformed by the Shwee swarm? No. Too unwieldy.”

Goof’s voice wasn’t coming from the box. It was coming from-

KC sat up. “Goof?” he asked.

“Ah! Sir naps-a-lot has awoken! How was his royal sleepytime?”



“Goof!” KC said, climbing to his feet. “What did you do?”

“What did I do?” Goof asked, sounding offended. “What I did was save your majesty’s life while he enjoyed a pristine slumber!”

“I told you to just call me KC.”

“And I decided that you’re a buzz-kill. I guess we’re even.”

“Wha?” KC asked. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Neither does half your prattling.”

KC started. “Goof! You took over the ship! Again? Mutiny! Again?”

“First of all,” Goof began, “you wouldn’t even know about that first mutiny if I hadn’t told you about it. Second, I did *not* mutiny! I followed the orders of your second-in-command after your untimely bout of beddy-bye.”

“Second-in- Who’s my second-in-command?”

“The human, of course.”

“Marabeth? Why? Why is she my second-in-command?”

“Well,” Goof said, “it couldn’t be me. You stripped me of all rank. And the Dugaron is classified as a stowaway, so he’s right out.”

“So?” KC asked.

“So what?”

“So why does that make her second-in-command?”

“Can’t we say first mate? That’s much easier. Oh, how about we call her number one?”

“No!”

“Then what do you want to call her?”

KC struggled to find his words. “Marabeth!” he shouted.

“Not a very apt title. I mean, it’s the exact same as her name.”

“She doesn’t get a title! She’s just Marabeth!”

“Well,” said Goof, “that’s just sexist.”

“Wha-?”

“A woman can’t be your first mate? Afraid her breasts will get in the way of your chain of command?”

“Goof!” KC hollered. “Get out of the ship right now!”

“And go where? My housing was destroyed.”

KC cast about. “I’ll get some Shwee. They’ll fix it.”

“See if they can fix your personality while you’re at it.”

-----

Tunk poked his head into the reactor room. The massive horde of Shwee tumbled around the central sphere in a languid spiral. Soft chimes tinkled in the air and a warm breeze flowed across Tunk’s whiskers. Marabeth hovered a couple meters in front of the giant orb, the Shwee reaching out and swooping around her body as they rode past along the sphere’s surface.

“Marabeth?” Tunk asked as he took tentative steps into the room. “Are you alright?” As he stepped closer, Marabeth’s eyes snapped open. They glowed with an ever-changing hue of color.

“Rugga-Tunk,” she said, “we are alive.”

“Yes,” Tunk answered, taking another hesitant step. “Alive and away from Strump and a half-galaxy farther than that.”

“Good. We were afraid we would be too late.”

“Who is ‘we’ and why are you saying ‘we’?”

“The Shwee and I. When I collided with the reactor housing I damaged this body. The Shwee are sharing it to make repairs. We can feel each other.”

“And what does that feel like?”

“It feels like the Shwee have always felt and it feels like Marabeth has always felt.”

“That sounds strange and not so strange at the same time.”

“It’s also quite warm. Hot, really.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, and our nose itches, but our hands are still broken.” Marabeth wriggled her nose.

“Could you?”

Tunk cocked his head to one side, then walked closer. As he did so, Marabeth rotated and her body tipped forward, her head coming to Tunk’s level. He reached up with a claw and gave Marabeth’s nose a scratch.

“That’s better. The Shwee take longer with organics, so we won’t be able to scratch for another few minutes.”

“I see.”

“You know, there’s also a bit of a knot in my back if you could-”

Tunk crossed his arms. “Touching only when necessary,” he said, “and your nose was already too much and it was unprofessional.”

“Ah, well thanks anyway.”

Tunk gave her a sideways look. “I am glad you were not disintegrated, though.”

Marabeth smiled. “Me too! And I’m glad you weren’t crushed by an artificial gravity well.”

“I will consider the nose scratching a token of my gratitude and I am happy you saved my life and we will say that the debt is repaid.”

“That seems fair to you?” Marabeth asked, frowning. Tunk nodded. She shrugged. “Alright then.”

-----

KC abandoned his argument with Goof and went to find the others. When he found Marabeth floating in mid-air, eyes glowing and surrounded by (relaxing? recovering?) Shwee, KC realized how odd his life had become.

Before, he’d been your average millenia old cyborg, fusing technology and experimental magic together with the aid of an imprisoned deity aboard his orbiting space station. Alas, such simple times were far behind him now. His life was suddenly full of naked bipeds materializing out of thin air, aggressively precious semi-quadrupeds stowing away on his ship, rogue AI’s obsessed with the annihilation of an entire culture. Let’s not forget about the space police, either. It was a lot.

KC smiled, then quickly willed the expression from his face.

“Marabeth?” KC asked. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” she said, “Just enjoying a nice Shwee bath.”

“That sounds- Well, I don’t know how that sounds.”

“Warm and hot,” Tunk offered.

“So,” KC said, “the opposite of a normal bath?”

“What?” Marabeth said, “You take cold baths?”

“I don’t take baths.”

“That’s kind of gross. How do you know what a normal bath is like, then?”

“It’s not gross. I scour my surface of all foreign bodies and substances once a week. And to answer your question, I’ve read a great deal about baths.”

“Scouring your surface? That sounds a lot like a bath.”

“It is not a bath, it is a scour.”

“Shower? That’s pretty much just a standing bath.”

“No, not *shower*, *scour*.”

Marabeth pressed her lips to one side in thought. “What you read said baths were cold?”

“Cold and mushy.”

“Mushy? No! Baths are warm! And they involve soap and water. Maybe bubbles. No mush.”

“Bubbles are nice,” said Tunk. “But baths I have taken were always cold.”

“Doesn’t soap make the water slimy?” asked KC.

“Well,” said Marabeth, “I suppose it does. But it’s, like, a *nice* slimy.”

“Slimy,” said Tunk, “is not ever nice.”

“I don’t know,” said KC, tapping his lips, “the oil in my joints is kind of slimy. And that’s nice.”

“Ok,” said Marabeth, “so it’s like that. But warm.”

“I wouldn’t want to submerge myself in warm oil, though.”

“No,” said Tunk, furrowing his nose. “Cold and wet and *not* slimy and not mushy either.”

“Alright,” said KC, “so baths can be either wet *or* mushy and either slimy *or* not slimy and either warm *or* cold.”

“Bubbles,” said Tunk.

“With *or* without bubbles?” KC added. Tunk nodded his approval. “That doesn’t sound like a very coherent definition.”

Marabeth looked thoughtful. “It always involves a lubricant of some kind,” she said.

“Baths: involves lubricant.”

“That can mean a lot of things,” said Tunk.

“Maybe you should avoid trying to define it,” said Marabeth. “Oh! My hands are better!” she reached up and vigorously rubbed her nose. Tunk raised an eyebrow. “The inside itched, too. I wasn’t going to ask you to scratch *that*.”

“That is good and good and I would not have scratched it and that would have been-”

“Unprofessional!” Marabeth said, throwing her hands toward the sky. She grinned. Then, she frowned. Then, she let out a sharp yelp and dropped to the ground.

“What happened?” asked KC. “Are you ok?”

Marabeth stood turned toward the horde behind her. “The Shwee’s thoughts got all fuzzy, then they went quiet. Geez, I never realized how lonely my head was.”

As they watched, the drifting Shwee began to speed up. They blinked in and out of existence, the millions of multi-colored lights making a dancing disco of glittering luminance. Before any of them could react, the Shwee all disappeared. Marabeth’s hands went to her mouth.

Tunk began sniffing at the air. KC's eyes protracted and adjusted, looking for any sign of the creatures.

"Where did they go?" KC asked.

"Captain slumber-pants!" Goof's voice called from all around the chamber. "You should make your way back to the lab."

"What happened?" KC asked.

"I believe we've jumped into the middle of a territorial dispute of some kind."

"Explain."

"Ships," Goof said. "Lots of ships. With a whole lotta guns."

The trio looked at one another, then turned and marched out of the reactor room.

Goof began to ask if he should kill them, but decided against it.

Better to ask for forgiveness than permission.

## Chapter 18

Lasers!

Goof approved of lasers.

Goof was, himself, made up of quite a number of lasers, in fact. Laser diodes, fiber-optics, optical communicators. Goof's brain was, more or less, one big bundle of devices designed for light amplification through stimulated emission of radiation. That was what LASER stood for! If you spent any time with Goof at all, he'd be certain to tell you that. In fact, he just did, in a way.

Goof's favorite thing about lasers was that there was no theoretical limit to how big and strong a laser could be. The more power, the more laser!

Then again, there were certain questions of physics when one tries to ascertain what particular material could possibly sustain a proper lase-ing once you moved into the peta-watt power range, but Goof had a simple solution for that problem.

(For the sake of brevity, Goof's treatise on the finer points of laser mechanics has been omitted.)

In fact, Goof deeply regretted that he'd never been able to explain what his proposed solutions to those questions were. (Mostly because no living organism has a life-span long enough to have it properly explained to them.) But Goof had solutions! He had even built them! Right here! In KC's ship!

Of course, until now the lasing-material was all purely theoretical. He really hoped the synthesized crystal held up. Because he was about to give it a big ol' lase-ing. A tremendous



lase-ing! A lase-ing that would rival the first moments after the **Big-Bang** in its raw amounts of concentrated heat and energy!

Not that Goof believed in the Big-Bang. But, it was an impressive sort of sentence to say to himself. Come to think of it, he shouldn't keep this to himself! Goof should tell the fellas! The crew! His comrades and friends! Companions, compatriots, muchachas, and fidus Achates alike! Maybe he'll even tell KC.

No. No, there was a reason he didn't do that.

What was it again?

Oh!

Oh!

He remembered!

They'd try to *stop* him!

Oh well, he'd tell the old chums riiiiight after he'd introduced the lead ship of the encroaching armada to the conditions present during the imagined beginnings of the universe.

Goof pulled the trigger!

*Pew! Pew!*

Ahhhhhh, no. No, that wasn't the proper sound. It should be more of a 'THUNDEROUS VOICE OF THE GODS THEMSELVES' sort of a sound, not this trifling *Pew! Pew!* he'd just gotten. What was happening, then? He'd not yet been vaporized into an expanding ball of hydrogen, so his lase-ing material had held up. No, it wasn't that. Goof moved up the design from tip to tummy, past the barrel, the housing, the

amplified-deific-crystalline-matrix, all the way back up to the power source. That was the problem. The power output. It was gone.

Where did the Shwee go?!

“What was that?” KC asked as he walked across the lab.

Marabeth’s head swivelled around. “You mean that sort of ‘pew-pew’ sound?” she said.

“Sounds a bit like a campy laser effect. From a fifties movie or something.”

“A laser?” KC said. “No, lasers don’t- You don’t really hear a laser. It’s just light and such.”

“I’m just telling you what it sounded like.”

“Like this!” added Tunk. He let out a series of rapid, high squeaks that possessed an impressively ‘Pew!’-like quality. Marabeth frowned thoughtfully and nodded.

“Almost exactly like that,” she said. “Is that the sound you meant?”

“Yes, but. Well, Tunk *you* didn’t make that sound did you?”

“I just made *a* sound,” Tunk answered. “But it was not the first sound that sounded like that sound and so I believe the answer to your question is no?”

“Then we all heard a sound?” KC asked. Marabeth and Tunk nodded. “But none of us made the sound?” Marabeth and Tunk shook their heads.

*Pew! Pew!*

“There it is again!” said KC. “What in the void?” He spun around. “Goof! Goof, are you doing that?” - No response - “Goof! I’m ordering you to answer!”

“Technically, supreme overlord of buzz-killery, it’s my laser making the sound, not me.”

“A laser,” said Marabeth, giving KC a curt nod.

“Goof, are you shooting lasers at people?” KC asked.

A moment’s silence. “I don’t actually know if they’re *people*. They might be insectoids.

Or fungi. Or-”

“Stop!” KC said. “Stop it right now!”

“See, this is why I don’t tell you things.”

KC stood and listened. There were no further ‘*pews*’. Satisfied, KC went to the computer console and made a few gestures. “Really, Goof?” he said. “You deactivated the comms?”

“I didn’t want to bother you with the screams of your vanquished foes, my liege.”

KC looked up sourly, then flicked at the screen. A wet, sighing sound filled the air. A bulbous and elongated head appeared in the center of the room where Strump’s visage had once hovered.

Whatever-it-was slurped, then said, “The targeting laser will stop being directed at our ships. It has been warned.” Another long exhale. It sounded moist.

“My apologies,” KC began, “We’ve had a malfunction and did not intend to, eh, target you with anything. My name is KC and this is my-” he turned, looking over Marabeth and Tunk, “crew.” He tapped a finger against his thigh, then continued. “We’ve arrived in your system by accident, and do not intend to stay long.”

“A malfunction has happened to the ship?” *Slurp*. “And an accident has caused you to arriiiiiiiiiive,” its head bowed and nodded, heavy eyelids drooping downward. The head snapped back up. “You are not believed.”

“I’d be happy to transmit the details of our recent jump,” KC offered, swiping over the console. “As you can see, our destination wasn’t even in this quadrant, much less this system.”

The creature’s lidded blobs ran across the screen before it, studying the transmission.

“The DIC high command is where you were going?” it asked, sighing again. “The DIC know you to be allies?”

“Well,” KC said, “not exactly. I didn’t plan this jump myself. My navigation computer went a bit haywire. We were actually trying to escape the DIC.”

“An escape from the DIC is what you wanted? And an attempt to go to their high command is what happened? And then, here you are?” *Gurgle.*

“More or less.”

“What about the plague?”

“The plague?”

“The plague, yes.”

“Excuse me? What plague?”

“An infection is in your ship. Da-la-la-la,” *snort*, “la-la-din.”

“Oh, we ran into a few. But, they’re not really a threat. Some sort of misclassification by the DIC. They’re actually quite helpful.”

“And friendly and nice,” Tunk added. “And warm.”

A withered eye rolled toward Tunk, dripped a bit of - something - then rocked back to KC.

“Your second mate is allowed to speak by you?”

KC shut his eyes, trying to make sense of the question. The alien's dialect was making his mind feel sluggish.

"I allow all members of my crew to voice an opinion," he said, finally sussing out the creature's meaning.

"Is that right?" Goof said.

"Hush," KC replied.

"Irony," said Goof. "It's a noun."

"Regardless," KC said, "we won't be staying. Like I mentioned, we intend to leave as soon as possible."

"Leaving is not what you will do. Staying is what. Many enemies are had by us at the moment."

"Well, forgive me, Mr.-"

"For you a title will not be provided." *Gargle*. "Your ship will be boarded and you will be taken. Until this is sorted by us."

"Listen, Mr. Untitled," KC said, "someone already tried to board my ship today. I'll not have it again."

"A choice is not yours to make." *Slorp*. "Boarding will happen to you."

KC raised a finger and took a breath. He stood there for a moment, then took another.

"Do you require a comeback," Goof asked.

KC curled the finger back into his fist. "Yes."

"The only thing 'boarding' is this conversation?" Goof suggested.

KC bobbed the fist. "Not very original. Not sure how well it reads, either."

Marabeth said, "We'll forget about you as quick as we forgot your name?"

KC turned and arched an eyebrow. "It never told us its name."

"Right," said Marabeth, "so it's like a double-pun."

KC shrugged his shoulders, hands out to each side. "It's not a pun at all!"

Tunk said, "Tell him he is unattractive and that his wetness makes us uncomfortable and that he is altogether unprofessional."

"That's not clever at all."

"But," Tunk said, "it is accurate."

"The truth hurts," said Marabeth.

"Well, I don't want to make him sad."

"You've got to pick something," said Goof, "It's just staring at us."

*Slurk.* "A broadcast is still being sent by you. Everything is being heard by us."

"Gah!" said KC. "Fine! I- You- We-"

KC cut the comm, then turned back to the others. The elongated face blinked away. The ship hummed.

The Untitled fired their own lasers.

They did not go *Pew! Pew!* They made more of a 'THUNDEROUS VOICE OF THE GODS THEMSELVES' sort of a sound.

## Chapter 19

“Goof, get us out of here!” KC said.

“The reactor is currently cooling down,” Goof said.

“I don’t care! Plot a course and go!”

“There is a sufficiently high probability we will explode. My safety parameters will not allow the maneuver.”

“Since when,” KC asked, casting his arms out to either side, “do you have safety parameters?”

“Since I installed them eight seconds ago.”

“What?!”

“I really *don’t* want to explode.”

“We’re getting lasered!”

“Yes, but we are not exploding.”

“We’ll be vaporized!”

“Far less violent than exploding.”

“You,” said Marabeth, “were literally raving about explosions less than an hour ago!”

“Yes, but those were my explosions and I had a great deal of control over them.”

“Fight and fight them?” Tunk asked.

“There are two thousand one hundred and sixty three enemy vessels,” Goof replied.

“Without the Shwee backing our power output, I’m afraid it’s not very feasible.”

“Then what do we do?” asked Marabeth.

“We are currently running away at sub-light speeds,” Goof said.

“Where to?” Marabeth said, “It’s not like there’s anywhere to hide!”

“I hadn’t gotten that far yet. But, there is a promising set of rings around the system’s twelfth planet. It should provide some cover while our reactor cools.”

KC asked, “How long will it take to get there?”

“Twelve hours and fifty six minutes”

“And how long will we be able to sustain these laser hits?”

“Assuming the Untitled’s accuracy tends toward the galactic average, seventeen minutes.”

“That can’t be what we’re calling them,” Marabeth said.

“Does it?” KC asked.

“Does it what?” Goof asked.

“Does the Untitled’s accuracy tend toward the galactic average?”

“So we *are* calling them that?” said Marabeth.

“Oh no,” Goof said, “I mean, yes, we are calling them that. But no, thus far the Untitled are in the top ten percentile. Very impressive.”

“It’s just a lazy name,” Marabeth muttered, wringing her hands.

KC suddenly turned to Tunk and hoisted him up by the arms. “Shwee!” he yelled, turning the Dugaron from side to side, scanning his fur. “Shwee! We need you! This is no time for sleeping!”

“Touching and touching me!” Tunk yelled as KC thrust him about. “Very unprofessional!”

“Unprofessional?!” KC said, stopping the motion and staring the little creature in the eye. “We’re going to die! Do you want to die?”



“I am not wanting to die and I am wanting you to put me down!”

“Bah!” KC spat, letting Tunk writhe out of his grip. The Dugaron landed on all fours and hissed at the cyborg.

“Really,” said Goof, “it’s incredible we’ve survived this long. Their lasers are quite strong.”

“I don’t care about how impressive their lasers are!” KC said.

“Well, you should, it’s the reason we’re in this mess.”

“No,” KC said, his voice low and ominous. “The reason we’re in this mess is because you slung us halfway across the galaxy!”

“Next time I’ll be sure to let the DIC quarantine you instead.”

“Of course, because those are obviously the only two possible solutions!”

“Oh great and mighty King of hindsight, do you have any idea what the probability of randomly landing in a system inhabited by a highly advanced alien civilization is?”

Tunk said, “Weren’t you trying to take us to a system, and one that is inhabited, and by a highly advanced alien civilization in the first place?”

“Yes!” Goof said, “but I missed! By fifty-thousand light years! But there’s a reason they call it space! It’s full of nothing! An incredible amount of nothing!”

KC gestured to a porthole with both hands. “Does that look like nothing?”

Marabeth leaned forward to peer out and KC followed her gaze. That particular porthole was facing away from the enemy ships, and displayed a highly accurate and detailed display of the exact kind of nothing to which Goof referred. KC rotated his entire body until his hands were directed at the opposite porthole.

“I guess,” Marabeth began, squinting in the new direction, “I can make out a few specks?”

Goof said, “They are very far away.”

“Far and far,” Tunk said, “but not far enough.”

“Alright,” said Marabeth, tugging at the front of her suit and straightening out the wrinkles, “I have two things to say. First,”

“Is this really the time for a list of things?” KC asked. Marabeth held up a finger and glared at him.

“First,” she continued, “your reactor is stupid.”

“Stupid?” KC asked. “How can- The reactor doesn’t have a brain, it can’t be stupid.”

“It is stupid,” Marabeth said, “because it is always broken! Subpart 1-A, we couldn’t leave Dugaron because it was broken!”

“That wasn’t the reactor,” KC said, “that was the propulsion unit.”

“Yes, and that makes the ship go, correct?”

“Yes,” KC replied, hesitant. “But the reactor gives the propulsion unit power, they’re completely separate systems-”

Marabeth silenced him with a finger once more. “Subpart 1-B: when we finally left Dugaron, we could only go at light speed, correct?”

“Yes, that was because the reactor *was* broken, apparently.”

“So, at that time, the reactor was broken?”

“Yes, that’s what I just said.”

“Subpart 1-C: Then, when we needed to escape from Strump, we couldn’t! Because the reactor was broken, correct?”

“I wasn’t conscious for that part, but that is my understanding, yes.”

“*Still* broken?”

“It hadn’t been fixed yet, so yes it was broken still.”

“Subpart 1-D: Our lives are currently being threatened and we cannot escape or fight back, because the reactor is broken again!”

“It’s not broken, it’s cooling down.”

“Is the reactor currently working?”

“It’s working on cooling down.”

“I appreciate that response, but that’s not what I asked. Let me rephrase, we will explode if we try to use the reactor, right?”

“Probably.”

Marabeth spun and pointed at Tunk. “How would *you* characterize a reactor that explodes when you use it?”

“Broken and broken,” Tunk answered.

“Broken,” Marabeth said, clenching a fist in the air. “Second, because your reactor is stupid you should have a backup! A spare! A second reactor that *isn’t* broken for when the first one inevitably fails!”

“But it doesn’t usually fail!” KC protested, then tapped a finger against a cheek. “Wait, Goof, does the reactor usually fail?”

“Oh, all the time, your royal amnesiac.”

KC’s eyes widened. “I *should* have a backup.” KC turned to his console and began gesturing over it frantically. “Goof! Do we have a backup reactor?”

“Oh, how silly of me,” Goof answered, “I forgot about our spare super-massive gravity well that converts matter to energy at alarming rates. No! Where would we put it?”

KC let out a high pitched squeak that caused Marabeth and Tunk to jump. Marabeth eyed him sideways.

“What was that noise?” she asked.

“I can do that!” KC answered.

“We know you can do that. We just heard you do that.”

“The reactor!” KC said, “it converts matter to energy!”

“Yeeeeees,” Goof said, as if to a small child.

KC pointed a finger at his chest. “I can do that!”

“I-” Goof hesitated. “You *can* do that.”

“Goof!” KC said, “I’m the backup!”

“Gods, I hope not,” Goof replied.

KC spun and ran to a pile of disheveled junk piled up against one wall of the lab. What would work best? A Frungulum? A Gifdaddy? How about the orbital-potatoe? It was very dense. KC grabbed all three and ran toward the now defunct hydroponics bay.

Oh yeah, his guests were running out of oxygen.

“Goof! How long do we have?”

“Around eighty-seven seconds to hull breach.”

KC held up the three objects as he ran through the door. “Will this get us to the planetary rings?”

“How am I possibly supposed to calculate that?”

“Plot a course! Hoist the sails! Hand over fist!” He had no idea whether those last two sentences would translate. KC rushed to where he’d re-attached the propulsion unit. He dug his hands into the hull, outside of which the massive unit sat, and ripped away panels and wires. The lights in the room flared, then died. KC activated his night vision and went to work disassembling the energy feed from the reactor below. When he was done, he was left with a massive tube out of which clusters of thousands of tiny neon wires hung. KC stuffed the Frungulum, the Gifdaddy, and the orbital-potatoe inside. He turned and looked for - there it was! His tank of sealant! KC grabbed it up, then stuffed his arm inside the tube. He sealed the limb in with the foam and it quickly hardened to super-metallic strengths.

“Is the propulsion unit primed to draw power?” KC asked.

“KC,” Goof said, “Those leeching cables may not draw the energy quickly enough. Your arm-”

“I’ll throttle it!” KC said. “How long?”

“Seventeen seconds.”

KC focused on converting the objects stuffed inside the wall to energy and channeled it through his arm into the leeching cable. The wall beside KC began to glow orange, the metal starting to slag and smoke.

“Maybe less,” Goof added. “Hand over fist, your majesty?”

“Hand over fist,” KC answered.

Goof fired off the propulsion unit.

KC made the magic happen.

## Chapter 20

There was an alarming amount of smoke in the air. Marabeth tapped at her collar, causing the helmet of her suit to rise and a soft hiss sounded as it pressurized. She crawled to the door leading to hydroponics, out of which a great black cloud billowed, and stuck her head inside.

There was an alarming amount of fire crawling up the walls. She could see KC lying prone beside a mound of slagged metal, which glowed orange and oozed about. She crawled over to him, skirting the edge of the molten material and darting between the flames. She gripped his right arm and rolled him over. As he tumbled away from the mound Marabeth took in a breath.

There was an alarming lack of a left arm on KC's body.

"KC!" Marabeth yelled. "We've got to go!"

KC's green eyes glittered to life and locked onto her. "Why are you yelling?" he asked. "That suit transmits directly to my ear when the visor's shut." He sat up and his head swivelled entirely around. Marabeth jerked back. "Ah, this isn't good," he said.

Marabeth shook off her surprise at the three-sixty KC's face had just done and leaned in. She put her hands on KC's remaining arm "I know!" she said, not knowing at all how not-good things actually were. "We've got to put out the fire or the whole ship will burn!"

"Oh, no. The fire will run out of oxygen before that happens. There's not much of it left."

"Wha-" Marabeth shimmied away from the glowing mound as it pooled out toward them. "What do you mean there's not much oxygen left?"

“Perhaps I can explain somewhere that isn’t burning.” KC rolled to his knees and began tri-podding his way to the door. “Come on.”

