



# The Next **MUTATION**

A Space Quest Novelization  
by Troels Pleimert  
Edited by Daniel Stacey



Published by



## The unspeakable fate of the Star Confederation awaits...

One word sprang to mind as Roger looked at the colony of Klorox II: *desolate*. The whole place looked empty. Unpopulated. In fact, the entire colony had an air of abandonment about it. Blast marks adorned the colony structures, the greenhouse was in shambles, and the shuttle (which was supposed to be on the shuttlepad) was missing, having been replaced by a large scorch mark.

Some meters away from Roger, an array of mining tools had been carelessly discarded, as if... *as if their owners left in a hurry*.

Something about this place made a chill run down Roger's spine, despite the heat.

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Written by Troels Pleimert.

Edited by Daniel Stacey.

Cover-art and layout by Troels Pleimert.

Published by Pestulon Publishing.

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This is a novelization of the interactive adventure game, *Space Quest V - The Next Mutation*, designed by Mark Crowe and David Selle. © 1993 Sierra On-Line.

Dedicated to  
**Mark Crowe, Dave Selle,**  
**Shawn Sharp, Rhonda Conley,**  
**Sean Murphy, Chris Stevens, Tim Clarke,**  
**and the rest of the SQ5 team**  
*for creating one of the coolest adventure  
games in human/andromedan history*

Thanks to:

**Daniel Stacey** for once again doing a stellar job at reading through my novel and cleansing out all the way-too-naughty bits, **Leslie Balfour** for supporting us Space Quest novel writers, and being generally a great person in every aspect. **Jess Morrissette** for getting me started on this Space Quest writing business in the first place. Still waiting for that best-selling SQ novel to come around, Jess... **Sean Murphy** at Origin for cool answers to some technical background questions. (Sean was art boy at Dynamix around the time SQ5 came out in 1993, and was even the video-captured actor playing Roger), and to **all Space Quest fans around the globe** for supporting and enjoying this fine game series!

You're great, guys!

A very special thanks to **Mark Crowe** at Dynamix for helping me with questions and plot difficulties that my simple, under-developed Earthling mind just couldn't comprehend.

With undying appreciation and admiration to Chris McLeod of CUC Software. Congratulations, Chris, on destroying everybody's dream.

**THE**  
**NEXT**  
**MUTA-**  
**TION**

A **Space Quest**<sup>®</sup> Novelization  
*by Troels Pleimert*

Based on characters created by **Mark Crowe, Scott Murphy & David Selle**

# 1

Captains Log, SCS Excalibur, Stardate 2709.69. Fleet Admiral Roger Wilco commanding.

The Excalibur is on course to investigate the disappearance of several ships in the region of space known as the Menudo Triangle. I no doubt have been selected for this mission due to my great achievements as a military leader and matchless diplomatic skills.

I go forward with total confidence in my ship and my crew, and yet I am vaguely uneasy. I cannot put memories of traveling to the future and meeting my son out of my mind. Each night my dreams are haunted by the image of the woman he said would one day be my wife. I know she's out there...somewhere.

But that's not important right now. The fate of trillions rides on the decisions I may have to make in the next several hours. As commander of the Star Confederation's proudest flagship, I must follow the Su-

preme Guideline:

To Boldly Go Where No One Has—no, no, no...

To Bravely Traverse Where No Creature Has Traversed—uhh, that's not it...

Aw, skip it.

\* \* \*

Roger Wilco leaned back in his command chair and stared at the viewscreen in front of him. White sparkly dots flew past him on an inky panorama of blackness as the starship Excalibur made its way across the Menudo Triangle sector. This was largely uncharted territory—most ships that had dared enter this sector never returned.

Even though the mission was intriguing, and the prospect of commanding the greatest starship known to beingkind was exhilarating, Roger still had a gut feeling. A gut feeling that he was doing something wrong. A gut feeling that he was embarking on something he wasn't capable of handling. Maybe he should just back out...

No! This was not the thinking fit for what had become the greatest diplomatic and strategic mind in the Star Confederacy. He would not give up. Those ships out there had to be found; their fate had to be learned. *It had* to be done!

But would it get himself killed? What if he *did* get killed? He would not only condemn the present, but also the future. Should he die here, he would not be able to become the father of his future son, who would in turn save *his* life in the past. So if he died in the present he'd die in the past, condemning Xenon to eternal dictatorship at the hands of the Super Bio-mech Computer.

It all sounded too weird to be true. But it was. He knew.



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He'd seen the destruction first hand. The time rippers, as they called themselves, had fetched him from the time period of Space Quest IV and brought him to Space Quest XII. His actions were the direct cause of the disintegration of the Super Computer and the insane Vohaul-personification it had adopted. In other words, he'd saved the future. And should he die today—or anytime before he would father his son—the future would lay in ruins...forever.

He gave up this train of thought, not only because it was depressing him, but also because he felt a serious headache coming on.

He found difficulty in doing so, however. The holographic image of the woman his future son had shown him...the woman who was to become his wife. He could not force that image out of his mind. He didn't want to. For the first time since he could remember, he was in love. And he didn't even think of asking for her damn phone number.

Abruptly, his daydreaming was interrupted by one of the console officers, who swiveled around on his chair and reported: “Admiral, strike ships are coming in at point three-five!”

*This is it. This is where it all comes down.*

Roger leaned forward. “Raise shields. Arm photonic dischargers and proton torpedoes.”

“Shields up,” acknowledged the console officers.

“Dischargers and torpedoes armed and locked, sir,” his tactical officer reported.

A photonic discharge-blast hammered into the side of the Excalibur, causing it to shake violently for a few seconds. The red lights around the bridge went off, accompanied by the loud wail of the red-alert klaxon.

“Shields are holding, Admiral,” his tactical officer yelled over the noise.

Roger screamed, “Fire torpedoes and dischargers! Helm,

hard to port!”

Another blast punched into the shields of the ship, causing it to take another tumble in space.

Suddenly, every light clicked off and all the bridge crewmembers vanished instantly. The viewscreen, which up until now had displayed a moving starfield occupied by several evil-minded warships, was replaced by the angry-looking face of Captain Raemes T. Quirk.

“Cadet Wilco, what in the name of the seventh star cluster are you doing in the bridge simulator?!” he yelled angrily. Roger didn’t have time to reply. “Get out of there and back to class where you belong, space cadet! And if I catch you in here again without permission I’ll have you tossed out of the academy so fast you’ll get warp disorientation!”

With that, the image flashed off and was replaced by the words SIMULATION TERMINATED in large, red letters.

The simulator, which had been suspended approximately five meters above ground during the simulation, lowered itself smoothly on the hydraulic pistons until it reached floor level. The darkened chamber in which it was located was lit up rhythmically by a rotating light on top of the ship-shaped simulator, indicating a simulation in progress. As soon as the simulator reached floor level and the doors opened, the light shut off.

Roger turned around on his fake command chair and stood up. Head bowed, he proceeded down the narrow walkway to the door which led into the academy hallways.

# 2

The door opened with a faint hiss into the classroom. Roger walked cautiously through the doorway, located an empty table, and sat down at it.

“Sorry I’m late, professor,” he apologized.

The professor explained to him, without any introduction, any *brace-yourself*, any form of merciful wrap-in, that the class was doing the final StarCon aptitude test today.

Roger nearly had a nervous breakdown. “You mean...today? As in, *right now?*” he managed to stammer between hyperventilation breaths.

The professor nodded. Roger thought he noticed a disguised hint of sadistic pleasure in the eyes of the professor, but it could just have been his imagination.

“By the way,” the professor inserted, “please come and see me after class, cadet Wilco.”

Roger nodded, unintentionally hyperactively. “Yes, sir,” he whispered.

The professor gave the signal to commence the test, and the entire classroom plunged into a disturbingly uncomfortable silence.

\* \* \*

1. GRONKO IS COMMANDING A NOVA-CLASS SCOUTSHIP WHEN HE COMES FACE TO FACE WITH THREE HORAK BATTLE CRUISERS. HE SHOULD:
  1. IMMEDIATELY OPEN FIRE WITH EVERY WEAPON AT HIS DISPOSAL.
  2. PRETEND THEY AREN'T THERE.
  3. BROADCAST WAGNER'S "RIDE OF THE VALKYRIES" OVER THE COM-LINK.
  4. 3, THEN 1.
  5. REBOOT.

The pixelized text on the StudentPad, imbedded into Roger's pupil desk, was staring back at him unceremoniously. It was still the first question, and the test had now been in progress for more than thirty minutes.

Roger had finally come to the ultimate conclusion that he had no clue whatsoever. When looking back at the past several months, he reluctantly realized his mistake. It had been some pretty rough months, what with having to deal with skipping classes, snoozing through lectures, and spending long moments considering the implications of actually opening a textbook. And when it finally got down to it, Roger was, essentially, screwed.

There was only one option left.  
Cheat.

\* \* \*

A proctordroid hummed diligently over the classroom, keeping an electronic eye on the students. Anyone caught peeking so much as *near* another person's test would immediately be spotted and would automatically fail the course.

Fortunately, the scanning range of the droid was limited,

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and it was constantly necessary to swivel 90 degrees in order to keep an eye on the entire class. So what the proctordroid did was to spend three seconds looking at one part of the room, then turn and spend three more seconds looking at the other part of the room, then turn again and look at the first part for three seconds.

Roger made good use of these three seconds to stretch up from his chair and peek at the StudentPad on his left side. This particular StudentPad was currently being used by a cadet whose name was unknown to Roger, but one look at him and you'd instantly come to one indisputable conclusion: The guy was undoubtedly smarter than Roger's whole family. It was probably the cranial configuration that gave it away—the forehead portion of his skull was large enough to contain two full-sized humanoid brains—and the overall intellectual look on him indicated that he probably made full use of *both* of them.

Thankfully, his reflexes weren't all that quick, as Roger managed to dive back down to a normal sitting position a couple of nanoseconds before the nerd-chieftain would swivel his head and gaze bewildered in Roger's general direction. To Roger's great relief, he didn't voice any objections throughout the whole 10 questions of the test.

A loud chime indicated the end of the period, and students rose from their seats and made their way to the door.

“The test's over already?” Roger asked, smirking slightly. He'd spent the past one and a half hour pretending to be hard at work on the last question of the test, when in reality he'd already solved it, with uncredited thanks to his new best friend.

The professor proceeded to inform him that, as punishment for his tardiness, Roger was to clean the academy crest in the main rotunda area. Realizing that refusing would result in immediate failure, Roger acknowledged briefly with a

clumsy salute and an almost incoherent “Yes, sir.” He then stood up and made for the doorway.

\* \* \*

After having procured a Scrub-o-Matic portable floor scrubber and a set of what he initially had labeled as orange party hats, Roger set out to perform his punishment. It seemed almost ironic to him that the professor would choose *that* particular form of punishment—janitorial job—seeing as Roger had been a janitor all his life, before joining the academy. Or maybe it was intentional. Maybe the sadistic grin *hadn't* been his imagination after all.

The rotunda was a massive, circular room, in which a lot of drive components and critical machinery was housed, but it was mostly made out to be a huge recreation area. You entered onto a circular, suspended walkway, which towered fifteen meters above the ground floor, and which encircled the whole room. Adorned on the walls were monumental view-screens looking out into space. The academy was an orbiting space station, so the view outside was, in all honesty, breathtaking. The floor far below was the main floor, and adorning it was the gold-colored crest emblem of the Star Confederacy.

And boy, did it look dingy.

Immediately, several fibers in Roger's body sprung to life and lit up like a storefront in Christmas season and screamed out for him to clean up that mess down there. *Once a janitor, always a janitor?* No. He would become a starship captain, no matter what it took. Once a janitor, soon-to-be commanding officer of his own ship and crew. But first, he had a job to do.

He took a graviton-lift down to the main floor. Upon closer inspection, the crest did indeed look extremely grimy. The janitorial staff had, apparently, been slacking off on their

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duty, or... He didn't like what he was about to think, so he abandoned the thought and concentrated on the task at hand.

He placed the safety cones (which he now knew the party hats were) at the three corners of the triangular crest image. He placed the Scrub-o-Matic on the floor, unfolded it, sat on it, and wondered to himself how the hell to get this thing started.

One button marked “START” seemed like the most obvious solution. Once Roger pressed the button, he was startled to hear the floor scrubber come alive and zoom off madly at an unprecedented velocity.

Soon, however, Roger got the controls somewhat under control, and within a remarkable short time, the crest looked sparkly clean. Roger moved the floor scrubber off to a corner to admire his handiwork. He might be on the high road up to fame and herodom, but he still had the golden touch.

At that point, he saw a familiar figure move towards him in the corner of his eye, accompanied by another figure, totally unfamiliar to him. The familiar figure, dressed in the all-too familiar purple uniform, was none other than his superior, Captain Quirk. His companion, who turned out to be female, was dressed in a gray uniform, and was not bearing the usual StarCon emblem.

Captain Quirk stopped a short distance from Roger and proceeded to direct the woman's attention to her surroundings.

“As you can see, ambassador Wankmeister, we run a very tight ship here at the academy,” Quirk droned. “This station is one of the most well-equipped and prized installations in the Star Confederacy.”

“It's nice to see our tax buckazoids aren't going *completely* to waste, Captain Quirk,” the ambassador replied sarcastically.

“Here we are, ambassador Wankmeister,” Quirk continued unabated, “this is the main rotunda. It was dedicated on star-

date 09-2097.09...”

The ambassador wasn't paying attention, however. She was busy looking at the cadet sitting on a floor scrubber in the middle of everything, gazing idiotically at her.

Quirk finally noticed that his companion's attention was no longer with him. “Ambassador?”

The ambassador moved towards Roger and stopped directly in front of him. “Excuse me,” she said, “but aren't you Roger Wilco, the man who foiled the Sariens some years back?”

Roger gazed deep into her eyes. She was so beautiful, so pretty...and somehow, she seemed so familiar. Then, it dawned on him.

*It's her!*

It was. It was the woman from the holodisk, which his future son had shown him, in the future of Space Quest XII. The woman whom his son had said was destined to become his future wife. Beatrice... Beatrice Wankmeister.

*This is my big chance*, he thought to himself. *Say something clever and romantic.*

“Uh, um...yeah...er, uhh, I mean, umm—yes,” he stammered.

*Way to sweep her back on her feet there, buddy*, his inner voice was saying to him sarcastically. *Nice to see you haven't lost your golden touch with women.*

“Excuse me, ambassador,” Quirk interrupted, “but we really should be heading back to the conference now.”

Beatrice didn't take her eyes off Roger, but her look had changed somehow. “You're...not all what I expected,” she said. “See you around, Roger.”

“Hold on there, cadet,” Quirk growled. He looked sternly at Roger's clean-up work. “Looks like you missed a spot,” he said, fixing his eyes on an imaginary stain.

“Uh, sir,” Roger stammered, “you'd better watch your



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step. The floor is still really wet, and just a little bit—”

Before Roger could say any more, Quirk had already lost balance and performed a rather acrobatic airspin before falling flat on his back. He fought his way to a sitting position, replacing a hair piece which had been jarred loose.

Beatrice was standing behind him. “Nice rug, Quirk,” she laughed. “Is that a toupee or a roadkill?”

Quirk scowled at Roger like an angered schäfer hound, still fighting to keep the jumpy hair piece in place. “You did that on purpose, Wilco,” he sneered. “I’m placing you on double secret probation. One more screw-up around here, and you’re history...*space cadet!*”

With that, he got up violently and stomped off, the still-laughing ambassador in tow.

Roger looked after them until they disappeared up the gravitron-lift and through an exit.

*It was her*, he thought as he got up from the Scrub-o-Matic, folded it, and put it in his pocket.

\* \* \*

Little did he know, as he exited into the hallway, a small, quick space rodent made its way across the floor and squeezed through the impossibly small ventilation shaft opening.

When it reappeared into open space a few seconds later, it was inside a stunningly huge room, occupied by an equally stunningly huge computer. The dark, almost blood-colored red ceiling in the room was at least ten meters high, and the machine was perhaps four or five centimeters away from scratching the paint job off. It was red in color, and was being attended to by a dozen attendants, dressed in white overcoats. A large legend on the side of the machine read GRADEMASTER 3000.

This was where all tests were transferred after having been

answered by cadets, to be graded electronically. A small screen somewhere on the machine read:

SAT	SCORES	GRADING	CURRENTLY	IN
PROGRESS:				
	GORDON, F.		—	FAIL
	EINSTEIN, A.		—	FAIL
	WILCO, R.		—	PROCESSING...

It was undoubtedly due to Roger's unprecedented level of dumb luck that the space rodent chose that particular moment to climb through another ventilation shaft, this time leading into the interior of the GradeMaster.

After asserting the situation, the rodent came to the conclusion that the stringy, brightly colored things in front of it must be food. It jumped them and chomped down. Immediately, sparks flew everywhere and the rodent was zapped instantly as it sank its teeth into what in reality was the main CPU processor cable.

# 3

“Huh? What was that?” said Captain Quirk, in reaction to the sudden stutter from the fluorescent lights in the ceiling. After fighting for control for a few seconds, the lights regained power and remained on.

The conference room he was sitting in was occupied largely by a rectangular table, which had room for four occupants on each side. All eight seats were occupied by StarCon officials, mostly station administrators and other top brass representatives. The end of the table didn’t have a chair, but was nevertheless occupied by a standing ambassador Beatrice Wankmeister.

“Excuse me, Captain,” tweedled a nearby StarCon official, “but you didn’t raise your hand.” He directed his attention to the ambassador, whose facial expression didn’t exactly reek of bliss. “Now, as I was saying, ambassador, we are a fairly remote installation and I simply cannot spare the ships for the kind of operation you suggest.”

“Admiral, I’m afraid you don’t understand the potential ramifications of this problem,” Bea explained. “If the Sludge Bandits continue to illegally dump toxic waste wherever and whenever they choose, the environmental consequences could be staggering. Entire planets could be devastated!”

“Now, now, ambassador, there’s no need to get so agitated,” said the admiral calmly. “StarCon already has enough ships on patrol to put an end to these ‘Sludge Bandits,’ as you call them.”

“Look, ambassador,” Quirk cut in, “StarCon has some of our most top-notch ships, staffed with the finest crews in the galaxy, on the patrol...”

“No, *you* listen, rug head!” the ambassador yelled, her patience runneth over. “This illegal dumping in this sector is going right under your poly-weave! Our patrols have located four planets in the G6 quadrant alone.”

Quirk didn’t seem abated. “I would like to hear more about these alleged dumping sites. Perhaps over dinner this evening?”

Bea was unimpressed. “I’ve already transmitted the coordinates to StarCon Central Command, along with a list of suspected sites we haven’t been able to check out yet.”

The admiral cut in. “Well, then, that settles it! Captain Quirk, you are to go and investigate these sites. You’ll soon see, ambassador, that there is nothing to fear, and that we have the situation completely under control.”

“Admiral, I will be going along as an observer,” said Bea.

“I’m afraid that’s impossible,” said the admiral. “StarCon regulations strictly forbid civilian participation in military operations...”

“Actually,” Quirk cut in, “I think having the ambassador along would be a good idea. I think the two of us could develop a very productive working relationship.”

“Admiral, may I remind you,” Bea continued, “that I am the *official* administrator of the G6 quadrant with full ambassadorial status, and as such not subject to—”

“I’m sure that Captain Quirk will do everything in his power to perform the mission,” the admiral interrupted. “There’s no need for you to hinder him on this mission.”

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Bea practically exploded. “This is *my* system, and *my* people we’re talking about here! I’m *going* on that ship and that’s all there is to that! *Case closed! We’re adjourned! Good day, gentlemen!*”

With that, she spun on her heels and headed for the door behind her. As it opened, there was a loud “Doh!”, and the sound of someone collapsing onto the floor.

“Oh great,” the ambassador growled irritated, looking down on Roger with a look that almost made him jump up and run for cover, “the savior of the universe in all his glory. Isn’t there a mop somewhere with your name on it?!”

Roger looked on helplessly as Bea shrugged frustratedly, left the room, and disappeared down the hallway. The door closed behind him, and Roger suddenly found himself standing inside the conference room, with fourteen eyes staring at him in bewilderment, and the two remaining—namely Captain Quirk’s—glaring angrily in his direction.

\* \* \*

A large crowd of cadets was huddled around the bulletin board in the hallway, half of them reading their individual sheet of paper, and the other half fighting their way through the crowd.

Roger recognized one of the cadets in the crowd. His name was Schplock, and he was intensely studying his paper.

“This is awful!” he exclaimed suddenly.

“What?” Roger asked, walking over to him.

“My test results!” Schplock whined, pointing to his sheet of paper. “I totally biffed on my SAT test. I’ll never make Captain now!”

“That’s too bad,” Roger said sympathetically.

“How’d you make out, Rog?”

“I haven’t seen my score yet.”

“They’re posted on the bulletin board there,” said

Schplock, pointing at the board. “I sure hope you made out better than I did.”

“Thanks,” said Roger, “I guess.”

Roger fought his way through the crowd and stuck in his cadet identification card. The LCD screen on the board printed “PLEASE WAIT, PROCESSING” and whirred for a few seconds. Then, the small dot matrix printer in the board began doing its work, and ten seconds later, Roger was holding his test scores in his hand, along with an extra sheet: A letter from the current academy commander in charge. It read:

Cadet Wilco,

On behalf of the administration I would like to congratulate you on receiving a perfect score on your SAT. Never before in the history of the StarCon Academy has a cadet achieved such high marks. You should be proud.

Based on the recommendation of our test analysis computer system, you are to begin training for captaincy on one of our fine star cruisers. Captain Quirk will post your assignment.

You’ve done the academy proud.

Sincerely,  
[current academy  
commander-in-  
chief’s name here]

Roger re-read the letter four or five times, and still couldn’t believe it.

# 4

After spending a weekend of intensive captain’s training on the planet Oakhurst, Roger was shuttled to his new command: The SCS Eureka.

Judging by the name, Roger had assumed that the Eureka must be one of the large ships in StarCon; one of the proud possessions of the federation; one that would be not just a pleasure, but an honor to serve on.

The blissful expression he’d so far been carrying on his face gradually faded as the shuttle got closer and closer to the ship that was to become his future command. When they finally reached the hatch, Roger couldn’t help but exclaim loudly: “That’s not a starship...it’s a *garbage scow!*” He sighed. “Figures.”

SCS Eureka, in all its glory, was a ship whose main dedication was to pick up the trash of others.

*Once a janitor, always a janitor?*

*Bingo, pal.*

\* \* \*

The door opened with a hydraulic hiss and Roger stepped through the doorway for the first time into the bridge of the

SCS Eureka.

His two bridge officers were busy doing something that Roger was sure wasn't in their job description.

The right chair swiveled around and the person in it, who had previously been playing around with a small hand-held games console, proceeded to introduce himself. He was humanoid in bodyshape, but his head looked like a big, red hood that had been pulled over his head, with only two white, bulging eyes serving to inform where the front of his head was.

"Hello, sir," said the man, though not in what sounded like sheer excitement, "I am sub-corporal Droole, your weapons and navigations officer on this heap."

The other officer, who had been preoccupied with manicuring her fingernails, turned around. She was a female humanoid, with green skin and a skin texture that had more wrinkles than a washed, undried table cloth. "And I'm Flo, your communications officer, grade four."

"Greetings, crew," Roger said cheerfully, "I am your new Captain, Roger Wilco. I know some of you may not be as excited to serve aboard the Eureka as I am, but I promise you this: We are going to be the best gosh darn garbage scow in the entire Star Confederacy!"

The two bridge officers exchanged glances.

"We have nothing to fear but fear itself, so hold your heads high, men, we shall overcome!" Roger droned on. "All we are is dust in the wind, born free, with liberty and justice for all. So let's be all we can be. Remember, it's not just a job: It's an adventure!"

With that, Roger walked forward, tripped over something unseen, and toppled over the captain's chair in front of him, landing in a disoriented heap in front of the chair.

He stood up and straightened his jacket. Flo and Droole didn't take their eyes off him. He sat down, and the chair gave out a flatulent sound of relief as all the air was pushed out of a



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hole in the inflated cushion.

“It was the chair,” said Roger. “Really.”

“Looks like we got a live one here, Flo,” Droole said under his breath.

“You said it, Droole,” Flo agreed.

Roger spun around in his chair excitedly.

After enjoying the sensation of sitting in his own command chair for a few seconds, he stood up again and went through the bridge door into the Eureka’s engineering room.

The Eureka was a very small ship, only consisting of four rooms. The first room was the bridge area, which was in front. It connected to the engineering room, which was a long and narrow room. This room, apart from the propulsion and electricity systems, also housed the trash compartment in which the collected trash was stored in. This room connected into the Eureka’s science lab—which also doubled as the transporter room. An elevation device in the engineering room led down to the airlock room, which contained nothing more than a series of lockers and cabinets, and a single EVA pod.

In the engineering room, Roger’s chief engineer was standing by the trash compartment. He turned around and looked at Roger. “Well, well,” he said, “if it isn’t our brand-spanking sparkly-clean new Captain.”

Roger put on his most friendly smile, went over to his new chief engineer and extended his hand. “Hello there. My name is Wilco, Captain Roger Wilco. And you are...?”

“Please,” said the engineer and shook Roger’s hand. “My friends call me Cliffy, but you can call me Clifford. I am your chief engineer aboard the Eureka.”

Roger retracted his hand when he felt something cold and clammy on his hand. “What the hell?” he muttered.

“Oh, sorry about the muck, Captain. I dropped my wrench down the head.”

Roger eyed the engineer strangely.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me sir, I do have some work to get back to,” Cliffy concluded and left Roger to go and pound on some delicate systems.

Roger went back up to the bridge and sat down in his command chair. Without further ado, he ordered Flo to hail StarCon and request their orders.

Flo acknowledged, and a brief whistling sound was audible. Flo turned around. “We have clearance for departure, sir,” she reported. “We have orders to proceed to Gangularis, Peeyu and Kiz Urazgubi for refuse recovery.”

“Well, let’s get under way, then,” Roger chirped happily. He turned to Droole. “Droole, set a course for Gangularis.”

Droole pressed a couple of touch-pad buttons on his console, then turned around. “Coordinates locked in, sir. Ready to get underway.”

“Lite speed!” Roger ordered.

“We’ll go to warp as soon as we’ve cleared the station,” Droole informed.

The hatchway doors in front of them opened and the Eureka glided easily out through them. As soon as they’d slid a couple of hundred meters away from the station, Droole punched a button on his console and the Eureka shot into warp speed, on course for their first mission.

\* \* \*

Just after their departure, a small, green ship decloaked off the station. The occupant—a metallic, female droid—programmed the navigations computer to set in immediate pursuit.

The ships engines powered up remarkably fast and zoomed off in the Eureka’s direction.

A small screen next to the pilot displayed a digitized im-

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age of Roger Wilco, with the word ANNIHILATE printed below.

# 5

“So, how are you holding up, Flo?” Roger asked, in attempt to strike up a friendly conversation.

“My life stinks, and it’s all your fault, sir,” Flo replied coldly.

“What?” Roger asked, stunned.

“You’re a man, right?”

“Uh...last time I checked, I was, yeah...”

“Well, there you go,” Flo concluded and turned back to her station.

“You’ll have to excuse Flo,” Droole said, “she has a bit of a problem with male authority figure.”

“Can it, lobster boy!” Flo spat.

Roger didn’t really know what to say. He figured Flo wasn’t going to prove a sparkling conversationalist right now, so he turned to Droole. “Tell me, subcorporal,” he began, “how does the refuse recovery system work?”

“Well, very basically, sir,” Droole explained, “the refuse recovery system—or RRS for short—works in conjunction with the tractor beam to suck up the trash, and by means of a pneumatic tube system places the trash in the trash compartment.”

“So it’s like a giant vacuum cleaner?”

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“If you want to call it that, sir.”

A bleep on Droole’s console distracted his attention from Roger. He turned around, studied it, then reported: “We’re approaching our destination, Captain.”

“Slow to regular speed,” Roger commanded.

A short, rhythmic bleep went off on Flo’s console. “I’m tracking a waste beacon, sir,” she reported.

Roger ordered Droole, “Activate RRS.”

Droole complied, and Roger heard the tractor beam kick in with a soft hum.

\* \* \*

The sunlight broke out over the planet of Gangularis, slowly illuminating the green surface. In orbit, a small, black trash-bag with the legend “Husky” floated slowly, a miniature mechanical beacon fixture strapped to the top.

In a smooth move, the Eureka swooped in like an eagle, sucked up the trash bag, and exited as quickly as it had entered.

On the bridge of the Eureka, Flo swiveled around on her chair, her face suddenly flushed with a mixture of puzzlement and alarm. “Sir, I’m detecting a *life form reading* from the trash compartment!” she reported, almost stunned.

“What?” Roger exclaimed.

Cliffy’s face appeared on one of the three overhang screens. “Sir, better get your tail down to engineering,” his voice said through the speakers. “There’s some weird scratching and whining noises coming from the trash compartment!”

Roger stood up, his puzzlement turned to excitement as the prospect of his first adventure lying before him filled him. He went through the door into the engineering room.

Cliffy was standing by the circuit breaker tube. He was

clearly not going to get any closer to the trash compartment than this.

“There’s definitely something in there, cap’n,” he said, his voice unusually hushed. “It might be dangerous. You go first.”

Roger eyed his chief engineer strangely, then began to move down the narrow and cluttered aisle to the trash compartment.

He too could hear the high pitched whining noises and strange scratching sounds from the trash compartment. Something wanted to break out. Something alive. It sounded weak and pathetic from here, but also strangely menacing. Was it something he would regret if he let it out? He didn’t really have a choice, did he?

He pressed the button that opened the trash compartment, half expecting some giant slobbering monster to leap out and go for his throat. But nothing happened. No monster, no nothing.

But the whining sound was still there. It still sounded weak and pathetic.

Roger leaned over to look into the darkened chamber. He could discern nothing at first.

Then, suddenly, he felt something slam onto his face and he saw his vision go black. Something had attached itself to his face, and it didn’t look like it was going to let go.

He clawed and pulled at the thing, trying desperately to get it off. The suction devices on the creature’s tentacles, which now had a firm grip around Roger’s facial contours, were stronger than they appeared, but after a period of tugging Roger could finally feel the thing losing its grip.

He pulled it off and held it at an arms length. After a few seconds, his disgusted facial expression changed to amusement. The creature he was holding wasn’t exactly cute, but it was small and looked fairly harmless. It looked like an over-

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sized, red scorpion with tentacles.

“Hey,” Roger grinned, “he’s a cute little bugger. I think I’ll keep him.” He looked in Cliffy’s direction, still grinning. Cliffy eyed his Captain with a look usually reserved for the mentally diseased. Roger’s smile didn’t fade. “I’ll call him Spike.”

At that moment, Roger’s new pet managed to release himself from Roger’s grip and Spike fell to the ground. He immediately wiggled away on his tentacles, into the inaccessibly small cracks of the ship.

“Hey, where are you going, little buddy?” Roger called. He thought about chasing him, but he could be anywhere on the ship now. If he could fit through the small crack he just went through, he could fit through almost any passage on the ship, and it should be a small matter for him to gain access to any room on the ship.

Roger shrugged. The little guy should be fine on his own. It wasn’t like he could run away anywhere.

He turned around and went back onto the bridge.

In the Eureka’s science lab, Spike reappeared through the wiring leading from the transporter pad. He waddled over to a clear area on the floor, sat down as if to rest, and performed a couple of odd wiggles. When he moved on, he left behind a large, gaping hole that led straight down to the Eureka’s airlock room.

\* \* \*

Roger heard a strange scream from a room behind him and the sound of something collapsing. He could hear someone struggling to make his way through something, and several things clashing onto each other. After several seconds, Cliffy’s ragged face appeared on the leftmost overhang screen.

“Captain,” he said angrily, “better get in here now. Your

little critter's running havoc on the ship."

"What do you mean, Cliffy?"

"That alien thing you found in the trash compartment!" Cliffy snapped. "It's got a real bad case of diarrhea. And I mean *real* bad!"

"How bad?"

"Come out and see for yourself."

Roger stood up, went through the door, fell, and collapsed into a disorganized heap on the floor of the airlock room. He looked up through the gaping hole in the floor and saw Cliffy's face. "I see your point, Cliffy," he said and got to his feet.

When he reappeared on the floor of the engineering room after having taken the elevator up, he looked around and saw two holes in the floor. Apparently, something had burnt through the metal.

"What did this?"

"Your little pet thingy. It's shitting acid, and it's taking me forever to patch up these holes."

"Colorful choice of words, Cliffy," Roger remarked.

"Yeah, well, you'd better do something about your little critter, else he might corrode through the hull of the ship and kill us all."

"I'll see what I can do, Cliffy," Roger answered, having absolutely no idea what to do.

\* \* \*

After having been working on the problem for ten minutes, Roger was certain he had a good solution to the problem. The science lab had a small specimen habitat, which would undoubtedly prove to be an excellent place for little Spikey to stay when he was not needed. Early attempts by Roger put him in the habitat proved somehow futile, because the instant



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he tried to leave the room, Spike would simply pop open the habitat and jump back out.

In the end, Roger had found what he was sure would do the trick: A bottle of antacid tablets, liberated from Cliffy’s jumbled toolbox, which he had left unattended in the Eureka engineering room.

All he needed to do now was to try and catch Spike again. Previously, it’d come easier than he’d thought—all he’d done was to stand with his back to the transporter, wondering how he was going to go about it. Next thing he knew, Spike had clamped himself onto Roger’s head and was again tugging weakly at his facial contours.

This time, it proved a little harder. Roger combed the entire Eureka in search for the little bugger, and when he finally thought it had blown itself out of the airlock or something, he found it sitting on the science lab floor, once again leaving the crew with a deadly present on the floor.

As soon as Spike saw Roger advancing towards it, he made a leap for Roger’s face. Roger tried to catch it in his hand, but he fumbled—didn’t have his hand arced right for catching—so all he managed to accomplish was to smack Spike in the head, causing his pet face hugger to fall to the floor in a thoroughly disoriented pile. Roger went over, picked up his pet, and stroke it cautiously, mumbling apologies.

He went over to the habitat, opened it, and gently lobbed Spike into it. Before closing it, he popped open the bottle of antacids with a flick of the wrist, and dropped two tablets into the habitat.

Spike appeared to be satisfied, albeit still a little doozy from the knock on the head.

When Roger got back up on the bridge, Cliffy’s face reappeared on the overhang screen, this time with a much more friendly facial expression. “Thanks for taking care of your

critter there,” he said, genuinely grateful. Then, the smile remained, but the look changed somehow. “And thanks for leaving all the garbage from the trash compartment for me to clean up. Real Captain-like of you.”

“Uh...no problem, Cliffy.”

Cliffy disappeared from the screen.

Roger decided it was time to get on with the itinerary. “Corporal Droole,” he said, “lay in a course for Peeyu, won’t you?”

“That’s a crystal-clear affirmative right there, sir,” Droole acknowledged. Roger eyed him strangely, but with his back turned to the Captain’s chair, Droole couldn’t see it. Eventually Roger gave up trying to figure it out and just shook his head.

“Course locked in, sir, ready to get underway.”

“Lite speed,” Roger commanded, trying to make it sound as ceremonious as possible.

“Aye aye,” Droole complied, and once again the G-force pounded into Roger’s face with astonishing surprise.

\* \* \*

The occupant of the green craft, which had only just picked up on its trail, was very unhappy to find no ships in the vicinity of the planet of Gangularis, but the mood improved immensely when it detected an ion-trail leading away from the planet. A quick scan indicated that it was heading in the direction of Peeyu.

The ship’s engines powered up and took off with its new pursuit course laid in...

# 6

“Tell me about your mother, Droole,” said Roger, desperate for conversation.

His navigation/weapons officer eyed him with a look that asked, *You’re not fully sane, are you, sir?* “I’d prefer to keep our parental units out of our discussions, Captain,” Droole replied, “although I *have* heard some interesting anecdotes about *your* heritage, sir.”

Roger didn’t want to mull too long over this one. “Okay, a change of subject, then,” Roger suggested. Droole didn’t seem to have any objections. “What set of happy circumstances left the Eureka Captain’s chair open for me?”