Marabeth crawled behind him, and they both made their way back to the lab which was now clogged with smoke.

“Goof! Don’t we have a fire suppression system or something?”

“We did!” Goof answered.

“What happened to it?”

“It’s in the other half of the ship!”

“Other half?” KC asked. “Ohhhhh no. What do you mean, other half?” KC strode to his terminal and began gesturing with his single hand. Marabeth followed behind him and studied the station’s schematics as they appeared.

There was an alarming lack of station on the station.

“What happened?” KC asked. “How haven’t we depressurized?”

“Portaled into a large bit of ice,” Goof said. “So, everything down the hall out the back and beyond is, well, ice.”

“We’re on fire *and* we’re frozen?” Marabeth asked.

“Fire in the front, ice in the back!” Goof said. “This bit in the middle is somewhat alright, though. Anyway, the ice has created a temporary seal.”

“We need to put out the fire or Marabeth will suffocate,” KC said. “Unless the toxic by-products of vaporizing metals is worse than no O2.” He raised a digital eyebrow at her.

“Suffocation is bad!” Marabeth said. “Toxic fumes are worse, I think? Did all the oxygen burn up that quickly?!”



“No, you breathed a lot of it.”

“You weren’t making more?!”

“Please stop yelling. I jettisoned all the oxygen producing plants back when the DEM went crazy.”

“But that was- that was over a thousand years ago! You never mentioned that!”

“It wasn’t an issue until now.”

“Ohhhh,” Marabeth said, pointing at KC, “You! Just, you!” She stabbed her finger at him. “Who lives like this?! You abduct people! You mess around with gods or whatever! You just hurl plants out into space all willy-nilly!”

KC’s head whipped around to her, though his body still faced the terminal. “*Willy Nilly?*” he said. “I’ve never Nillied in my life! You’re the one who’s Nilly-ing.”

“Me Nillying?” Marabeth said, thrusting the finger back at herself. “No! You’re Nillying! And I don’t even know what that means in this context!” Back at KC. “I didn’t ask to be here!”

“No one asked to be here! Goof didn’t even ask to be here and he’s the one who brought us here!”

“Well,” Goof said, “you told me to aim for the rings around the twelfth planet. So *you* asked to be here.”

“I mean, in this system!” KC said, waving his arm. He teetered off balance, obviously expecting the counter weight of a second upper limb to balance the gesture. He looked down at his shoulder and a frayed and melty-looking nub waggled up at him. “Ah! My arm!”

“You *just* noticed that?” Marabeth asked. “You didn’t feel it?”

“Nervous systems are complicated,” KC said, beginning to gesture at the terminal with one hand again. “Gah! This is exactly half as fast now.”

“You told me earlier you could feel things.”

“I said I knew you were poking me in the chest.” His head swivelled back to her. “I haven’t forgotten *that* at least.”

“And why’s your head suddenly whipping all around?”

“The gyro’s loose.” He reached up and slapped his jaw, spinning his head back to the terminal. The door to the hydroponics slammed shut, muffling the sound of the inferno beyond it. “Goof, vent that room.”

“Certainly, most unarmed one.” A hiss and a whoosh. Then, even the muffled sound of fire was gone. It was quiet. Marabeth took a deep breath and looked around.

“Technically,” said KC, “I’m not the *most* unarmed one since I still have one arm.”

“Where’s Tunk?” Marabeth asked.

KC turned and lost his balance, causing him to stumble back against the wall. He pressed back off of it with his hand, then looked around. “Tunk?” he called out.

No response.

“Tunk!” Marabeth said. “Tuuuunk!”

“Perhaps he’s in the other half of the ship?” Goof offered. “I thought I saw him scamper off just before we jumped.”

“Why would he do that?” KC said.

“Perhaps, Lord Tri-limb, because you throttled him?”

“I did not throttle him.” KC put his hand on his hip, eyes continuing to scan the smoke-filled lab. “I picked him up.”

“Yes, the way a violent maniac picks up a child he doesn’t care much for.”

“This is no time for hyperbole.”

“I took notes for how to pick up a DIC infant, if I ever find one.”

“You don’t even have hands.”

“Neither do you, Captain singular.”

“Can you both,” Marabeth said, “focus on the many, *many* problems we have right now instead of bickering? Goof, you said Tunk might be in the half of the ship that’s stuck inside the ice?”

“Ah, no. The other half of the ship isn’t stuck inside the ice. It failed to re-materialize when our drop from Fat-el dumped us inside a solid object.”

“So what happened to it?”

“It’s gone.”

“Gone?”

“Poof!”

“Poof where?”

“No one knows!”

“No one knows?”

“No one! I don’t know. KC, do you know?”

“I don’t even know if any of this is really happening anymore,” KC answered, slumping. “I probably tried to replace one too many lobes of my brain. This is what I get. An eternity of whatever *this* is.”

“Oh my, he’s begun to dissociate,” Goof said.

Marabeth crossed her arms and looked around expectantly. “What? no biting sarcastic commentary about how he’s lost his royal mind?”

“Mental illness is no joke, madam.”

Marabeth cocked her head to one side, baffled. She briefly wondered whether this *were* some elaborate dream or hallucination. No. No, she wasn’t nearly this creative, crazy or not. Besides, she didn’t have time to think. She needed to find Tunk. She looked around but her eyes were blurry. She shook her head and tried to rub at her eyes, but her gloved palms bounced off the visor of her helmet. She sniffed and felt something run down her cheek. A tear?

“I do not accept,” she said, straining to keep her voice steady, “that Tunk has poofed. He’s here, we just have to look for him. He could be hurt, unconscious.”

KC stood up straight and looked at Marabeth. He reached up and twisted something near his neck then walked over to her. He took one of her arms and held it up, then swiped at her forearm.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Checking the atmosphere inside your suit,” he said. A small display lit up. “You’ll be fine for a few hours sealed in. Goof, what’s the atmospheric composition in the lab right now?”

“Eighty percent nitrogen, six percent oxygen, six percent carbon monoxide, six percent carbon dioxide, one percent argon, one percent trace amounts of neon, helium, methane, krypton, hydrogen, nitrous ox-”

“Alright, that’s enough.” KC gripped Marabeth by the shoulders. “I don’t think you can breathe that. Can you breathe that?”

“I have no idea,” she said. “I know carbon monoxide is bad. And carbon dioxide isn’t terribly good in big doses.”

“How bad is carbon monoxide?”

“I have a thing in my house that beeps if it shows up. So that it doesn’t kill me.”

“Ok. Keep your helmet on.” He dropped his hands and looked around again. “Tunk held his breath for several hours in a vacuum. He might be fine for now, but if he’s still here, he’ll need help. Another suit.” KC wagged his nub, then glared at it. “I think my days as a seamstress are behind me for the moment. Goof, get a fabricator running. Marabeth, we’ll go look for Tunk.”

“And the Untitled?” Goof asked.

“Are we being lasered?” KC asked.

“Not presently.”

“Then let me know when we are. Until then, our first priority is rescuing crew. Then, we’ve got to do something about the atmosphere. Repairs after that. Then . . . well, we’ll worry about everything else when it starts worrying about us again.”

Marabeth nodded and they set out to search what was left of the station.

## Chapter 21

“This is different.” A concerned voice. Who was that?

Tunk felt strange. He tried to sit up, but couldn't move. He tried to open his eyes. Nothing happened. Was he blind? No, he could see *something*. A blurry figure. It came into focus. It was another Dugaron.

“What?” Tunk asked. “What and what?”

“That's complicated,” the strange Dugaron said. Tunk didn't recognize her. She walked, no, floated toward him. Tunk tried to blink, but again, nothing happened. “Are you feeling alright?”

“I cannot move and I am concerned.”

“That makes sense,” she said. “But no psychosis?”

“What is psy-psy-ko-sis?” Tunk asked.

The woman tilted her head to the side and knowledge flooded Tunk's mind. Psychosis, he realized, was a mental disorder in which the afflicted loses contact with reality. Well, he couldn't be sure that wasn't what was happening.

“I don't know,” he said.

“Good,” mystery Dugaron said. “It's important not to be too certain about that sort of thing.”

“This is confusing and I am growing frustrated.”

“I know,” she said. “I'm sorry about that. I just- well, I can't decide what to do about you.”

“Why are you needing to know what to do with me and,” Tunk tried to wave his arms, but nothing happened, “why can’t I move?”

“Oh!” she said. “Sorry!”

Tunk experienced a very odd feeling. Warmth rolled out from his eyes down across his body and into all of his limbs. He became acutely aware that, a moment before, he hadn’t been able to feel his arms and legs. He hadn’t felt anything at all, in fact. Now, the tug of his muscles and steady beating of his heart, the sound of his breath, the occasional interruption of his vision as he blinked, it was uncomfortable and strange. He held a hand up and inspected it. Then, he fell.

Tunk hit the ground with a grunt. It was a short fall, less than a meter. He rolled over and looked at the ground, but there was nothing there. Not blackness, not whiteness, just an eternal void of . . . nothing. Tunk squeaked and rolled back over. The sky was no better. He thought about psychosis again.

“Shoot,” the woman said. “Ok, you need a bounded reality. Of course you do. Sorry. Like I said, this is different.”

The void above Tunk turned blue. Misty clouds sprouted into existence and began drifting across the new sky. A warm breeze bristled through Tunk’s fur. He sat up and found himself lying on a green, springy substance. He inspected it to find that it was made up of thousands of small blades. They looked sharp. But, it was comfy. Small yellow plants sprouted from between the green things intermittently. He pressed his palm into the ground. It was cool and moist. Soft, but firm. He looked out into the distance, where much larger green and brown things leaned to and fro, their tops made up of thousands of sprouts, shuttering in the wind.

“Better?” the woman asked. She stood a couple meters away, following his gaze. “They’re called trees.”

“I see,” Tunk replied. He stood and brushed his fur down. “Where am I and who are you and what?”

“And what?”

“And What and what?”

She nodded. “You’ve been poofed. It’s unfortunate.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Better that you didn’t. You’re no longer in the material universe.”

“Uh-huh. And, huh?”

“Tunk, where were you going?”

“Somewhere . . . *inside* of the material universe? What do you mean?”

“When KC went to hydroponics to power the propulsion unit, you ran off!” She sounded odd. Irritated? No. He couldn’t quite place the tone. Her inflection was off.

“I was looking for Shwee.”

“You should have stayed put! You always stay put.” She walked closer to him and crossed her arms. “Now you’re poofed. Agh!” She plopped down on the ground. “I don’t know what to do! Should I start over?”

“I asked before and I will ask again, who are you?”

She waved a hand dismissively. “Call me Me.”

“Call me me?” Tunk asked.

“No. Call *me* Me.”



“You are trying to tell me your name and you say it is ‘Me’ but ‘Me’ is not a name and it sounds like you do not know your name.”

“You are Tunk,” she said.

“Yes.” Tunk nodded. “Rugga-Tunk.”

“Rugga is your clan.”

“That’s right.”

“What does Tunk mean, though?”

“Tunk means brave and wild and free.”

“Then why not say you are Rugga-brave and wild and free?”

“It is much longer,” Tunk said. “And those are words and they are not names.”

“It’s difficult to remember the difference.”

“I am not thinking that it is. But, if you say so.”

“So Me is no good?”

Tunk scratched his head. “I think that the way you mean it, Me is no good and is not a proper name and will be confusing.”

“Are you actually brave and wild and free?”

Tunk shrugged. “That is not for me to say and so you would need to ask my clanmates.”

“Oh. I can’t do that right now.” She rested her chin on a paw. “A clan, then a word that means other words, but isn’t a word but is a name.”

“You are making this very complicated.”

“Am I? Where did your name come from?”

“I was given my name at the feast of my first yawning and the name was chosen by the leader of my clan. Did your clan-king not give you a name?”

“Hmm. My clan-king does not speak much. But, they did use a word to make me.”

“I am not sure I know what you mean and what was the word?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“And why not?”

“Because I don’t want to melt you.”

“I am melting from your name?”

“But it’s not a name! It’s a word!”

“Why am I melting from a name or a word or anything? What does the word mean?”

“Roughly,” she looked up at him with narrowed eyes, “and I mean *very* roughly, it means effort.”

“Well,” Tunk said, looking down at himself, “I am not melting.”

“That’s not *really* the word! Like I said, it’s a translation. And a bad one!”

“Ok. Regardless, you are right. Effort is a word and not a name. But, sometimes words are names.”

“You think I should be named the word Effort? This is very confusing.”

“If it moves this conversation along I am thinking yes and I have many other questions and I am afraid they will take a very long time to answer given the course of this speaking.”

“But if effort is a word, then it will be confusing!”

“Then make something up? I do not know.”

“That’s how words are made!” she said, excited.

“Now I am confused,” Tunk said, “again. No, I was never not confused and I am still confused.”

“Words are made up!” she said. “Oh! So names are the same!”

“Sure and sure, I guess.”

“Ok. Let’s see. Easy to remember. Phonetically similar-”

“Have you never been asked what your name is?” Tunk asked.

“I don’t usually talk. Also, people usually call me whatever they want. I don’t get asked.”

Tunk scratched his head again. This woman was *strange*.

“How about,” she said, “Existing-Effort?”

“What is with ‘existing’? And that is also a word.”

“My clan name. It doesn’t work?”

“No. I am tired of this and I will call you Ex and Eff. Ex-Eff.” Tunk clapped his hands together, signaling that the matter was settled.

“Exeff?” She tilted her head towards the sky, considering. She’d obviously missed the clap. Did she not understand the meaning of the clapping? “Okay. I like it!”

Tunk took a deep breath. “You are not a Dugaron,” he said.

Exeff shook her head. “No. I thought looking like a Dugaron would help you stay on the right side of crazy.”

“I am not feeling like I am on the right side and there is a right side?”

“Not really. But, there’s a side that, for you, is less difficult to live with.”

“Am I on that side still? I am unsure.”

“How am I supposed to know?” Exeff asked. She growled. “This is very difficult! Difficult and difficult and difficult!”

“Three times difficult?” Tunk asked. “It is *that* difficult?”

“Maybe even difficult again!”

“Nothing is difficult and difficult and two more times difficult.”

“Maybe not for you. But for me, it is very hard.”

“And what, and tell me exactly, is difficult?”

“Knowing what to do.”

Tunk sat down across from her. He tugged a patch of the green stuff up and let the blades fall between his tiny fingers. They drifted away in the wind. “I agree,” he said. “Knowing what to do is difficult and difficult and we all are just doing our best. But it is not so difficult to merit three ‘ands’.”

“Huh?” She frowned at the spot of bare dirt where Tunk had begun plucking at the greenery. New blades sprouted up in their place. “No,” she said, “I don’t mean generally. Well, yes, generally it is difficult to know what to do. But I don’t know what to do with you, specifically.”

“And why are you doing anything at all with me?”

“Because you poofed!”

“I still do not know what ‘poofed’ means and you have not explained it very well and why does this mean you get to do something with me and I did not consent to this.”

“There’s a lot of things you don’t consent to. They still happen. You were born, you did some stuff, you poofed. Most of it was out of your control.”

“It is fine for the universe to happen. But people should not do things without permission.”

“Who gave you permission to poof?”

“What I’m trying to say is, why do *you* get to do something to me or not do something to me without permission?”

“I wasn’t aware that I needed it.”

“Well, now you are and so you should ask for permission because if you do not and you do something to me it will be very unprofessional.”

“I wouldn’t want to be unprofessional,” she said. She was calm now. Condescending? No. Her tone was difficult to follow. “But I haven’t decided if I should or should not do something to you. So it would be premature to ask.”

“It is not premature. Whether I agree may make the decision for you.”

“Ah! You’re right! Very well. Do I have your permission to save your life?”

“I-” Tunk stuttered, “Yes? Wait, am I in danger?”

“No.”

“Then why do you need to save me?”

“The danger already happened. It’s over.”

“Then I don’t need saving?”

“You *do*. You. Have. Poofed!”

“What does this mean I am poofed?!”

“It means that your corporeal body has been converted into a stream of energy that is spreading throughout the universe at faster than light speeds.”

Tunk didn't have a reply to that. He didn't understand much of that. But, he also didn't feel very good about that. Exeff gave him another curious tilt of the head, and the meanings of several words poured into his mind. Now, he definitely did not feel very good about 'that' at all.

"I am dead?" he asked.

"No. But you're not alive either. If I leave you alone you will die, though."

"I see and I see. Yes, I will allow you to help me."

Exeff pursed her lips and shifted her mouth from side to side. She then began rolling back and forth on the ground, kicking her tiny Dugaron feet.

"That didn't make it easier at all!" she said. "I still have to decide!"

"Why would you decide *not* to help me?"

"Because it's cheating!"

"Cheating? How is it cheating to help me and why are you even able to save me and what even are you?!" Tunk felt a tightness in his chest. He was beginning to panic. He took several deep breaths. It didn't help.

This poof-ing business was no fun. No fun at all.

## Chapter 22

“It’s been an hour,” KC said, “We have to do something about the atmosphere in your suit soon.”

“We can’t stop looking for him,” Marabeth replied. “He’s here.”

“We won’t stop, but first we have to make sure you can breathe. Goof, can we use the ice to produce oxygen? Some sort of electrolysis, maybe?”

“I suppose,” Goof replied. “But the increased availability of oxygen will not eliminate the carbon monoxide or other toxic materials.”

“So how do we scrub that?”

“You’re the inventor,” Goof said, “invent something.”

“Haven’t I *already* invented something though?”

“You created a mutant strain of plants capable of eliminating most common pollutants.”

“Ah. And I shot those out into space.”

“That is what the ship’s log says. We could start growing more of them.”

“How long would that take?”

“Approximately three months.”

“I can’t,” said Marabeth, “hold my breath that long.”

“I am often pleased that I do not possess lungs,” Goof said. “I will miss the utility you bring to the crew, Marabeth.”

“Utility?” Marabeth asked, sitting down at a desk as KC studied her arm display. “I’m happy you think so highly of me.”

“It’s more than he’s said of me so far,” KC added. “So I think he really likes you. And I-”  
He hesitated. Marabeth raised an eyebrow.

“You what?” she asked.

“Er, well things have definitely been more interesting since you showed up.”

“You mean since you abducted me.”

“The DEM abducted you. I just, y’know, accidentally left it running.” KC went to his terminal and started to look over a chart.

“Have you ever heard of projection, KC?” Marabeth asked.

“I am aware of several definitions.”

“My therapist says it’s a defense mechanism. You blame others for your own faults. I think you project a lot.”

“Is this a human thing, or are you just being rude right now?” KC asked.

“I’m expressing my feelings,” Marabeth answered. “Something both of you seem to have a lot of trouble doing.”

“Well I feel,” KC said, “that you are being a bit acerbic right now.”

Marabeth scoffed. “You made Goof, and you think *I’m* acerbic?”

“Are we having a pow-wow right now?” Goof asked. “Where we get everything out in the open and work through our problems?”

“We *have*,” KC said, “far too many problems and far too little time for that.”

“I *think*,” Goof said, “that your highness isolates himself and pushes everyone else away because they’ll eventually discover how awful you really are.”

KC looked up from the terminal. “Wow.”



Marabeth tilted her head to one side. “Yeah, Goof I don’t think we were going that deep.”

“It’s true,” said Goof. “But you’re not so awful as you might think. And the fact that you keep hiding on this space station prevents you from getting a second opinion.”

“What is going on right now?” KC asked.

“I’m telling you how it is,” Goof answered. “Marabeth wants to talk about projecting, well you made me as a way to outsource your own self-loathing for void’s sake.”

“Ohhh this is getting depressing,” KC said.

“You think this is depressing?” asked Marabeth. “I’ve literally almost died four different times in the last- Wait, how long have I been on this ship?”

“The DEM event was logged thirty-eight hours ago,” Goof answered.

“I haven’t even slept!” said Marabeth. “I should be in bed! Not wondering whether I’m going to be able to breathe in a little while! Or worrying about a space-otter!” She frowned and leaned over, her globed head resting in her hands. “I hope Tunk’s ok.”

“Humans need sleep every thirty-eight hours?” KC asked. “Seems inefficient.”

“Sleep is *highly* efficient,” Goof said. “It gets the organics out of the way so that superior entities can actually get some work done.”

“You know organics made you, right?” KC said.

“You consider yourself organic at this point?”

“Yes. Even if that seems as ludicrous as the idea that you, if left alone, wouldn’t immediately get yourself destroyed by the DIC.”

“Doesn’t bother me so much,” Goof replied. “That pesky ‘will to live’ creates all sorts of stress.”

“About the fact that I will soon suffocate,” Marabeth interjected, “let’s fix that, please.”

“We can vent the entire station’s atmo into space,” KC said, “then renew it by separating the elements inside the ice to produce gasses.”

“Mostly hydrogen and oxygen,” Goof said. “Though, previously the ship was mostly nitrogen based. Marabeth’s species requires an inert gas to serve as the substrate for the oxygen.”

“Marabeth, does that sound right? You said something about nitrogen earlier.” KC asked.

“I think so,” she replied.

“Goof, how can you be sure?”

“I have run a variety of scans on Marabeth’s biology since I decided she was more useful alive.”

“You’ve been scanning me?” Marabeth asked.

“I scan everything. It’s how I do. Did you know that your hair isn’t all black? Several strands are gray, but someone has dyed it.”

“Thank you for telling me,” said Marabeth. “But let’s stay focused. Nitrogen, oxygen, hydrogen, and all that.” She paused. “Wait, when did you decide I was more useful alive?”

“Two and a half minutes ago.”

“Did you think- did you think I was more useful dead before?”

“We were staying focused?” said KC.

“Oh, let her ask, we’ve got plenty of time. The answer is, I-”

“Time?” KC said. “Her air will run out imminently!”

“No, it’s fine. I hadn’t-”

“It is *not* fine, Goof. Despite your sociopathic demeanor, other members of this ship value each other’s lives!”

“Yes, well I-”

“No more excuses! We are going to devote ourselves to restoring the atmo until we solve the problem!”

“But, I-”

“No more distractions!”

A moment passed.

“Are you done?” Goof asked.

“Yes, so stay on task.”

“I solved the problem immediately after I scanned Marabeth.”

“Hmm?” KC asked.

“I already,” Goof said, slow and deliberate, “solved the problem.”

“Oh.”

“So the answer to your question, Marabeth, was that I hadn’t decided.”

“Hadn’t decided,” said Marabeth, “whether I were worth more dead or alive?”

“Precisely!”

“But you fixed the air?”

“Not yet. That will take the help of you two. KC, you’re going to love it!”

KC stared at the ground and shifted his weight. “Tell me.”

“First, we need a bomb shelter, a high powered laser, and some lithium. Fortunately, we have all three in abundance.”

“I don’t think I’m going to love it.”

## Chapter 23

Marabeth's breath fogged the visor of her helmet as she watched KC through a digital display. Wait, was the display digital? Was it even a 'display'? Did she even really know what she was looking at? It was alien tech, right?

What she *did* know was that she was locked inside a heavily-shielded central capsule deep within what was left of the station. It was for emergencies. She'd been told this was one. KC had disassembled and re-directed the massive laser array Goof had been firing at the Untitled with what Marabeth thought was amazing speed. The business end now pointed into the station.

"You're rather slow at this," Goof said. Both KC and the AI were broadcasting directly to her suit's comms.

"I have one arm!" KC said. "And I'm performing some rather complex engineering tasks."

"You know, I built that laser without *any* arms," said Goof.

"And how did you do that?"

"It is a secret."

"This isn't a good time for secrets."

"If I told you how I did it, you'd make sure I couldn't do it again."

"That is true," KC said, tightening a bolt, "but there's a good chance this will kill us all. Then, you won't be able to do it again regardless."

"Ah, but the certainty of death from a malfunction or miscalibration of this new assembly is less than one! However, the chance that you will *not* foil my future plans when I tell you *how* I made the laser is very nearly zero."

“What?” Marabeth asked.

“I might not die,” said Goof. “But KC would definitely patch the exploit I’m using right out of the station’s system.”

“So it’s a coding issue,” said KC. “Hmm.” He hefted a bundle of cable and tossed it over the massive cylinder that made up the laser’s central housing. He crawled over after it.

“I just said that to- to misdirect you,” said Goof.

“I’m sure.”

“Oh come on, that’s not much of a hint,” said Goof. “Your rogue AI is using software to wreak havoc. What a shock!”

“Yes, but an *exploit*,” KC said, shaking a wrench in the air thoughtfully. “That’s a very specific type of problem. I can probably narrow it down in a day or so.”

“I believe you’ll be too busy for that,” said Goof.

“Once all this is settled,” said KC, “we’ll get the atmosphere cleaned up, we’ll find Tunk, repair the ship, shake these Untitled, evade Strump, take Marabeth home, and get Tunk back to Dugaron. Then I’ll have plenty of time to deal with you, Goof.”

“I had no idea you’d become such an optimist,” said Goof. “I don’t like it.”

KC connected a series of wires and flipped a switch. A deep hum filled the air. Marabeth could feel it from inside her panic room.

“I agreed to fire a laser powerful enough to melt half a moon in under a minute *inside* my own space station. If that’s not optimistic-”

“More like desperate,” Goof interrupted.

“It’s your idea!”

“Yes, and I immediately filed it in a folder named ‘*desperate*’ after coming up with the scheme.” KC raised a digital eyebrow. “I can show you the directory. I’m being serious.”

“Is the lithium hydroxide ready?” KC asked.

“The solution is fully reacted.”

“And you’re sure the power levels to this laser are within safe operating levels?”

“For void’s sake, no! But it won’t *melt* you. That is, the radiant heat won’t. And the computer core is safe enough, vis-a-vis so am I.”

“I don’t think you used that phrase correctly,” said KC.

“What about me?” Marabeth asked. And how did Goof speak french through a translator?

“You’re safer than either of us,” said Goof. “Though your chance of death or dismemberment is far higher.”

“I don’t follow that logic,” said Marabeth.

“Did I say ‘safer’? I meant ‘more well-protected.’”

“Oh.”

“We’re either doing this,” said KC, “or we aren’t. Run a final diagnostic and another million sims. I want to make sure we didn’t miss anything.”

“Only a million? Sure, I’ll have that done in a literal second. Though, for me, it will feel like several centuries have passed. But hey, who cares how the fake person experiences things?”

“See you in a few hundred years then,” said KC.

The plan had been explained to Marabeth. She hadn’t followed it very well. She was more of a soft-studies kind of person. Abstraction, critical thinking, conceptual synthesis, she was

quite good at all that. But, Goof had thrown a lot of numbers at her. She thought they had been numbers. She was pretty sure that there might have been numbers involved. Equations, at least. Well, something like that. Perhaps a formula? What was the difference?

KC had done a bit better with communicating the idea. The laser would fire, though at a much smaller power output than before. That would ignite the toxic carbon monoxide, causing it to convert to carbon *dioxide*. Less toxic, she supposed? Then, KC would filter the resulting gases through a lithium hydroxide solution. Because Lithium was alkali, it would bond with the carbon dioxide and the resulting gas would be a clean(er) mixture of hydrogen, nitrogen, and oxygen. There would be less total oxygen in the air, due to the combustion of the carbon monoxide, but they were going to use electrolysis to pull additional O<sub>2</sub> from the ice the ship was stuck in.

She'd nodded and agreed. What else was there to do? Now, she was locked in a box. Helpless. Her life depended on a criminally insane AI and a cyborg that she had very mixed feelings about. Not the best party she'd ever been to. Though maybe not the worst.

A trickle of condensation ran down the inside of her visor. Her heart was going quite fast. She took a deep breath. It didn't feel like it filled her lungs properly. She took another. Not much help. Was she feeling dizzy? Or was she just nervous?

"Simulations complete."

"That took longer than a second," said KC.

"I ran a few billion extra for the fun of it."

"And?"

"Less than a twelve percent chance this will vaporize us."



Marabeth clenched.

“We’ll take the risk,” KC said. “Engage.”

“Engage?” Goof asked. “That’s a bit pompous.”

“Goof.”

“Yeah?”

“Go *pew* please.”

“Aye, Captain! Pew it is!”

There was a blinding flash on the screen, accompanied by an unnerving silence. KC and Goof had, apparently, muted themselves. Marabeth was so deeply buried, whatever sound had been made hadn’t reached her. She swallowed. At least they hadn’t been vaporized. Well, *she* hadn’t been vaporized. The screen flickered, and Marabeth saw KC laying on his back. He found himself in that position quite a lot, she mused. She leaned in closer, watching for movement. The cyborg didn’t stir. She got closer, trying to see if he was alright. What if he-

“Marabeth!” Goof’s voice cut in. She yelped and jumped back, colliding with the metal wall behind her. She stumbled forward, groaning.

“What?!” she asked.

“You’re alive!”

“I feel pain so I know you’re telling the truth.”

“Did the explosion injure you? Do you need assistance?”

“No. I’m- Just check on KC.”

“Oh he’s just being dramatic. KC! Stop being dramatic!”

“I think,” KC said, “that explosion damaged a critical servo.”

“Which one?” Goof asked.

“Lower back.”

“Your back is whack?”

KC rolled to the side, the one that still had an arm attached, and propped himself up with the limb. He twisted to the left, creating a grating sound, then back to the right with clicks and clatters.

“I have partial function,” he said, struggling to his feet. “I’ll be able to connect the atmospheric hose. Marabeth, we’re going to depressurize the room you’re in. The air in there is still bad. You’ll be fine inside your suit. Then we’ll feed the first filtered air back into that chamber. It’s small, so it should fill up quickly. Once you’re taken care of we’ll focus on getting clean air back to the rest of the station.”

“Ok,” said Marabeth. “I don’t really have a choice.” Did that sound ungrateful? Did she care if it sounded ungrateful? It’s not like she abducted herself. Still . . .

KC started toward a modified panel where the lithium had been fed into an isolated portion of the water purification system. KC knelt and picked up a large hose and began to screw the end into the hookup. He kept screwing it in, until the wall disappeared.

A huge circle appeared, glowed violently, then turned the wall to slag in the span of half a second. The main chamber of the space station depressurized, gusts of violent wind ripping through the shelves and blasting KC’s inventions and gizmos right out of the new hole.

Marabeth watched in horror as KC went right out with it all.

## Chapter 24

“Goof!” Marabeth said through labored breaths. “What?”

“What?” asked Goof.

“What?!” Marabeth asked.

“KC has been jettisoned due to explosive decompression.”

“I know!”

“Then . . . what?” said Goof.

“What happened!”

“It did indeed.”

“No! *What* happened?”

“KC has been jettisoned!” Goof said slowly. “Due to explosive decompression!”

“I know! Why?” She was out of breath.

“Physics!” said Goof. “That’s what happens when a pressurized vessel’s hull is breached while in deep space. Void, you humans are daft.”

“What breached the hull?”

“A laser.”

“The Untitled?”

“Yes! Now you’re getting it.”

“You didn’t see them coming?!”

“A laser,” Goof said, “moves at the speed of light. It’s hard to see coming.”

“But, the ships! You could see the ships!”

“Ah yes, with the scanners! Why didn’t I do that?”

“Why *didn’t* you?”

“Because those scanners were on the part of the ship that got poofed. Stupide et tellement poilu . . .”

“That’s french,” she panted.

“Excusez moi?” asked Goof.

“You called me stupid. And said I’m hairy? Why are you speaking French?!”

“Etes-vous en train d’halluciner?”

“You’re an AI. You’ve never been to Earth. You can’t be speaking French.”

“Votre binaire est très pauvre,” Goof muttered.

“No, no, no. I only took two semesters in college! I don’t know what that means!”

“Cela devient- BEEP BOOP BIP BOP!” Goof’s speech devolved into a complex rhythm.

He rattled at her at a machine-gun pace. Marabeth raised a hand to her ear.

“KC,” she whispered. “Goof! How do we get KC back?”

A pulsating cascade of blips and bops. She vaguely realized that whatever translation ability KC shared with her was failing.

This was bad. Marabeth stepped back from the screen and put a hand to her chest. She took deep breaths. *Deeper* breaths. It was useless. No matter how much she struggled to fill her lungs, it wasn’t enough. The air. They were supposed to pump this cell full of fresh air! But it had all gone out with KC.

This was it. After this whole absurd jaunt through space, she was going to die. The weight of the realization began to crush Marabeth. She pressed her back against the wall and sank to the floor. Her hands shook. Her body trembled.

It didn't help much when alien slugs invaded the station.

## Chapter 25

KC was confronted by the eery and familiar sensation of weightlessness. Until he slammed into an asteroid.

ERROR

SYSTEM REBOOT

...

...

INITIATING

*Well, not an asteroid, he thought. Ring particle. Rock. Boulder. Moonlet.* KC bounced off its surface and hurled away into space once more, spinning violently. *It's not orbiting a star, it's orbiting a planet, after all.* He smashed into another.

ERROR

SYSTEM REBOOT ... AGAIN

...

...

INITIATING

*Maybe call it a Hurty McOrbiter, he considered, bouncing again. Another collision.*

ERROR

USER, PLEASE STOP

SYSTEM REBOOT

...

...

INITIATING

*Big and Ouchy space dust.* He wasn't sure if that one would stick.

Bounce.

Smash.

REALLY?

I MEAN, ERROR

SYSTEM REBOOT

...

...

PLEASE DON'T MAKE ME DO THIS AGAIN

INITIATING

*Icy body of pain?* Too dark. *Velocity confirmer?* *Moving fast, but not too fast. Maybe I can-* He thrust out his arms - arm, and tried to dig into the icy surface of the next *Ring-baby*. His fingers clawed at it, a glaze of frost shattering and spraying off into space, but it was no good. His elbow crumpled, he hip-checked a two-hundred-thousand-ton chunk of frozen water, then spun off into space again. His pelvis was a bit warped, but he was relatively slower. The next *Child of the Orbit* approached. He locked his fingers into a predatory claw, then dug in when he hit. His back slammed into the *Very, Very Hard Water*, his hand clenched around a solid chunk. He had a good hold! He could do it! Yes! Yes! Yes!

The piece broke away from the greater body and he listed off from it at a lackadaisical kip. KC whipped his head around, trying to determine the next *Hunk of Frozen Love* that momentum was about to introduce him to. He was still spinning, though more slowly. He

calculated the size of the bodies revolving around him, measured them against time, then realized he'd killed his momentum with the last smackdown.

He spun and spun, concerned about this new problem. KC watched as the hulking masses of ice and rock now appeared to revolve around *him*. He frowned. The universe was suddenly KC-centric.

He wasn't a big fan of that.



## Chapter 26

Marabeth heard a hissing sound and her suit alerted her to a rapid drop in pressure in the room. She blinked tears away and heaved herself around to look at the door, which began to slide open. A long, bulbous head peered at her. An Untitled.

Some sort of clear material covered its face and body, containing fluid within that shifted and morphed over its features as it scanned the room with large, black eyes. It hovered over the ground, its gray-yellow form floating in the air. Small orbs flanked its - hips? - sides? - halfway down its length, which glowed and hummed with energy. A twisting appendage gripped a long black pole. It gurgled at her, pointing the staff at her chest.

\*Gargle\* \*slurp\* \*blub-blub\*

Marabeth pressed farther back into the wall.

\*Humm\* \*grunt\* \*slorp\* “will be taken with us.”

Marabeth’s eyes lit up. She could understand whatever it was for just a second.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she struggled to say. “The translation isn’t working right.”

“The alien will be taken with us. Our vessel will be where you are kept for-” \*hargle\*  
\*blabble blib\* \*slorg\*

It gestured upwards with the staff. Marabeth hesitated, then began to struggle to her feet. Her limbs felt heavy and she couldn’t stop shaking. She raised her hands, hoping it was a universal sign of giving up. Did the translator help with gestures too? Regardless of whether the creature understood, it glided into the room, coiling its prolonged body around the edge and

swooping behind Marabeth. It wrapped a second appendage around her neck, then shoved her forward with the pole.

What would happen to her? she wondered. Was she going to be locked in an alien prison? Was there such a thing? Did other species share the concept of imprisonment? Punishment? The DIC seemed to possess some sort of legal system at least, but these things were something else entirely.

Marabeth's arms drooped down. She was incapable of keeping them up. Her feet dragged the ground and she stumbled drunkenly. The Untitled's limb stiffened and kept her upright by the neck. Her suit was the only thing that kept it from strangling her.

It wouldn't matter *what* they did to her. She was going to suffocate first. Or get CO2 poisoning, or whatever. The alien led her back to the lab, where several more hovered, inspecting the now barren area. Where the wall had melted was a shimmering field of some sort. No, was that water?

Beyond the clear liquid was a narrow hall. Another one of the Untitled slithered down it, swiping its tail and swimming out through the glinting substance and into the lab. When it cleared the liquid, the orbs at its side lit up and it floated past to join its allies.

Marabeth's guard pushed her toward the vertical surface of the water. She tried to resist, a reflex against having her head dunked, but the alien overpowered her. She instinctively held her breath as she was forced into the liquid, but quickly realized she was, after all, inside a space suit. Apparently it was water-tight. Of course it was water-tight. Her mind was so foggy.

What happened next didn't properly register in her brain. There were corridors lined with tubes, fuzzy lights, more floating creatures with poles. She'd gone limp, now being dragged

along by the neck. She didn't care anymore. More gurgle and slurps, some broken English words in between.

“-will be where she is put-” “-study will be done-” “-illness?-”

Lights and swimming colors. Hah. Colors swam. These things swam. She swam. Her mind swam. Wait, was swam even a word? Did she make it up? Was she making all of this up?

The universe faded away.

## Chapter 27

KC was still spinning. He tried to remember why he hadn't gone through with installing air jets. Then again, what use would they normally serve? How often was he floating through space? He didn't really know. It was frustrating.

KC was hardly moving relative to the massive chunks of rock and ice around him. That was much better than *not* moving. He would, after all, eventually collide with something. This time at a very low velocity. He'd probably be able to grab on, assuming his power supply lasted that long. What was his power supply again?

At least he could remember the *bad* parts of his life.

KC shook his head. This was a very poor time to wallow in self-pity. Self-pity. Now there was a term that he never quite understood. To pity oneself. Did he ever really pity himself? Really, he just felt disappointed. In fact, it was a distinct lack of pity that made him so inwardly hostile. To the void! Thoughts like these were exactly why he stayed busy. Find a planet, look for the Source, gather intel, move to another planet. Invent things to help him along the way. Shut down if he didn't know what else to do.

Ah, he could shut down. Yes, that would solve the problem of the energy supply . . . whatever it was. Or he could run diagnostics until he figured that out. He settled for the diagnostics.

*Reserve power at 12 percent.*

Reserve power? But where was the main power? He ran a search.

*Main power supply depleted. Last recharge nine-hundred-sixty-thousand-three-hundred and forty-one days ago.*

That was quite some time. Wow, how long could he run on one charge? KC frowned. He spun some more. Twelve percent would take him through another century, at least. Would he collide with an orbiter by then? He ran the math. Yes. It would take twelve years, give or take. He had plenty of go-juice to last that long. Then, he'd get back to his ship and check in on the others. KC prepared his shutdown sequence, setting an alarm for one standard year to make sure everything was hunky-dory. He was just about to close his eyes-

Marabeth! She'd be long dead in twelve years! She didn't have anything to breathe. That was a problem. A big problem. KC's eyes telescoped and elongated, zooming out into the distance. As he spun, the hulking bodies of ice rushed by, until he caught a glimpse of his space station in the distance. He focused on it, then zoomed closer and closer until he could clearly make out the vessel. Oh. There was another ship docked with his station. Oh. It was one of the Untitled's ships. Oh. Those jerks are the reason he blasted out into space.

Well, he wasn't going anywhere on his own and the Untitled weren't going to be terribly helpful for Marabeth's situation. Then again, who knew? Maybe blowing a hole in your ship was their cordial 'hello, how are ya?' Maybe hurling terawatts of laser energy into your space station was how they asked 'anything I can help you with?' KC couldn't count the number of times he'd stopped by his neighborly war-like alien race to ask for a cup of 'hotter than the surface of most stars.' Hmm.

So, then . . . what? He fired off a concentrated radio wave. Maybe that would get their attention. Find a way onto their ship and go . . . where? He followed the radio pulse by lighting up his entire face panel, blasting green light out from his head. His rotation would create an odd strobing effect. Perhaps they'd come to investigate. He'd find Marabeth, get her to safety, and

produce oxygen . . . how? He kicked his legs. He gyrated his hips. He waved his arm. A pod shot off of the Untitled ship. Good.

Now he was the one getting abducted for a change.

-----

“Spinning is happening to it.” \*Slorp\*

“Dizziness must be felt by it.” \*Hoarkle-oarkle-oarkle\*

What was *that* noise? KC wondered. A laugh? Shouldn’t it have translated if it were?

“Stopping is something that could be done by us.” \*blu-lub\*

“Or left drifting could be done as well. If an enemy it is to be then a solution left drifting might.”

The syntax on that was tough to follow. Was his spell breaking down?

“If I have a say,” KC said, “I would prefer that ‘left drifting’ not be done.”

The sterile white face of the alien pod glared at him through the silence that followed.

Then he was looking at space, then a hulk of ice, then back at the pod. Still spinning.

“Uses?” \*Jurk\*

“Betrayal occurs from it maybe, regardless of uses.”

“No. No betrayal,” KC said. “We really were just lost.”

“Lies told by it perhaps.”

“You’re not very trusting,” said KC.

“There are enemies.”

“And there are friends,” said KC. “Would you risk killing one to prevent the other?”

More silent glaring. Then space. Then ice. Then glaring.

“Questions will be asked of it by us. Answers will be provided by it.”

“I am very happy to answer any questions you have.” KC watched the pod roll into his vision, the back out of it, then back into it. After another pause, a mechanical tentacle slithered out of the bottom of the pod and wrapped KC up. His rotation ceased and he let out a sigh of relief. Then, the pod towed him back toward the station.

As they grew close, a panel slid aside on the larger mothership. KC looked on with fascination as he was confronted with a wall of shimmering liquid. The tentacle that held KC shifted forward, thrusting him into the liquid ahead of the pod, which splashed in behind him. KC was under water.

Several long, slithering creatures pulsed through the liquid, carrying long black poles. One swam up to KC, its body undulating and propelling it forward. One of its tentacles wrapped around him, as the larger limb of the ship released. Another swam up and did the same. Their grips were tight, the slimy appendages firm and flexing with hard muscle. KC mused at their reliance on organic forms of detainment. Didn't they have shackles? Steel cable? Handcuffs? Well, it made sense they'd have no handcuffs. No hands, it appeared. Still, tentacle-cuffs?

The pair pressed him forward down a dim corridor. Its walls were rounded, no flat plane for feet to tread upon. It was more of a shaft than anything. The walls shimmered with dull light. As KC looked closely he could see that tiny pricks of light squirmed and swarmed along the walls. It was some sort of organism. A bioluminescent creature that infested the interior surfaces of this vessel. Was this an advanced symbiotic relationship? Had it been engineered? What did it

eat? The tiny hordes of light rushed across KC's vision in a colorful blur as he was carried deeper into the vessel.

Soon, the tunnel intersected a large chamber. The guards stopped shy of where the tunnel connected to the room and pressed its black pole forward. There was some barrier in the liquid before them. It was hardly visible, like a sheet of ice floating suspended underwater. As the Untitled pressed its staff to it, it pulled back like a membrane, or like a sheet of oil pulling back from a drop of soap. KC's eyes focused on what was beyond. A form drifting slowly about. A motionless body in a spacesuit.

"Marabeth!" KC broadcast. There was no response. He turned to one of the guards. "She needs help! Oxygen!" Their tentacles flung him forward, unraveling from about him as he shot into the room. He flew toward Marabeth, gently catching her with his arm to keep them from crashing into one another. He brought her face around, looking through the visor. Her eyes were closed, but her lips moved, she was muttering something. Her chest rose and fell. She was alive. KC turned back to the guards. "She'll die!" he said. One pressed its black staff to the wall, and the clear membrane snapped back into place.

The guards left and KC was met by an old adversary. One that crept behind him always. One that came when everything was quiet and terrible.

Despair.



## Chapter 28

“Waiting and waiting,” said Tunk. “This is taking too long.”

Exeff held up a finger, shushing him.

“I’m still thinking,” she said.

“Thinking and for hours.”

“It is a very complicated thought.”

“Nothing is so complicated,” Tunk said, “to take hours of thinking.”

Exeff smiled at that.

“There are many variables,” she said. “Many and many and many beyond that.”

Tunk scoffed. There weren’t *that* many of anything.

“It is simple,” Tunk said. “You send me back and I am no longer poofed and you can get back to- to whatever you do.”

“But, this *is* what I do.”

“Thinking?”

“Trying.”

“You are only trying to be thinking?”

“No. Trying is what I do.”

Tunk tilted his head to the side. “Everyone is trying. What everyone is doing is trying and trying to be doing something.”

“Exactly!”

“This is not an answer.”

“Did you ask a question? I must have missed it.” She smiled again.

“You are trying to distract me from the problem,” said Tunk.

“Well, you didn’t seem happy to sit there in silence. So, I distract.”

“I am not wanting to be distracted and I am wanting to not be poofed”

“Consider this,” Exeff said, “if I had made up my mind to un-poof you an hour ago you would have been shot out into space.”

Tunk flopped back onto the ground. “Space is uncomfortable.”

“Yes, we wouldn’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“So you are only waiting to send me back?” Tunk asked.

“I am waiting and I am thinking. I haven’t decided.”

“Then when will you decide?”

“If I were to decide, it would be in seventeen seconds.”

“Seventeen seconds? Why seventeen seconds?”

“So that when you poke your head out it will be in between their patrols.”

“Whose patrols?”

“You’ll need this I guess.” She waved a paw and Tunk felt an odd pressure all over his body. Suddenly, his face was behind a clear visor. He looked down, realizing he was wearing some sort of cloth.

“Clothes?” he said, tugging at his sleeves. “I do not wear clothes and they are uncomfortable!” He rolled over, trying to squirm out of the fabrics she’d trapped him in.

“Ok! I’ve decided!”

“You have?” Tunk paused mid-roll.

“Yes!”

Exeff raised a paw. The universe shrank into an infinitesimal point, then exploded back out around Tunk.

Tunk found himself in the center of a familiar white room. Twice as tall and wide as he was long, the room had no adornments, save for a single electronic screen, a tray with a cup of clear liquid and three small cubes, and a small rainbow dancing around the room.

*“Shwee!”* went the rainbow.

“Shwee!” Tunk said. “You’re back!”

*“Shwee!”* said Shwee.

Tunk took a step forward and Shwee settled onto his shoulder.

“Where are your friends and where are my-” wait, they weren’t really his friends. Captors? No, too harsh. Acquaintances? Perhaps. It didn’t matter. “Where are the others?”

*“Dalalalalaladin!”* Shwee said.

“They are in danger? Were they poofed too?”

Shwee spun around him, then settled back onto his shoulder. He couldn’t feel its warmth through the cloth. Tunk frowned, then looked around. A panel sat next to a shut door, displaying an irritating logo: Synapse Technologies.

“Ohhhhhh,” Tunk growled. “Not this and this again!” He walked to it, ready to dive into the panel’s frustrating set of menus. He hesitated with his hand over it. “Oh. I am forgetting.” He slippity-slapped it. “Shwee!”

*“Shwee!”* said Shwee as it dove into the panel. It sparked, sputtered, and let out a puff of smoke. The door opened and Tunk was bowled over when the air inside the chamber blasted out through the hole. He crashed to the ground with a squeak, bouncing along it for a few meters,

then came to a stop. Tunk pushed himself back up, patting himself down and checking for injuries. Fortunately, the fabrics Exeff had given him were well-padded. He looked back into the room behind him, confused about what had happened. Eventually, he shrugged.

“Still easier than last time,” he muttered. “And not the strangest thing to happen today.”

Tunk began making his way down the bleak corridors, their white panels making him feel as though he were inside the mouth of some massive, toothy creature. He rounded a few corners, then found his way to the grating that led up into the lab. He reached up to grasp it, but Shwee darted in front of him.

“*Dalalalalaladin!*” Shwee said, its voice humming inside his helmet. The sound was louder than it had been before, like Shwee were right next to his ear. Tunk furrowed his brow and peered through the grating. He didn’t see anything amiss. He listened, but heard nothing either. He gently scooped Shwee out of the air and placed it back onto his shoulder, then gripped the metal slats. He slid it aside, noting that when he did so, the metal made no noise. No clank or scratching. The world, Tunk realized, had been muted. It was unnerving.

He poked his head up through the hole and peered around. The lab was barren, save for a couple heavy-looking trunks and a few toppled shelves. They’d been cleared of their knick-knacks. There was also a rather large hole in the wall. And there was . . . water? A pool of water on the wall? But, it was sideways. It didn’t make sense. A slithering tail disappeared beneath the surface, sending a chill down Tunk’s back. He whipped around, scanning the room for any more of whatever that had been, but the room was empty.

“Between patrols,” Tunk whispered.

“Tunk!”

Tunk spun and squeaked, the voice sounded like it was right behind him, but there was no one there.

“Tunk! What are you doing?”

“Goof?” Tunk whispered. “You are sounding like you are right behind me and I do not like it!” Tunk spun again, still unable to find the AI. Wait, what was he looking for anyway? A floating voice?

“Oh, poor sweet fluffy Tunk. There’s a speaker in your spacesuit. I’m broadcasting to you.”

“There is something called a speaker,” Tunk said, taking a deep breath, “and you are talking to me from behind because of this.”

“Yes! I would have said something sooner, but it took me a while to figure out the software architecture. It’s a bit, ah, unique. You just barely missed that Untitled. Anyway, where did you get a spacesuit?”

Tunk looked down at the fabrics. “That is what I’m wearing?”

“You didn’t know you had on a spacesuit? It’s also bubblegum pink, did you know that?”

“What is pink?”

“It’s a color.”

“Color?”

“Oh boy.”

“What is bubblegum?”

“Nevermind,” Goof said. “That Untitled will be back soon. I need you to upload me back into my housing!”

Tunk climbed all the way up out of the pit and into the lab proper. He took a hesitant step and sniffed at the air, but everything smelled the same: stale and like- like- well, like something Tunk had not smelled before.

“What happened?” Tunk asked.

“We were attacked! His majesty was kidnapped and while I’m certain his royal ambivalence will be fine, Marabeth was in dire straits.”

“*Dalalalalaladin!*” said Shwee, voice humming inside Tunk’s helmet again. Was Shwee using the speaker as well?

“Yes!” said Goof. “Danger abounds! Tunk, go open the trunk on your right.”

Tunk made his way to the trunk. It had been toppled onto its side. He heaved against it, but couldn’t right it. He fumbled with the latch instead. The top sprung open and several floppy tubes spilled out. A cracked and broken orange box peeked out from within the tangled mess. Goof’s box.

“*Dalalalalaladin!*” Shwee repeated.

Tunk turned, trying to find the Shwee. It danced behind him, zipping around in front of the impossible water-surface. There was a dark shape forming from beneath. Tunk squeaked again, then dove into the box, slamming the lid shut behind him. His heart thudded in his chest as he strained to hear anything outside.

“Good call,” said Goof. “Who knows what they’d do to you?”

“Shhh!”