“Well,” said Droole, “our last Captain blew himself out of the airlock...”

“That’s too bad,” Roger said with genuine sympathy.

Flo muttered, “If you say so, sir.”

Roger looked strangely in the direction of his communications officer, but she didn’t react.

Droole was just about to turn around and report that they were nearing their destination when something very hard and painful slammed forcefully into the hull of the SCS Eureka, causing it to rumble and shake sickeningly for a few seconds. Immediately, every red light aboard the ship lit up and began

flashing rhythmically to the accompaniment of a loud klaxon wail, and the three overhang screens on the bridge displayed the meaningful sentences, “DANGER!”, “ALERT!”, and “UH-OH!”.

“Fuck!” Droole exclaimed loudly.

“What?” said Roger.

“Fuck ... sir?” Droole tried again.

Roger immediately sat up straight and stared wildly at the viewscreen. “What *was* that?”

Droole consulted his console. “We’ve been hit by a photonic discharge blast,” was the verdict.

“But,” Flo said, bewildered, “the scanners don’t show anything out there ... wait! A ship is decloaking off the port bow!”

On the front viewscreen, an ugly green craft dematerialized in front of the Eureka. It was vaguely shaped like a hawk on the attack. There was no visible curves in sight—it was as if the entire ship had been constructed using hard, almost triangular edges. Although not very large in size—in fact, it was only slightly smaller than the Eureka itself—it still looked like it could deliver some serious punishment. It all culled down to looking extremely menacing.

Suddenly, a bright light on the front of the green ship came on, and seemed to punch into the SCS Eureka, but there was no blast sound. There was, however, a significant amount of rumbling.

A red warning light went off on Flo’s console. “We’re caught in a tractor beam, sir,” she reported. “It’s pulling us into orbit around Kiz Urazgubi!”

“Droole, is there any way we can get out of here?” Roger inquired.

“That’s a definite negatory, sir,” Droole replied. “The first blast knocked out all our navigational—and, for that matter, weapons—systems, so ...”

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“Captain,” Flo interrupted, “we’re being hailed!”

Roger shifted in his chair, realizing he was about to come face to face with his captor. Whoever it was, he had them over both barrels, and all they could do was plead for their freedom. With a rare sense of courage (and a voice like Mickey Mouse swallowing helium), Roger replied, “Put it on viewer.”

The angry visage of the female killer android appeared on screen. Its shiny, metallic curves and angular composite features, coupled with the piercing red eyes, made a chill run down the collective spines of the bridge crew.

“Roger Wilco,” said the female killer robot, with a voice as sharp as a butchers cleaver. “By authority of ERGS (Extensively Revised Galactic Statute) 2564.45, chapter 4723, paragraph 425, you are to beam down immediately and surrender. Failure to comply will result in the instant annihilation of your ship and crew.”

Roger stared truly mortified at the image of the killer android in front of him. Apparently, the good people at the Gippazoid Novelty Company hadn’t forgotten about that bit of mail fraud he pulled back on the planet Labion, a long long time ago.

Droole whispered abashedly, “That’s a WD-40 Mark V Deathstalker android!”

“But ...” said Roger to the screen, “I thought all that had been taken care of, when I ran into that Arnoid Annihilator android on the planet Phleebhut a couple years ago.”

“You thought wrong, humanoid,” came the cold reply. “It just goes to show: Never send a mandroid to do a womanoids work!”

“Can’t we come to some sort of arrangement?” Roger pleaded.

The android paused for a moment. “Beam down to the planet. Your body will be disassembled and sold off to vari-

ous biotechnology firms for overdue fees and interest.”

Roger wasn't sure this was an arrangement he'd go for.

“I am currently scanning your ship,” WD-40 continued. “Any attempts to break free or subterfuge will result in the immediate disintegration of your ship. You have five standard time units to beam down and give yourself up, Roger Wilco. Transmission ends!”

The screen fizzed for a moment, and was then replaced by the image of the killer android's green ship.

Droole turned around and spoke with a surprisingly agitated voice. “It sounds like she means business, captain!” he said.

“Yeah,” Flo continued, “you'd better beam down to that planet before she gets impatient and decides to blow us all up!”

Roger mulled it over. The situation didn't look to favorable. With the navigation and weapons systems dead, there was little hope that they might have some chance of fighting back. The only solution, it seemed, was to follow the androids instructions and beam down to the surface. However, Roger didn't much care for the idea of having his bodyparts disassembled and sold off to biotech research companies. He'd only just started his captain's job. There was still that flagship waiting out there, patiently, for him to command, on the pathway to fame, glory, and—

The exaggerated cough from his bridge crewmembers brought him back to reality. The only solution was to beam down. That much was clear. Maybe there was some way he could convince her to see things *his* way...or maybe vanquish her somehow.

In a flash, Roger rose up from his chair, and in a sudden flow of naïve heroism bellowed, “Well, she's not going to get me without a *fight!*”

The cheer that Roger had subconsciously expected never

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came. Instead, what he got was Droole’s sarcastic voice, saying, “Whatever you say, sir. It’s been nice knowing you.”

The heroic feeling only slightly dampened, Roger stomped out of the door.

Droole and Flo exchanged glances.

\* \* \*

“What’s happening?” Cliffy asked, momentarily startled, when Roger briskly walked through the doorway.

“Nothing much, except that a killer android has incapacitated us and demands that I beam down to surrender before she blows up the ship,” Roger said non-committally.

“What did you do to piss her off that bad, sir?”

“Well, a couple years ago I visited the forest planet Labion and ordered a Labion Terror Beast Mating Whistle,” Roger explained briefly. “Guess I forgot to pay for it.”

“Mail fraud’s a serious offense, cap’n,” said Cliffy warily. “I’d say you’re in pretty deep shit.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, chief.”

Now *completely* unsure whether what he was doing could be considered smart, Roger walked through the door to the transporter/science lab, stepped onto the transporter pad, and said, “Energize,” not knowing if he’d ever get the privilege to say that word again.

# 7

The planet of Kiz Urazgubi is nothing if not scenic. The landscape is a broad mixture of jutting peaks, soft lakes, cascading waterfalls, and beautiful buttes, stretching all over the planet.

The place where the transporter beam struck was near the base of a large cliff, where a waterfall cascaded into a picturesque lake, which proceeded further downward. After a second of shimmering lights, Roger finally materialized and took in his new surroundings. It was near tropical heat, and Roger found his anti-persperant to be fighting a fierce battle against a commonly known fiend. But it was pretty damn beautiful, he admitted.

Too bad the beauty was negated by the current circumstances.

\* \* \*

Elsewhere on the planet, the smallish, green craft touched down on a rocky plateau, not far away from the waterfall. The plateau stretched out over the cliff, like an unfinished bridge, and cracked slightly when the heavy metal put its weight firmly on it and the landing gear claws clasped around the



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edges.

A small antigravity lift protruded from the belly of the ship, carrying the killer android to the surface of the plateau. With a flick, she hit a button on her wrist and the ship suddenly vanished into thin air.

WD-40 lifted off on her portable jetpack, while activating her personal cloaking device.

\* \* \*

Roger had little time to think when he noticed a breeze in the trees above him. He thought he saw something moving out of the corner of his eye, but when he looked, there was nothing there.

Then, with a start, WD-40 appeared in front of him, a couple of meters away from where he was standing.

Roger practically leapt out of his skin.

“There you are, Wilco!” The android almost grinned with synthesized sadistic pleasure. “Now prepare to meet your *doom!*”

Roger narrowly avoided the first shot fired in his direction from WD-40’s wrist-mounted dischargers. He screamed at an embarrassingly high octave as he leapt acrobatically to the left and almost slammed his head into the rocky cliff towering above him.

Then he noticed something behind the stream of the waterfall.

*A cave!*

He made an insane break for the only hope of refuge. WD-40, apparently, made no attempt to follow him through the cave. Instead, she merely activated her cloaking device and disappeared the same way she had appeared—the only trace of her egression being the blowing of the tree leaves.

Roger stormed up the naturally formed steps inside the

cave, never allowing himself to slow down or take a peek behind him. A subconscious voice was relentlessly informing him that, any second now, a photonic discharge-blast would hammer into the small of his back, rendering his escape plan useless.

But it didn't happen. Roger reached the top of the stairs and looked behind him—he couldn't hear or see anything, and presumed that he wasn't being followed. He allowed himself a moment of rest.

The stairs had ended in the exit of the cave, which led to a narrow half-bridge set into the towering cliff, suspended high above the lake below. The bridge gave up a bit of its narrowness a couple of meters to the east of where Roger was standing, where it made a right-turn and followed a short distance to another cave.

From his left, Roger could hear the sound of cascading water even more clearly than from the lake below. He looked up, but couldn't see anything; his view being obstructed by the towering rock, still escalating further upwards to who-knew-where.

Roger proceeded to his left, wanting to see what lied further upwards. He reached the end of the cliff, which ended in a suspended halfbridge, teetering over the edge. A couple of meters ahead of him, he could see the start of another plateau, which proceeded parallelly upwards with its neighbor. The gap in between, which led straight down to the pool below, was spanned with a fallen, hollow tree log. Roger didn't have time to contemplate how a log—a log, which not only appeared to be the exact recommended length of a bridge to span that particular gap, but also professionally cut as well—had found its way there.

From where he was now standing, the log proceeded to distance the cleft in front of him, his back turned to the cave which had previously caused his great exasperation, and to his

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left the cliff made another slight jut, only to once again break off. At this end, a small tree had apparently been planted, and was growing quite happily on the edge of the rock; its twigs and branches teetering dangerously over the edge. And from below that came the rushing, thunderous sound of splashing water.

Roger moved closer to the tree and tried to look down, but the many branches obstructed his view. His curiosity got the better of him as he climbed out on the thin branches to get a better look.

The view that met him was breathtaking. He could see the lake, where he first materialized, far below, almost a forty meter drop down. The cataract of water fed into the lake here, and proceeded up about ten meters, where it came to sort of a rest at a plateau, which stretched maybe a few meters across, and then proceeded further upwards to the unseen.

Roger looked up to see where it fed in. That was when he heard a slight crack in protest from the branch he was sitting on, and he came to the realization that this might not have been such a grand idea. He didn't have time to think more about his options before the branch made its choice for him—and snapped off, sending both it and Roger down to the “holding pool” ten meters below.

Between the wet splash and the shock of suddenly not having solid matter to steady on, Roger barely had time to gain his composure before the hard currents of the waterfall stream caused Roger (and his new branch friend) to approach the edge of the watery plateau with startling speed.

Unable to do anything, or even *think* about doing anything, Roger and his companion fell unceremoniously over the edge and took another twenty-meter drop down to the pool at the bottom.

In the shadow of the looming tower of rock above him, Roger finally managed to gain his equanimity. The pool

wasn't as deep as he had anticipated, so he was quite surprised that he hadn't broken any limbs in the fall. He suspected that, had he landed on anything else than his stomach, the fall would probably have been a whole lot more disastrous. Once he managed to get above surface, he made a swim for the sure, still powered by a rush of panicky adrenaline.

Once he reached the shore, he collapsed in a spent heap on the rocky bank. He lay on his back, allowing the water to seep out of his aural crevices, looking up, and wondering if this nightmare would ever end.

From his current position he could see the log forty meters above, and even further up—maybe a hundred meters up from where he was now—were more plateaus, and waterfall “reststops”. *That waterfall must be pretty damn high up*, he thought to himself.

Then he noticed something. A rock was poised on top of a tall rock peak. Maybe—just maybe—he could get lucky this time. He would have to get closer to see if it could be done first, but the idea was definitely there.

Once he got up the cavern stairs and onto the narrow ledge, he—this time—proceeded to the right and into the other cave, which—as he had anticipated—led even further upwards.

He was now standing possibly seventy meters above ground level, under an overhang. In front of him was a large pool of water, and he could see streams of water falling into it from above—apparently, the waterfall seemed to go on upwards forever. This pool was large; much larger than the one down below, and the plateau he was standing on was very big; oval-shaped, with maybe fifteen meters across from one side to the other. Water fell from here to the “reststop” he'd seen during his cliffhanging-experience, and then onwards to the pool down below.

He looked up and saw the rock, still poised on the peak.

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The tall rock-spire it was on was a stand-alone structure, and was not connected to the rocky tower Roger was currently standing on. However, Roger could see a small outcropping way up alongside the spire, which seemingly had another cave entrance. And the two peaks were only a meter apart, if not less.

Roger looked to his right and saw another cave entrance, which he assumed led up to the small outcropping.

Roger’s grin broadened. *Perfect.*

If he could somehow trick WD-40 into going up those cave-steps, and if he could get to the rock before she managed to get out of the cave, he was pretty sure he could pot a shot with the large boulder into the cave entrance. The maniacal robot would have no way to escape, and would be instantly pummeled by the unstoppable boulder.

It was a perfect, if slightly insane, plan.

Now, all he needed was a bit of leverage for the boulder. He returned to the lowest pool and fished around in the lake for about three minutes until he found the branch that broke off from his ungraceful fall earlier on.

Just as he found it, he noticed something out of his eye corner, and immediately picked up speed. WD-40 was on to him. He’d have to act fast. *Very fast.*

He sprinted as fast as his less-than-muscular human frame would carry him up the way-too-many steps until he finally reached the large pool at the top. Once again, a narrow cliff-edge was all that stood between him and a seventy meter drop to almost certain death.

Off in the distance, he noticed a faint blip of movement, and it glistened like metal. *WD-40!*

Roger’s adrenaline got an extra burst, as Roger hurried into the cave opening to his right. The steps, as he had expected, led steeply upwards. Ignoring his muscles, which were at this point groaning loudly in protest at the sudden

constant barrage of physical punishment, he ran madly up the steps. Finally, he reached the small outcropping.

There, straight across him, was the rock-spire, and on the peak of that, was his weapon—the Boulder of Doom, ready to launch.

He looked down below and saw something moving through the water. *Good*, he thought, *she's on my trail*. And he immediately questioned his own sanity when he finally grasped what he was thinking. He could see sparks flying arrhythmically as WD-40's circuits passed under water. Roger was sure he had just discovered another flaw he could exploit: WD-40, it would seem, wasn't waterproof.

But she was, thankfully, heading into the mouth of the cave, unabated, heading upwards.

Roger looked ahead and saw the small standing jut on the opposite spire, maybe a meter away from him—and then he looked down and saw the gap. There had to be a hundred feet down to the pool below, if not more! Considering how lucky he'd been to survive even a twenty meter drop, he had absolutely no desire to try his luck with over a hundred meters.

He could hear WD-40 advancing behind him, and immediately snapped back into reality. He took a small running start—as big as the small outcropping would allow him—and jumped ferociously, almost kamikaze-like, over the drop.

He grabbed onto the other ledge, ignoring his fingers which were now screaming loudly in pain and the stick which was threatening to snap again, and pulled himself up. His muscles were aching severely, but he managed, with a tremendous effort, to forget about them for the moment.

He climbed up behind the rock, and jammed the stick forcefully under it. Using as much power as he could muster, he began applying force to the free end of the stick, hoping to loosen the boulder from its foundation. The rock nudged back and forth a couple of times, but seemed to be quite content

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with where it was right now, and had no desire for relocation.

*Dammit!* Roger thought to himself, frustrated.

He heard WD-40’s metallic footsteps from the cave. Being more than a meter away from the entrance of the cave, this could only mean that WD-40 had almost reached the end of the stairs...and that Roger had better get working fast!

Adrenaline pumping, Roger’s aching muscles gave their last shove and the rock finally yielded. Tumbling maniacally down the small drop to the outcropping, it made a tremendous bounce over the one-meter gap and neatly glided into the opening of the cave.

Roger uppercuted the air excitedly as he could hear the boulder tumbling down the cave steps, increasing in speed. His mind was briefly overrun with visions of WD-40 sprinting for her metallic life.

Then, almost with a shock, the robot shot out of the bottom cave entrance, followed by the intimate boulder, which barely fitted through the smaller entrance. The giant rock exited the cave with a strange popping sound, ensued by a shower of smaller pebbles. What followed next was a loud splashing sound, and another even louder splashing sound, as the annihilator robot and her new friend crashed into the bottom pool.

Roger sat back and took a deep breath, for the first time since he’d set foot on this planet. Finally, a moment of relaxation. He spent the next ten minutes, just lying there, a hundred meters up in the air, on a tall rock spire, glaring into the sky and thinking *How lucky can a guy get?*

\* \* \*

When he went down to the bottom pool to observe his handiwork, he was slightly surprised that he could only see the boulder in the water. True, maybe WD-40 was trapped below

it, but the boulder seemed to be floating, and if that was the case, the android should've surfaced by now. But she wasn't there.

This feeling of surprise quickly turned to alarm. *If she's not here...then where in the name of the seventh star cluster is she?*

Roger looked up and—to his horror—saw WD-40, still in flight, circling the waterfall-area. But to Roger's slight wonder, the robot's cloaking device wasn't on anymore.

Then the truth dawned on Roger. He hadn't killed her. In truth, he now doubted that *any* brute force he could muster could ever kill her. The only thing he seemingly had accomplished was to knock out her cloaking device and piss her off *reeeeaaally* bad.

Roger ran this piece of news by his braincells, and they came to the unanimous conclusion that he was in very deep shit.

Something had to be done.

\* \* \*

After having run around in a panic frenzy for several minutes trying to find an ingenious hiding place—hoping that WD-40 would eventually give up and go away—Roger realized what he was doing. Should WD-40 eventually give up, the first thing she'd do when she got back was to blow up the Eureka. And when that happened, even though Roger would've survived, he had no way to get off the planet again.

He was currently lying under a bush near the bottom lake, mulling over his situation. It was quite apparent that there was no way to convince her to go against her orders.

As was often the case in a panic situation, Roger suddenly found himself hungry. In fact, starving. After all the business with running up and down endless stairs, shoving boulders



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through cave entrances, and narrowly avoiding precision-fired shots from a killer android out for his blood, Roger’s stomach was beginning to complain seriously about its lack of nourishment. Roger tried to look at the situation from a logic point of view—should he try and go find food, he might be an easy target for the annihilator android—but, then, if he *was* going to get up and fight, there was no way he could do that on an empty stomach. At least, that was what his abdomen was trying to convince him.