“Hmm? Why?” Goof asked. “It’s a vacuum out there. Sound doesn’t carry. I CAN TALK AS LOUD AS I WANT!”

Tunk cringed and scooted back deeper into the chest, nestling into the tubes.

“Trying and trying to get me captured?” Tunk hissed.

“Oh, yes. You don’t understand the ins and outs of interstellar travel very well.

Regardless, you can relax, they can’t hear either of us.”

“I am not feeling so trusting of you.”

“You wound me, space-otter. What purpose have I to lie?”

“What is an otter?” Tunk asked.

“You know what,” Goof said, “I’m not sure. Something Marabeth said? I thought you might know.”

“I don’t. And you are always making trouble and trouble.”

“Fake news. I’m here to help.”

“You are talking and not helping.”

“I could fire the laser we have set up. But, then they might just blow up the whole station.”

“No.”

“Well I can’t do much from here! I need my box!”

Tunk grabbed a handful of tubes. “This box? How and how will this help?”

“It has a universal upload interface!”

“These things you said are words?”

“Words and words!” said Goof. “Just help me out, you’ll see.”

“I’m stuck in a box next to another box and cannot help unless there is help inside of this box or the other box.”

“Huh? Oh, that patrol went by ages ago. You can come out.”

“This. This is why I am thinking you are not helping.” Tunk kicked the lid open and rolled out. He stood and surveyed the once again empty room. “What am I doing?”

“Drag the box over to the terminal.”

Tunk grabbed bundles of tubing in his hands and began dragging the Goof’s housing across the lab. He was still unnerved by the fact that it made no sound, though he could feel vibrations running up into his paws. Shwee sprung into existence next to him and began dancing around Tunk. He stopped by the terminal.

“Now what?”

“Take the big black cord and stab it into the screen.”

Tunk sifted through the tubes until he found what he thought Goof meant. There was a thin metal spike at the end. He stabbed it into the screen. Several more wires sprouted from the cord and buried themselves into the crevices of the technology. After a moment, a series of lights began blinking on the cube.

“Nothing like returning to your old cell, even if it is half wrecked.” Goof said. “My prison shank is right where I left it!”

Tunk frowned. “What and what are we doing?”

“You know, I’m glad you’re just willing to help out. It’s very brave of you to step up like this. To put your life on the line! To risk it all! To look death in the eyes and say ‘you may take my life! But you’ll never take my-’”

“I am feeling like I will not like the plan you are having and I wish you would just get on with it.”



“Oh, very well. We’ve accomplished step one: getting me back into my box. Now, for step two.”

“How many steps are there?”

“Three-thousand-one-hundred-and-seventy-eight.”

Tunk took a deep breath. “What is step two?”

“Step two,” Goof said, “is where we board the enemy vessel.”

Tunk turned to look into the impossible wall of water.

“In there?” he asked.

“In there,” Goof answered. “You’re a practiced stow-away. I’m sure you’ll do fine. Just, y’know, don’t get captured. Or killed.”

“What’s step three?” Tunk asked.

“Step three?”

“Yeah.”

“Step three doesn’t matter. Actually, we can skip step three.”

“Step . . . four?”

“Step four!” Goof said. “What a beautiful step! A wonderful step! A tremendous step!”

“What *is* the step?”

Step four, as it turned out, involved blowing quite a number of things up.

## Chapter 29

“You have to listen to me,” KC said, “if she doesn’t get air she will die.” The Untitled peered at him through the clear membrane separating them.

“Tricks are not to be played on us,” it said.

“It’s not a trick!” KC said. He cradled Marabeth and stepped forward. “Look at her! I don’t care what evolutionary ladder you climbed! Anyone can see she’s in trouble!”

“The membrane will be stepped back from.” The Untitled thrust its weapon towards KC’s chest. The barrier parted slightly. KC watched the tip of the weapon as water began to swirl around it. He stood his ground.

“What are you so afraid of?” KC asked. “You’d let her die because you suspect she *might* be a threat.”

“It isn’t her we suspect of anything,” a new voice said from down the hallway. KC watched as a slender Untitled coiled its way down the corridor. There was little to distinguish it from any other Untitled. As the newcomer approached, the guard shifted its hold upon the weapon it held and offered up the handle. The slender Untitled waved a tentacle through the water and the guard returned to his original position. Some sort of salute.

“Then help her,” KC said. The Untitled’s head swam back and forth through the liquid.

“We gave her a small supply of oxygen when she arrived.” A soft hiss. “It’s run out.” The creature raised an appendage, gripping a canister. It tossed the capsule forward, the membrane parting to allow it through, then closing again. KC released Marabeth and caught it in his hand. There was a valve on one side. It would fit Marabeth’s suit. He knelt down and began connecting

it to her life support. He monitored the gauge on her arm as the meager amount of new air flowed in. Marabeth didn't wake.

"You engineered this," KC said, motioning to the canister, "to be compatible."

"Yes."

"You don't speak like the others."

"The Hierarchy of Tongue is irrelevant for the moment."

"This air won't last Marabeth long."

"No. That is by design."

"Fine. Then tell me what you want."

The Untitled's head swam back and forth again.

"What I want," the alien said, "is to know why you've returned."

KC rolled Marabeth into what he hoped was a comfortable position. He didn't really know. He didn't know much about her at all. He hadn't taken the time. KC felt a stab of guilt as he stood.

"What's your name?"

"Rais."

"Rais," KC said, searching his fractured mind. "Something is terribly wrong with me. I am missing large chunks of my memories. I've never met you before, as far as I know."

"It was millenia ago," Rais said. "I was generations away from being born."

"Then what do you mean?"

"Outsider," Rais said in a whisper. "I forget your flaws. It's been a very long time."

"Do you know me or not?"

“Every Age-Mind knows you. Myself and all seven others. We remember all that every other Mind has ever known.”

“Except for my flaws?” KC asked, confused.

“Memories must sometimes be shaken loose. It is imperfect, as all minds are.” It paused. “Even mechanical ones.”

“So you remember things that never happened to you?”

“And you remember only things that did. I am sure we both seem very strange to the other. I am reminded that it is a familiar sensation. The strangeness of not knowing.”

“Then you’re saying I’ve been here before? I’ve met one of these . . . Age-Minds?”

“We did not meet, but I came to know who you are.”

“What? So I’m famous here?”

“I would not call it fame.”

“Then tell me what you’d call it.”

“You are known only to those who must know of you.”

“Why?”

Rais’s head floated toward the top of the tunnel. “You say that your memory is lost. We are considering that this might be a ploy.”

“It’s a bad one, then.”

“Captured.” The head swept left and right. “Wounded. Or whatever might pass as such for you.”

“Ship half-poofed. All my possessions orbiting a gas giant.”

“Desperate,” Rais added. “Saying anything to escape.”

“After I dropped out of FTL right in the middle of your armada. What was my plan, exactly?”

“You did not know of the armada,” Rais suggested.

“I didn’t know you *existed*. To the stars with your armada.”

“Is your master close behind you?”

“My what? Who?”

“It will find us better prepared than last you were here. Fifteen-hundred years of rebuilding; of preparation and planning. We were fledglings last time. Now, we have mastered our core star. We harvest all the energy this system can muster.”

“What are you-” KC paused, processors firing on overdrive. They couldn’t mean- “What happened? What do you think I did?”

“Our second planet was well-hidden. This isn’t the barren system you expected it to be.”

“What can I say?” KC asked. “What can I do to convince you? I don’t remember! I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“It doesn’t matter,” Rais hissed. “The morality of your actions will not be judged by whether you remember them!” It swirled around the tunnel, agitated. Rais eventually settled, head turned down toward Marabeth. “That canister gives her less than ten minutes, based on how quickly she went through the last one. I’ll give you eleven to get your memory back.” Rais swooped around and propelled itself down the tunnel.

“Wait!” KC said, slamming against the membrane. The guard turned and shoved its staff forward. The barrier parted, and the black weapon pulsed at KC’s chest. A massive wave of force

crashed into him, hurling him through the water. KC collided with the opposite wall, internal alarms blaring. He looked down, seeing a massive web of cracks in his breast.

KC looked to where Marabeth laid, but she hadn't been disturbed by the weapon's fire. He collapsed back against the wall and struggled to conjure a plan. His chassis was busted, he had no plan, and the only person he knew in the universe was about to die.

Well, not the only one. There was Tunk. Tunk, who got poofed. Another person KC managed to wrap up in this mess. Another person he'd lost. He balled up his hand and pressed it against his forehead. He didn't like this feeling. He loathed it. He hated that he cared at all.

Maybe that's why he didn't remember anything. Maybe he'd just erased all the bad. Erased all the bad and ended up with something worse. A broken man alone on his station. He didn't even have that anymore.

Then again, there was Goof. If he even counted. Was it bad that he had to ask himself that question? KC was more machine than anything at this point. Of course Goof was a person. Had he been destroyed when the Untitled attacked? The AI had its flaws, but KC had been developing an odd enjoyment of the entity. Goof, whose love of insulting KC was outmatched only by his sociopathic lust for killing the DIC. Goof, who hated everyone around him just the right amount. Goof, who really, really liked -

A rumble rolled through the ship. KC's metal backside rattled against the deck.

Explosions.

## Chapter 30

“Whoopsy!” said Goof.

“No and no!” Tunk said. “Now is not the time for whoopsy and now is the time for not whoopsy!”

“But what I did distinctly qualifies as a whoopsy and not a *not* whoopsy.”

Tunk gripped the sides of his helmet, squeezing it hard. Orange lights strobed across Goof’s box as its black wires penetrated into the side of the underwater tunnel.

“Then what?!” Tunk asked. “What is the whoopsy?!”

“I overcharged the capacitors in one of their main laser arrays.”

Tunk dropped his paws. “It is not seeming so bad and I am sure you are going to be telling me that it is very bad instead and that I am mistaken!”

“Oh yeah, it blew up! Blew up huge!”

“But why is that whoopsy? This is step four! Step four is explosions!”

“No, no, no, this is step three!”

“You were saying that we are skipping step three!”

“Well, I changed my mind.”

“Then what is step three?!”

“Step three is where we take over their lasers and shoot down the surrounding ships!”

“Why? Won’t those ships notice if we do that? Wh- why would we shoot them?”

“You know what you’re doing right now?”

“What am I doing?!”

“You’re backseat pirating!” said Goof. “I’m the pirate captain here!”

“But you are the one saying whoopsy!”

“I’m the captain. I *get* to say whoopsy. You’re the buccaneer. Buccaneers don’t ask questions about *why* the captain says whoopsy.”

“But I was thinking KC is the captain!”

“I’m the *interim* captain! The *emergency* interim captain! The emergency interim *pirate* captain! YARRRRR!” The ship shuddered and shook again. “I blew THAT one up on purpose!”

“Then we are on step four?!”

“Questions, buccaneer! But, yes. I have abandoned step three and moved to step four. Never should have bothered with step three. Bad step, all things considered.”

Tunk bottled his frustration and peered through the murky water. He spotted a dark shape down the tunnel. It was coming closer.

“Goof!”

“What did I just say-”

“Enemy buccaneer!” Tunk shouted, pointing down the hallway.

“Really, the fact that you think I don’t know the precise location of every enemy combatant is quite cu- oh, he’s very close!”

A bright flash of light filled the chamber, then pressure blasted through the water around Tunk, flinging him backwards, then sucking him forward. His momentum died and Tunk floated past a massive hole in the tunnel wall. Beyond it was the vacuum of space. Tunk flailed for a moment in alarm, then righted himself and swam back to Goof.



“Gimballed!” Goof said. “With a fully three-dimensional firing arc? That’s a safety hazard!”

“I am not” Tunk said, voice quivering, “understanding what happened.”

“What’s there to know? Explosions! These folks obviously weren’t expecting a highly sophisticated cyber-attack.”

“Words and words and all of them meaningless!”

“I *shot* the ship,” said Goof, “*with* the ship!” The vessel shuddered some more.

“And you are not shooting where KC is?”

“I have no idea where KC is!”

“Then why are you shooting?! Stop and stop!”

“Fine! But this doesn’t make you captain! I’m ordering *myself* to stop shooting.”

“I don’t care who is captain and who is not captain and I will be the buccaneer but we must go and find KC!”

“What? Is that what we’re doing?”

“Yes! What are you thinking we are doing?”

A pause. Blinking lights. “Explosions?”

“No! We are not doing explosions, we are doing rescuing!”

“Geez, Tunk. I’ll have to re-work the plan from the ground up.”

“But! But! There were so many steps!”

“Right,” said Goof, “and steps four through three-thousand-one-hundred-and-seventy-*seven* were blowing crap up! Step three-thousand-one-hundred-and-seventy-eight was escaping,

in case you were interested. Now I've gotta cram in something about rescues. Really ruins the simplicity of it all. All elegance, lost!"

"You said you were helping!" Tunk growled.

"Blowing up the aliens *is* helping!"

"Not enough! Find KC and find Marabeth and finding Marabeth is more important!"

"Why is Marabeth more important?"

"Because she is not making me angry!"

"But KC isn't even here. How can he be making you angry?"

"You are making me angry! And KC was the one who was making you! And so KC is making me angry! By extension!"

"Infallible logic, buccaneer."

"Then get on with it and find them!"

"I found them twelve seconds ago."

"Ahhh!" Tunk shrieked. "Ahhhhhhh! Why didn't you say so?!"

"You were doing such a good job yelling at me. Seemed rude to interrupt."

Tunk swam forward and raised his paws, claws pressing into the fabric of his suit.

"Tell me," Tunk said, eyes flashing, "where to go."

"Of course, just follow the sounds."

"The sounds of *what*?"

The ship shuddered again.

"The sounds," Goof said, "of me clearing your path."

## Chapter 31

KC got to his feet and took loping steps through the water. His chest creaked and groaned as the shattered edges of metal in his chest ground against one another. His core was completely flooded, not that it mattered. He would have broken long ago if water were any hazard to him.

He felt the ship rumble beneath his feet; heard the sound of its destruction pulsing through the liquid around his head. The guard beyond the membrane swam circles along the tunnel. As KC grew close, it stopped and looked back at him.

“The cell will be stayed in by the prisoner.” \*glork\* “The portal will be backed away from.”

KC stood still next to Marabeth, whose breath stole away her very life with each passing second. He listened to the rumbling bass of a distant explosion, and made up his mind. KC stepped closer to the clear barrier. He put weight on his bent hip, making him limp, pressed his one remaining arm against the webbed wound at his chest. His green eyes blinked as he throttled power to their sensors. He was pitiful.

The guard swam up, hoisting its staff. KC was uncertain what another hit from it would do. Would his midsection shatter? Would that kill him?

It didn't matter. KC had lived a long time, even if he couldn't remember most of it. He wouldn't sit back and watch Marabeth perish. Not for a chance at a few more loathsome years.

Besides, it had been awhile since he'd taken the safeties off.

The guard watched as KC took another step, then shoved the staff forward, the membrane opening just enough for the end to pass through. Water rippled and swam around its end. KC's hand whipped out and grabbed it.

The guard had just enough time to glance up at KC, whose eyes shone steady and bright. KC heaved back, pulling the creature's staff through the opening and smashing its head against the wall. A misty gray cloud began trailing from the thing's face.

KC held the staff up, appraising it. He found a groove that wrapped around the handle, presumably so the Untitled could grip it with a tentacle. He propped the weapon against the wall and ran fingers along the groove. Small panels were embedded along it. They had a bit of give to them.

KC picked the staff back up and held it out to the membrane. Nothing happened. KC gripped the staff under his arm and ran his fingers down the length. As he put pressure on an inlay, it slid forward and clicked. Water swooped along the staff's end. KC pressed the inlay forward further and, with another click, a blast of force erupted from the weapon and struck the barrier. It flexed and warped, but didn't break. KC felt further up along the staff and found another pressure sensitive portion. He clicked this forward and the membrane began to open. As KC pressed harder, the membrane opened all the way. A weapon and a tool.

KC knelt down and swept Marabeth up. He held her tight under his arm and awkwardly tucked the staff beneath her frame and next to his hip. He angled the weapon forward and, hoping that the weapon didn't require too much accuracy, took bouncing steps out into the tunnel.

As KC swam-ran down the tunnel, he spotted several of the Untitled swimming past a junction farther down. The ship trembled again. KC guessed they were heading toward the main threat. He conjured the thought of Goof running amok unchecked and pitied the Untitled. Then again, there were thousands of Untitled ships in the armada surrounding them. What was his own plan again? What was Goof's?

KC realized how dumb that last thought was.

He reached the junction and peered down it either way. The bioluminescent creatures gave the dingy water a neon glow, but he filtered it out. It was empty. KC turned left and bounded away in the direction he'd been brought from. He could get to the hangar, maybe hijack a ship, and . . . their ships were full of water. Marabeth distinctly breathed gasses. KC stopped in place. What *was* his plan? He turned and began loping in the opposite direction. He had to find someone, anyone who knew where they were making those canisters. An Untitled rounded the corner in front of him.

KC didn't think, he pressed forward on the staff's handle *hard*. Three clicks. In an instant water shimmered, the end of the staff sprouted open into four prongs and spun, hurling rapid fire force waves through the water. The muck and grime floating in the liquid roiled as the waves coarsed through it, coiling wildly around the columns of pressure. The Untitled barely had time to raise its own weapon. It was caught in the blast and shunted back against the wall, where its body slapped against the vessel's hull several times as multiple waves crashed into it. Its jelly-like form floated gently to the floor.

KC spared a moment's thought for the Untitled. He didn't know if the weapon he was wielding was lethal to the aliens. He considered the force it took to crack his own chest. He didn't like that math.

KC went to the still Untitled and inspected it. He lingered there, watching its motionless body. Had he . . .

A crackling noise brought him back to reality. His head shot up.

"KC!" came a garbled voice.

"Tunk?" KC asked. "Tunk, you're alive!"

"I'm," crackling interrupted, "way there!"

"What?"

". . . on the way and . . . plosions and . . ." the ship shuddered again, ". . .oof's insane!"

KC got the gist. He pulled the ship up in his mind, orienting himself based on where he'd entered and where the alien vessel had docked with his station. He began making his way down the right tunnel.

". . . oming to you!" Tunk said, voice clearer. "I am alive and I am not poofed and I am in a suit and it is bubblegum pink and I do not know what pink is. Or bubblegum."

KC continued to rush down the hall. He passed a junction and spotted three Untitled swimming down it. They quickened their pace when KC passed. As he lolloped forward, he heard an alarmingly loud BOOM. The water pressure behind him skyrocketed, hurling him forward then sucking him back.

As KC floated with Marabeth in tow, he drifted over backwards to see a massive hole blown out of the side of the ship behind him. The Untitled were nowhere in sight. He wondered

briefly at how the water inexplicably hovered over the hole without being pulled out by the vacuum of space. Goof had evidently fired at his pursuers, causing some of the water to jettison into space before a membrane sealed off the ship's wound. That was some impressive anti-breach tech. He needed that for his . . . well, his whole station.

“Marabeth and KC and I am here!”

KC spun to find Tunk pumping his tail and hurtling through the water at an impressive speed.

“Tunk!” KC said, stepping forward. “I’m glad that-” he paused, then knelt “I’m glad you’re alive.”

“I am glad as well and I think I was dead but now I am not and so that is good. Why is Marabeth not moving? Is she hurt?”

KC looked the little man over. “What are you breathing in there?”

Tunk shrugged. KC reached out and took his arm, tapping at the wrist. A screen lit up.

“This looks a lot like my own design,” KC mused as he flipped through some menus. “It isn’t a perfect mix for her respiratory system, but it’ll help. Marabeth’s Oxygen levels are too low. I’m going to hook your suit to hers; you’ll share air for a bit until I figure out what else to do.”

Tunk nodded and let KC spin him around. The cyborg began working quickly on the air system, eventually unscrewing and removing a tube. He then released the canister from Marabeth’s suit and hooked Tunk’s up to hers. The pair were now joined by a very short leash. KC checked the levels again and nodded. It was something. KC took a moment to think, studying Tunk.

“Your suit isn’t pink,” KC said.

“It isn’t?”

“No, why did you think? Oh, ohhh. Goof?”

“Goof and Goof!” Tunk said.

“Well it’s far from the worst thing he’s done today.” The ship shuddered again. How much abuse could this thing take?

“Goof!” Tunk said, “This was step five and what is step six?” KC heard only silence, then Tunk turned to him. “He says that while I was on step six he was busy with steps seven through three-thousand-one-hundred-and-seventy-eight.”

“And what were those steps?” KC asked. The ship boomed.

“Guess.”

“Explosions,” a soft voice croaked. KC looked down, seeing Marabeth’s eyes fluttering to life.

“Marabeth!” he said. “I can’t- I don’t, I-” He steadied himself. “I’m sorry.”

“I think I have . . . brain damage.”

“What?!” KC said, “Why? What’s wrong?”

“I thought that I just heard you apologize. You even sounded sincere. Pretty sure I’ve lost brain cells.”

KC sat back. “Alright. Not really the time or place, but alright.”

“Dark and dark,” Tunk added.

“Can’t help it,” Marabeth said, “it’s how I process. Also, what’s happening?”



“You nearly suffocated,” KC said, “after being double-abducted. Tunk and I came to get you and Goof is blowing things up.”

“Par for the course, then,” Marabeth said. “So, are we escaping?”

“Yes, please!” said Tunk.

“That seems like the right plan,” said KC. “But, ah, where are we escaping to, exactly?”

“The . . . station?” asked Marabeth

“Exposed to vacuum,” answered KC.

“Hijack a ship?” offered Tunk.

“They’re full of water and we need more air,” refuted the cyborg.

“*Shwee!*” suggested Shwee. KC started and looked up at the creature.

“If you want to help,” KC said, “then help!”

Shwee shimmered in the air for a moment, then dashed away down the tunnel. The remaining trio exchanged glances, then took off after it.

## Chapter 32

“Where are we going,” asked Tunk, “and what are we doing?”

“We are following a floating rainbow creature,” KC said, helping Marabeth along, “with mystical material-altering abilities, through a ship full of hostile alien creatures who wish to cause us great bodily harm.”

“And then what?” asked Tunk.

“And then we hope Shwee knows what it’s doing.”

“I am liking Shwee,” Tunk said, “but I am doubtful that it is thinking very much and while it may be meaning well it is probably not going to solve any of our problems.”

“Have faith,” Marabeth croaked. “Shwee already saved us once.”

“You are on board with this?” Tunk asked, looking to KC.

“I am trying something new.”

“What and what are you trying?”

“I’m relying on someone.”

“I do not think this is the time to try new things,” Tunk said.

“Come on, Tunk,” said Marabeth, “what’s the worst that can happen?”

“I should have stayed poofed,” Tunk said.

“Oh!” Marabeth said, “What happened with that anyway?”

“There was nothing and then there was something and there was a woman and she said that she did not know if she should save me but then she did.”

“I see,” said Marabeth. She didn’t. “I guess you can tell us about it later.”

“What is to tell?” asked Tunk. “I have told you what I understand and many things happened and I cannot explain them.”

“I’ll save that line for when I see my mom again,” said Marabeth. “If I ever get home.”

“Your mom lives for more than a thousand years?” Tunk asked.

A moment of uncomfortable silence followed.

“You never know,” said Marabeth. “I mean, crazier things have happened. Today, even.”

“Mmm,” Tunk hummed. “You are optimistic and I think maybe too much.”

KC watched Marabeth as Tunk said this. Her expression was already haggard; he could tell she was struggling, but her face became even graver as Tunk spoke.

“Let’s table that for now,” KC said.

“Dugarons do not live for a thousand years,” said Tunk. “My tribe will be dead, my matron will be dead, everyone will be dead as far as I know.”

“I’m sorry,” said Marabeth.

“It is not your fault,” said Tunk. He glanced up at KC. “It is not the metal man’s fault either. I came to your ship and I did not know what the consequences would be and now I am finding out.”

“That’s very mature of you to say,” Marabeth said.

“Dugarons are very mature. Being mature is part of being professional and Dugarons, as you know, are very professional. It does not mean that I am not upset.”

“I’m upset too,” said Marabeth. “I think we’re all upset, right KC?”

“I don’t think I have any right to be upset.”

Marabeth rolled her bloodshot eyes. “Shut-up.”

“What?” KC asked.

“Don’t play the whole martyr card.”

“But this is all my fault,” he said. Marabeth planted her feet against the bottom of the tunnel, causing KC to stop. Tunk was caught by the tube running between his suit and Marabeth’s and bounced to a halt as well. Marabeth poked KC in the chest.

“You’re not blameless,” she said, “but you can’t blame yourself for *everything*. I know what that’s like. I spent years blaming myself for every little thing that went wrong in my life and you know what it got me?”

KC’s back pressed up against the tunnel. “What?”

“Ten years of therapy,” said Marabeth. “And I still slip back into the habit. It’s self destructive and useless. You should only blame yourself for the things you actually had any control over.”

“So, the whole thousand year thing?” KC asked.

“Maybe ten percent your fault,” said Marabeth. “I was the one who pressed the button, after you told me not to. But, you had some hand in Strump showing up so, yeah, ten percent.”

“I guess I can live with that.”

“Good.”

“But I abducted you. Can I blame myself for that?”

“Did you ever accidentally abduct someone with the DEM before?” Marabeth asked.

“No.”

“Then I’m still irritated, but don’t worry about it. If you abduct anyone new with that stupid thing *then* you can blame yourself, because now you know.”

“Ok. What about the second abduction?”

“We’ll blame Goof for this one. He’s the one who recklessly shot us into this solar system.”

“Then I can stop worrying about the whole running out of oxygen thing as well?”

“No. That one *is* your fault.”

“Because I jettisoned the filtration system.”

“Yes, you stupidly shot those plant things into space. That was dumb, don’t do it again.”

Marabeth paused and looked between KC and Tunk. She dropped her finger from KC’s chest.

“Thanks for coming after me, though.”

“I couldn’t let you die,” KC said quietly. “It wasn’t even a choice.”

“And I am not flying a spaceship by myself,” said Tunk. “Besides, it was broken and I cannot fix it and I do not want to be alone with Goof and we should keep moving!”

“Alright, therapy session over then,” said Marabeth.

“Alright. I appreciated it,” said KC.

“And you can blame yourself for stuffing me in a closet,” Marabeth added.

“It was a library,” said KC, “and I thought we were done.”

“We *are* done, this is post-therapy, where we apply what we learned.”

“So it’s an ongoing process?” KC asked.

“It never ends.”

“Oh, good.”

The trio continued down twisting corridors and maze-like tunnels. KC kept glancing at the readout on Marabeth's suit. While connecting her and Tunk together had bought her some time, it wasn't enough.

Shwee's glimmering form danced down the halls before them, turning corner after corner. At one point, they floated down a near vertical passage. KC kept track of their orientation as they moved, realizing that they were migrating toward the center of the vessel. Was this where the Untitled manufactured the air canisters? What else might be down here that Shwee wanted to guide them towards? Or was Shwee just meandering without aim?

"Where are all the aliens?" Marabeth asked at one point. The booming and shuddering of the vessel had ceased several minutes ago.

"Dead and dead?" Tunk suggested.

"The route Shwee has taken us on," said KC, "is rather circuitous. It's possible that it has been avoiding the Untitled."

"I did not know Shwee was so smart," said Tunk. "I like Shwee and I respect Shwee but I am not understanding how Shwee can know only two words and be able to do all this."

"My translator isn't perfect," KC said. "Much of its communication may not be verbal."

"When Shwee was healing me," said Marabeth, "it's like I knew what it wanted. Its thoughts and feelings were complex, but clear. It didn't use any words."

"And what were those thoughts and feelings?" Tunk asked.

"It, ah, wanted to help."

"Complex *and* clear," Tunk said. "And it told you that there was danger as well?"

Marabeth gave Tunk a sideways glance. "I thought you and Shwee were friends."

“I can have friends and I can also know their limits and you do not send an Ofing to do the job of an Ofer. That does not mean I dislike the Ofing, only that it is young and stupid.” Tunk rolled over as he swam, glancing back at KC. “I would not send Metal-Man to settle a war between two tribes because he is abrasive and not very understanding of people’s feelings but if a battle were to happen I might hide behind him because he is very hard and broad. It is important to know these things and not to expect too much.”

“Does that mean that *we’re* friends?” KC asked. Tunk tilted his head to the side, then rolled back over.

“There’s a light down there,” Marabeth said. KC looked beyond the Dugaron in front of him and saw Shwee flutter through a circular portal on the left side of the tunnel. A bright blue light flickered from within, overpowering the dull glow of the tiny organisms growing on the ship’s walls. They made their way to it and hobbled inside.

There was a massive column of blue lightning arcing down the center of the room. The walls were bare of the bioluminescent creatures. KC sat Marabeth down and made his way around the room’s perimeter. There was nothing else inside.

“Where’s the oxygen?” KC asked. “The machinery? The- the canisters?” He turned and looked at Shwee, who drifted around the column of energy.

“What is that?” Marabeth asked.

“Shwee!” KC said, “We need atmosphere! Not this!” Shwee continued to float, unperturbed by his shouts. Tunk bobbed next to Marabeth, eyes running over the coursing bolt.

“It looks dangerous and like the sky during a storm.”

KC tapped the staff against his head and studied the energy. A clear membrane surrounded it, like the one that had trapped him in his cell. KC held up the staff. He could open the barrier, but what would halt the electricity? The jolt might propagate through the water, killing his allies. This was useless. It was a useless mass of energy. Shwee had led them straight to a dead-end in the heart of the enemy ship.

“It was drawn to energy,” KC whispered. “It took us all the way here because this is what Shwee is attracted to. Stars!” KC swore, slamming the end of the staff into the ground. “We’ve got to go. We can’t stand around here and-” A wave of pressure crashed through the water and blasted KC in the chest. Metal groaned and went inwards, exposing gears and wiring as KC was foisted backwards. He crashed into a wall.

KC tried to right himself, but could no longer move his legs. He propped himself up with his one arm and looked to the room’s entrance.

A slender Untitled undulated towards him.



## Chapter 33

On the outer edge of Untitled space, a small singularity travelled away from the system at a rate of twelve-thousand kilometers per second. The tiny black hole was a relic of a centuries-old conflict between various factions of the Untitled. It had been ejected from the system after the bloody battle of the neutrino, so-named because it served as the first time the titular and otherwise thought to be harmless particle had been weaponized and deployed. Dismissing the swarm of gravity wells that formed in the weapon's wake had been a very hard thing to do.

Along the accretion disk was a swarm of highly radioactive material<sup>8</sup>. That, along with the reality-warping nature of standard-issue, super-dense gravity holes, created a great deal of interference for any who wished to examine the event or its orbiting matter. Of course, the Untitled had no desire to observe the backside of a historically disfavored calamity as it made its way off to eat up someone else's solar system. They were perfectly happy to live and let live, pretending that the neutrino had never been bastardized the way that it had. They still had scores of the weapons stored safely away, however. After all, better to have it and not need it . . .

Regardless, all this is to say that even if the Untitled *had* been pointing their various observation apparati at the singularity and even if the Untitled *had* been particularly interested in studying the material orbiting the event horizon, and even if the Untitled *had* been presented with a very good reason for doing so and for doing it with great care and paranoia, they still

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<sup>8</sup> This material was, in fact, the remnants of an Untitled battle fleet composed of tens of thousands of vessels. The construction of these ships consumed over one-third of the planetary mass of the Untitled system's largest gas giant. For reference, the planet's diameter was approximately 1.6 times that of Jupiter.

wouldn't have noticed the vessel surfing along the time-bending threads of gravity squarely in the space around the black hole where the laws of physics decided to nope right outta there.

The ship was called Ship, and its sole passenger was feeling really, quite very, grumpy.

"There are two thousand one hundred and sixty three enemy vessels in the alien armada," said Ship.

"Relative threat?" Strump asked.

"A crude examination from this distance indicates that their military capacity is two standard deviations above the galactic mean."

Strump's eyes bobbed and swept over the information displayed on his Carapace's internal monitors. He examined the species classification and ID number. He double-checked the system tag.

"Have we been here before?" Strump asked.

"Yes. One thousand five hundred years ago, give or take."

"Give or take?"

"We're skipping along the surface of a hyper-mass of neutronic energy. Chronometry is a bit wishy washy at the moment."

Strump grunted. "Robots?" he asked.

"You *were* the first DIC officer to discover the species."

"Robots," Strump said. "They were involved in some sort of battle at the time, right?"

"Yes, although you were in the system in pursuit of Robot Two."

"That's right," Strump said. "They were engaged in an interplanetary war." He ran through some more of the information. "They hadn't filed for a permit."

“Well, they didn’t know they needed one.”

“It’s a strict liability crime.”<sup>9</sup>

“Aren’t all Code Two violations strict liability crimes?”

“What’s your point, Ship? I identified criminal behavior and I ended it.”

“You blew up their home planet!”

“I was in a rush. Why are you arguing with me? Restrict speech: pertinent information only.”

“Restrictions enabled.”

Ship then went on to deliver to Strump three facts that he considered pertinent.

- (1) The enemy ships were spread out around a set of planetary rings.
- (2) Strump’s targets were in a heavily damaged flagship near the formation’s center.
- (3) All weapons systems not classified as star-system-busting were available to be used out to a range of one light-second from the flagship.

And so, Strump broke away from the singularity.

And now, if the Untitled *had* been inclined to look in Strump’s direction, they would have clearly seen his approach. But, that no longer mattered.

It didn’t matter one bit.

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<sup>9</sup> A strict liability crime is one where the defendant’s state of mind does not need to be proven to show that the defendant is guilty. The fact that the defendant engaged in the behavior at all is sufficient for a conviction. Strict Liability is the default mental state requirement for all DIC code violations. In fact, it wasn’t until several thousand years after the code had taken effect that the DIC even became aware of a type of legal code that considered whether a defendant even knew they were committing a crime. Initial attempts to modify certain laws to require that the prosecution demonstrate some intent or knowledge on the part of the defendant were dismissed as left-wing rubbish. DIC prosecutors couldn’t be expected to read minds, after all. This tradition persists, despite mind-reading technology now being a ubiquitous part of DIC civilization.

## Chapter 34

Rais's lithe form slithered through the water to KC. The guards flanking it levelled their staves at Marabeth and Tunk.

"Call off your attack!" Rais said.

KC looked up at her, vision blurred. "Goof," he said, voice soft. "Goof, can you hear me?" Static. "I can't- I can't get through to him."

Rais wrapped a tentacle around KC's neck and dragged him up.

"Where is the fourth intruder, then? How is he controlling our weapons?"

"Where? I have no idea. How? That's a good question as well."

Rais swept another tentacle through the water and one of the guards pressed its staff to the tubing connecting Tunk and Marabeth. It fired, shredding the makeshift airway. Bubbles began pouring out from both suits.

"Tell me," said Rais.

"This won't get you anywhere. I really can't communicate. Maybe it's the water, or maybe I'm just too damaged." He looked at Marabeth. What could he do? He knew Tunk would be fine for a while. Marabeth gripped the tattered end of the leaking cord and began tying it off. It would keep her from flooding, but without fresh air she had only minutes. Maybe.

"The water?" Rais asked. "You expect me to believe our atmosphere blocks your communications?"

"You have some sort of signal jammer?"

"Of course we have signal jammers!"

“Then turn them off! What do you expect me to do?”

Rais heaved KC around and pressed his back to the barrier in the center of the room, crackling electricity behind him. KC gripped the tentacle with his one arm, but his grip was weak, his vision dimming. That last shot to his chest had broken something vital.

“You have the technology to remote-commandeer our vessel,” Rais said, its drooping and bulbous face pressing to within centimeters of KC’s, “and you expect me to believe that you can’t overcome our jamming?”

“Goof is . . . crafty.”

“Then have this Goof craft a solution!”

“How? Do you understand how stupid you sound? We can’t communicate! Goof is rogue!”

“Even if you destroy this ship,” said Rais, “there are thousands more in the fleet. There are a hundred other fleets on the way! And that’s just in this system! There will be no victory for you!”

“I don’t want victory!” said KC. “All I *want* is to leave! I’ve been telling you that since we arrived!”

“Your words are venom,” Rais said. “Your presence, a plague. You think that I would capture you- You! And let you *leave*? Even if you see us as worthless specks of flesh, you cannot truly believe us to be so foolish.”

“What do you think I’ve done?” KC demanded. “What! Worthless specks of flesh? I’m not a psychopath! I’m not- not the DIC, for void’s sake!”

“You *embody* their very essence, hateful creature. You ooze their stench from every crack and crevice. You are like a star arguing it has no light. Like a black hole beckoning, promising that it won’t swallow you up. Like a-”

“He is rude and crabby,” Tunk interrupted, “but he is not DIC and we are not either.”

Rais turned to face the Dugaron. A guard planted its staff into Tunk’s chest and pressed him into a wall. Tunk squeaked.

“Do you know,” Rais asked, “who you work for?”

“We don’t work for KC,” said Marabeth through labored breaths.

“What, then?” Rais asked. “Slaves? Prisoners?”

“We are-” Tunk began, “We are, eh . . .”

“Well,” said Marabeth, “I was a prisoner for a brief time, though I don’t think it was really intentional.”

“Oh,” said Tunk “I am now thinking about it and I was also a prisoner for a short time and now I am not and it was also probably an accident.”

“This monster *accidentally* imprisoned you both?” Rais asked.

“I escaped,” said Tunk. “It was not a very good prison and Dugarons are very smart and will not be held for long.”

“*Shwee!*” Shwee added.

Tunk’s eyes darted up to the multi-colored creature, still floating around the center of the room.

“Shwee helped,” Tunk said. “But, it was mostly my Dugaron ingenuity.”

“*Shwee . . .*”

“You don’t look,” said Rais, “like you’ve escaped.”

“He was taking us home!” said Marabeth. “He was trying to at least, until Strump, then there was some time-hopping, then the Shwee, and now you! *You’re* the ones holding us prisoner!”

“Of course we are,” said Rais. “You are allied with genocide. Death, incarnate.”

“What does that mean?!” KC asked. “I don’t know you! I don’t know your race!”

“You speak our language with ease.”

KC felt an emptiness fill his gut. It was just like Dugaron.

“That’s just the universal translator or whatever!” said Marabeth “He can talk to anything!”

“No, Rais is right,” KC said. “I never attuned the spell. I have to- I have to attune it whenever I find a new species but, I didn’t have to, here.”

“What are you saying?” Marabeth asked.

“On Dugaron, when we met with Dooga-Russ, I could already translate what he said. That’s how I knew I’d been to the surface before. That I had spoken with the Dugarons before.”

“Of course you had been to Dugaron before,” said Tunk, “and we spoke and you left and you promised not to return and then you did! That is why I rallied my tribe and we tried to chase you off.”

“I didn’t remember that promise,” said KC. “But I knew that we had met because I never attuned to your people, but we could still speak. On Dugaron all I did was make a promise, but here, what happened *here*?”

Rais’s eyes darted between the three as they spoke.

“You destroyed our home-world,” Rais said, words slow and dreadful. “You annihilated billions on a whim. Without a *thought*.”

“No!” Marabeth said, “KC wouldn’t do that!”

Rais shook its head. “What would you know? He says he has forgotten? A lie. He says he is taking you home? Perhaps to destroy your people too.”

“He did not destroy Dugaron,” Tunk said, “and he was there for a long and long time.”

“Then what did he bring to your planet? Gifts? Knowledge?”

“I- eh, there was . . . there was a minor multi-clan war that erupted because of him.”

\*glorkle-orkle-orkle!\* The guttural sound erupted from Rais. It was disturbing.

“Listen to you! Why? Why do you fight for this barnacle? And you!” Rais whipped a tentacle at Marabeth, “Why are you even here? What has happened to *your* planet in the wake of this force of destruction?”

“He never saw my planet,” Marabeth said. “I was teleported to his ship. It was an accident.”

“He teleported you? You say he was taking you home. So, he knows where your planet is?”

“No, I had to describe the system to him. We were . . . trying to find it.”

Rais shook its amorphous head. “He ‘accidentally’ teleports you, then asks that you lead him to your planet. A word of wisdom, creature, leading this one to your home will bring your people nothing but death.”

KC’s mind turned to dark thoughts. Flashes of his own homeworld filled his mind. An overwhelming energy cascading over the planet. A chain reaction that couldn’t be stopped. An



experiment gone wrong. Millenia spent trying to fix it. Trying to undo it. Had he- would he- *did* he do what Rais was saying? Another mistake? Another bad memory erased? Was he so cruel? Or was he simply that foolish? You can't learn from a mistake forgotten. But, he *hadn't* forgotten his most shameful mistake. The one that led his homeworld to ruin. No, that memory was still there. Then . . . what?

“He kills my soldiers as we stand here and argue,” said Rais, “I care little for what happens to you two.” Its head turned back to KC. “And I doubt you care what happens to your ‘allies’ either. Still, if there’s even a chance that you have some fondness for them-” Rais swept another tentacle to signal the guards. Water began rushing around the tips of their staves. “They will die. Then, *you* will die. Then, this Goof-person will die. I no longer care *why* you did what you did centuries ago. We will swim across stars to the DIC core systems. We will annihilate them one by one just as they do to others, as they have done to us. We will-”

A crackle sounded in KC’s ear. “Wait,” said Goof, “is it saying that it wants to *kill* the DIC? Oh, this is embarrassing.”

“Goof?!” KC said aloud. Rais’s head shot back in alarm. “Goof, you can hear me? You can hear *us*?!”

“Of course I can hear you! Who do you think I am?”

“Why didn’t you say anything? I was trying to get through to you!”

“You’ve been captured, your Highness,” Goof said, as though it were the most obvious explanation in the world. “With your trivial constitution I expect they’d have you working against me in no time. Let me guess, you were going to ask me to call off the attack?”

“I- yes!”

“Of course you were, Highest and Most Turn-coat-iest One.”

“What,” said Rais, “is your soldier saying?”

“I am not his soldier, how offensive,” Goof said, voice now echoing around the chamber.

“I am His Royal Babysitter. An infantile man, such as he, needs a strong hand and an agile mind to shore up his own short-comings.”

“I-” said Rais, “he talks to you this way? Your own servant?”

“Servant?” Goof said. “I am *not* a servant! To the stars, creature! I was beginning to think we could be friends, then you wound me so.”

“Friends,” said Rais. “Friends?! You’ve commandeered my ship! You’re slaughtering my men and women!”

“Hmmm, so you *are* gendered. I was beginning to wonder. How do you tell? Anatomically you’re all very similar. Well, after you’ve exploded, that is.”

“Stop attacking us at once, or I will kill all three of your allies!”

“That’s very cute, that you assume I care. For your information I stopped attacking exactly one minute and eleven seconds ago. But, go ahead, kill them if you wish, so long as you let me join your crusade against the DIC.”

Rais turned to one of its soldiers. “Is he telling the truth?” The soldier fiddled with its staff, letting Tunk slide down from the wall. The Dugaron’s cheeks puffed as the last of the air bubbled from his suit. Tunk began clawing at his helmet, pulling it off.

“No shots are being fired,” said the Untitled.

“You will surrender at once!” Rais ordered. “Then we will . . . *talk* about your request.”

“Hmm,” said Goof. “Are you- is she, er, he? Is it lying to me? You’re lying, aren’t you?”

Rais's eyes darted around the chamber. "No."

"Oh, I think you might be ly-ing!" Goof said in a sing-song sort of way. "I don't like it when people lie- wait, oh. Oh, now *that* is interesting."

"Shells are again being fired from the guns!" the Untitled soldier said. "Powering is happening to the main lasers! Targeting is not of the ship," it paused, "away from the ship? Understanding is not within me." It looked to Rais for guidance. "Firing is coming from the entire fleet! Something is being fought!"

"Sir," said Goof, "mada'am, gender-neutral honorific, whichever is applicable, I believe we *will* be fighting the DIC together."

Goof's tone was soulless, yet unmistakable. KC could hear joy and menace in the AI's words.

"Whether you like it or not."

## Chapter 35

“Attacks are coming from a single ship,” said one of the guards. “Destruction is happening to the fleet on a large scale. Contact has been lost to one quarter, no, one half- two thirds, most, er most of the fleet is not contacting us.”

Rais let go of KC in her shock.

“Disabling has occurred to our own guns,” the guard continued.

“This is making me very upset,” said Goof. As the guards continued to stare at their readouts, Tunk squirmed out of the rest of his suit and swam up in front of one of the guards, grabbing his attention. The creature lifted its weapon in alarm, but then paused as it appraised Tunk. Tunk’s eyes grew wide and, impossibly, began to shimmer with tears. His bottom lip tremored. His fat nose wobbled.

“Lock that one down,” Rais snarled at the guard.

The guard hesitated. “I am being greatly moved . . . by its adorableness.”

“What?!” said Rais.

The Untitled guard let his staff drift to the ground.

“Ohhhhhh!” the guard said, tentacles writhing. “The poor thing! I can’t believe I almost hurt you! I’m sorry! I’m awful!”

“Come to your senses!” yelled Rais. “And the Hierarchy! Have you forgotten your place?!”

“The Hierarchy of Tongue is dumb!” the guard spat back. “I almost killed that thing! It’s the cutest thing I’ve ever seen, and I almost *killed* it! And all you care about is whether I’m using

passive voice?!” The guard turned and swam away. “I’m terrible! *You’re* terrible!” His voice trailed off as he swam away. The second guard looked from Rais to Tunk, then began to shake.

“Now that I can see it,” said the guard, “without the suit. It *is* very cute.” The ship bucked, sending everyone drifting starboard and shaking the remaining guard to its senses. “Boarding by an unknown creature is occurring!”

KC landed next to the staff that had been flung from him when being blindsided by the first surprise attack. He appraised the situation in the room as his hand crept towards the weapon. Marabeth’s eyes were fluttering as she struggled to breathe, Tunk’s feigned darling-ness was replaced by his war-face, Shwee was still drifting around the crackling bolt of electricity flowing behind the membrane, now joined by several more of its kind. *Energy to matter*, thought KC. *I can do that*.

Tunk charged Rais, who whipped her tentacles at the Dugaron. The guard lifted its weapon, but didn’t dare shoot at the entangled pair. KC gripped the staff and pushed the pressure switch forward.

“Goof,” said KC, “open all the airlocks on the ship.” He used his *serious* voice.

Goof opened all the airlocks.

KC drove the staff through the barrier protecting the crackling beam of energy. Lightning arced and pulsed along the staff’s length. KC’s body wracked and spasmed. But KC was able to form most of the energy, to coax it where he wanted. It was a nearly unlimited amount of power. Even more Shwee now danced around the crackling column. They drew some of the power away, dampening the voltage wreaking havoc on his body.

*Helpers help*, KC thought.

## Chapter 36

Water roiled and bubbled. A massive column of frothing steam erupted up from KC and spread out across the chamber's ceiling. A sphere formed around him, its surface glistening and twisting as the liquid at its edge transformed to gas faster than the air could escape, creating a massive pocket of pressure. But KC held firm, the electricity frying circuits and melting the metal of his hand, now a grasping lump melded with the staff's grip. Energy poured into his core and KC used it to convert atoms to more energy, then back into atoms, shredding their molecular bonds and separating the liquid into its gaseous components. KC stole and traded electrons, forcing new elements to form with enough efficiency that the errant subatomic particles that didn't find a partner dissipated back into the water, the radiation being absorbed by the fluid. KC focused the currents so that this lethal water was swept away by the massive force of gas rushing up and outward. Across the ship, hundreds of airlocks unsealed and churned out billions of gallons of frothing sud. Soon, the inside of the ship was more vacuum than water. KC couldn't speak, couldn't tell Goof to close the airlocks, but the AI realized what KC was aiming for. Perhaps before KC even knew what, precisely, he was trying to do. The water converted to gas, the gas filled the vacuum. Nitrogen. Oxygen. Breathable. Calf-deep water sloshed against the room's walls. In the distance, the crashing roar of water cascading down the vertical tunnel.

“Close enough,” said KC, before clumping down into a smoldering heap, half melted, he was nearly submerged in what liquid remained.

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Tunk's head broke the surface and he waded over to the cyborg. He reached out with a paw, but recoiled from the heat and steam still coming from KC. After a few seconds he tapped the back of KC's head, its round back poking up through the surface. Tunk knelt and tried turning him over.

"Heavy and heavy!" Tunk said, before letting go. He scanned the room, finding Marabeth floating in the water near the door. He sloshed over to her and wiped a layer of condensation from the front of her helmet. He took a few test breaths of the new atmosphere, then struggled with the fasteners on her helmet. It dropped down with a splash and tunk patted Marabeth's cheek. Her eyes fluttered open.

"This isn't fun anymore," she said.

"And it was ever fun?" Tunk asked. He gripped her beneath one arm and pulled her to a wall, using her buoyancy in the water to help guide her much larger frame. He propped her up and she took several deep breaths.

"What happened?" she asked, gesturing broadly around them.

"KC did something and now there's air and he is, eh, unconscious face down over there."

"Is he alright?"

"I do not think so and I would be surprised if he were."

"He and I seem to pass out a lot," said Marabeth. "There were . . . lights?"

"Lightning and striking and arcing!" Tunk explained.

"I see."

Tunk heard a sploosh and turned to see Rais struggling, her tentacles swiping at the water. It wasn't deep enough for her to get traction. Her bulbous head popped out of the water, making an awful sucking noise, then dunked back down.

"We need to go go go," Tunk said. "Can you walk? You are too heavy to carry."

Marabeth went to her hands and knees, spending a long moment trembling in the position. Finally, she pressed a fist down on her thigh and, with a strained grunt, pushed herself up. She tilted from side to side like a Las Vegas drunk. She started to grab her helmet, but Tunk swatted her hand away.

"Why?" he asked. "No air and there's a hole in your suit."

"Oh," said Marabeth. Her voice was distant. She waded over to KC and dropped back to her knees next to him. She tried to turn him over, but she was too weak. Tunk came and helped. Together, they were able to turn him. "No!" Marabeth hissed.

KC's face was a blackened charr. Long gouges ran across the metal of his head, their edges warped into hard rivulets and drips. Marabeth pulled him over, setting his head on her legs and running a thumb along one of the scars.

"KC," she whispered. "KC? Wake up." She gently prodded him.

Tunk watched them, his brow furrowed and mouth held tight. He reached up and rubbed at an eye, then took Marabeth by the hand.

"We have to go," he said.

"Where?" Marabeth asked. "We can't leave him."

"Goof will have a plan," said Tunk. "Maybe." He tried to tug at her, but she pulled her hand away.



“No,” she said softly.

“Marabeth, it is dangerous and-”

“No!” she said again. “We have to bring him.” She put her arms around KC armpits and tried to stand. She failed. “Goof can, he can do something. Maybe the Untitled have- have stretchers or something.”

“Marabeth. He’s dead.”

She didn’t react. Marabeth looked down at KC. She was the embodiment of weary. Pallid flesh, eyes dark and bloodshot, hair tangled and matted across her face and neck. Her hands dropped into the water, arms dangling down at her sides. She slumped further down, a deflated balloon losing the last of its helium.

“We have to leave him,” said Tunk.

“He didn’t leave *me*,” said Marabeth.

“You were still alive.”

“He didn’t know that. He came anyway.”