Roger reluctantly had to realize that his stomach wasn’t going to shut up until it got what it wanted. He tried to bring up the mental map of his surroundings, trying to remember if he’d seen any food source nearby.

He was about to give up and start eating the bush, never mind if it was poisonous or not—hell, he was probably going to get it anyway, said his pessimistic mental half—when he remembered. Near the waterfall “rest stop”, twenty meters above...where he had previously, and quite literally, gone out on a limb...where the log spanned the gap to the other side... Could it have been?

Utilizing what he regarded as incredible stealth, Roger inched his way behind the waterfall stream and ran up the stairs to the second plateau. Here, he proceeded to the left and found himself at the “rest stop”.

He looked over the gap, spanned by the fallen log, and saw—to his relief—what was, quite distinctively, a banana tree.

He attempted to cross the gap with the improvised bridge by walking on it—like a tightrope walker—but the log was very slick with some kind of mold, which made that approach impossible. Roger had only managed to take a few steps before friction abandoned him and he had to struggle just to stand still. With no small effort, Roger inched his way back to where he started.

When he finally got there, his mind said to him, *Maybe that's why the log is hollow*. Sometimes Roger was as much a mystery to himself as he was to his buddies. Right now, he couldn't tell whether his mind was being sarcastic or trying to help him. He settled on "trying to help," although he had been wrong in that area before. A small part of his mind, it seemed, took a strange, obscured, sadistic pleasure in Roger's failure.

Seeing no other way, Roger got on all four and began to crawl into the hollow tube. This was much easier, and the icky stuff on the outside thankfully wasn't on the inside. In no time, Roger was standing on the other side.

The banana tree had a cluster of six bananas hanging down from a branch; the rest were, unfortunately, way out of reach. That is, unless Roger dared climbing the tree, which he wasn't *particularly* keen on right now. First of all, he'd be easy prey if WD-40 should decide to drop by, and secondly, he'd had some bad experiences with tree climbing in the past.

The six-pack of bananas came off easy. Roger liberated one of them, and managed to stuff the rest of them in his pocket. He surveyed the fruit—the skin was oddly green, but it smelled ordinary. He tore off a slice of the skin, and remarked that the insides were white. He took a bite, wondering if he'd wake up dead or with a third leg the next morning. It tasted like a perfectly normal, ripe banana.

After he'd finished the first one and was about to start on a second, Roger noticed a small, moving speck out of the corner of his eye. With startlingly high velocity, the thing grew in size. And it glinted.

*This can only mean one thing, his mind warned, find a place to hide! RIGHT NOW!*

Roger looked around. There was a tunnel carved through the rock wall behind him which led to the plateau on the other side, but if he jumped to safety in there, WD-40 might think of collapsing the wall, either trapping him in there or killing him.

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Neither of which were preferable.

Roger decided the best hiding place would be the log. He skidded frantically and took a surprisingly acrobatic leap into the hollow tree.

Roger crawled maniacally until he judged he was about halfway. A small, naturally-carved hole was in the side of the trunk. Looking out, he could see the bottom pool below—twenty meters looked like a lot more when you were at an altitude.

Then, he heard a muffled *whoomp* from above. WD-40 had landed on the log.

“Where are you, Wilco?” she called, tauntingly.

Roger looked up through the hole and immediately felt scorching heat. This puzzled him. Sure, the planet had almost tropical climate, but this felt (and smelled) more like...jet exhaustion!

Roger clinched his eyes and looked up. He was looking straight up into WD-40’s jetpack exhaust pipes.

WD-40 called again, “I know you’re here somewhere, Wilco! Come out and face me like a woman! It’s your destiny!”

Roger surmised that he might’ve had *too* much sun when he carried out his new, improvised plan. At first, his stomach—which, apparently, had taken on a life of its own now—had disapproved strongly, but Roger chose to ignore it now. The issue here was *survival*. He reached into his pocket, and with a graceful motion managed to produce the cluster of five bananas. Careful not to make any sudden sounds—though most of the sounds were muffled by the crashing sound of the waterfall—Roger snapped the cluster into five individual pieces. He stretched as far as possible, armed with a single banana in his right hand and the remaining four in the other, and inserted the banana into WD-40’s left exhaust pipe. WD-40 didn’t seem to notice; she was apparently busy scanning

the perimeter. Thankfully, it never occurred to her to look *down*. Another banana followed the first one, and the remaining three went into the right exhaust pipe.

When the last one, with much difficulty, glided into the pipe and managed to jam itself thoroughly in there, Roger quickly retracted his hand when he felt a scorching, burning sensation on his hand. The jetpack thrusters were coming alive.

Fighting to keep back a rampage of obscenities, Roger dived back down into the log, only keeping the top half of his head outside the hole.

He looked up and saw WD-40 taking off. The higher and higher she flew, the more and more Roger began to contemplate that he might've screwed up somehow. Maybe the thrusters had some extra emergency exhaust engines? Maybe—

His train of thought got no further as he heard a loud explosion, saw a flash of white from above (much whiter and clearer than the heating sun above), and was suddenly accosted by a shower of glistening bits and pieces, most of which landed near the bottom pool.

Roger breathed a loud sigh of relief.

*I've done it*, he thought to himself with assuagement, relief. *I'm safe.*

He heard a loud rumble.

*And I'm still hungry.*

# 8

Roger reached the bottom of the pool, carrying his new trophy: The head of the killer android, which had been severed clean during the explosion, cradled under his right arm. He had found it when he climbed back out of the log, after a ten minute rest, lying on the ground. At first, his weary mind had hallucinated that the head was leaping for him, trying to masticate him, but he eventually gathered enough courage to pick it up. Now it was sort of like a memento, a vestige of his heroic feats.

When he got down to the bottom pool, he was not at all surprised to see the bits and pieces of WD-40 scattered over the ground. What he *was* a bit surprised to see was a transporter beam, striking the ground.

Cliffy, his chief engineer, materialized. He waved for Roger to come over.

“Well, I’ll be,” his engineer said, mildly astounded. “You’re still in one piece, cap’n.”

“That’s right, Cliffy,” Roger concurred, beaming.

“The ships sensors detected a big explosion on the surface, and we drew lots to see who was gonna come down here and collect your remains.”

“And you lost...”

“No, I won, sir,” Cliffy said, disregarding Roger’s monumentally surprised facial expression, “but it’s still good to see you again, cap’n. It’ll save a lot of uncomfortable explanations back at StarCon headquarters.”

“I guess so,” Roger stammered, the smiling face having descended into slight bewilderment.

“I’ll beam you back to the Eureka now, sir,” Cliffy continued. “I’ll stay down here and pick up all these pieces.”

“Okay,” said Roger.

Within seconds, he was standing on the transporter pad of the SCS Eureka’s science lab.

Roger had just stepped out of the door to the engineering room when he heard the familiar *whooshing* sound of a transporter beam. Apparently, Cliffy had returned. Roger swiveled around on his heels and went back into the science lab.

He was just in time to see Cliffy lugging the last big pieces of WD-40 over to an improvised surgical table—which in reality was three large computer cabinets stuck together.

“What are you doing?” Roger inquired.

“I’m reassembling the android,” said Cliffy. “When I’m done, I think I can reprogram her to act as our science officer.”

“I’m not sure I like that idea, Cliffy.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” Cliffy said reassuringly. “By the way, you wouldn’t happen to know where the head piece for this thing is?”

Roger looked in the crook of his arm, where he was still carrying the android’s head. He threw it to Cliffy. “Here,” he said, “I thought you might want to *get ahead*. Bwah-ha-ha-ha!”

Cliffy seemed unamused. “Your sense of humor is only surpassed by your captain’s skills, sir,” he said sarcastically. “Here,” he continued, changing the subject, “I’ve got something you might want to take a look at.”

He walked over to Roger and put a remote control device

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of some kind into Roger’s palm. “This thing apparently isn’t a part of the exoskeletal structure, so I really don’t have any use for it. I thought you might like a souvenir or something.”

“Thanks, Cliffy,” Roger said, not sure if he meant it or not. To be perfectly frank, he would’ve preferred the head.

Roger got back up to the bridge and sat down. Flo swiveled around to face him. “Sir, after we detected the explosion, we started scanning the surface. We found something strange down there, maybe a hundred meters from the waterfall.”

“So?” Roger said, completely missing the point.

“Cliffy said he detected some unusual signaling from there. He says there might be a cloaking device down there.”

“A cloaking device?” Roger said, his enthusiasm level still somewhere below measurable.

“Yes.”

“I suppose he wants me to go and check it out, right?”

“That’s right.”

“And if I don’t?”

“He mentioned something about jury-rigging your captain’s chair... It had something to do with—what was it?—electrical shocks?” Flo said, a hint of sarcastic sadism hidden in her voice.

“Ah,” said Roger simply and got up from his chair, heading back to the science lab.

Roger got on the transporter pad and was just about to voice-activate it to energize when Cliffy’s voice interrupted him. “Hang on, cap’n, I’ll go with you.”

Cliffy waddled over and positioned himself on the transporter pad.

Roger waited for him to get in a comfortable beaming position before saying, “Energize!”, and the two men were promptly whisked away from the pad.

\* \* \*

They materialized a few seconds later on a rocky path going upwards. It was a narrow trail—probably no more than three and a half meters across—and was suspended parallelly to the waterfall “rest stop”, which Roger could spot a hundred meters or so to the west. The sun was still hot, but Roger could feel a slight breeze, and both that and the current situation served to give him a chill. It wasn’t a steep incline, but it *did* curve upwards slightly. Roger and his companion had materialized maybe seven or eight meters away from the cliff.

The first thought that struck Roger he said out loud. “Why did we materialize here?”

He looked at Cliffy, who offered nothing but a shrug.

Roger looked at the gadget he was holding in his hand. The little remote control device Cliffy had given him as a WD-40 souvenir. He mumbled to himself, “Maybe this little gadget has something to do with it.”

He walked forward, wanting to go to the edge and look down; maybe find some kind of clue as to why they were here; maybe even find that cloaking device Flo was talking about. Cliffy didn’t mention that he’d salvaged WD-40’s personal cloaking device—maybe it’d flown clear off and landed someplace they hadn’t found. But then, what was the deal with the remote control?

Roger didn’t have much time to think things over before he slammed into something unseen, face first. He fell to the ground, thoroughly astounded, and looked up, as if to look for some kind of explanation, but found none. All he could do was to exclaim, “What the hell?”

Cliffy stayed rooted to where he was.

Roger got to his feet and felt the air in front of him. There *was* something there—something invisible. It was large and metallic. *The cloaking device?* No. When he extended his



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arm as far up in the air as it could go, the thing in front of him was still taller than he was, and last he checked cloaking devices were small and compact devices; not hulkingly large devices.

This theory was even more shot off when Roger found what felt like a crevice. An opening, which apparently went through to the other side of the barrier in front of him. He felt for the edges—it was a squeeze, but he should be able to fit through.

With some minor displays of acrobatics, Roger squeezed himself through the small opening and arrived on the other side.

He turned to Cliffy and motioned for him to follow. Cliffy made a couple of pathetic attempts to cram himself through the opening, but his waistline wouldn't allow it. After realizing he wasn't accomplishing anything, Cliffy gave up.

“Sorry, cap'n,” he said, wheezing, “you'll have to go without me.”

Roger nodded sympathetically. He went towards the edge of the cliff and looked down, he saw nothing unusual—just more plateaus, rocky spires, pools, the usual material he'd come to expect from Kiz Urazgubi—but when he tried to step on the very edge of the cliff, a soft *clang* sounded and his foot hit metal.

He felt around the edges of it and found it to be identical to the one near Cliffy. An idea came to him. “This must be WD-40's ship,” he said.

“Ah,” said Cliffy, “so *this* is where the cloaking beacon came from. You're standing right below it, Cap'n.”

Roger nodded, impressed by the technology. And he thought the *floor scrubber* at the academy was impressive.

“But,” Cliffy wondered, “how do we get inside it?”

Roger glanced, once again, at the device in his hand. “Maybe this has something to do with it,” he said thoughtful-

ly. He pressed the only button on the alien remote control.

Immediately, he heard a low hum from above him. A hatchway in nothingness opened, and through it he could see the interior of WD-40's ship. It was like a portal had opened before him, leading into another world, but yet he knew that wasn't so. From the small hatchway, an anti-gravity lift descended and reached ground level. Roger glanced in Cliffy's direction, but Cliffy offered nothing more than a shrug, as if to say, *Hey, you're on your own with this one, pal.*

Roger cautiously stepped onto the lift. Sensing pressure, the lift immediately began the ascent into the interior of the ship. An odd sense of foreboding crept through him. Although there was no immediate danger, he had a strange feeling he couldn't quite put his finger on.

When he finally stepped off the lift, the feeling of dread lingered. The interior was perhaps the size of the Eureka's engineering room. There was a small cockpit up front, and the rest of the ship—which consisted of a rectangular room maybe four square meters—was littered with computer consoles, blinking lights, keyboards, engine equipment, and other stuff that Roger had no real desire to mess with. The interior color was of a dark, almost menacing green, and the room was dimly lit. The red flashes of light from the various consoles all around added to the sinister look of the ship.

All this alien technology looked very interesting, but nothing seemed to have anything to do with the cloaking device he was looking for, and none of it seemed to have any other valuable use (other than to keep the Eureka's chief engineer drooling). Roger thought about the cockpit, but was pretty sure it wouldn't be located in such unprotected location—if someone took a good shot at the cockpit, there wasn't enough insulation to protect the cloaking device, wherever the android might have thought of putting it. No, it was probably somewhere where it wouldn't be so easily damaged.

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A compartment on the far wall attracted Roger’s attention. Unlike the other ones, which were marked with machine code, this one was undistinguished.

The compartment came open easily. All he had to do was to tug at the edges and it immediately creaked off. Roger was relieved and exhilarated by how easy this was, until he saw what the panel covered: A locking mechanism. Roger sighed. It didn’t look hard, but it was still a nuisance.

The mechanism consisted of four panels in the four corners, each with a turning knob and an indentation for opening the panels. Two latches were at the top and bottom, and seemed to hold the panels in place. It looked like all four panels had to be opened in order to get to what was beyond it.

First thing to go was the latches. Roger tugged at the top one, but it didn’t come off. When he gave it a shove, though, it retracted itself upwards and uncovered a small portion of the compartment beyond, giving Roger a small view of the device behind the doors. It *was* the cloaking device, he reckoned. Though he had never seen one before, it *had* to be.

However, he was positively shocked to hear an annoyingly high-pitched beeping sound go off and continue to beep relentlessly. He saw a small LCD display next to the compartment, which was constantly changing by the second—to Roger, it looked like an alien stopwatch, or a timer. *A timer to what?* he asked himself. He didn’t know, but whatever was going to happen, it would undoubtedly be bad.

Something made Roger want to hurry up. The bottom latch moved downwards and retracted itself as easy as the top one had. Now onto the panels. Roger tried to open all four of them, but all of them refused. Immediately, Roger considered the knobs. Maybe a special combination was required. He began flipping knobs randomly, trying to open the panels with every turn. One correct combination got one panel open, and with a few more twists and turns he got a second panel open.

So, he reasoned, *they not only have to open with a certain knob-combination, but also in sequence.*

This further complicated the matter, but it wasn't beyond his ability. It took him maybe four or five minutes to get the last two panels open. When they did, they exposed the cloaking device beyond. An automatic mechanism began to disentangle the device from the wires attaching it to the ship systems. Roger glanced at the LCD screen next to him, and literally went into hyperventilation. All three first digits looked identical, and only the last one was merrily ticking away—and the first three digits looked a lot like zero's to him!

*Fuck the wires*, Roger reasoned and tore out the device. Cradling the machine in the crook of his arm, he staggered panickly to his feet and bolted for the anti-graviton lift.

He heard the ominous beeping noise increasing in pitch, which could only mean one thing...

The anti-gravity lift slowly—much too slowly, according to Roger—descended onto the rocky plateau below the ship. Cliffy was standing around casually, looking at the tall green ship that had suddenly revealed itself before him.

As soon as the lift was maybe a meter from the ground, Roger jumped from it, scurried over to the leg of the craft, screaming: “Get us out of here, Cliffy! This thing's gonna blow!!!”

Cliffy only had a second to react before the ship exploded.

# 9

Of the two people that materialized onto the transporter pad, Cliffy was the lucky one. He materialized more or less standing, although he skidded uncontrollably across the science lab floor for a meter or two until a friendly computer console cushioned his fall.

Roger, on the other hand, had performed a rather silly-looking acrobatic leap to safety when the ship on the surface exploded, and therefore materialized suspended half a meter up in the air. His brain didn't have enough time to readjust and take in the new scenery he suddenly found himself in. In fact, his braincells had only just recognized the fact that he was now located in the Eureka's science lab before they started thinking, “Hey, aren't we forgetting something?”. This boggling question was quickly answered when Roger landed, quite painfully, in an amazingly agile-looking leg-split. One look at his face, however, would instantly kill any sense of admiration, for it was horribly distorted with pain.

Cliffy's face was a mixture between mild surprise and amusement. “Whoa, chief,” he said, fighting to keep back a veritable convulsion of laughter, “that looked painful. Are you okay?”

Roger was slightly shocked at two things: One, that his

testicles hadn't leaped straight up through his esophagus; and two, that his chief engineer was either too surprised or too rude to help him up.

"Fine, perfect, now help me up," Roger exclaimed sarcastically.

This elicited a response from his chief engineer. "Oh, sure, sir," he said, and grabbed hold of his hand. With an extraordinary yank—which Roger thought might have been a secret attempt to injure his wrist severely—Cliffy pulled Roger to a standing position.

"Well, I'm glad we made it back in one piece," said Cliffy. Roger was busy tending to his aching legs, which were now screaming in pain. "I'll get around to hooking up this cloaking device," he said, liberating it from Roger's hands, "as soon as I've put together the android."

Roger gained normal footweight and recovered the power of speech.

"I'm not so sure that I like the idea about reassembling WD-40," Roger said, almost cautiously.

"Oh come now, sir," Cliffy said, "there's no reason why she can't become a valuable member of the crew. Just because you two had a slight little misunderstanding—"

"*Slight misunderstanding?*" Roger snapped. "Cliffy, she tried to *kill* me!"

"Well, there is that," said Cliffy thoughtfully. "I think I can crank down her lethality setting, though. After that, she'll probably just want to beat you severely."

Roger was stunned. "That's not going to cut it, Cliffy."

"Yeah, you're probably right," said Cliffy. "It would be kind of hard to captain a ship if you've been beaten severely. But I *do* think it would help keep you on your toes, sir, if she just took a random swing at you every now and then."

"I don't want her to as much as *scowl* at me, Cliffy," Roger said sternly.

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“Have it your way, sir,” Cliffy half-sighed.

Roger was still frowning oddly when he left the science lab.

\* \* \*

Roger went over and sat down in his command chair. It now felt like routine, like it was something he’d done all his life. In the same odd way, it felt great to sit in the chair again—as if he was revisiting home after a prolonged period of absence, which, in a sense, it was. He even disregarded the flatulent voice of the cushion completely.

Flo turned around and reported, “We just had an incoming call from StarCon.”

“Oh yeah?” said Roger, wondering what it was.

“Or, more precisely, from Captain Quirk,” Flo continued. She looked about as thrilled as Roger did now.

“Oh yeah?” repeated Roger, though the anticipation from his voice had disappeared completely, leaving him with a sense of resentment.

“He was just wondering why he just got a call from the planet Peeyu wondering where their garbage pick-up was, and—I quote—‘what in the name of seventh star cluster is taking us so long?’”

Roger immediately felt a pang of cold sweat build up. “Cripes,” he exclaimed quietly. “Well,” he said, recomposing himself, “we’d better get going. Flo, hail StarCon and tell them we’re on our way.”

“I already tried, but their wavelengths were busy. They informed me that if I could just hold on for a millennia or two, they’d get back to me.”

“Ah, I see,” said Roger. “Well, in that case...Droole, set a course for Peeyu, and floor it.”

“Sir?” Droole asked, genuinely confused.

“It means ‘lite speed,’” said Roger.

That one registered. Within a few seconds, the Eureka was on its way; stars were streaking past the front viewscreen at a speed faster than light; Roger’s gut was once again threatening to flip-flop like a freshly caught fish on a boat deck.

\* \* \*

After a few minutes of travel, the Eureka slowed down and awaited the signal of the trash bag. The recovery procedure went swiftly and without any hindering.

It wasn’t until the procedure had finished that Flo turned around, and with a surprising tone of voice said: “Sir, I’m intercepting an unusual message on StarCon priority frequency 2.”

*What the heck?* Roger thought. “On screen,” he said out loud.

The viewscreen crackled for a moment or two, and then displayed the visage of an alien figure. His appearance was vaguely bug-reminiscent; his mouth consisting of four panel-looking pieces that covered his mouth, and moved back and forth when he spoke. His eyes, all three of them, had a total blackness about them, and when you gazed deeply enough in them it was like looking into infinity. His skin was dark brown, and there was something about his facial expression; something that Roger found utterly menacing.

The alien was repeating the same message over and over again. “*Maggot to Dung Heep...come in, Dung Heep. Maggot to Dung Heep...come in, Dung Heep.*” The transmission was fairly garbled and the image was covered with flashes of white noise, which made the voice sound like it was being fed through a modulator.

After a short period of time, Flo reported that there was another participant on the line.



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His voice, too, sounded distorted; distorted enough to kill any attempts to discern who he was; but he didn't sound alien. More like human. There was something familiar about the voice, Roger thought, but the bad reception made it impossible for him to decide.

*"This is Dung Heep,"* replied the voice, not sounding terribly happy. *"What in the Pleiades are you doing on this frequency?"*

The alien seemed unabated. *"We've got a hot load of stuff that needs to be disposed of...right away."*

*"I thought I told you never to call me here again!"* the angry voice persisted. Then he sighed. *"Okay. Meet me at the usual place and we'll discuss it. But don't call me here again, is that understood?"*

*"Right. Maggot out,"* the alien concluded.

With that, the transmission disappeared from the screen, leaving Roger and his crew totally perplexed.

Roger was the first to speak up. "What the hell...?"

Droole piped in. "I'm not exactly sure, Captain, but it doesn't sound like good news to me. And whatever they were talking about, it sounds like it was something they didn't want anybody else to hear. What puzzles me is the fact that they were using a StarCon priority frequency."

"What do you make of that?" Roger asked.

"I don't know, sir," Droole said apologetically. "All I know for sure is, something stinks around here."

"But I just put on a fresh batch of roll-on," Roger protested.

"Not you, sir," said Droole. "The transmission."

"Ah," said Roger. "Flo," he said, turning, "were you able to pin down the transmission?"

"No, sir," Flo replied. "They were using a complex encryption algorithm and were frequency-hopping quite rapidly. All I could do was stay with them."

“But how did you—” said Roger, but cut himself short. “—never mind, I don’t think I want to know.” He figured it would be best to save the whole topic for later. Mutinous images of court martial were dancing in the back of his brain, but he chose to ignore them. “What’s next on our itinerary?”

“Actually, that’s it for today,” was Flo’s reply. “We’re off duty now. And—I don’t know about the rest of you—but *I* could certainly use a drink right about now.”

“Me too,” said Droole. “Captain, how about we stop by the Nova Station and catch some R&R?”

Roger knew about the Nova Station. It was a local orbital spacebar, whose clientele mostly consisted of off-duty Star-Con personnel and people stopping by during their travels through the galaxy. It wasn’t much, but it was the only half-decent spacebar in the G6 quadrant.

“Sure, why not?” was Roger’s final verdict. “Droole, lay in a course and let’s get underway. Come to think of it, I wouldn’t mind a bit of unwinding myself.”

“Now you’re talking, sir,” Droole grinned—or, rather, did what would be conceived as grinning.

With surprising speed, Droole keyed in the coordinates, and within a second, the Eureka was underway.

# 10

“Last one down to the transporter is a rotten Orat ovum!” Droole exclaimed loudly, only nanoseconds after the SCS Eureka had gone into standard orbit around the Nova Station spacebar.

Droole had scarcely finished his sentence before him and Flo had disappeared through the door and into the science lab. When Roger walked through the door to the lab, he was just in time to see his two bridge officers plus Cliffy be whisked away from the transporter pad.

Roger stepped onto the pad and soon found himself standing on one of the six transporter pads of the Nova Station.

The bar was a large, circular room, which could have held a large football field. The walls were covered with large viewports, giving a panoramic view of the endless universe beyond. The centerpiece was a large, red lava lamp, stretching up to the ceiling of the dome some thirty meters above, and cast a cool, red glow on the entire room. Encircling it was the bar itself, which was being tended to by an Analog waitron. Strewn around the floor was several tables with up to four seats available. On the far back and front walls were elevated booths—one containing the small arcade portion of the establishment; the other contained four small tables, intended for

people who preferred some more peace and quiet while enjoying their drinks. Both booths were elevated perhaps five meters up, giving a nice view over the entire bar.

Cliffy was standing in front of the transporter when Roger materialized. "Excuse me, Captain," he said, "but I see an old buddy of mine over there by the bar."

"All right, Cliffy," said Roger.

Roger could hear Droole's voice, saying, "Uh oh, here we go again..."

Roger scanned the bar, looking for Flo and Droole. They had found themselves a relatively undisturbed corner, taking up two of the three chairs available. Roger took that as an invitation. He went over and took a seat.

Immediately, an Analog waitron hovered over to their table on its anti-gravity base.

"Good evening, I am your waitron for tonight," the machine chimed monotonously with its modulated voice. "What is your poison, humanoids?"

"Bourbon on the rocks," said Roger. Although he had a low alcohol tolerance, a single bourbon wouldn't hurt that much. Besides, he was off duty, and could get as much out of his skull as he wanted.

"I'll have a Fuzzy Nostril," Droole ordered.

"Gimme a Green Goblin," Flo said.

The small panel at the bottom part of the waitron hissed open. The miniature replicator, built into the waitron, flashed for a few moments and produced a synthetic replication of a bourbon with ice. Roger took his drink. The replicator glimmered again, and produced Flo's and Droole's drinks.

"Here are your drinks," the waitron announced. "The charges will be deducted from your StarCon account. If you feel the urge to hurl, please feel free to use the restrooms, humanoids. Have a nice evening," it concluded and wafted away.

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They all took a sip of their drinks. It was nice to unwind a bit, Roger thought. It had been a rough day; particularly rough, considering that it had been his first day, and just now he realized how weary and spent he really was. The sip he took of his bourbon, however, was enough to send his throat into a hysterical paroxysm of pain, and as the liquid passed downwards through his esophagus towards his stomach, every bit it touched screamed out in pain. Roger’s exterior expression mirrored this perfectly, although to other people it looked like he was having a minor epileptic seizure.

He looked at the glass. His sip had been minuscule—if he didn’t know better, he’d say that he hadn’t touched the glass at all.

*Thank Hirako I didn’t gulp the whole thing!* he thought.

He tried for some conversation instead.

“What did you mean,” he said to Droole, “when you said, ‘Uh oh, here we go again’ when we first came in?”

“Well, it’s just on account of what happened last time we came through here,” said Droole. “Cliffy had a slight tiff with a crewmember of the SCS Intrepid.”

“Define ‘slight tiff,’” Roger urged.

“Well, it started off with some unhealthy anecdotes about his inheritance,” Droole elaborated, “and then continued with some unflattering anatomical references...”

Roger interrupted, “I think I get the picture.”

“Hrmp! Men!” Flo exclaimed under her breath. “You can’t live with them...and sometimes you can’t even house-train them!”

Roger was just about to retort when he heard a slight cough and felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around and saw a bearded man stand behind him. The man was wearing a revolting brown vest covering a dingy beige shirt, khaki pants, and a hugely exaggerated smile.

“Howdy there, partner,” the salesbeast intoned. “Allow

me to introduce myself. My name is Nelo Jones, Merchant of Venus. You know, from the moment I saw you I could tell you were a man of good taste, with an eye for quality, with an IQ significantly higher than the chair he was sitting in. Could I interest you in a lucky tribble's foot? A bootleg copy of the latest Thing's Quest game? Or maybe some genuine Chernobyl handcuffs—guaranteed to give you that 'special glow' that only hard radiation can?"

Only one word came to Roger's mind concerning these items, and it wasn't one meant for polite conversations. "Well, actually I'm—" Roger tried.

Nelo didn't take notice. "I can see you're looking for something special, Roger. Can I call you Roger?" He didn't even wait for a reply. "Well, I've got just the thing..."

He rummaged around in his pocket. Roger took full opportunity of this rare moment of silence to try and get the man to go away. "Um, you know what, I—" he tried again.

His attempt to dismiss the salesbeast failed, as Nelo produced a small plastic bag featuring a green creature and the legend *Space Monkeys*. This didn't look too promising.

"I gotcha," Nelo continued unabated. "How about a pack of these delightful *Space Monkeys*? They're all the rage in the colony worlds. You don't have to feed them, and there's no mess! For you: Sixty buckazoids."

"You know, I really don't—"

"You drive a hard bargain, Rog. Tell you what: I'll give you a sample pack of *Space Monkeys* and my business card, with my compliments. Then, you can buy something for your lady friend the next time you pass through here, all right?"

"Well, that—" said Roger, having no other choice than to accept the objects the salesbeast was handing him.

"It's been a real pleasure doing business with you, Roger. Well, I gotta get goin'. Ciao!" Nelo concluded. Realizing he wasn't going to make a big score here, he turned around and

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moved on to find another victim.

Roger exchanged glances with his crewmates. Himself, he hadn't much to say. All he could think was that he'd just experienced what could easily be classified as a 'lucky escape'.

Suddenly, he noticed a looming shadow over him, and heard an oddly familiar, menacing giggle. He turned around and looked straight into the lower abdomen area of a purple uniform. Embossed on the front was the yellow, triangular StarCon emblem. He looked up and stared into the face of Captain Quirk.

“Well, well,” he giggled tauntingly, “look who it isn't.”

The sudden appearance of Quirk was like putting a bullet in the brain of Roger's good mood. It didn't take much for Quirk to offend Roger or put him on defense, and now that Roger equaled him in rank, there was no point in hiding it.

“Buzz off, laserbrain!” Roger retorted.

Quirk seemed unabated. “Enjoying your new command, trashman? I recommended you for the job.”

“That's *sanitation engineer* to you, crumb!” Roger spat.

“Ooh, an aristocrat,” Quirk continued, finding Roger's anger almost invigorating. “I bet ambassador Wankmeister would be impressed.” He leaned forward to whisper in Roger's ear, but made sure that the whole table, and a few of the surrounding ones, could hear it. “She and I are having a very good time, working together...*closely*...on the Goliath.”

Roger's face started to match the color of his uniform. He positively exploded, “Quirk, you have the looks of an Orat and the *manners to match!*”

That did the trick on Quirk. His scornful visage changed to deeply incensed and vexed. “Why you little...” he muttered, then started yelling: “I could have brought you up on *charges* for that!”

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\* Translated: “His teasing face expression changed to deeply angered and offended.” ©

The two men, both angered beyond the point of polite conversation, stood up. Although Roger was tall, Quirk was a head and a half taller than him, which made him look looming—an aspect of the situation that he particularly enjoyed. Under normal circumstances, this would have intimidated Roger beyond breaking point, but in this case he was so furious that he forgot everything about being afraid. All he really wanted to do was leap for Quirk's throat and start tearing it out, but realism kicked in and just left him standing there, breathing heavily, face flushed red with rage.

Quirk seemed equally enraged, but decided to keep cool, just to seem superior. "I demand satisfaction, wimp," he said coolly. "I challenge you...to a game of *Battle Cruiser*."

"Fine!" Roger spat. "I'm going to kick your ass into the next quadrant, Quirk!"

Quirk allowed himself to smile patronizingly. "We'll see about that, broom jockey."

And with that, the two duelists went for the staircase leading up to the leftmost booth, which housed the arcade machines.

Management had made a bit of a blunder in installing that booth—somebody had managed to convince them that putting arcade machines up would keep the younger crowd busy. Then they were hit with the fact that there was such a thing as a legal drinking age, and those people that played arcade machines were usually *under* it. This presented a problem, which management quickly (some say *too* quickly) solved by re-christening the booth the "duel chamber", and keeping only the arcade machines that involved two players and a lot of violence.

*Battle Cruiser* was not especially violent, but strangely popular, which was the only reason why management had decided to keep it. It was a game of strategy where two people would hide a fleet of starships on their own board,



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obscured from their opponents view. The object was to shoot blind, try to find all of your opponents hidden ships, and then nuke them. The game was developed by the ScumSoft Corporation, and had been marketed as “a revolutionary game of wits for all ages”. Fact is it was a total rip-off, but nobody seemed to care—it was still, despite all its blatant tackiness and unoriginality, fun.

Roger recalled from his academy days when part of the practical training was playing games of strategy and reflex against fellow cadets. Roger had done surprisingly well at *CyberDOOM*, considering that his opponents had all known the secret cheat codes for invincibility and infinite ammo. His experience with *Battle Cruiser*, though, was his first.

Even so, after half an hour of play, the game was set at a tie. Roger was a veritable waterfall of transudation. Even Quirk was beginning to get warm around the collar. Roger was left with a starbase in sector three, and Quirk had his escape shuttle left somewhere in sector one. Quirk had already knocked out two of the four squares on Roger’s starbase, but Roger had two of the three on Quirk’s ship.

Roger took a gamble, pointed out the coordinates on the touch-pad screen, and pressed FIRE. The speakers on the console made a laser sound, and visually displayed Roger’s shot. A green text in the upper right corner flashed MISS. Roger muttered something unintelligible.

Quirk took a shot and hit the third square of Roger’s starbase. Quirk smiled mischievously, and Roger almost went into spasm.

Roger took another shot, biting his lips—this was his last chance of victory. The familiar laser shot sounded, and then...then...

...the sound of an explosion!

A red text displayed the word HIT in the upper right corner. Quirk’s escape shuttle appeared on Roger’s screen, shak-

ing uncontrollably, then detonating with another, louder explosion.

Roger's face lit up like a Christmas tree. He had won! He had beaten his enemy! Quirk's face flushed red with anger and he bowed his head, teeth gritted, fists firmly clenched.

Roger, in a fit of exhilaration, called out, "I won! I won!" repeatedly. He pointed a trembling index finger at Quirk, who was now looking at him with a facial expression that burned a hole in Roger's eyes. Roger didn't notice. "That'll teach *you* to call me a mop jockey!" he taunted playfully.

Quirk didn't do anything. He just stood up and walked silently towards the stairs, heading down. Roger followed, a cheerful skip to his step.

When they came down, Roger was rather surprised to find two men restraining an unknown StarCon officer, and four men desperately trying to keep Cliffy from pulverizing the aforementioned officer.

Cliffy managed to disentangle himself for a brief second, of which he made full use, screaming "Why you dirty no good..." and lunging at the officer. The officer received a powerful punch to the jawbone, which sent his head to one side, spitting teeth fractures. The four guys behind Cliffy got him back under control and pulled him to a safe distance.

"What's going on here, Cliffy?" Roger asked, incredulously.

"Captain," Cliffy half-yelled angrily, "that slug-bait crewman from the Goliath just called our ship a *garbage scow!* I couldn't just sit there and let him get away with it!"

"Cliffy...the Eureka *is* a garbage scow," Roger said quietly.

"I knew that," Cliffy continued, "but he didn't have to go rub our noses in it!"

At this point, Quirk piped in. "I've heard enough. Guards, place this man under arrest and toss him in the brig!"

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he barked, indicating Cliffy with his hand

Roger looked at Quirk, positively stunned. “Wait a minute, Quirk, you can’t just—”

“I can and did!” Quirk growled. “Now just *stow* it, Wilco, or you’ll end up alongside him in a *detention* cell!”

Two of the four men restraining Cliffy, who turned out to be station security guards, slapped a couple of hand cuffs on Cliffy’s wrist. Cliffy tried to get a last swing at the Goliath crewman, who just smiled tauntingly at him. The two guards proceeded to drag Cliffy away to the brig area of the station.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me,” Quirk continued with an evil grin, “I have to get back to my ship. I wouldn’t want to keep the *ambassador* waiting.” The last sentence hit Roger like a bombshell, but he managed to restrain himself.