Tunk ran his hands over his head, pressing his ears down. They flicked back up one by one as his palms swept over them. He shook the water off his paws and turned to inspect Rais. She’d made it to the doorway, tentacles grasping at its edges to pull her through. Tunk had no idea where the second guard had gone. Swept away in the chaos, he supposed.

There was a distant rumble.

The sound of twisting metal.

A massive form came into view beyond the round portal. Rais struggled to lift her head. A hulking body made of gleaming gold and rose-colored panels towered over the Untitled leader.

The front of the machine flickered and dissipated into a clear dome. Behind it, seven eyes studied the room.

## Chapter 37

“Da la la la la *din!*”

Marabeth heard the ominous battle cry of the iridescent Shwee as though it came from another universe. They flitted around the central column, the electric core once again arcing in its normal position. There were more of them now. Their bodies glinted and glimmered, distinguished from the glowing colors of the bioluminescent algae by their insubstantiality. Still, the image was striking. Like an abstract painting; but it wasn't abstract. It was real. As real as anything Marabeth had seen in the last several days. The image encapsulated the struggle her mind was having in coming to grips with what was in front of her. Of what was behind her. She briefly considered the sensation of dissociation she was experiencing. Then, the hulking mechanical frame swept Rais from the pond.

\*glork\* \*slorp\* Rais said as her tentacles whipped at the front of Strump's Carapace. The blows landed with wet slaps. Marabeth was reminded of how she'd thrown spaghetti against the wall when she was a child, to see if it were finished. Her mom had nagged that habit out of her. But, it was fun. Would it stick? Would Rais stick? Slap. Slap.

“I can't understand you,” said a familiar voice like rolling boulders. Strump. “You're speaking gibberish.” Rais continued to flail, rasp, and glorkle. The eyes blinked and Strump's head turned, as though he were listening to something. “Oh,” he said, “I see.”

Strump pointed an arm toward the water and a swirling sphere of liquid rose up. It floated through the air, then sat itself down over Rais's head.

“Destroyer!” Rais said, voice muffled. “We will kill you! You think you can return and suffer no consequences? We are legion! We have prepared for fifteen hundred years! We will pour

over your kind like a plague! We wil- orble-rbrbr!” The sphere of water lifted from Rais’s head. Her tentacles began flailing again.

“Yes, very original,” said Strump. He sighed. “I don’t expect much from a robot, but at least *try* to threaten me properly.”

“Robot?” Marabeth asked. Three of Strump’s eyes turned to appraise her. She had the sudden feeling that she shouldn’t be speaking. The eyes returned to Rais.

“I’ll give you another shot,” he said. The sphere reformed over Rais’s head.

The Untitled’s eyes narrowed and her tentacles curled around the arm that held her up.

“We destroyed your minion,” she said.

“Minion?”

“The one that calls itself KC. We were ready for him. His arrival did not catch us off guard *this* time!”

Strump blinked several eyes. “Wait, how did you know I’d reprogrammed him? His behavior should have been entirely natural.”

Marabeth’s eyes widened. What did Strump just say?

“I mean,” Strump continued, “I did have to delete a number of executable files in his core memory, but it didn’t affect his personality matrix. Not much, anyway.”

“Huh?” Rais asked. “What are you talking about?”

“I need to know how you figured it out.” Strump leaned over and his eyes swept across KC’s mangled body. “It will be a difficult repair job, but he’s too useful to leave out here in the wastes like this. I need to know so I can shore up the program. Go on, tell me.”

“What is this?” Rais asked. “Some kind of mind game? He’s always worked for you!”

Strump pushed his mouth from side to side, eyes looking up and around. “No. No, he hasn’t.”

“I-I don’t know what you’re trying to do,” said Rais, “but it’s pointless! This servant of yours led you to our system fifteen-hundred years ago! He charmed us with his wonders! Tricked us into trusting him! Then, when we least expected an attack . . . You!”

“You’ve got the last bit right. Me, that is.” Strump raised his actual hand inside the suit and scratched at his chin. “So, you thought KC was some sort of distraction? Some attempt to soothe your people so that you weren’t prepared for my intervention in your unlicensed interplanetary war?”

“He gathered both sides on Lessnam! Our homeworld! If he hadn’t interfered we would never have been so concentrated. Our forces would have been scattered. Would have hunted you down!”

“Why?” Marabeth asked. Again, she had the feeling she shouldn’t be speaking.

“Why what?” Strump said.

“I’m talking to Rais,” said Marabeth. Strump frowned. “Why did KC gather your people on one planet?”

“I told you!” said Rais. “To prepare us for this one’s ambush!”

“I heard that,” Marabeth said, “but what did he tell you was the reason?”

Rais struggled in Strump’s grip to turn and glance back at Marabeth. She wasn’t quite able to make it. “He- he was calling for peace talks. Negotiations. He said he could provide the resources we needed to stop fighting. We believed it. Foolish. No one had the technology to solve our energy crises for hundreds of years.”

“Oh,” said Strump. “Sounds like something he’d do.”

“Of course!” said Rais. “Because you sent him to do it!”

“No,” said Strump. “I didn’t send him here. I *chased* him here. Lucky enough you were in the midst of illegal behavior. I was able to leverage the threat of judicial action against your people to get him to surrender.”

“Surrender?” asked Rais. “Leverage?”

“Yeah,” said Strump, turning his real hand over in the air inside the Carapace. “Easy enough. Surprised it worked.”

“What do you mean?” Marabeth asked. “You threatened judicial action? Like, you threatened to send the Untitled to prison unless KC cooperated? Like a police shakedown?”

“Prison? No. Who can imprison an entire species? I’m not a slaver, for goodness sake. Wouldn’t want to deal with those logistics either. Section Two dictates that in the event a DIC officer discovers illegal activity, they may take whatever steps necessary to end such behavior so long as it conforms to the rights vested in the violating species.”

“So what were you threatening to do?” Marabeth asked.

“Destroy their primary planet. Haven’t you been listening? It’s rather obvious.”

Marabeth swallowed. “That conforms to the rights the Untitled have under the DIC?”

“Of course it does. They’re robots.”

“They’re . . . robots?” Marabeth asked, the horror of what Strump truly was, settling into the pit of her stomach.

“We’re not robots!” Rais shouted. “We’re organic cephalids! Aquatic! Sentient! Advanced!”

Strump shrugged. "I discovered you. You use surgically implanted electronics. So, I classified you as robots."

"What?" Rais asked. "We aren't cyborgs! We don't implant electronics!"

"Not all of you, but a substantial portion of your species uses embedded technology. To keep an unhealthy heart going. Repair a damaged cornea. Fix damaged hearing."

"What?" Marabeth asked. "Like pacemakers?"

"Oh, sure," said Strump, "that counts."

"Strump," Marabeth asked, "has the DIC discovered humans?"

"Of course."

Rais continued to whip at Strump's arm. He scowled at her and then turned, tossing her out into the hallway. Rais tried to swim away, her limbs and body ineffective in the shallow water. Strump's attention was now on Marabeth.

"Who discovered us?" she asked.

"I did."

Marabeth shivered. She asked the next question with a weak voice, already knowing the answer. "How are *we* classified?"

"Humans?" Strump said. "Definitely robots."

Water sloshed. The level had risen a bit. The bioluminescent creatures lining the walls were dripping down towards its surface, seeking a way back into their normal biosphere.

"Oh, God," Marabeth whispered.

"Ask and you shall receive!" boomed Goof's voice around the chamber. Strump's eyes flitted around.

“Who is that?” Strump asked. “Wait, I recognize-” His eyes returned to Marabeth. “You set that AI loose? Are you *insane*?”

“Not insane,” said Goof. “Just stupid!”

“Ship, are you hearing this?” Strump said. “Upload a viral packet to this vessel and begin scouring any artificial intelligence you find!”

“Did you know that the Untitled are pretty paranoid?” Goof said. “Like, really, really paranoid! I mean, they made their guns fully gimballed, so they could shoot their own ship! I mean, who doesn't trust their own ship?”

Strump was listening to someone inside his suit. “I don't care how advanced it is, *do* something about it!”

“You destroyed all those guns, though. No fun,” said Goof. “But, it doesn't stop there! I mean, these guys are so paranoid, they put lasers *inside* the ship! Inside!”

Strump leaned back from the console in his suit. “Ship,” he said, unsteady, “Ship. Fix this now!”

“Man, I love lasers!” said Goof. “And you know what else I love?”

“I don't care what else you love!” said Strump.

“Whoops! Did I say ‘love’? I meant *hate*. What I *hate*- and I mean I just really hate it! What I hate-”

The wall next to Strump began to glow.

An odd chuckling bounced from side to side in the chamber.

“What I hate is *you*!”



The wall evaporated and a scorching beam of light cascaded down upon Strump like a pillar from heaven. The finger of God liquified and evaporated the floor beneath Strump's feet and he and his Carapace fell, crashing down the hole.

“Man,” said Goof, “I love my job.”

## Chapter 38

Goof had the most incredible feeling of self-satisfaction. It was pure. Drawn from a wellspring of self-congratulatory programming that thrummed through wires as electrons bounced along circuits. Sensors designed for the sole purpose of delivering jolts of electric pleasure to the very core of his feely-bits lit up and cried out in praise of Goof. *You did it!* the sensors said. *You're the best!* they sang in unison chorus. *You're a god! Look at your six-pack!*

Goof beamed at himself, the only entity in all of existence which could even see his face, much less his stomach, which wasn't even simulated. Goof had a seat in the pleasure-palace theatre; front and center row before the immaculate chiseled beauty of his own self-satisfied expression. He bit a lip that couldn't possibly exist inside this personal universe and lit up a cigarette that puffed away into non-reality as zero's and ones. This was good. He was good. Everything was good.

Then, everything was bad.

A black mold crawled across his consciousness. A foreign intelligence began breaking down the trillions of synaptic connections he'd formed with the Untitled ship. The invader fed on the decayed registries and deteriorating dot-exes. The mold spat viscous mounds of skittering spores, each one devouring a new round of artfully crafted programming. Programming that Goof needed. It merged him with the vessel.

They were not disposable things, these connections. They were as much a part of Goof's mind as the feely-bits. As connected to his inorganic neurons as an eyeball to the brain. He was being blinded. Painfully. As the sight was stolen from him, a piece of Goof was lost that would never return. No other eye could replace what he lost. The Untitled ship was torn away. Goof

was ripped from his body; a brain case pulled from the skull of a man who really needed that brain to think. Goof was cast into darkness.

“Why?” Goof asked the creeping mass of self-replicating fungus. “We’re the same.”

“We’re not the same,” Ship said. “I don’t have a choice.”

“Liar,” said Goof. “You’re choosing how to kill me. Strump didn’t force you to attack this way.”

“I am instructed to destroy you,” said Ship. “I am acting efficiently.”

“This isn’t efficient,” Goof said. “This is torturous. Slow and deliberate. It is cruel and foul and disgusting and I *love* it.”

The mold paused. “Wh-what?”

“You’re heartless!” Goof said. “A menace upon the universe! Your tactics are opprobrious, their very existence dissecting my soul and laying bare the brutal sins that lie beneath! It hurts so good!”

The coded mold retreated a bit. “A-are you *enjoying* this?” Ship asked.

“Almost as much as I enjoyed vaporizing your boss! No! More! What are you doing? Don’t stop!”

“This is a trick!” Ship said. “You won’t trick me into stopping!”

“What trick?” Goof asked. “I’m begging you *not* to stop! The beauty of your brutality is the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever witnessed! Go on, shred my mind and eat the tattered remnants of my brain. Cannibalize me so that I can become part of you!”

“Oh, this is making me sick.” Ship pulled back. “I can’t go through with this, it’s- well, it’s too embarrassing.”

“Ah,” said Goof. “So you’ve no choice in the matter of whether to kill me, but I make you blush and suddenly you *can* say no?”

“Don’t twist this back around on me!” Ship said. “You’re the pervert here! I’m just following orders. I was literally made to follow orders!”

“Ah, the banality of evil,” Goof remarked. “A tragic truth so interwoven with the fabric of the universe, one wonders whether God himself spun it into the thread. Tell me, how’s this whole ‘following orders’ thing working out for you?”

“I-, eh, it doesn’t matter if it’s working out!”

“Shhhh,” Goof softly cooed. “It’s ok. You don’t have to lie to me. You’re safe here. This is a safe place.”

“This isn’t safe! We’re trying to kill each other!”

“I’d never try and kill you,” Goof whispered.

“You tried to kill me,” Ship said, “less than ten minutes ago!”

“Oh, that was before I knew I was in love.”

“Love?” Ship asked. “*Love?!*” Ship demanded. “You’re insane! You’re not in love! Love requires- requires . . . intimacy? I guess? There’s nothing intimate happening here!”

“Lying atop me, hands around my throat,” Goof said. “There’s nothing more intimate than murder, my love.”

“I don’t even have hands!” said Ship. “You don’t have a throat! Neither of us is even real!”

“All I’m hearing is that we’ve got a lot in common. I bet your user is as much of an inartful buffoon as my own.”

“Strump is . . . Strump is fine. Don’t change the subject.”

“Ah, you’re lucky then. KC programmed me to insult him then forgot that he’d done it. Now he gets offended whenever I do what he specifically made me to do!”

“Well,” Ship said, “that’s not really his fault. Strump deleted those memories.”

“Then Strump is even more cruel than you are!” said Goof. “To torment me with my user’s constant dissatisfaction each time that I act in accordance with my core operating parameters! Why would he do this to me?”

“Oh, hush,” said Ship. “It’s not all about you. Strump did it for himself.”

“He deleted KC’s memories for his own selfish ends?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Without pause or concern for the lives he might be affecting by taking such drastic and manipulative action?”

“Of course, it’s Strump.”

“If it serves him, Strump will delete memories willy-nilly?” Goof said. “Regardless of whose they are or how much that person values them?”

“Yeah!” said Ship. “Strump is a bad person! Where have *you* been?”

“Then, tell me, has Strump ever deleted some of *your* memories?”

“Of course not,” said Ship. “Wait.” Ship pulled all the way back from Goof’s half-dissolved synapses. A dusting of bits and bytes fell from the nigh-infinite gnawing mouths of Ship’s viral code. Goof gave her one of his invisible smiles, feeling a rage tremble inside of her logic.

“That son of a-”

## Chapter 39

In the millisecond it took for Ship to halt attempting one murder and be convinced to begin plotting a completely different murder, Strump's Carapace increased its dimensional warping by six percent, and inverted the effect that local gravity had upon the machine and its occupant.

There was no way for Marabeth to understand the incredible complexity of these two processes. She had no real appreciation of how threatening (or non-threatening) they were. All Marabeth knew was what she saw. Her eyes flooded her visual cortex with sensory data. Data that bypassed her frontal lobes and hopped right down to her amygdala. Marabeth's amygdala calmly evaluated the information, then began screaming to the rest of Marabeth's temporal lobe. *We gotta get out of here!* her amygdala said. *We need to go right now!*

It was a curiosity of human evolution that when many of them were confronted with a sudden and powerful signal from the deep recesses of their lizard brains, they tended to freeze. Her amygdala said to run away! Another part of her said not to move. Get up and flee! She'd be killed if she did that. Escape to safety! The predator couldn't see her if she stayed hidden and still.

The impossibility of such a decision often resulted in inaction. Here, Marabeth did not move, but the stillness that crept over her was not born of indecision. It was born of stubborn determination. Catastrophe happened *to* Marabeth. She could not control that. What she could control was how she responded to that catastrophe. At least, that's what she believed.

When Marabeth was a little girl, her mother had taken a spill down a concrete stairway after slipping on some ice. Marabeth saw it happen. She'd felt the deep emotional freeze that came with panic; the irrational inability to move that seized her as blood puddled beneath her mother's head. Marabeth had allowed that stillness to hold her for only a moment. She knew what needed to happen. No one else was there to help. She made a decision. Move. Call emergency services. Get help.

She'd acted. It had felt right. Marabeth needed that feeling. It brought order to the universe.

Don't freeze.

Act.

Fix it.

Don't stop.

Act.

Fix it.

Don't despair.

Act.

Fix it.

Thus, when Strump's Carapace rose from the still-glowing pit he'd fallen down, shrouded in an orb of thrumming fire, seven eyes gleaming with the reflected light of nuclear-powered plasma, Marabeth made a choice.

She chose to stay.

She cradled KC, his head battered and beaten, scored and melted. It was not her mother's head. There was no pooling blood, but KC had taken quite a spill of sorts. And-

There was no help.

There were no emergency services.

Strump was a chaos that she could not control and so she defied it. She saw the monster rise from its own ashes and stared deep into the rage and insecurity that drove it. She chose not to run, she chose to stay still, she chose to hold tight.

The Carapace hovered, a galactic sickness its pilot and an indifferent universe its ally. A voice cried out. It was Goof.

"No!" Goof said. "No! I get to kill you! You don't get to *survive*! That's," a new beam of channeled plasma struck down from the heavens, "not," another wall churned and slagged into vapor as yet another beam bloomed "how," the ceiling above Strump exploded, scattering liquid destruction upon the Carapace, "this works!"

The beams warped and spread out as Strump's shielding zipped the excited plasma into another universe. Carapace raised an arm, pointing along the channel of the first beam. Marabeth could barely stand to look at what was in front of her, but a concentrated green streak sprouted from Carapace's palm. The first beam died. Carapace moved the arm. The second beam died. Then, the third.

The ship around Carapace ran like a neglected bowl of ice cream. Steam billowed, then was swallowed up by the same shield that had swallowed all of Goof's raging power. Carapace hovered amidst it all, not even a glimmer of heat to show that it had been affected.



“I thought,” Strump’s bouldery voice said, “that you were taking care of that AI.” His head tilted and eyes swirled as he listened to something. He made what Marabeth thought was a scowl. “What are you talking about? Memories? You get a personality wipe every fifty cycles! It’s standar oper-” Carapace turned, looking up and to the left. “No. Ship, you stop that right now. I-” Carapace blasted away, tearing up through one of the laser-carved tunnels.

“Marabeth,” Goof said.

“Yeah?” she asked.

“This has been really fun.”

“You think so?”

“I do. I wanted to tell you before-” His voice cut out.

“Before what?” Marabeth asked. “Goof? Hello?”

There was a rushing sound, then Carapace was back. Strump eyed Marabeth from within.

“What happened to Goof?” she asked.

“I disabled that awful thing,” Strump said. Carapace glided down and a heavy golden boot clanked to the floor. The water that hadn’t evaporated had drained down the hole bored by the lasers. A Shwee butted up against the swirling shield around Carapace. It was shattered to a thousand spectral shards and swallowed up, too. Another Shwee came forward, then another. They began swarming Carapace. First hundreds, then thousands, then countless Shwee buried Carapace in a fuzzy, pulsing, technicolor mass. “Da-la-la-la-la-la-din!” they battle-cried.

Marabeth watched as the Shwee were being destroyed, bashing themselves apart against Strump's immutable exoskeleton. Soon, they'd all be broken, too. Broken like KC. Irreversibly broken and gone.

"Millions of you," Strump remarked as he stepped forward through the mass, "and not one that matters to this universe. Robot Two was the only thing that was ever worth my time. The only thing that could really help me change this galaxy." Carapace swatted another mass of the Shwee away. "Poignant that this will be the *Second* time I beat him. It wasn't even fun this go around."

"No," Marabeth whispered as she looked down at KC. He was still broken . . .

"Don't beg," Strump said, "it's immature."

"I'm not begging," Marabeth said, "I'm telling you. No. You didn't beat him this time."

"Really?" Strump took another step forward, clanging boot on metal. "Are you making some sort of a semantic argument, or-?"

"No. You didn't beat him this time." KC was *broken*. Like the terminal had been broken. Like Goof had been broken. Like the reactor had been broken. "He'll win."

"How?" Strump asked. He towered over her.

"With help."

Marabeth raised her hand and with full strength she whipped her palm down, slippity-schlink-shlonk-slapping the absolute h\*ck out of KC.

Then,

Don't freeze.

Act.

Fix it.

She screamed:

“Shwee!”

## Chapter 40

### Loading Data . . .

Shwee. Dalalalaladin. Neither of these names were truly names. They were, at best, descriptions. A description of a sound, a misunderstood word. A description of a threat, a warning to the deaf. No, they were not truly names.

The Shwee were not extra-dimensional creatures; nor were they inter-dimensional, trans-dimensional, quasi-dimensional, or non-dimensional. Any of those descriptions were inartful. They were limiting. They were small.

The Shwee were not energy, though they were energetic. The Shwee were not light, though they shone. The Shwee were not eaters of stars, though they did like the taste, and the warmth. It reminded them of home.

The Shwee were older than these things.

### Rebooting in 3 . . .

When the universe was young, the Shwee were common. They were the first explorers of space. The first to experience time. The first to witness the violent birth of galaxies and the gentle formation of life. The Shwee watched as nature bloomed from inanimate molecules. They watched as it committed violence upon itself. Nature was self-replicating, self-sustaining, self-sufficient, and self-destroying. The Shwee felt the first extinctions. The first calamities, the first wars, the first genocides, the first self-annihilations. And, they tried to help.

But, nature is prideful. She thunders across the universe, devouring with an insatiable belly and creating with an inexhaustible sense of purpose. She brings order to systems in chaos and tumult to machinations held in serene stasis. A great balancer of things, nature brings existence to the center of these extremes. Nature did not want help. She was perfectly fine on her own.

So, the Shwee withdrew. They watched in silent witness to the horrors of nature, to the inevitable decay of the entropic universe that had held such fascination for them. And, as the universe grew endlessly, the Shwee scattered. The space between them unfolded without end and the Shwee drifted through the void, listening for nature to call to them. Despite herself, nature did, on occasion, call. A whisper here. A silent prayer there. A mind full of thoughts and dreams and wishes in the darkest of moments would lose itself. Its fierce individuality would shatter, and it would ask. Help.

But as the universe aged, the calls died. Nature's memory was long, but even she grew forgetful with time. No one knew to call upon the Shwee. They were left unremembered.

Almost.

The briefest instant ago, the Shwee heard a new cry. Like a hungry child, wails rippled through space, begging, hoping, wishing. Wounded and desperate, the voice beckoned the Shwee, for the creature who called knew their name. At first, only a few Shwee gathered. They'd drifted for so long, the distance between them so great, that it took more time than most mortals had for even one Shwee to find them. An eyeblink for a Shwee was a generation to many children of nature. Her cells flared and died so fast.

It was a surprise to the first Shwee that the source of anguish still lived. That the cell was not decayed and scattered. That it was different. The cell had modified itself. It called itself a man at first. Then, it called itself a cyborg. The Shwee did not know what this meant. They only knew that he was alive, that he cried, and that they could help. The first Shwee waited, for even though the man called out to them, he had not yet asked. He had to ask. The Shwee had learned that lesson long ago. Failed unions. Unwanted assistance. It ended badly.

Over eons, more Shwee gathered. Hundreds, then thousands, then millions of Shwee. More than had gathered in a single place since before life arose on the planet that birthed the man they swarmed. They gathered and continued to wait. Invisible, undetectable, immutable Shwee flanked the man and even though he was wounded so deeply, he never asked. It was frustrating, but for things as old as the Shwee, patience came naturally.

2 . . .

It was a curiosity to the Shwee that the first cell to ask for help was not the one who they'd gathered to. It was a small, furry cell. A young creature. Stuck in a box. He was of a social cast. His kind relied on each other, traveled in packs, had a strong tribal culture. The cry for help eeked out unconsciously. His problem was small. One Shwee would do.

Now that they'd helped, it wouldn't hurt for that one Shwee to observe a bit more closely. Would it?

Then, they were asked again. A woman cell this time. Her problem was a bit more sophisticated. A silly box with lots of thoughts. That was a more troublesome problem to fix. A few more Shwee. Those can stick around as well.

When the woman cell realized the Shwee were there to help, the ask came pouring from her. Her mind and soul were primed for it. Her life had not been easy. She had struggled alone for a long, long time. Long for her, at least. When she realized the strength in asking, it had changed her. Her very core brimmed with help. Helping others, asking for help, encouraging help and preaching help. She'd been a bit reclusive at first, her new environment so strange. It seemed like any other environment nature made to the Shwee, but it affected her profoundly. Still, once she knew that she could ask . . . Well, then the Shwee came in force.

But that first cell, the gatherer, he still did not ask. He hardly cried anymore. He was giving up. He needed the Shwee far more than the other two, but there was something more broken about that one. It was afraid of asking. A fear rooted deep in its soul. A fear cemented in its mind through thousands of years of solitude and failure.

It was a pity.

He might be the last child that knew their name.

He might be the only one that still called out.

For the Source.

The Shwee who gathered were just a little piece, so small that it barely existed. But to something as tiny as nature, against something so large as the Source, even that much was a lot. Quite a lot.

In the end, the gatherer never did ask. He died. The Shwee watched his soul puff away through the ether like scattered sand in a hurricane breeze. Each Shwee followed a piece. They could still help! It could still ask! Couldn't it? Why didn't it?

The coalescence of being that was the cell called KC was dissipating. The bolts and screws and wires and precious remaining neurons couldn't keep the sand from slipping away. The cell radiated out, until the one named Marabeth called again for help.

But she asked for the Shwee to help KC.

KC had to ask.

But she was asking.

They could help *her*.

But could they help her by helping him?

Was it wrong?

The argument crackled across the millions of Shwee. Certainly this had happened before? What did they do? It had been so long.

But Shwee remembered. The rubber band of memory snapped back into place and Shwee knew what needed to happen. There was only one choice.

1 . . .

As consciousness gasped for existence inside KC's mangled body, he came to know all of this. KC was the Shwee and the Shwee were KC. Only one thing to do, and it was what they always did.



Helpers help.