Quirk threw his head back superiorly, jarring the hair piece loose a bit, and headed for the transporter, followed by his crew members. Roger was still glaring incredulously at the pad after they’d transported away.

Eager to find out what had transpired, Roger went through the small doorway next to the transporter with the ominous moniker BRIG AREA—KEEP OUT OR WE’LL BEAT YOU SEVERELY.

The brig area was totally different from the main lounge area. First of all, the lights—or, rather, the absence of lights—gave the room a cool, dark blue decor; one that spoke of immense impersonality and discomfort. The room was rectangular, and shaped roughly like the Eureka’s engineering room, except that it was much, much longer. A perpetual-seeming aisle of small cells stretched the length of the station, and up front—where Roger had entered—the two cell rows ended. In the corner was a computer console, apparently operating security systems, and was guarded by the two security guards that had dragged Cliffy away.

Roger’s plan was simple: Walk down to Cliffy’s cell and work out a plan. Considering his rank, the two security guards

had no power to control his desire to visit. Briskly, he strode over to the first cell and began his walk down the aisle. Or rather, *attempted* to walk down the aisle. For the minute he tried to get past the beginning of the first cell, he was shocked instantly and thrown back a meters distance. The invisible forcefield in front of him crackled slightly with the electric discharge, then plunged back into silence.

Roger got on his feet and tried to ignore the incessant giggle from the two security guards.

“Sorry about the jolt there, sir,” said one of them. “I just turned the force field off. You’re free to go in there.”

Roger tried again, and, not too surprisingly, was shocked again. This time it seemed like the forcefield discharge hurt even more, and Roger had serious trouble regaining a standing position. The all-out guffawing laughter from the two guards didn’t help much either.

“I can’t believe he fell for the old ‘shut-off-the-forcefield’ trick!” laughed the one guard.

Reluctantly, Roger realized that he wasn’t going to get anywhere with those guards. He turned around, saying nothing, and headed back to the bar, ignoring the guard’s imaginative and unflattering tales on how he became captain in the first place.

Disgruntled, Roger went over and sat down at his table with Flo and Droole.

Flo sighed. “Men. You can’t live with them...and sometimes you can’t even houstrain them.”

“The Captain hasn’t got time to listen to another one of your fascinating narratives, Flo,” Droole intoned. “He has to figure out a way to get Cliffy out of the slammer...right, sir?”

“Right,” Roger said, not sure if he actually meant it. Jail-breaking a convicted felon—even if he *was* innocent—was bound to look pretty bad on his exemplary record.

“See, Flo, I told you the captain wasn’t a *complete* closet

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case!” Droole said excitedly. “I’m with you, sir,” he continued to Roger. “Let’s go blast him out!”

Roger wasn’t sure how much of that drink Droole had consumed, but it was apparently beyond what was considered healthy. “That’s...a fine idea, Droole, but it would probably draw too much attention. No, there’s got to be a better way.”

“Well, whatever it is, we’re with you, sir,” Droole reassured.

Roger couldn’t decide if that was a good or a bad thing.

At any rate, he began rummaging around in his possessions, looking for something that could cause a distraction, but wouldn’t pin the direct responsibility on him. What he found was the pack of *Space Monkeys*. There was a red textbox at the bottom of the front, reading: WARNING—DO NOT ALLOW CONTENTS TO OVER-MIX WITH ALCOHOL.

And that was when Roger got his idea. He cautiously opened the bag, careful not to spill any of its contents—God knows what its contents might be, anyway—and moved it towards his half-full glass of bourbon.

As soon as he did this, the facial expression on his two crewmates changed considerably when they realized what he planned to do.

Roger teetered the bag over and dropped its contents—which turned out to be a strange form of green powder—into his bourbon. The concoction crackled and fizzed, almost to the point of frothyness, and began to turn slightly green. And from out of the glass popped a small, green, silly-looking space monkey.

It didn’t look like a monkey at all, in fact. It was more frog-reminiscent than monkey, but it didn’t crouch down and croak all the time. Instead, it was furnished with large, white eyes that seemed to extend beyond the confines of the eye sockets, and carried a hugely exaggerated smile. They also seemed to defy the laws of gravity. The space monkey that

just escaped the confines of Roger's bourbon glass did not crawl; it hovered. Apparently unable to control this at all, the space monkey quickly gave up on that idea and settled in a relaxed fashion, hands wrapped together at the back of its head, legs crossed, floating off into the lounge area.

Roger stared bewildered at his new pet as it suddenly began to split itself in half. Before Roger could blink, the one space monkey had suddenly become two—an exact duplicate, which *also* began to replicate. And from out of his glass came more and more space monkeys.

Roger began to wonder if this had been such a smart idea after all.

In a remarkably short time, there were at least a hundred space monkeys floating around in the bar room. Panic was beginning to erupt among most of the patrons, who fled for the transporter pad, eager to get off the station. A voice from one of the corners cried out, "Okay, who's the *dead* moron that let all those damn space monkeys loose?"

Although this was more than he'd really expected, Roger realized that he'd gotten the thing he was after: a diversion. He stood up from his chair and made his way through the crowd that was now huddled around the transporter to the brig area.

Inside the brig area, things were still quiet, and the sounds from the bar were muffled enough for the guards not to notice. They were still standing around the computer console, chatting idly about long-distance communication services.

Suddenly, a series of red flashes lit up, and a klaxon wail went off on all speakers. The security guard standing in front of the console gripped it by the edges, intensely studying the read-out.

"We've got a problem in the main lounge!" he said.

"Really?" said the other one.

The first one looked excitedly at his partner. "Come on,

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let’s go see what it is! Maybe we’ll get to beat somebody up!”

With that, they bolted to their feet and zoomed past Roger, ignoring him completely, into the cluttered lounge area.

Roger was left alone in the brig.

He went over to the computer console, hoping to find some way to turn off the forcefield. It proved to be a simple matter of pressing a button. When he did so, the forcefield crackled as it discharged all its current energy, then disappeared.

He went down the aisle of cells, looking at each one of them, trying to find Cliffy’s holding cell. That, too, proved to be easy.

“That’s quite a mess you’ve gotten yourself into there, Cliffy,” Roger said to his chief engineer.

“Cap’n!” Cliffy exclaimed when he saw Roger. “Boy, am I glad to see you. You’re not just going to leave me here in this cramped little cell to rot for eternity?”

“Of course not, Cliffy,” Roger reassured. “The Eureka isn’t going anywhere without its chief engineer. Heck, nobody else can figure out half the jury-rigged contraptions you’ve installed.”

“It’s nice to feel needed, sir,” said Cliffy. “Where did everybody go?”

“Well,” said Roger, “I sorta had to...divert them a bit. Now,” he said, looking at the locking mechanism around him, “let’s try and get you out of here.”

One look at the panels and keypads lining the cell proved one thing: This was *not* going to be easy.

Roger tapped a couple of buttons on the color-coded keypads next to him, but none of them made any sense to him, and certainly didn’t yield any results. The incessant klaxon wail brought Roger back to reality and made him give up with a sigh of frustration.

“It’s an unbreakable lock,” said Cliffy, with a certain de-

gree of concern.

“Thank you, I’ve noticed,” Roger retorted.

“It’s one of them ProtectoSeals,” Cliffy elaborated, “they won’t open without a specific key combination.”

“You wouldn’t happen to have caught that in passing, would you?”

“ ‘Fraid not, sir.”

“Darn, we could’ve used that.”

“I guess you’ll need to find another way in,” said Cliffy. “Maybe find something that’ll cut through these bars.”

Roger had an idea. “Your laser torch?”

“Sound idea, sir,” said Cliffy, “but it’s mighty cramped quarters in here, and you’d end up frying your chief engineer here. And I hope that’s not in your plan.”

Roger smiled weakly. One thing kept running through his mind, though. *Something that’ll cut through these bars. Something that’ll cut...*

Then it hit him:

*Corrosive!*

Not cut, but *melt!*

He leapt to his feet, much to Cliffy’s bewilderment, and bolted for the main lounge area.

“Sir, where are you going?” Cliffy called.

“Just hang in there, Cliffy, I’ll be right back!” Roger shouted.

“That’s...what I had in mind, sir,” said the chief engineer.

\* \* \*

As soon as Roger entered the main lounge area, his adrenaline immediately caught on fire, bolted up through his entire system, and didn’t give a flying fuck about any health standards.

The space monkeys were reproducing at an alarming rate. Literally billions upon billions were floating around in the air.



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The otherwise warm red decor had changed to a strangely ominous-looking green. Roger knew it would only be a short time before the little bastards began clogging up the air ducts, making the dome pop like an overfilled balloon.

The station was now almost completely devoid of patrons. The last two remaining customers groggily stumbled onto the empty transport pads and were whisked away to their ship.

Roger hurried over to the transporter and beamed back to the Eureka.

When he materialized in the science lab, he skipped off the transport pad and went for the specimen habitat. He pressed the open button, the habitat swooshed open, and Roger could see a squiggly little tail and a couple of tentacles clasp around the edges of the tank. Next thing he knew, he felt a slam on his head and his vision went black. He pulled Spike loose from his face, shoved the little critter in his jacket pocket, and hurried back onto the transporter again.

When he arrived back on the Nova Station, it was ominously quiet. The klaxon had stopped. Only the sound of scurrying—the space monkeys trying to find someplace to put themselves and their offsprings—reverberated throughout the station. The lights were going on and off arhythmically. Some of the space monkeys had apparently found their way into the control bits of the station and had started messing up the wiring. It wouldn't take long before power would cut out completely. That meant the transporter would also shut down.

Roger hurried back into the brig area, found Cliffy's cell, and managed to almost give him a minor heart attack when he produced his diarrhetic friend.

“What...” stuttered Cliffy, pointing a trembling finger at Spike, “...what do you plan to do with that, sir?”

Roger smiled serenely. Cliffy had a hard time telling whether his captain was merely playing with him, or if he'd really gone stark raving bonkers.

Much to Cliffy's alarm, Roger proceeded to place Spike on the cell bars. The creature, apparently aware that *something* was going on, went into what looked like a grueling process of building up waste material from its abdomen. Then it began the process of precision-firing defecation on the individual bars. Both Cliffy and Roger looked on in astonishment.

It didn't take long for the creature to complete a round-trip and spill a little corrosive matter on each bar. And each little present slowly began to sink into the metal and erode, eat its way, until it finally disintegrated. The center of the circle, now having nothing to support itself on, came away neatly and collapsed with a loud *clang* on the metal floor, which reverberated several times down the long hallway.

Cliffy gingerly crawled out of the new emergency exit and set in hurried pursuit of his captain, who was already down near the door to the lounge.

Roger practically flew out the door and landed neatly on the transport pad. Cliffy appeared in the doorway, several seconds later, looking seriously exasperated.

"I'm hurrying, I'm hurrying," he said in response to Roger's almost panic-stricken hand movements.

Cliffy trudged over to an empty transporter pad and got on it. Roger activated the transport.

The station's lights were beginning to flicker at an insane rate. It looked like the power could cut out any second now.

The transport beam struck down on the two men and whisked them away.

Nova Station plunged into a deep, dark silence. The only thing breaking the throbbing cessation of sound was the scurrying and scampering of the little green space monkeys, who never knew what was about to hit them.

# 11

The starry panorama was briefly lit up by a brilliant white flash.

The dome structure of the Nova Station, now unable to handle the added pressure of billions of space monkeys, finally gave way and caused the dome to expand to its full size. And then it popped.

Countless bits and pieces were scattered by the explosion. Some of these were structural survivors from the combustion, but most of them were soggy, green remains.

Droole managed to steer clear of the larger derelict bits, but a couple of green bodyparts managed to *splat* their way onto the viewscreen. They were, however, wiped off by the convenient (if not slightly outdated) windshield wipers, to the accompaniment of a sickening slurping sound. Roger winced in disgust as some of the more mushy bits still managed to cling to the screen, despite the wipers' effort.

After a while, Droole turned around and reported, “Sir, we’re clear of the debris zone.”

“Thanks,” said Roger. “Do you think we’ll get in trouble for that incident in the spacebar?”

“I certainly hope not,” Flo said. “Anyway, that was really brave what you did for Cliffy back there. It gave

me...moosebumps.”

“Moosebumps?” said Roger.

“Yeah. Like goosebumps, only...bigger,” said Flo.

There was something about that tone that Roger really didn't like.

Flo turned around. “Sir, we just got a call from StarCon Central Command. We have orders to proceed to the colony on Klorox II for an emergency trash collection.”

“Klorox II,” Roger mumbled, “the name sounds familiar, but I can't quite place it ...”

“Why don't you go in the back and lie down,” said Flo, a strange new smile to her face, “I'll bring you a hot cup of tea and give you a back rub while you think about it.”

Apart from space monkeys flying out his butt, this was the last thing Roger had expected. “*Huh?*” he said, stunned. “You want to give me a *what?*”

“A back rub,” Flo continued unabated. “You know, you lie down, I start with the shoulders and work my way down...”

“Nudge nudge, wink wink,” Droole whispered. “I think Flo's opinion of you has altered somewhat.”

Roger turned to Flo, who was still smiling. “Well, eh, I'll,” said Roger, “I'll have to think about it...”

Flo seemed unabashed. “You ever do it Regillian style, sir?” she proceeded.

“Can't...say that I do,” Roger answered.

“Once you've had green, you'll know what I mean, sugar.” With that, she flashed Roger a wink and turned back to her station.

Roger turned to Droole and whispered, “What's with Flo?”

“Well, I can't say for certain,” Droole responded with a hint of sarcasm, “but I think what you did for Cliffy back at the station has changed her attitude towards you a bit. Confi-

## **“The Next Mutation”**

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dentially...” Droole’s voice went to almost inaudible. “... *I think she kinda likes you.*”

“Ah,” Roger said, not exactly thrilled with the notion. “Well...maybe we should get underway, then. Set a course for Klorox II and let’s get it over with.”

“That’s affirmative, sir,” said Droole and keyed in the coordinates. “Coordinates locked in, sir, ready to get underway.”

“Lite speed!” Roger commanded.

The Eureka’s engines powered up, the ship made a nifty U-turn, and within a few seconds, the giant vacuum-cleaner sped off.

# 12

The commanding administrator leaned back in his chair and took a breath of air. He had just finished his log entry for the day. The three moons outside would soon be setting—it was already getting a bit dark. The bright light, which had poured through the window walls of the greenhouse a few hours before, now seemed dim and diffused.

His mind was briefly overrun with a sense of panic and wondering: Where could they be? Could something have happened to them?

But, in the interest of preserving his good mood, he forced the thoughts out of his mind.

They still lingered, however. He didn't think of them directly, but somewhere in his subconsciousness, he still worried. *Could it be related to... Could they have had something to do with it?*

One thought kept creeping up. He tried to fight it back, dismissing it as silly and juvenile, but it kept pushing:

*Could the creatures have gotten them?*

\* \* \*

“Commander!”

## **“The Next Mutation”**

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The administrator had been dozing off, dreaming fitfully of...

“Commander!” The voice again. It came from outside the greenhouse.

He didn’t want to think about the dream. It had been too real, too actual. Not your average nightmare; almost like... *a warning.*

*The base was being attacked... people were screaming, running for their lives, abandoning their tools... laserblasts could be heard. The creatures... it was the creatures!*

“Commander!” the voice yelled again, closer this time. Much to the administrators relief, it managed to knock him back to reality. The voice sounded frail and desperate. “Commander, we’ve got a real megaload of problems on our hands!”

He turned around to see his second-in-command, Trelle, stand in the doorway. The two of them had been friends since their academy days. Whenever Trelle started calling him “commander”, which was his actual rank, instead of by his first name, he knew there had to be something terribly, terribly wrong.

“What is it, Trelle?”

Trelle just looked at him. He didn’t have to do anything else. The blood soaking the rupture in his stomach lining, cascading slowly down his legs and onto the ground; the splatters on his forehead; the wild look in his eyes...

“Trelle,” the commander repeated, “what’s going on?”

“Harry...” Trelle whimpered. “Harry...this is it...we’re screwed...”

And then he collapsed. Trelle fell to the floor where he stood... *dead.*

And just then, Commander Kerry could hear the sounds surrounding the colony:

People were screaming, running for their lives, abandon-

ing their tools... laserblasts could be heard.  
The creatures...  
It was the *creatures*.



# 13

“What do you know about Klorox II?” Roger asked, not to anyone in particular.

“Not much, sir,” Flo replied. “Only that it’s a small Star-Con colony at the fringes of the G6 quadrant.”

“Anything exciting?”

“Sorry, no, sir,” Flo said with genuine sympathy.

“Looks like we’re stuck with another crummy job,” said Roger.

“What did you expect, sir?” Droole retorted.

Roger shrugged. “I just thought they might give us a break.”

“Fat chance,” Droole snorted. Then he continued, his voice strangely soft. “By the way, what you did for Cliffy back at the station was really great, sir. Most other commanders would’ve just left him there to rot.”

“Thanks,” said Roger.

“And that diversion with the Space Monkeys...very creative, sir.”

“Yeah, it...*was* pretty brilliant, wasn’t it?”

Immediately, Droole’s voice changed. “Now don’t get all puffed up on me, sir, or I’ll have to smack you upside the head.”

Roger stared strangely at his sub-corporal.

Suddenly, Cliffy's face appeared overhead. "Cap'n," he began.

"Yes, Cliffy?"

"Just wanted to let you know I've finished the repairs on the android and reprogrammed her to act as our science officer. You can reach her through the buttons on your command chair console."

"Okay, thanks for that," said Roger. Then, a thought hit him. "You... *did* kill the lethality setting?"

"Oh..." said Cliffy. "Oh...sure I did. Cliffy out." He grinned, then severed the connection.

Roger wasn't sure he was going to like this. He was sure Cliffy was joking, but he had been wrong in that area before.

A blip on Droole's console distracted his attention. "Sir, we're approaching our destination," said the red-hooded sub-corporal.

"Drop to regular speed," Roger ordered.

"Aye sir."

The engines audibly cut out and the rumbling of the engines ceased. The orange planet of Klorox II came into view.

"That's strange, Captain," Flo reported, "I'm not tracking a waste beacon..."

"Have you contacted the station?" Roger asked.