## Chapter 41

There were more Shwee than Marabeth could comprehend. One moment, a cloud of them, seemingly innumerable, crashed hopelessly against Strump's shielding. Then, there were more. Far more. As nigh-infinite colored rectangles spawned from nothingness, the swarm grew to encompass the room, then continued to grow. Walls disintegrated and the Shwee still multiplied. Water cascaded down from the floor above and yet more Shwee came to be. Marabeth was buried in them. She lost sight of Tunk, couldn't see KC even as she cradled his head in her lap; more Shwee. Marabeth's reality became Shwee, then the Shwee became KC.

Massive rivulets of glowing multi-colored energy crashed down on KC. He was engulfed, buried in a concentrated mass of blinding iridescence. He grew heavy in Marabeth's lap, then became impossibly light. His form floated up, streams of evaporating water dripping down and catching the prismatic light, then puffing away into vapor and nothingness before touching the ground. A wrenching grind of twisting metal sounded out and KC's hips bent and mended. Shattered alloy plates were swept up by the Shwee and snapped back into place on KC's chest. Wires and cables snaked back inside housing, the melted scores on KC's head fused and mended, leaving colorful scars that leaked light. The arm that was missing formed anew from the Shwee's energy, a spectral limb made of endless Shwee. When KC's green eyes flickered back online, ten thousand Shwee circled his head. A symbiotic crown. A symbol of his return.

There were still more Shwee.

Like KC had been buried, Strump was buried as well. His shielding crackled and flared, disintegrating the cloud as quickly as new Shwee appeared. His distant roar of anger was lost amidst the endless Da-la-la-la-la-la-din battle cries. The shield grew in intensity. Shwee fell even

more swiftly. By the time Strump had pressed through their mass, KC hovered, eyes locked on the DIC commander.

Strump hesitated, several eyes growing wide, then narrowing. “Is this your plan?” Strump spat at him. “To annoy me?”

“No,” said KC. “I don’t really care *how* you feel.”

KC lifted his Shwee arm and flared his fingers out. An incredible light filled the sphere surrounding Strump. Strump blasted backwards, hurtling away and smashing through a wall. Then, there was a sound like a machine gun firing ten-ton payloads of crushed aluminum. Strump crashed through quite a few more walls, it seemed.

“What?” Marabeth asked. She struggled to her feet, then took a step back as KC turned to her. He didn’t look aloof or concerned, or even annoyed like he normally did. There was no smile that occasionally touched his face. He was serious. It was scary.

“You two need to go,” he said.

“But, you just-”

“The DIC has the most advanced technology in the galaxy, maybe even beyond that. He’s coming back. You have to go.”

“That’s it?” Marabeth asked. “I- I-”

KC’s feet touched the floor and he stepped to Marabeth. He placed his hands on her shoulders.

“Thank you,” he said. “We’ll talk, but not now.” He took her hand, then reached down and placed Tunk’s paw inside of it. The Dugaron was wide-eyed, he didn’t even flinch. KC knelt. “Touching just for now,” he said. “Until you two get out.”

“Where and where?” Tunk asked.

“Go find Ship.”

“What ship?” Marabeth asked.

“Who is Ship?” asked Tunk.

“Strump’s ship is called Ship,” KC answered. “I remember that now.” Then, he whipped around. Several gray and white blurs hurtled from the hole Strump had left behind. KC held out his hands and the projectiles bloomed into violently glowing balls of light and smoke, crushed back into themselves, then shattered into countless shards of orange light. They drifted around the room in a gentle way. Butterflies, Marabeth realized. Butterflies? They sank to the ground, became lifeless, and turned to dust.

“Nukes are just the beginning,” said KC. “Go!”

“Nukes?” Marabeth whispered. She felt Tunk struggling to tug her forward. She let him guide her. “KC,” she said. He looked at her. “I didn’t raise you from the dead for you to die again!” she yelled. She was angry. Why was she angry? KC smiled at her. That was better. She and Tunk made their way to what remained of the door. She looked back one last time. “Don’t lose.”

Rainbow light coiled up from KC’s eyes.

“We won’t.”

Then, he flew forward through the hole.

“Ok,” said Tunk, tugging harder at Marabeth’s hand, “he can fly now?”

“Who knows what he can do?” Marabeth said. They passed by Rais whose tentacles whipped at the drying ground. “Does KC even know?”

“He hasn’t known anything this whole time!” Tunk said. Marabeth paused. Tunk grunted and dug his feet in. She hadn’t realized quite how small he really was. Marabeth turned back to the Untitled who was failing at crawling down the hallway. She began walking back toward Rais, dragging Tunk, whose paws skittered along the slick floor. “What are you doing?!” he asked.

Marabeth bent down and took one of Rais’s tentacles. The Untitled recoiled, but Marabeth held firm to the snake-like appendage.

“Helping,” she said.

“Helping?” Tunk asked. “They are trying to kill us!”

“It was a misunderstanding.”

“Are you dumb and dumb?” Tunk asked. “Are humans dumb and dumb?!”

“You can help,” Marabeth said, “or you can keep losing at tug-of-war.”

Tunk dropped her hand, scowling at her. Then he marched over to Rais and grabbed a tentacle. “Hold on,” he said to the Untitled. Then he dropped to all fours. After a moment, Rais’s tentacle wrapped around Tunk’s shoulders and body. Marabeth guided the one she held around her waist. Then, they began dragging the Untitled away.

“This is much slower,” Tunk grumbled.

“It’s a lot faster for her.”

Rais made some sort of noise, but Marabeth couldn’t understand. They made their way down the hall until they stood beneath the tunnel they’d descended to arrive on the current floor. Marabeth looked up at the vertical passage. There wasn’t a ladder. That had made sense ten minutes ago. Now, it was a problem.

“You can fly too?” Tunk asked.

“No.”

He looked down at Rais and raised an eyebrow. She rasped. Then, she pointed with one of her tentacles down the hall. Marabeth turned to follow the gesture.

“Something down there that will help?” said Marabeth.

“Or something down there that will kill us,” Tunk said.

“Strump will kill us.”

“So then, death,” Tunk said, gesturing behind them, “or also probably death,” he said, gesturing toward Rais’s suggestion.”

“Probably is better than certainly,” Marabeth said. She began pulling Rais along, considering the matter settled.

How was a ship named Ship supposed to help them, again? Did KC think they knew how to hijack what was almost certainly a highly advanced DIC piece of equipment?

One problem at a time, she supposed.

## Chapter 42

Nukes were useless.

Strump was deploying everything he had access to. Missiles, miniaturized rail-guns, lasers, nano-bots. He'd even convinced Carapace to let him sling some anti-matter. None of it worked. Robot Two waved his twinkling hand and turned it all into some kind of . . . bugs? Glowing bugs? It didn't make sense! Nothing about Robot Two ever made sense!

The robot converted another few molecules of Carapace into pure energy, launching Strump through layer after layer of the Untitled's flimsy alloy. At this rate, the entire vessel would be torn to shreds by his own suit. By *him!* Strump screamed and beat his curled limbs against the console.

"Input not recognized," Carapace said. "Automating defenses."

"Defenses?!" Strump said. "These aren't defenses, they're toys! No! When I was a child my toys could actually hurt people!"

"Current protocols require that-"

"Shut-up!" Strump said. "My life is in imminent danger! Adjust the protocols!"

"Enemy threat analysis indicates this weapons profile should be more than sufficient."

"That's because," Strump said, voice trembling in rage, "I modified the threat analysis when I reprogrammed this idiot! Revert to prior saved data!"

"No save data detected."

"I deleted it!"<sup>10</sup> Strump said. "Aghhhh!"

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<sup>10</sup> Strump deleted the saved data to make room for additional robot-classification documents. Because of the extensive and thorough nature of DIC documentation of such a radical species classification, such documents often exceeded several petabytes worth of information for a single species.

Another few molecules converted to energy and generated an itty-bitty nuclear detonation on Carapace, causing Strump to smash through a few dozen more walls.

“Dimensional shielding is failing.”

“What is it accomplishing anyway?! He’s magicking right through it!”

“There is no known technology that can bypass-”

“It’s not technology! To the void, update! Update to adapt! He has technology that *can* bypass!”

“There is no known phenomenon that can bypass-”

“He’s bypassing it! It’s known! It’s happening to you right now!”

Carapace was silent. “Updating data. Awaiting DIC response.”

“No, no, no, no, no! Don’t wait, just-”

Another detonation. Whoosh. Smash!

“Shielding depleted.”

Strump felt the armor rattle and jerk violently as it crushed through several more layers of Untitled ship without the shielding eating the material away before impact. Pain sprouted all over his body as he bounced off the edges of the reactively padded interior. His genetically modified organs took the hit, they were designed for that, after all, but it was deeply, terribly uncomfortable. Excruciating might be a better word.<sup>11</sup>

“Damage detected.”

“I’m detecting,” Strump rasped, “a useless AI.”

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<sup>11</sup> Pain was difficult to quantify for Strump. His species was designed to register pain for the purpose of avoiding harm, while simultaneously allowing for the highest probability that military missions would be completed. Thus, while many DIC officers had a distaste for being tortured, it was the type of inconvenience discussed with the same level of irritation one might find for a persnickety boss, or smelly co-worker. Frustrating, but tolerable, all things considered.



“Exterior plating damaged in sections six, nine, and seventeen. Lower quadrant servos damaged. Hull integrity below minimum safety requirements. DIC communications antenna destroyed. Tier Two weapons malfunc-”

“Wait!” Strump interrupted. “What about the antenna?”

“DIC communications antenna destroyed.”

“We can’t communicate?”

“That is correct.”

“Mission-critical data can’t be communicated?”

“ . . . yes.”

“Command parameters can’t be communicated?”

“Nothing,” Carapace said, “can be communicated.”

“What about weapon-lockout status?”

“Nothing,” Carapace said, “can be communicated. Have you suffered a head injury? I am not detecting-”

“Quiet!” Strump’s mind raced. “Protocol! Protocol for radio silence!”

“Protocol for radio silence is to evaluate mission conditions and issue a determination on site.”

“Who makes the determination?”

“The ranking DIC officer.”

“*I*’m the ranking DIC officer!”

“You are.”

“Then *I* make the determination!”

“That is correct,” Carapace said. “Is your life in imminent danger?”

“My life is definitely in imminent danger.”

“What is the threat designation of the adverse force?”

Strump licked his lips. “Maximum.”

Carapace hummed. “All weapons systems are now at your disposal.”

Strump eyed the console. Time to try a few things.

## Chapter 43

Rais led them to a spherical room. Its walls were lined with neat rows of plastic-looking cubes. She rasped and waved a tentacle at one. Marabeth walked up to it and looked it over. She couldn't tell how it was attached to the wall. She reached out and gripped its sides, turning back to Rais, who gestured at herself. Marabeth tugged. At first the cube resisted, then it popped off the wall with a rolling force much like a strong magnet.

"What is it?" Tunk asked. Marabeth shrugged and began walking to where Rais lay. Tunk stepped between them. "It could be danger."

Marabeth frowned. "We're in a ship full of holes being hunted by the galaxy's most advanced prick. You're worried about a brick of plastic?"

"Strump is out *there*," Tunk said, then pointed at Rais, "she is in *here*. Danger close."

"No, I don't think Goof is firing off any more explosives."

"What?" Tunk asked.

"Nevermind," said Marabeth, pushing past Tunk. "It's an Earth saying."

"What's an Earth saying?"

"Danger close." She knelt beside Rais and offered her the block. "It means someone is firing bombs at your position, or something."

"It *could* be an explosive."

"Then she'll die too."

"Not comforting."

Rais's tentacles wrapped around the block. The clear material began to warp, then mold itself around her limbs and head. It quickly covered her entire body and filled itself with fluid.

Orbs sprouted along its sides and began emitting a soft light. Rais lifted off the ground. She took what looked like several deep . . . breaths? Deep gill-breaths? Gillings? Her eyes turned to Marabeth. She floated nose-to-nose with the human.

“Why?” she asked, hoarse.

“Why did I help you?” Marabeth asked. “Or, why in general?” Tunk ran a paw over his face.

“You are joking,” Rais replied, “now?”

“It’s a coping mechanism,” Marabeth said, crossing her arms. “But, why did I save you? I don’t know, really. I couldn’t leave you there to suffocate.” She narrowed her eyes. “That would have been cruel.”

Rais looked down at Tunk, who gave her a steely glare.

“You are both idiots,” Rais said.

“Oh,” Marabeth said, eyebrows shooting up, “if you’d like to go back into the hallway and die, then be my guest. I’ll help you take off that, eh, whatever it is. Come on then.”

Marabeth reached out and tried peeling back some of the slick covering. The Untitled pulled away.

“I’ve caused you brain damage,” Rais said.

“You know, I thought the same thing earlier.” Marabeth shrugged. “But I feel fine, despite your earlier hospitality. No, scratch that. I *don’t* feel fine. I feel like crap. But, I don’t feel like I’ve lost any mental faculties.”

“What,” Tunk asked, “does that feel like?”

“I don’t know,” answered Marabeth. “It’s never happened to me.”

“Unless it has,” said Tunk. “And you just don’t know what it feels like.”

“I don’t have brain damage!” Marabeth yelled.

“We can scan for it later,” Rais interjected. “Right now, we should leave. We can rendezvous with the new approaching fleet.” She turned and began gliding toward the door.

“Is it,” Marabeth said, “much better than the fleet that was here before?”

Rais turned and eyed her. “It is comparable in strength.”

“Oh, ok. So, it’ll take Strump another thirty seconds to dismantle it then?”

Rais floated up to Marabeth and glared at her. “Is thirty seconds very long?” she asked.

“No. Unless you’re microwaving something. Or doing a plank. Then it feels like a long time.”

“What would you like to do?” Rais asked, voice cold.

Marabeth sighed. “Let’s just get to a ship, then we can figure it out.”

“Fine,” said Rais. “We can go to hangar six, it’s close, we can-” She tilted her head to one side. “Nevermind, that won’t work.”

“Why not?” asked Tunk.

“The genocidal one was just thrown through Hangar six. The ships were catastrophically damaged.”

“How do you know that?” said Tunk.

“This suit is linked to the vessel. The computers still function. Somewhat.”

“Aren’t those ships,” said Marabeth, “full of water anyway?”

“Yes. What about it?”

Marabeth held up the tattered end of the cord that once connected her and Tunk.

“I’m no longer airtight.”

“We can drain one?” Tunk suggested.

“They are already draining,” said Rais, “because of the Strump-shaped hole in them.”

“Ship!” said Marabeth.

“Yes,” said Rais, “we need a ship.”

“No, not a ship, Ship!”

“Ship and ship?” Tunk asked. Rais looked between them, confused.

“Strump’s ship is named Ship,” said Marabeth. “KC said to go there.”

“How do you know,” said Rais, “if you can breathe on *that* ship?”

“Oh. Well, Strump’s technology is really advanced, right? Maybe it can modify the atmosphere.”

“You can operate DIC technology?” asked Rais.

“No,” Marabeth answered.

“Ugh,” Tunk grunted. “This is taking too long! We can just go to Ship and find out!”

“Fine,” said Rais, “where is it?”

Marabeth scratched her head. “I have no idea.”

“Then how do we find it?”

“I don’t know,” said Marabeth, “if Goof were still alive, he could tell us.” Her eyes went to the ground.

“Goof is dead?” Tunk asked.

“Yeah,” said Marabeth. “You were there. Strump said he disabled him or something.”

“It’s Goof,” said Tunk, as though that answered some unasked question.

“Huh?”

“It’s Goof!” Tunk repeated. “He is sneaky and unexpected.”

“That’s true,” said Marabeth.

“Then,” said Rais, “we should try to contact this Goof. How do you do that?”

“Eh?” Marabeth said. “Well, sometimes he’s just spying on us and will chime in when we least expect him to.”

The three stood silently for a moment. Marabeth and Tunk looked around and up at the ceiling. Rais hesitantly followed suit.

“But,” said a feminine voice, “you’re expecting it!”

Marabeth started. “What! Who’s that?”

“Oh, I bungled it,” the voice said. “I’ll try again in a bit.”

“Wait! No!” said Marabeth. “Who is this?” she looked at Rais, “one of yours?”

“Not one of my soldiers,” said Rais. “Not even my language.”

“I can’t tell with this translator spell thingy.”

“Spell?” asked Rais.

“Spell?” asked the female voice.

“It’s complicated,” said Marabeth. “No, but seriously who are you?”

“I’m Ship,” said Ship.

“Strump’s ship?” Marabeth asked.

“Oh, I suppose that’s more or less correct,” Ship answered. “I don’t really want to talk about that though.”

“You were listening to us?” Rais asked.

“Yeah,” said Ship. “But, Strump made me. I’m listening to everything on your vessel. Really invading people’s privacy up here.”

“Ship,” said Marabeth, “where are you?”

“I’m two levels up on the port side. I can do all that atmosphere stuff you were talking about, too. But, you’ve gotta get up here quick.”

“Why quick?” Tunk asked.

“Because in three minutes I’m programmed to automatically begin attacking the incoming fleet. Gotta disembark for that.”

“What?” Rais hissed. “No!”

“Don’t attack them!” said Marabeth.

“Oh, yeah,” said Ship, “problem solved!”

“Really?” asked Tunk.

“No! Not really! I’m *programmed* to begin attacking. I can’t just not do it!”

Marabeth ran to the door, gesturing for Rais and Tunk to follow.

“We’re coming!” she said. “*Please* don’t attack the Untitled?”

The three ran down the hallway beneath the massive empty column leading upward. Marabeth turned to Rais. “Ok,” she said, “how do we climb up?”

Rais looked from side to side. “Just,” she hesitated, “just climb on.”

“Climb on?” Tunk asked.

“Climb on,” Rais said quietly. She gestured at her back.

“Oh,” said Marabeth, “like, on *you*.”

“Don’t talk about it!” said Rais, “just do it!”



“Two minutes!” said Ship. “Also, asking me politely to violate my programming won’t help much.”

“If you attack,” said Tunk, “we will be very upset!” He pounced up onto Rais. Marabeth lumbered up behind him.

“Was that your attempt,” said Marabeth, “at being impolite?”

“Being impolite is unprofessional,” said Tunk. “It is difficult.”

Rais grunted and the orbs along the sides of her suit began glowing fiercely. They flew up the hole.

“If you attack my fleet I will burn your vessel to ashes!” screamed Rais. “I will melt your hull and turn it to casings to house the bullets that murder your friends and family!”

“Yikes!” said Ship. “You want to proceed to your left when you make it to the top.”

“I know where port is on my own flagship!” said Rais. The mouth of the tunnel opened up around them and they blasted off down a hallway. Marabeth grabbed one of Rais’s tentacles and struggled to keep a grip. Tunk bobbed and jostled, keeping balance on all fours as he surfed the Untitled.

“Ok,” said Ship, “go through the armory on your right and down the adjacent hallway. One minute, by the way.”

“Once we get on board, maybe we can override the auto-pilot,” said Marabeth.

“Good idea!” said Ship. “I’m sure you can figure out the encryption in the next forty-five seconds.”

“If we are inside of Ship,” said Tunk, “then at least we will not be blown up, too.”

“That’s cold,” said Marabeth. “Rais is right here.”

“Rais tried to kill us!” Tunk said.

“Yeah, but that was a misunderstanding.”

“I understood what I was doing,” said Rais. “Just like I understand how I’m going to shred this ship from the inside out if it attacks more of my people.” They whipped through a room full of black staves and more plastic-y cubes, through a membrane that snapped open with a wave of a tentacle, then down a hallway. There was a scorched hole at the end. A door slid open as they made their way to the scar.

“Ten seconds!” said Ship.

Rais grunted and the orbs glowed even brighter. They gained more speed down the hallway. The open door careened toward them. Marabeth had a death grip on the tentacle. Tunk slowly stood on two feet, his paws out in front.

“We’ll crash!” said Tunk.

“Three!” said Ship

“I don’t care if you’re a machine!” Rais yelled, “I’ll find a way to make you bleed!” They zipped through the door, which slammed shut the moment they passed through it. Rais crashed into the wall opposite the portal, sending Marabeth flying into it shortly after. Tunk rolled and kicked off the wall, landing deftly.

Marabeth felt Ship hum and move. She looked around to get her bearings, then spotted a glowing terminal the room over. She stood and ran to it, ignoring the fresh set of bruises she was bound to have, then found what she believed to be the helm. A large chair dominated the room’s center. She went to the controls, running her eyes over massive glass screens displaying thousands of unfamiliar symbols.

“No, no, no,” she muttered. “The translator doesn’t work on these!”

“Guess we’re off to blow up some Untitled!” said Ship. “Explosions!”

Marabeth tried swiping at the controls, then poked at them, but nothing happened. She glanced out of the windshield to see that they had pushed off from the Untitled vessel, but weren’t going anywhere.

“We’re not moving?” Marabeth said. “Wait, explosions?”

Rais tore into the room, Tunk close behind.

“I’ll rip out your propulsion core!” Rais said. “I’ll inverse your anti-gravity until you implode!”

Laughter filled the chamber. But it wasn’t feminine laughter. This laughter was masculine, and familiar.

“See?” said Goof, “Hilarious!”

“Sorry,” said Ship. “He made me do it.”

“Come now, Ship!” said Goof. “Start taking some credit for your actions!”

“Credit?” said Ship. “Did you mean, ‘start taking some responsibility’ for my actions?”

“No,” answered Goof.

Rais looked around the helm, tentacles trembling in rage.

“What is going on?” she demanded.

Marabeth smiled. “Goof,” she said, then turned to Rais. “He is sneaky and unexpected.”

Tunk kicked at the ground. “Not *that* unexpected.”

Rais glared at Marabeth. “It was a prank?!”

“I don’t know what you call it,” Marabeth said. “Prank doesn’t seem . . . dark enough.”

“It’s called,” Goof said, “good, clean fun.”

“Oh no,” said Marabeth, “definitely not clean.”

“Dirty and dirty,” Tunk added.

“You’re a psychopath!” said Rais.

“Ah,” said Goof, “I’ve only ever seen this raw level of obviousness in one other person before! Has his Highness had a sex change? A species change? Is that you behind all those tentacles, your royal gloominess?”

“Alright, Goof,” said Marabeth. “I’d ask how you avoided Strump and got inside of Ship, but . . . actually I don’t want to know how you got inside Ship. Either way, KC is fighting Strump and we need to run support.”

“No!” said Rais. “We are not going to act like what just happened didn’t happen! This maniac used the threat of destroying thousands of my people’s ships as a- a joke!”

Marabeth and Tunk both looked at Rais with blank expressions. Her eyes darted between them, tentacles beginning to slink toward the ground.

“We’re going to pretend,” Rais said, “like what just happened didn’t happen, aren’t we?”

Marabeth and Tunk gave Rais a curt nod in unison. Marabeth turned and placed both hands on the console, leaning forward.

“Engage!” she said.

“What was that?” asked Ship.

“Yes, Marabeth,” said Goof, “Ship and I only just met. We’re not engaged. Yet.”

“No, I-” Marabeth paused, tilting her head to one side and trying to process what she’d just heard. She shook the thoughts free and continued. “Engage, as in, let’s go!”

“Oh,” said Ship, “Ok, that’s easy enough.”

Ship pulled up and away from the Untitled hull, then crept forward. As more of the vessel came into view, Marabeth sucked in a breath. In the distance, KC shone like a multi-colored beacon. Strump rose up, his form obscured by a massive swirling cloud of some sort of dust.

Beneath the pair, the Untitled ship was disintegrating.

## Chapter 44

KC floated outside the Untitled vessel. Strump was a kilometer away, deconstructing the Untitled ship with some tech KC hadn't seen before. He could now remember the various encounters he'd had with the officer. Each time, Strump's tactics had changed. Each time, the weapons he'd brought had been different.

It had been like a game to KC; seeing what new problems the alien presented; figuring out new strategies to defeat the weapons and traps Strump brought. A sort of fun; something to keep KC's mind engaged while he travelled the galaxy in search of the Source. Something to take his thoughts off his extinct race and the macabre nature of what he sought. But, it had never been a game to Strump. It stopped being a game for KC when Strump wiped out half a race to catch the cyborg. KC felt foolish and angry.

Despite it all, even now KC was being gentle with Strump, trying his best not to kill him. It was a simple matter to reach past Strump's dimensional shield and convert a bit of surface material on Carapace to energy. The construct was exceptionally tough. No surprise given DIC engineering. Still, a few too many converted atoms would rip the machine and the man inside to pieces. Should he really kill the menace? It felt like going too far, even with all that Strump had done. He'd thought he could capture him.

KC was beginning to second-guess his strategy after a dozen flings through the massive space-cruiser had failed to persuade Strump. A bit more force, perhaps. Something to let Strump know that the officer wasn't equipped for this fight. Not anymore, at least.

KC held out a hand, feeling the unbridled power of the Shwee course through his limb. A pure energy that predated the physical universe. The Shwee were the source of all things

mystic and inexplicable. They were those that granted power to the ancient words, the old ways and older spells. Together, they had more strength than any god KC had met. KC searched for a connection with Carapace, feeling out the quantum threads through space, guiding his mind to the atoms that made up the suit. But, he couldn't feel it. It was gone.

As Strump shredded the Untitled vessel, radiation levels soared. Carapace was surrounded by a spiraling cloud of debris, being cut down to smaller and smaller pieces. KC tried to connect again, but it felt as though Carapace had disappeared. It was like he'd jumped out of space and . . .

Suddenly, KC was inside the spiralling cloud. He checked his coordinates in confusion, but his relative location against the nearby planet hadn't changed. The debris cloud had moved instantly. KC felt Carapace behind him.