"Yes, sir, but they're not responding. Maybe their communication systems are out...?" One look at his communications officer informed Roger that even *she* wasn't buying *that* explanation.

"Maybe we should investigate, Captain," said Droole. "I can bring us into standard orbit so we can take a look..."

"Yeah," said Roger, "take us in."

"Aye, sir, standard orbit," said Droole.

The planet became visibly larger as the Eureka entered its atmospheric bane and began circling the planet.

## “The Next Mutation”

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“Flo, hail StarCon, let them know what’s going on,” Roger ordered.

“Aye, sir,” said Flo. After a few seconds, she reported apologetically, “There seems to be no response. Their wavelengths are still busy.”

Roger had an idea, but he wasn’t sure he was going to like it. But there seemed to be no option. “Well, can we reach the Goliath from here?” he asked.

“I believe so, sir.”

“Well, hail them. Maybe *they* can give us some advice.”

Flo carried out the order, and within a few seconds, the face of Captain Quirk appeared on the viewscreen. “*This is the Goliath,*” he grumbled, “*who’s on this frequen—*” As soon as he noticed who he was talking to, his expression changed considerably. “*I might have known...it’s you, Wilco. What do you want?*”

“Well, we’ve arrived at Klorox II,” said Roger, “just as ordered. But there’s nothing here. No waste beacon.”

“*It’s probably nothing,*” Quirk assured, irritated, “*but if you’re so concerned with it, why don’t you beam down and take a look for yourself?*”

“We intend to...”

Quirk snapped him off. “*Good. Now do your ship a favor and stop wasting your carbon dioxide on the com circuits. The ambassador and I have important work to do.*”

Roger’s ire immediately went up a few notches, and he checked a rude remark that was about to escape his lips.

“Will do,” he said, unable to disguise the naked contempt in his voice.

“*Fine. Goliath out!*” And with that, Quirk disappeared from the screen.

There was a moments silence as the facts began to seep in. Roger reasoned that the answers could only be found on the surface of the planet, and staying up here wasting time was not

going to accomplish much.

“Well, better get down there, I suppose,” he said, standing.

“I’m going with you, sir,” said Droole.

“Fine,” said Roger. “Let’s go.”

Both men went out the door and down to the transporter room.

# 14

The dry heat was the first thing Roger noticed when he materialized onto the surface of Klorox II. Although the three moons, which the colonists had nicknamed Larry, Moe and Curly, were setting, the temperature was still high. Despite this, a gust of wind blew steadily across the landscape, toying with Roger’s hair as it flowed, carrying a lone tumbleweed to an unknown destination.

One word sprang to mind as Roger looked at his surroundings: *desolate*.

He was standing on a ridge encircling the colony. Below he could see a small canyon, which nestled the colony structures. The canyon was almost perfectly circular, causing Roger to wonder whether it was artificially constructed or not. If it had, it had been impeccably crafted. The red sand, the red-hued cliffsides—just like the rest of the planet.

The structures themselves consisted of several domestic buildings, a larger construction which Roger assumed must be some kind of gathering or mess hall, and a greenhouse. He could spy several crop areas further to the north. A shuttle pad was also situated about a hundred meters away from the greenhouse.

But the whole place looked empty. Unpopulated. In fact,

the entire colony had an air of abandonment about it. Blast marks adorned the colony structures, the greenhouse was in shambles, and the shuttle (which was supposed to be on the shuttlepad) was missing, having been replaced by a large scorch mark.

Some meters away from Roger, an array of mining tools had been carelessly discarded, as if... *as if their owners left in a hurry.*

Something about this place made a chill run down Roger's spine, despite the heat.

Therefore it came as quite a surprise when Droole announced, "Maybe we should split up, Captain."

"What?" said Roger, looking at his sub-corporal with mild astonishment.

"We can cover more territory that way," said his bridge officer.

"Don't you think we ought to stick together?" Roger asked.

"Only if you make a quick wardrobe change, sir," Droole said, looking at Roger's red uniform with a certain air of displeasement.

"Droole, this is not the time to play fashion critic."

"Well, it's just...your uniform is so *red*, sir. It's bad luck." Droole left no room for discussion. "I'll meet you back on the ship."

Roger was seriously beginning to wonder what he'd gotten himself into now. But before he could formulate a protest, Droole had vanished.

Roger shrugged and sighed. He started walking towards the colony buildings.

\* \* \*

Most of the buildings, Roger soon found out, were boarded up.

## “The Next Mutation”

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Those that weren't were protected with access codes, which Roger didn't have the slightest clue how to break. Not that he figured it would do much good. If the colonists were here, they wouldn't lock themselves up in a place they knew nobody could break into.

Roger approached the large greenhouse. The walls were made up of several panes of glass, all of which had been covered with white sheets. One of these, at the side, had been torn apart, and the glass beyond it had been smashed, creating an improvised—if not somewhat destructive—entry.

Cautiously, Roger stepped inside the greenhouse. Now that he looked at the place from the inside, the deliberate cruelty and ruinous that had gone into the making of the doorway seemed mild by comparison.

The arboretum was, quite simply, a shambles.

Several glass panes on the wall were shattered, only covered by the flimsy piece of cloth. Plants, pots and other assorted gardening material had been strewn carelessly about the room. Large computer consoles, presumably for cataloging or researching, had been thrown about inattentively.

Then, Roger heard the noise.

It sounded like something scurrying around the corners of the room. It gave Roger quite a shock at first, but then he reasoned he was being silly. The colony was, obviously, abandoned. It was probably just the eerie sensation that seemed to engulf this place that had played tricks on his mind. Maybe a space rodent or something.

A slight, muffled humming noise attracted Roger's attention. He strained to listen—to find out what it was, and where it was coming from. The latter proved quite easy, as he quickly deduced that the sound was coming from this room. The first was also relatively easy, now that he discerned the noise—it sounded like a computer running.

He located the device quite easily. It was a large, rectan-

gular shaped console, which stood in the center of the room. As Roger approached the computer, he noticed that the screen read “LOG COMPUTER”, and was asking for a five digit access code.

Just as he was about to give a couple of random numbers a try, he heard another noise. This time, it was loud, and was coming directly from behind him.

*Something was moving!*

He spun around, just in time to see a large figure come flying towards him and whacking him across the face with both hands.

Roger was sent flying a clear meter across the floor, and landed on his back. The creature, whatever it was, was standing with his back towards the sun, making it impossible to see who—or what—it was.

But it was agile, if nothing else. It skipped furiously towards Roger, fists clenched, eager to deliver some more punishment.

Roger rolled on his back to his left as quickly as he could, narrowly avoiding the creature, who struck into the hard rock ground with his elbow.

Roger formulated a quick plan. It wasn't a good one, but it was the best he could think of right now, when panic had seized him and every muscle in his body were twitching with mild paroxysms of terror. He would jump for his life. Skip over the log computer, land on his feet, and bolt like hell for the door. Then he'd figure out what to do once he got outside—maybe yell for Droole, or something, or try to find some safe place to hide...

The creature had recovered and was rising to its feet. Roger sprinted, jumped up in the air, landed with one foot on top of the console, tried to put his other foot in front, but slammed into the edge of the console, lost balance, and fell on his face.



## “The Next Mutation”

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Roger didn't even have enough time to utter a curse. The creature picked him up off the console by the lapel and threw him in a corner. Roger landed uncomfortably in a pile of broken ceramic pots, which protested loudly by breaking even more. Roger wasn't used to this sort of physical punishment. He slid down and came to rest, lying flat on his back.

The creature jumped over to Roger in a single leap. It bent over him and grabbed him by the lapel.

Roger got his first good look at his attacker now. It was humanoid, but the face was horribly distorted and looked like it was in the early stages of melting. His arms, neck, and various other visible appendages followed the same description. The clothes he wore were blue, but tattered and ripped to the point of uselessness.

To Roger's great surprise, the mutant spoke. “Well, well, aren't you an ugly one?” it said. Its voice sounded growling, sepulchral, almost as if he was speaking with the bottom of his throat, not his mouth.

Roger found the remark quite contradictory.

“I was once ugly like you,” the creature continued, “but look at me now! Maybe I can make you...pretty like me, hmm?”

This didn't sound too promising.

“Now try and dodge my death loogies, monkey boy!” the creature concluded menacingly, almost grinning with sadistic pleasure.

Roger could audibly hear the saliva and slime gather in the mutants throat—*hhrrrrkkk!*—which was almost enough to make him retch. Not so much the thought that he was about to spit on by a guy with a haemorrhoidal skin condition, but more what those loogies might do to him. *Maybe I can make you pretty like me?*

The first spitball escaped the creatures lips, but Roger threw his head to one side. The glob of slime—which turned

out to be a regurgitational shade of green—collapsed harmlessly onto the ground with a *splat*.

The mutant only smiled, somehow finding this whole situation rather amusing, and began powering up for another.

Roger had regained his lost strength from the beating by means of pure adrenaline rush, and was now struggling like a gazelle caught in a lion's maw. Just as the sound of the creature spitting the completed spitball out, Roger managed to release the mutants grip and throw himself off to the right.

The creature was stunned for a moment. Roger tried panickly to gain a standing position, hoping to resume his previous plan—bolt for the door—but the creature was too fast and managed to pin Roger again, this time restraining both his arms in a firm grip. Roger was helpless this time—his struggles against the restraint were weak and had absolutely no effect, other than to strain his arm muscles above and beyond what is considered healthy, and he could barely move his head.

The mutant horked extra loudly, to build up a third—and by far, the most all-powerful—spitball of doom.

Roger closed his eyes, hoping that at least it would be somewhat painless. Any second now, he expected a wet glob of slime to hit his face and start seeping into his skin.

But it never came. Even with his closed eyes, Roger could notice the bright flash that suddenly appeared. He opened his eyes, in time to see the mutant's grin evaporate in horror. His abdomen began to drip with ooze—red colored ooze. His grip suddenly grew forceless. Roger took full advantage of the situation to stand up, jerking the mutant off of him, and sending him lying back down on the dusty ground.

Roger got up and looked around to see who had saved him. Droole was standing in the doorway, holding his service discharger, casually blowing at the tip of the nozzle.

Roger calmed. "Nice shootin', Tex," he said, still panting.

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“I thought I was a goner...”

“Hey, he’s a real looker,” Droole remarked. “I’m gonna go see if there’s anymore of these creatures I can blow away. I’ll meet you back on the ship.”

Roger nodded, too breathless to speak at the moment. Droole left.

Roger turned his attention to the mutant, which—much to his surprise—was still breathing. He wasn’t trying to go for Roger, though; his strength had left him. What he *was* doing was undergoing a strange form of transformation. The pusfigured disfigurement of the skin slowly disappeared, until Roger found himself staring at a human being.

“Thank you,” the man gasped, “at last...I’m free.”

Roger knelt down. “What happened here?”

“Entire colony...mutated...” the man panted with his last breaths. He gathered enough strength to raise his arm and point to an area beyond the arboretum. “Bad...soup...secret path...over...the ridge...”

The last word was uttered only as a whisper. His arm fell down lamely, and his head lost control of itself and tilted to a resting place.

He was dead.

\* \* \*

After having stared at the corpse for over ten minutes in disbelief, Roger finally gathered the courage to search the man for any artifacts which might reveal who he was and what had happened to him.

What he found in the man’s pocket was a folded scrap of paper with five numbers on it.

It didn’t take much brainwork, even for Roger, to put two and two together. He stood up and went over to the log computer console.

As soon as he entered the five digits onto the keypad, the screen immediately cleared itself and was replaced with a screen of text. The header above read: PERSONAL LOG: HARRY KERRY, KLOROX II COLONY ADMINISTRATOR. RECENT ENTRIES.

Personal Log, Stardate 3012.68. Something very strange has been going on in the colony since the Goliath's last visit. A small survey team is a week overdue and there have been reports of strange creatures roaming the badlands. No doubt it's just a bit of "cabin fever" by some of the more imaginative types, but I am worried about the disappearance of the survey team.

It quickly became apparent to Roger that the dead man in front of him was the colony administrator. Harry Kerry. But what had happened? Why this horrible disfigurement?

Roger pressed the NEXT button, and the screen replaced itself with the next entry:

Personal Log, Stardate 3016.68. I am becoming more and more alarmed. The search party dispatched to learn the fate of the survey team hasn't reported back for more than 50 hours. Fear spurred on by more wild rumors about the creatures has the colony on the verge of panic.

Roger hit the NEXT button again, and managed to receive quite a shock just from reading the first sentence. The shock didn't relieve, but lingered instead as he read on.

Personal Log, Stardate 3016.68. God help us! A band of hideous mutant creatures attacked

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the colony last night! Very few of us escaped this massacre, and I have been wounded slightly. There is no doubt that these creatures are intelligent and even appears to have a rudimentary understanding of technology. They have captured the shuttle pad, cutting off our only means of escape. Using my personal passcodes, I have sealed the colony so that the creatures will no longer be able to get into any of the undamaged structures.

The chill had returned and refused to go away as Roger pressed the button again and read the last entry.

Personal Log, Stardate 3017.68. I am in agony. The wound I received burns like fire. An hour ago, the mutant creatures blasted off in the colony shuttle. As they climbed the boarding ramp, I got my first good look at a creature in daylight. It was hideous. The tattered rags it wore were the remnants of a survey team survival suit. I have a terrible suspicion of the fate of the survey team. I am now utterly alone on this planet, dying—I hope...

Roger sat down abruptly after finishing reading. A small, red textbox in the top right corner read <END>. That was it. That was the last entry.

The facts began to assemble themselves in Roger’s mind.

The administrator...*Harry*...had transformed into this hideous mutant creature as a result of having been wounded by one of their weapons. Roger was terrified of imaginings, vividly demonstrating what would have happened, had the mutant managed to score a bullseye hit with his spitballs!

But where did it come from? What was the cause? Apparently, the survey team contracted something while on expedition. Something that made them turn into this horrible, disfigured state of being. And the search party had also come in contact with the same substance. It was apparent that the mutagenic substance—whatever the hell it was—altered the mindstate, warping it to psychotic levels.

Now that the group had weapons, and had increased significantly in number, they charged the colony and blasted off in the shuttle, leaving only one survivor—the administrator—who only escaped the horror by means of his own execution.

Death was seemingly the only thing that could cure the condition. But it was hardly a prescription Roger favored.

There was still one piece of the puzzle missing, though: What had caused the mutation in the first place? Something indigenous to the planet? Hardly...StarCon would not set up a colony on a planet with known dangers of *this* magnitude.

The answer came in the form of a recollection. Roger's subconsciousness kept cycling the same three sentence over and over again:

*Bad soup. Secret path. Over the ridge.*

Roger's eyes widened.

*Over the ridge!*

\* \* \*

Roger scampered from the eerie greenhouse and hurried up the incline to the ridge. The discarded mining tools—*left in the panic*—were lying just in front of him. To his right, the path continued to nothingness, and to his left was just a tall rock wall.

*Secret path...*

There had to be something with the wall. Roger felt around, hoping to find something...anything...

## “The Next Mutation”

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And found it.

It was basically just a large rock that had been pushed in front of a small indentation in the wall. When he moved it, he discovered a metal canister lying inside.

The canister was dripping with a volatile greenish-brown liquid. It was thick and oozing, and reminded Roger of the mutants spitballs. Roger figured it would be best not to get too intimate with that thing.

Instead, he moved to allow the dim sunlight to catch the canister and lighten up the label on the front.

It read, PRIMORDIAL SOUP. BIOHAZARD: TERATOGENIC SUBSTANCE. DO NOT EXPOSE TO DIRECT SUNLIGHT, AIR OR WATER. DO NOT INGEST, INHALE, OR ALLOW CONTACT WITH EXPOSED SKIN. ANOTHER FINE PRODUCT FROM THE GENETIX RESEARCH CORPORATION, COORD. 41666, QUADRANT G6.

Roger fumbled for his PCD (Personal Communication Device) and ordered to be beamed up immediately.

# 15

“Did you find anything of interest on the surface?” Roger asked, settling himself into his command chair.

“No, sir,” Droole replied, “in fact, I found the entire planet to be quite boring...except for that one bit of excitement.”

“For which I owe you one,” said Roger.

“Yeah,” said Droole. “What about you, sir? Did you find anything?”

Roger didn’t have time to answer. Flo swiveled around on her chair with a distressed look on her face. “Captain,” she said, “I’m picking up a distress signal from the Goliath!”

Roger sat up. “Put it on screen.”

The screen crackled for a moment, then displayed the face of Captain Raemes T. Quirk. However, the usual smugness and superiority had left his facade to reveal what could only be described as pure terror.

*“To all Star Confederacy ships in the vicinity...this is the SCS Goliath. We’re under attack! Repeat, we are under attack!”* The screen was briefly overrun with static, and Roger could hear screams in the background. *“They came through...the shuttlebay! Any StarCon ships out there, please respond!”* A storm of white noise flashed over the screen, distorting the picture. Roger thought he saw something bub-



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bling, sizzling on Quirk’s face.

Then, the message abruptly cut itself off.

Roger stared wildly at his bridge officers. Then, his eyes fixed on Flo. “Flo, hail the Goliath, tell them we’re coming!”

“Aye sir,” said Flo and turned back to her station.

Roger pressed the orange button on his command chair keypad, and WD-40’s metallic face appeared on one of the overhang screens. “What function may I assist you with, Captain Wilco?” she said.

“Scan for ships in the immediate vicinity. See if you can locate any that match the description of the SCS Goliath,” said Roger.

WD-40 acknowledged and went to work for a brief second. “Scans show that the Goliath is currently in the vicinity of the Thrakus system. Anything else, Captain?”

“No, that will be all. Thanks, WD-40.”

“Affirmative,” said the android and severed the connection.

Roger turned to Flo. “Any luck?”

“No, sir,” Flo said apologetically, “there is no response from the Goliath.”

“Droole, set a course for the Thrakus system!” Roger ordered.

“That’s affirmative, sir,” Droole acknowledged.

Within seconds, the Eureka was on its way.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, on the SCS Goliath, Quirk sat in his command chair, gleaming. His smile was gleaming, gleaming of pure evil and banefulness. And his skin was gleaming, gleaming of ooze; dripping, orange ooze that covered his face, his arms, his entire body, disfiguring his face, contouring his posture, and warping his brain.