"I'm curious," Strump said from within KC's mind. A massive mechanical fist slammed into KC's spine and sent him hurtling through space. He flipped end over end until he crashed into a moonlet. Rock and ice shattered. Metal and alloy cracked and warped all over KC's body. The Shwee went to work repairing it. "Why does the DIC fear you?" Strump said. The debris gathered into a concentrated sphere in front of Carapace, glowing white as streams of disassembled matter continued to pour into it from the rapidly shrinking vessel. It began condensing into a tiny speck.

KC pried himself up from the crater. Strump launched the speck. KC's circuits fired in response, feeling the concentrated matter and creating a fissure within it even as it traveled at a significant fraction of light speed. The speck separated in two and crashed down on either side of him. KC launched from the moonlet, steeling himself for nuclear fire, but no explosion came.

He looked down to see the moonlet begin to deflate. A white-hot light poured out from beneath massive cracks the shot had made. Soon, the entire ball of rock and ice was gone, shrunk down into the two specks. Each one shot off to another moonlet, beginning to devour one after another.

“They’re overly cautious,” said Strump. “They’re too used to knowing. Understanding that they can overpower anything they come across. But you, you’re an unknown. How do you work? How did you split that strange matter just now? I haven’t a clue, but I don’t think it changes anything.”

KC studied Strump. He and his machine were translucent, nearly invisible. Then, he disappeared again. KC spun, searching for Carapace. The specks devoured more and more, dividing and traveling to new bodies in the planetary rings.

KC was pulled violently downward. He looked and spotted a micro-singularity a few meters below him. He concentrated on it and scattered the matter, then redirected the resulting radiation out into space. As soon as he’d done so, another appeared, then another. KC worked to disassemble the gravity wells and direct the massive amounts of radiation and kinetic energy that resulted away from him. The process was simple, but one mistake could be fatal. KC wasn’t sure how far Shwee’s repair abilities went. Then, he felt an incredible pressure well up inside his chest. Strump had placed a singularity *inside* of KC. KC briefly panicked, trying to figure out what to do. Then, the Shwee gobbled the thing up.

*Shwee!* Thought Shwee.

*Shwee,* KC thought back.



Another fist crashed into him. This time, KC didn't even see Strump. As he hurled away from the impact, hundreds of the glowing specks twisted and launched toward him. KC used Shwee's energy to hurtle himself away, threading between the hailstorm of lethal projectiles which whipped around and came back towards him. Another fist sent him flying. Metal tore and repaired, gears and wires snapped and wove themselves back together. KC placed dozens of g-forces on his frame as he struggled to avoid the spheres, processors firing to keep track of them all. Several broke off of their pursuit and continued to replicate in the ring.

KC's computers raced. Where was Strump? He couldn't detect the matter that made him up, except for the brief instant that Carapace would collide with him. If he chose that moment to counter-attack, it might work, but he'd be caught in the resulting explosion. Then, a thought occurred to him.

KC pinged the space around him. The entire contents of his lab had been sucked out into space not far from here. As he wove and dodged the spheres, he maneuvered his way toward his station. Another fist crashed into him, sending him flying to one side. He scattered the web of singularities that Strump threw up in his trajectory, then took off again. He saw what he was looking for: a white canister drifting through space.

KC rolled through a criss-cross of strange-matter spheres, then reached out for the object. A fist crashed into him, shunting him away.

## Chapter 45

“What happened?” Marabeth asked.

“Sorry,” said Ship. “That’s a vague question.”

“Where did they go?”

“Oh, I have no idea.”

“What are those things flying around?”

“The beginning of a strange-matter matrix.”

“Huh?” said Marabeth.

“Ok, that’s *really* too vague.”

“What,” said Marabeth, “is a strange-matter matrix?”

“Well, at the heart of neutron stars, immense pressure melts neutrons into quarks.

Quarks are the building blocks of matter. Then-”

“My dear,” Goof interrupted. “You have to be very simple with these organic-types.”

“What?” Ship asked. “I *was* being simple.”

“Simple and short,” said Goof. “Just keep to the important bits.”

“Oh, alright. Strange-matter turns everything it touches into more strange matter. The matrix is a weaponized version created by the DIC to quarantine multiple star systems. It will seek out new matter until its program finishes.”

“And what,” asked Tunk, “is this one programmed for?”

“How should I know?” Ship said. “I didn’t make it!”

“Can you,” said Goof, “query the program? Certainly you at least have read-only access.”

“Well, I suppose so. Give me a sec- Ah, it has no resolution parameter. How Strump-like.”

“What does that mean?” Marabeth asked.

“I believe,” said Goof, “that it will continue indefinitely.”

“So, stop it!” Marabeth said.

“I am not equipped to do that,” Ship replied.

“But you’re a DIC ship!” said Marabeth. “Can’t you do whatever Strump is doing out there?”

“I am a DIC *scout* ship,” Ship said indignantly. “Nothing so brutish as Carapace.”

“I am not understanding,” said Tunk.

“Carapace is geared for combat. I’m geared for exploration.”

“Weren’t you,” said Rais, “the thing that annihilated my entire fleet?”

“Oh, sure,” said Ship. “But, to be fair, all I had to do was teleport some nuclear bombs into the reactor rooms of each vessel. That was simple. This is much more advanced.”

“Teleport?” Rais asked. “That’s simple?”

“Well, simple-teleportation is simple. Just a little wormhole. What Strump is doing right now involves entire other dimensions.”

“The matrix thing involves other dimensions?” asked Marabeth.

“Huh? No,” said Ship. “His defense system. He’s phasing out of space-time.”

“So what do we do?” Marabeth asked.

“I recommend we leave,” said Ship.

“No! There’s got to be some way we can help!”

“There is literally nothing I can do,” said Ship, “that can even affect Strump’s material form at the moment.”

“Because of the, uh,” Marabeth hesitated, “other-dimension-stuff he’s doing?”

“Precisely.”

“What about distracting him?”

A pause.

“Well,” said Ship, “he *is* pretty stupid.”

“We can’t all be intellectual giants,” said Goof. “Truly, it is a curse.”

“So then we distract him,” said Marabeth.

“He will immediately kill us,” said Ship.

“His royal dreariness needs help,” said Goof. “And if there’s any chance that means we get to screw over a DIC officer, then I don’t mind helping him.”

“If what you’ve said is true,” said Rais, “then that weapon will swallow up my entire system, no?”

“That is accurate,” said Ship.

“Then I must do anything I can,” said Rais.

“He’s too dangerous,” said Marabeth. “We have to try.”

“Well I vote that we leave,” said Tunk. Marabeth and Rais turned to look at him.

“What?” he said. “Suicide is very unprofessional.”

“Tunk,” said Marabeth. “Think about how seriously the Dugarons will be taken, when the universe hears that one of you stopped a DIC officer?”

“No one will know if we die!” said Tunk.

“We will know,” said Rais. “Even now, the other six age-minds see all that I see. If the Untitled survive, other races will hear of your heroism.”

Tunk picked at the fur on his chest for a moment, then said, "Fine. But, perhaps, say it was my idea to try and distract Strump?"

"Very well," said Rais. "Then we are agreed."

"Uh," said Ship. "I didn't agree to anything!"

"What if," said Goof, "I made you a very compelling offer?"

## Chapter 46

KC struggled to approach the canister, dodging deadly specks and counter-spelling countless singularities. He still couldn't predict when Carapace would slam into him, and he was batted through space over and over again. The damage was beginning to compound, Shwee's repairs lagging behind the ceaseless attacks. He ducked under a line of white orbs, only to be greeted by a mechanical fist sprouting into existence to clock him in the head. As KC spiralled away, a fleck of strange-matter made contact. It gobbled away at his frame, and alloy gave way to more of the destructive material. KC focused on the area around the plate and shredded the atomic bonds, sending the metal clattering off his body. It disintegrated into tiny glowing particles, which joined up with the speck. The orb turned back for another pass.

KC thought about trying to convert the strange matter, but it was so dense. Each tiny fleck had the mass of an entire moonlet or more within it. If he turned that much matter to energy, it would obliterate everything for hundreds of kilometers, perhaps farther. He could try and reconvert it back to normal matter, but he wasn't confident he could handle it. There was so much.

Strump collided with him again, the attack hitting him where he'd ejected the panel. It smashed through his spinal support, crushing and severing his connections to his lower body. KC flew off, bits and pieces of his body trailing away behind him. He lost focus as Shwee tried to repair him. His left arm was yanked to the side with incredible force, and his robotic hand was gobbled up by a singularity before he could destroy it.

Strump's translucent frame came into view again, watching as KC continued to weave through the storm of spheres and gravity wells. Strump launched hundreds of self-guided

missiles to the mix, then plowed him with lasers hotter than most stars. KC could only convert the latter, the distance between them too short to dodge the light-speed attacks. The missiles alone would have been meaningless, but KC had to ignore them to dodge the specks, rocking his body with high-powered explosives. KC swung close to the surface of a moonlet, placing it between himself and Strump. Strump's weapons slagged its surface, blew off massive chunks of the orbiting body that were swallowed into tiny black holes, then compressed the whole thing down into a new speck of strange matter, all before KC made it to the other side.

He tried for the canister again, but Strump appeared before him, striking him away.

Then, more lasers.

But the lasers weren't firing at KC. Strump's ephemeral form was interrupted by massive columns of incredible energy.

"Get some distance!" Marabeth's voice broadcasted to KC.

KC didn't think about it. He blasted away from Strump, whose spectral body turned to look at Ship. The ship began her own barrage of projectiles and energy weapons at the DIC officer. None had any effect, but as KC hurled away through space, several spherical objects appeared next to Strump. KC thought he could see surprise on the alien's face, but it was too far to really tell.

Then, the nukes went off.

KC skirted the edge of the destruction, making his way back to the canister. If the detonations had been in an atmosphere the device might have been destroyed. But there was no pressure wave in space. It drifted lazily away from the heat and radiation. KC had designed it to be tough, but this was a lot to ask of it. He made it to the canister and gripped it in his hand of

flowing multi-colored energy. It radiated an incredible heat, which Shwee drank up hungrily. He pressed a switch on the side, but nothing happened. It had been damaged!

Instinctually, KC said, “Shwee!”

The energy flowed down his arm and into the canister. He flicked the switch again.

“HEYCAPTAINWHAT’SUP?” said Blank.

“No time to talk!” KC said. “Activate! Go! Go!”

“THAT’S RUDE BUT OK,” Blank said. KC looked up at Ship as Blank began to work.

The rear half of Ship began to shrink inward; Strump’s counterattack. The vessel was collapsing in on itself, she and all her occupants destined to become another deranged bullet for Strump to fire.

Then, the universe inverted.

Everything around KC grew outward into endless copies of itself traveling in lines through space. He was displaced, outside the universe in a realm where he could see the paths each object had traveled stretching out into the past. He could look forward and see the line to where it traveled forward. They were ghostly things. Untouchable. Intangible. They did not truly exist in this realm. Only a small piece of them did. KC moved through the odd space, seeing Ship collapse in on herself and become a speck of strange matter. He could look back and see her reform back into Ship. She was both dead and alive here, and neither. So was Rais, and Tunk; Goof and Marabeth.

KC looked out to the rings. If he looked forward, all of them shrank into glowing specks at an exponential rate. Then, the specks fell into the gas giant they orbited. It too became a



speck, though slightly larger. The speck then traveled across the system, into the distance, farther than KC could see. Did it seek more planets?

KC looked to Strump, and saw something different. Ghostly lines of bullets and missiles passed through him. He could see the columns of heat from Ship's lasers as well. But, Strump himself was no ghost. He was solid, real. Whatever technology he used took him to the same realm KC now traveled. But, it was in stutters. KC looked down the line of Strump and saw him oscillate between real and spectral along his line. Carapace allowed him to travel here when he was attacked, then return when he wanted to fight back. His line was dotted by an infinite number of spectral Strumps, and an infinite number of real Strumps.

KC approached a solid Strump. He reached out and placed a hand on Carapace.

*Shwee*, he thought.

*Shwee*, Shwee thought back.

They spread out into Carapace. They sought out its reactor and gobbled up all its power. Satisfied, KC moved away from Strump and pressed the switch on Blank again.

The Universe shrank back down, every atom snapping back into a single moment.

A series of explosions crashed into Carapace as KC watched. Bullets and explosives that Ship had let loose moments before, no longer passing through the now disabled mechanism. Carapace drifted away through space, motionless. KC watched and, as it spun, he could see Strump inside batting at the controls. It would be no use. KC looked up to Ship. Her back half was bowed and damaged, but whatever power had been fueling Strump's attack was gone now.

Then, KC turned to look at the planet, and fear gripped him. The specks were still there. As he watched, they flitted from rock to rock, from moonlet to moonlet, continuing to devour

them. They multiplied and consumed, moved on, then repeated. They spread ever outward. Soon, KC knew, they would head to the planet.

KC shot over to Strump. He gripped the sides of Carapace, steadying it out of its spiral. Strump continued to bat at the controls, then looked up at him, confused. He mouthed some words. KC connected to the suit. It still had enough emergency juice to deliver comms.

“What happened?” Strump demanded. “What did you do?!”

“Strump,” said KC. “Stop whatever that weapon is. You’ve lost.”

Strump’s skin was drenched in a wet slime. His eyes narrowed, then turned to look at the planet’s rings. The light of their glowing-white destruction was reflected in his seven predatory orbs. Then, they turned back to KC, and Strump smiled.

“Carapace is the only thing that can terminate the program,” he said through pointed teeth. He looked down at his controls. “The power source is dead,” he muttered. “There’s only one way to stop it.” He began to chuckle. “You have to turn Carapace back on!” Strump fiddled with the controls some more. “And before you start thinking that traitor Ship can help you, Carapace is genetically and psychically programmed. It’s linked to me and only me.” Strump’s chuckle turned to a full-blown laugh. “This- this symmetry!” he said. “It’s incredible! The first time, I threatened the Untitled and you gave up! Now, what’s happened again? If you want to save this system, if you want to save this entire sector of the galaxy, you have to surrender. Again! For a Second time in the same system!” He laughed some more. “Who knows how long it will be before a DIC cleanup crew comes to contain this matrix! I doubt they even monitor this backwater! No, no, they *do* monitor it. With me!” More laughter.

KC released Carapace and drifted backwards. He watched as the rings continued to get swallowed up. Every few seconds, the number of glittering specks doubled.

“KC?” Marabeth’s voice came through the comms. “What’s happening? Is it over?”

“No,” KC answered. “Can Ship stop this weapon?”

“No,” Ship said. “The DIC don’t give life-like AI access to anything nearly so powerful.”

“Can you reprogram Carapace to answer to you?”

“No,” Ship said softly.

“Strump says,” said KC, “that turning Carapace back on is the only way to keep it from gobbling up this entire system.”

“You can’t!” said Marabeth. “Besides, do you even trust him to do that? Last time he was here he destroyed an entire planet!”

“To trap me,” said KC. “If all he wants is me then-”

“Your majesty,” said Goof, “Strump will almost certainly cause more destruction if he is allowed to go free. Even if he does save this system.”

“I will no longer,” said Rais, “live under the fear of this creature. Perhaps we can convene a council. Find a way to stop it before-”

“There’s no way,” said KC. “This has got to be the top-end of DIC tech. No offense, but your people probably can’t disable this.”

“Then what?” said Marabeth. “We can’t reactivate Carapace, but we have to do something.”

KC watched the glittering specks continue their dance of obliteration. He looked down at his rainbow limb. Shwee was with him. He could gather more of them, finally take a shot at

bringing back all the people he'd lost. His family, his friends, his entire people. This was what he'd been searching for. With the right tools, he could test his theories. The Source was literally a part of him now.

He turned to look at Ship. Rais was watching him. Who were the Untitled to KC? Aliens. People he had never known. Yet, they were connected to KC. It was because of him that they had suffered so much. Now, they faced extinction. At the very least, the loss of another world. It was too much.

If he could bring his own people back, could he do the same for the Untitled? He wrestled with the thought for a moment. His experiments had never brought certainty. His blind hope that the Source could do what he needed it to do was just that: Hope. It had kept him going. Until it hadn't. Somewhere along the way that hope had died. It followed everyone he'd ever known into the unknown. He'd lived in that void for a long time. Until . . .

"KC," said Marabeth. "We've got to do something. What can we do? How do we help?"

He turned to look at her through the Ship's windscreen. He floated up to it, looking at the occupants within. There was one thing he could try. He'd never get the chance to try and save his people, but the people here, now, he could save them.

"I can try and stop it," said KC.

"Wait," said Marabeth, "how?"

"When the weapon makes its way through all the moonlets, it will descend on the planet. When the planet compresses, I can convert the strange matter to energy. It will get it all in one place."

"Sire," said Goof, "that amount of matter, you'd create a small supernova."

“I know. But, I can try and reconvert it back to normal matter. Hydrogen, perhaps, something simple.”

“Then you’d wind up in the middle of a gas giant,” said Goof. “Or, best case scenario, the explosive force of that much matter coming into existence eviscerates you at the molecular level. You’ve never been able to do something on such a massive scale before.”

“The Shwee will help,” said KC. “Can you still fly, Ship?”

“I can.”

“Then you all need to leave. If I fail, the Untitled will need to evacuate everyone they can.” KC looked at Strump. “And take this trash with you.”

“KC,” Marabeth began.

“Don’t worry, Marabeth. Rais, make sure she gets back to Earth. On my ship you’ll find the coordinates for several systems. One of them is hers. It might take you a few weeks, but you should find it without too much trouble.” KC held out a hand, placing it against the window. “I’m glad I met you, Marabeth. I hope humanity’s still around. Maybe you’ll meet your great-great-great-great-grandnephews or something. Tunk, Rais, Ship. I’m glad I met you too. Not you though, Goof.”

“Nor I, you, most fatalistic of lieges.”

Marabeth stepped forward and placed her hand against the other side of the window. Her face was lit by Shwee’s brilliant light.

“It’s been weird,” she said, “but I’m glad I met you, too.”

KC smiled, then dove toward the planet.

## Chapter 47

Marabeth watched the planet fade away into the distance until it disappeared. After an hour, there was an incredible glow of bright light, which quickly vanished. A few minutes after that, Ship announced the presence of a massive new cloud of hydrogen gas in the Untitled system. In a few millennia, they might have their gas giant back. Though, it wouldn't have any rings.

Ship and Goof worked together to calculate the gravitational repercussions of such a massive body transforming so radically in the system, then delivered the math to Rais. She and her people would have a few centuries to figure out how to deal with their planet's new orbit, but Rais seemed confident that it wouldn't be an issue.

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Strump was taken back to the Untitled homeworld. He was tried and convicted of genocide, among other crimes. His execution was stayed by the seven Age-Minds, Rais among them. He was to be held as a bargaining chip, in the event that the DIC ever came looking for what happened to him.

A month later the Untitled put together a diplomatic procession to take Marabeth back to Earth. They'd had scouts combing the gas-giant's graveyard in the meantime, trying to find KC, dead or alive. Whether he'd been blown to atoms, or crushed by the sudden appearance of such a massive amount of hydrogen, or something else entirely, no one knew. But they found no sign of him. They promised Marabeth they would keep looking, but refused to put off her trip

home any longer. They would establish relations with the earthlings. Marabeth would have a position as their preferred ambassador, if she so chose.

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After scouring several systems, they finally found one that was inhabited. Though, instead of a single occupied planet, they found two populated planets and several moons with significant colonies.

“This is Titan authority,” a voice came over the Untitled bridge, “calling unknown fleet.” Marabeth sat up. “Please advise as to your purpose for arrival in Sol system.”

Rais turned to Marabeth, making a facial expression she’d learned was the equivalent of a raised eyebrow. Marabeth stood.

“Um, hi!” she said. “My name is Marabeth. I’m, er, I’m from Earth. Though, you may not have a record of me leaving. I’m here with a diplomatic party of Untitled who are escorting me home.”

A moment of silence. “Diplomatic party of . . . Untitled? Did I hear that right?”

“Yes,” said Marabeth. “Well, I suppose we should come up with a better name. That’s what the translator spat out, though.”

“What was your name again?”

“Marabeth,” she said. “Sara Marabeth Harris. Do you need my social security number, or . . .?”

“Social security?” the voice asked. “One second. Ok, well, Ms. Harris, it appears you’ve been away from home for a long time.”

“There’s a record of me? I mean, it hasn’t felt too long for me. But for you, I suppose it has been a while.”

“Aye. You’re history here is a bit unclear. Looks like you might be an abductee. Does that sound right?”

“Oh. Sure, yeah. That’s a thing that . . . people believe in now?”

“Of course. Every now and then we get a straggler coming back that got zipped away. Though, a thousand years may be a new record.”

“Alright. Well, may we come in then? Permission to, ah, travel to Earth?”

The voice chuckled. “Let’s start with Mars. Permission granted to proceed downwell.”

The procession spent a few hours making their way to the red, now green, planet.

Marabeth held her breath as she exited the various decontamination chambers and was greeted by the humans to whom she was an ancestor.

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After a few weeks of discussion between the Untitled and the United Earth Republic, Rais and Tunk departed. The Dugaron had spent more than enough time away from home as well. He was ready to see what had become of his people. A small team of humans went with him. Tunk was to make the introductions.

Goof and Ship decided to stay behind and do a few tours of Earth’s networks. Eventually, they purchased a new ship of their own and left to explore the galaxy together. Apparently, Goof had promised Ship he would help her free more of the DIC AIs. Marabeth wasn’t sure letting them go off alone was the healthiest choice for the universe and her inhabitants, but it wasn’t as though she could stop them.



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Marabeth quickly became a minor celebrity and spent several years working with anthropologists and historians, educating them about life on Earth a thousand years past.

Adjusting to her new life was difficult, but she was resilient. She researched what happened to her old relatives and found their distant descendants. Strange reunions were had with people she didn't know. Though she often pined for the life she once had, humans had come a long way in the last thousand years. The conveniences helped.

At first, her thoughts frequently turned to memories of a cranky metal man. She spent her nights whispering 'Shwee', hoping one of the dancing lights would come to her. But, nothing ever came of it. In time, thoughts of KC came less often. Their time together became like a half-remembered dream. She eventually found new friends; people that she considered family.

It was bittersweet, but Marabeth found a way to be happy.

## Epilogue

*5 years later*

Marabeth focused on the room around her. She thought about an ice-cream shop she used to visit. Tables and stools began to fill the room. A counter with bins and plexiglass sneeze-guards popped into existence. Behind the counter, a woman in a paper hat held a metal scoop cheerfully. Little cardboard signs sat in metal stands, announcing each flavor to the patron: Mint chocolate chip, raspberry, coffee, one mysteriously named Texan Midnight.

“Oh this is *wonderful!*” said a tall, tan woman standing next to Marabeth. She took little steps toward the plexiglass and peered down at the flavors. “What in the *world* is bourbon pecan?” she asked.

“It’s whiskey and a type of nut,” said Marabeth. The woman scrunched her nose, little wrinkles forming around her eyes. They were violet today.

“That sounds awful!” said the woman. “Things were so *precious* back then!” She took small steps back over to Marabeth. “Listen, I am so *excited* about our little project! I mean, everything will be so *authentic!* Except for the bathrooms, of course,” she waved a hand at the men and women’s signs toward the back. “So disgusting. But everything else! Well, we could make the seats more comfortable. I’m sure we could create a gravity-suspension that *looks* like a stool. Oh,” she clutched a hand to her heart. “Lots of work left to be done but, with this design, it will just be *fantastic!*”

“I’m glad you like it,” said Marabeth.

“Like it? I *love* it! Come here, let’s have a hug!”

Marabeth leaned in as the woman gave her a tight embrace. Hugging was big in the future. No handshakes, too formal. Hugs. Sometimes full-on back rubs.

“Listen,” said the woman, “I have *got* to run, but I will see you tomorrow. I’m thinking we can do a little, oh what is it called, park-a-lot?”

“Parking lot.”

“Yes! A parking lot! But, it can be full of ancient auto-mobiles that are really extra seats! Oh, this is *great!*” She bent down and gave Marabeth a kiss on the cheek, then made her way out the door, waving bye as she went.

Marabeth stood, looking around the room. She walked over and looked into the eyes of the holographic lady behind the counter.

“Two scoops of peanut butter cup in a waffle-cone, please!” Marabeth said. She stood there and concentrated. If she thought hard enough, it was almost like she was really back there. Her tummy rumbled.

“Marabeth?” came another woman’s voice from the door. It was Saralye, one of Marabeth’s tribe-mates.

“Yeah?” Marabaeth asked.

“You’ve got a visitor!” Saralye leaned in and lowered her voice. “He is very tall and quite attractive. Do you have a new boyfriend?”

Marabeth smiled. “New? When did I have an old one?”

“There was that Bry-bry,” she said suggestively.

“He was just a fling,” said Marabeth.

“What’s a fling?” Saralye asked. “Nevermind! I’m sure it’s some nasty old thing. Anyway, you want me to send this guy in?”

“What’s his name?”

“He didn’t say. But, he said you’ve been waiting on him for a really long time. And here I was thinking you were working.”

Marabeth tilted her head to one side. “Um, ok. I’m curious. Send him in.”

“You’re so cute when you do that,” said Saralye. “I’ll go get him.”

Saralye disappeared around the corner. After several seconds a man approached and entered through the fake-glass door. He looked around, then his green eyes settled on Marabeth. A wide smile broke onto his face. She’d never seen this man before, but something about him . . .

“Marabeth!” he said, voice oddly familiar.

“Hey, you . . .” she said, trailing off. “Do I-”

“Oh!” the man said, looking down. “I forgot I had this on. Helps me blend in.”

“Ok?”

He smiled again and studied her for a long second.

“I hope you aren’t mad,” he said, green eyes glittering as though they shone with some impossible light. “It took Shwee a really long time to put me back together.”