Two men approached the pus-filled chair. The setting around them was that of the Goliath's bridge, which now lay in shambles—blast marks on the walls, convulsing crew-members on the floor still in the early stages of the mutation, and pus-oozing globs of primordial soup dripping from the walls.

The men were also gleaming, though only in one aspect—they weren't smiling.

"Were you able to recover the pod?" Quirk inquired.

"No, sir," said one of the two men. "But we *were* able to get a fix on the general location of it. It is on the surface."

"How long before you can have a 100% certain fix on its location?"

"Not long, sir. We're scanning the surface. We should be able to have it narrowed down to a few meters within the next fifteen minutes."

"I want it done in *ten!*" the captain boomed. "What if—"

"Relax, sir," the other officer intoned, "the pod cannot lift off again, and there is no settlement on the entire planet. And she cannot possibly get far in fifteen minutes time."

"Ten!" Quirk corrected forcefully.

The two men paused. "Yes, sir," they acknowledged in unison, and left.

Quirk's anger was rising, but he had to admit, his minions had a point. There would be no hiding place...

# 16

The planet of Thrakus is a botanic-lover’s paradise, and a truly spectral sight. The ground itself is muddy, gray and dull, but that’s not really important because if you were to go to Thrakus, chances are you wouldn’t get the opportunity to see the ground. The planet is almost totally covered with huge, green plants—so mammothly huge, in fact, that a single leaf can be about the size of a small continent across, and the longest stem is rumored to scratch the stratosphere. All the plants reproduce themselves underground and grow at an alarming rate, needing no seeding or care.

The atmosphere, however, is also highly toxic. Which is why Roger was wearing a rebreather mask when he materialized onto one of the smaller leaves of the planet.

This leaf was actually minuscule by comparison to some of the other planet features, and yet it was over thirty meters across. From where Roger was standing, it proceeded twenty meters to the right, came to an overhang, and proceeded to carry on for the last ten meters on the other side.

Across from him, he could see the escape pod. As soon as the Eureka had arrived, Flo had reported no sign of the Goliath...but an escape pod homing beacon on the surface. After consulting with WD-40, it was decided that a surface search

would be the best approach.

After having procured a gas mask from the lower airlock part of the Eureka, Roger set out to explore the surface. Apparently, he had caught a lucky break. The escape pod was right in eyesight, and, from the looks of it, it would be a small matter to get to it.

He proceeded to walk under the overhang. Here, a corner led to another leaf, and Roger could skim the white gleaming metal through the opening.

He went up to the escape pod. It was small. The front portion consisted of a minuscule cockpit, which could only house one person—maybe two, but only if they were *really* close friends. The entire back portion (which was, maybe, twice as big as the cockpit) was the engine department. Roger held his hand close to the engines and could feel a consistent heat rising—the pod had only crashed very recently. Whoever occupied this pod could not be far away.

He turned his attention to the cockpit. It was a huge jumble—the escape pod had seemingly taken a death-defying spin towards the surface, and the entire cockpit layout had now been turned upside-down. The seatbelts were left dangling in the toxic winds, and somebody's overcoat had been left behind. An incessant beeping sound clicked on and off rhythmically. When Roger removed the coat, he noticed a small light under it that flashed on and off to the accompaniment of the beep.

*The homing device.*

Well, whoever it was had been found now. So there was little point in keeping the beacon on. Roger hit the button and both the light and the sound shut off forever.

Roger stood up and eyed the gray frock. It looked strangely familiar. Roger surmised that whoever this coat belonged to must be freezing now, since the temperature on the planet was surprisingly low. It all had to do with sun cycles—this

## “The Next Mutation”

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side of the planet was in its winter time now, and the plants were lying dormant now. Now that he came to think of it, he *was* kind of chilly himself.

He flung the coat around his shoulders, careful not to obstruct or even destroy some of the components of the rebreathing device.

He proceeded back the way he came. When he came to the cliff, he couldn't resist the urge to take a look over the chasm. Thrakus was popular for its vegetation growth, and few people can imagine the spectral spectacle unless they're actually there, high above the surface, staring over the endless growths.

Roger did.

It was, truly, an awesome sight. Far below him, he could see several other leaves—some close by, some far away. More stalks in the distance, and yet, no civilization in eyesight. Roger tried to imagine what this might look like during the *summertime*.

Then, he heard a strange noise behind him. He didn't have time to spin around on his heels and look at what it was before he saw a white flash of pain. Vision lost, he reeled. He felt something hard slam into his body this time. The ground slipped away from under him, as both him and whatever burden had just hit him fell over the chasm. He clasped ferociously for something to hold onto. His fingers caught onto the edge of the cliff, and he strained in order to get a firm grip. He tried pulling himself up, but it was impossible—something was tugging at his legs, dragging him down.

He opened his eyes, and to his terror saw Beatrice dangling from his pants leg.

“Beatrice!” he yelled. “What's going on?”

“Roger!” she yelled back, genuine astoundment in her voice. Then, her voice turned to fear. “Help me, Roger! I can't hold on! I'm slipping!”

“Just hang on!” Roger assured. “I’ll—”

He didn’t have time to say anymore, when he noticed several flashes on the platforms below him. *Transporter beams!*

Seven uniformed StarCon troopers materialized, cradling what looked like water guns. Roger found this very odd. He also found it very odd that there was something altogether inhuman about their appearance.

“Oh no!” Bea yelped. “It’s them! They found me! *The pukoids found me!*”

Roger’s only comment was *Oh, shit!* although he didn’t say it out loud. Mutant guards had pursued Bea, for whatever reason, and had found her!

Then, the troopers started shooting. The water guns, it soon turned out, weren’t loaded with water. What came out of the nozzles was something despicably ugly and slime-like. It reminded Roger of the globs the mutant at the Klorox II colony had thrown at him. *The primordial soup!*

Roger began clawing ferociously at the cliffedge, hoping to pull both him and Bea up. But even though the adrenaline rush was back, all his strength went to just being able to hang on.

“Roger, I’m *slipping!* Help me up!” Bea cried.

A glob of ooze punched into the cliff wall, dangerously close to Roger. A surge passed through his body, and he had nearly released his grip, but he regained his composure.

Then, he heard a loud outcry from somewhere near his pants. It was Bea. And he heard the sentence he never, ever wanted to hear:

“Aarrgghh!! *They got me, Roger!*” she screamed.

Roger’s first thought was the SCS Eureka. Maybe they could beam them up!

Roger gathered enough courage to release one hand from the cliff edge and pulled out his PCD. Flo’s face appeared on the screen.

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“Go ahead, Captain Wilco,” she said.

“Flo, we’re in deep down here! Have Cliffy beam us up, now!” Roger yelled into the little console.

There was a slight pause, then Flo returned. “*That’s gonna prove a trifle difficult, Captain,*” she said, “*Cliffy says your current position won’t fit into the containment field of the transporter. There’s a clearing not very far from where you are now. Can you make it there?*”

“Do we have a choice?”

“*Not really,*” said Flo. “*Eureka out.*” The image flashed off the screen.

Roger sighed. Then, he felt something tug *hard* at his pants leg, and heard Bea scream, “Aahhh!!! I’m slipping!”

Roger, acting on impulse now, hurriedly took off the jacket. He held it down to Bea. “Grab hold of this!” he urged. Bea complied and began crawling up. The pain in Roger’s hand was almost unbearable.

Finally, Bea reached the top of the cliff. She took hold of a nearby vine, ripped it loose, and tossed it down the cliff side. “Climb up!” she urged.

Not an invitation to refuse. Roger desperately grabbed hold of the vine. The primordial soup-splatters from the mutants’ guns were getting pretty close, now. He climbed up.

Just as he reached the top (and pulled up his pants), he could see six transporter beams surround them. “Oh no!” he yelled.

He clutched Bea tight and cowered, protecting her. It was a futile gesture, he knew that, but it gave a certain sense of comfort to know that he was protecting her so that maybe, maybe, she would survive. The only thing he could think of now was the future. Would the future survive? He felt guilty for thinking this—he didn’t want to save her just because it would save himself, but because he *loved* her...

He didn’t have more time to think before the pukoids *ma-*

*terialized.*

And him, Bea, and his pants *de-materialized*...



# 17

Roger and Bea collapsed on the Eureka’s transporter pad, panting breathlessly. Roger gained a sitting position, but Bea remained lying. She looked weak; unhealthily weak.

Roger was not himself right now. As he looked at the woman, lying on the pad next to him, fighting just to stay conscious, it was like everything was swimming. His vision seemed to bob up and down almost imperceptibly. Everything around him had faded and only existed in his recollection. All he could focus on was her.

He picked her up and cradled her. Trying to keep the oxygen flowing, or so he told himself.

“What happened?” he asked.

The answer was not what he had expected.

“He’s mad!” Bea stuttered.

“Quirk?”

“He started out by denying me access to the bridge,” Bea continued. “Soon, he had me confined to my quarters. Then...we were attacked. I barely managed to escape in an escape pod. But...they found me anyway...” Bea convulsed in a cough.

“What...what’s wrong?” he asked, needlessly.

“One of those...bastards...nicked me with that awful

primordial soup...” Bea gasped. Suddenly, she glared him sternly in the eye. “There is not much time! The pukoids...attacked the Goliath! Infected the whole crew!”

A chill ran down Roger’s spine. “From the colony?”

Bea nodded. “They’re planning galactic domination!” she said. “We have got to stop them!”

“But how? The Goliath could be halfway to StarCon central command by now.”

“No,” Bea grinned weakly, “they’re not going to get far without this.” She reached into her pockets and produced a small, round, metallic device. “It’s the Goliath’s warp distributor cap. I managed to liberate it from their engineering department before I made my exit. They won’t be able to go to warp without this.”

“Bea, you’re a genius,” Roger beamed.

“I...I know,” Bea smirked. “I must admit, Captain, I thought you were a bit of a putz back at the academy. But you’ve turned out to be...an okay guy.” Roger was certain he noticed a twinkle in her eye. “Maybe more than okay.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Roger said, his eyes glowing themselves, locked onto Bea’s blue eyes and threatening never to let go. “And call me Roger...”

“Okay, Roger...” Bea smiled. Her face suddenly grimaced and the smile vaporized. “Ughhh...” she gasped. “There’s not much time, Roger. They got me...the mutation process...it’s under way already...”

Roger’s face turned to alarm. A voice inside him kept on crying out, *This is not happening, this is not happening!*

He really, *really* didn’t want to know, but he asked anyway. “You’re turning into—”

To Roger’s horror, Bea nodded.

“Is there anything we can do?” he asked, his voice suddenly frail.

“Unfortunately...there’s no cure,” was the sad response.

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“The only thing you can do is to put me in cryogenic suspension.”

Roger wasn't exactly thrilled about the idea. “Bea...you're asking me to freeze you, when we're getting along so well.”

“*Please*, Roger, it's my only chance!” she pleaded.

Cliffy, who had been standing in the corner of the room, suddenly piped in. “Who is that, Captain?”

With what can only be described as a major effort, Roger managed to pry his eyes away from Beatrice.

“Ambassador Beatrice Wankmeister,” he said. “She escaped the Goliath just as it was being puked out by the mutagenic soup. Unfortunately,” he said as his eyes fell down upon her face again, and his voice had a fifty percent volume drop, “they got her.”

“You'd better do something, sir,” Cliffy said, in an unusually sympathetic way. “She's starting to look a little green around the gills.”

Roger stared into her eyes. Now he *really* didn't fancy the idea. “Are you sure freezing you down is the only way?”

“The only way I know of,” Bea whispered.

“There's got to be a cure!”

“You have to hurry,” she warned. “It's the only way to stop the pukoids from wiping out the Star Confederacy. Hurry!”

This wasn't what Roger wanted to hear. What if there *was* no cure? And if there was one, what if he never found it? But he realized time was running out. He picked up Bea in his arms, ignoring the groan from his back, and walked her over to the cryogenic chamber.

The pill-shaped one-man/woman chamber slid out on hydraulic pistons, and the hatch slid open with a whisperous *swoosh*. Roger removed Cliffy's crates of Keronian Ale from the compartment, ignoring Cliffy's disagreeable looks, and put

Bea into the compartment. Closing the lid, he turned to the control panel.

Cryo-freeze... twenty seconds.

The compartment lit up in blue as the cryogenic generators kicked in, reducing the temperature in the chamber dramatically, while a green digital countdown displayed the remaining seconds of the process. Eventually it flashed a 00:00, and you could literally see Roger's face fall. He sighed deeply.

The cryo sequence was complete. The mutation had been slowed to a crawl. But she was not out of the woods yet.

\* \* \*

When he got up to the bridge, he could immediately sense there was something wrong. Droole's console beeped furiously.

"Sir," he said, an unusually alarmed tone in his voice, "we've found the Goliath! Or, rather...*she found us!*"

The world seemed to be falling apart on Roger. Reality shattered before him. He was no longer accountable for his actions, letting impulse and fate decide for him. He watched himself from a third eye, somewhere above, sitting down in his command chair.

"The Goliath is approaching at maximum impulse speed," Droole continued, "and she's arming torpedoes!"

"Shields up!" Roger ordered. Droole acknowledged, and Roger could hear the low hum kick in.

Nobody had time to say anything or to voice any opinions. Only nanoseconds after the shields were up, the Goliath appeared on the viewscreen and zoomed towards the Eureka at impressive speed. The Goliath banked, fired off two photonic discharge-blasts, and exited to starboard.

"They shot at us!" Flo exclaimed.

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“Brilliant observation, Flo,” said Droole dryly. Then, he turned to his instruments. “Shields are down by 90%! They know our shield frequency. One more shot and we’re space sputum!”

And that was when Roger’s instinct, determination, heroism and everything cut out in a flash, leaving him to reality. The deadly reality. He was about to *die!*

“Get us out of here, Droole!” Roger yelled.

“Sir, warp controls—as well as weapon controls, for that matter—are totally inoperable. We only have impulse speed left.”

“Well, then, take evasive action!”

“Where?!” Droole asked, going panicky.

“Anywhere!!!” Roger screamed.

Droole punched in the first heading that came to mind and slammed the FULL IMPULSE button. The Eureka powered up its engines amazingly fast and headed into the nearby asteroid belt.

Roger breathed a sigh of relief, which quickly turned to a hiccup as a small asteroid slammed into the hull of the ship. The bridge took a slight tumble.

“Have you lost your hood, lobster-boy?” Flo asked. “Taking us into an asteroid belt, that’s pure suicide.”

“Got any better hiding places?” Droole said defensively. “They’ll never follow us in here.”

“No, because they’re not as brainblown as we are!”

A tweedle on Flo’s console disrupted her attention. “Sir, the Goliath is hailing us,” she reported.

“Put it on screen!” Roger commanded.

Quirk’s face appeared on the screen, horribly distorted. It appeared to be in the early stages of putrefaction. Quirk was, quite obviously, a mutant.

“Well, well,” he grinned eerily, “*the insignificant pimple on the behind of the universe... We meet again!*”

“Speaking of pustules, Quirk, you’ve never looked better,” Roger remarked.

Quirk’s tauntingly smiling face evaporated in anger. “*You are going to pay for what you did, broom jockey!*” he half-yelled.

“What I did?”

“*But first...*” said Quirk, regaining his composure, “*...I’m going to puke out the whole galaxy. Infest the Star Confederation. Make them my personal servants in my legion of doom.*”

“Not if I have anything to say about it!” said Roger, in a moronic display of heroic bravado.

“*Ah, but you don’t,*” said Quirk calmly. “*Your puny ship is no match for the Goliath.*” He chuckled menacingly. “*Au revoir, broom jockey. You caught a lucky break this time, but I promise you...the next time we meet, you won’t be so fortunate!*”

“Now, haven’t I heard that before?” said Roger, making no attempt to hide the sarcasm in his voice.

Quirk’s anger rose again, and he severed the connection with a violent slam on an unseen console. The picture vanished from the screen. The entire Eureka bridge joined in a chorus of relieved sighs.

Then, Cliffy’s face appeared on the overhang screen. “Sir, we took a pretty nasty beating from the Goliath. I’m goin’ to have to go EVA and make some external repairs.”

“Okay,” said Roger, “but be careful, Cliffy.”

“Don’t worry, chief,” Cliffy grinned. It didn’t help much. “You can monitor my progress over the audio communication circuits.”

His face vanished from the screen. A few moments later, his voice came over the speaker system on the bridge. “*Exiting airlock now,*” Cliffy said.

Another lengthy pause set in. Then, “*Nearing the external circuit systems.*”

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There was a semi-loud clang from the hull as Cliffy’s gravity boots attached themselves to the hull.

*“Made it,”* he said. *“I’m making the adjustments now...”*

A series of worrying cricks and clicks were audible, and suddenly all the light on the bridge flicked off.

*“Oops.”*

A few more cranks and the lights came back.

*“Okay, that’s got ‘er, cap’n, I’m coming back no—”*

Cliffy’s voice was abruptly cut off. There was a rather disconcerting crashing sound, and an Eureka EVA-suit entered into view on the viewscreen and zoomed off in the distance.

Everybody stared at the viewscreen in puzzlement.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, sir,” said Droole, “but isn’t that man floating around out there in the spacesuit with the rather surprised-looking facial expression our chief engineer?”

# 18

Roger hit the ROTATE button on the console. He was standing in the lower airlock of the SCS Eureka, preparing to enter the small EVA pod.

The EVA pod was a small, circular vehicle, capable of holding only one man. It was fitted with grabbing claws on the front, useful for complicated external repairs or anything that required large components. Now, “search and rescue” would be added to the list of applicable uses.

The pod rotated slowly and silently on its base and revealed its entrance hatch. It slid open with a hydraulic *swssshh*. Roger winced as he climbed through the impossibly small hatch into the lone cockpit seat.

The on-button automatically caused several things to happen. First, it caused all the little dashboard lights in the small, circular cockpit to light up, some of which started flashing, others clicked off again in disinterest. Second, the airlock in front of the pod, now sensing that the pod was occupied, opened. And third, the pod began to slowly glide out on rails into outer space. Once it reached the zero gravity of space, it bobbed up and down sickeningly for a few seconds, then went completely dormant.

Roger moved a few of the controls, and the pod shud-



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dered abruptly forward and tilted uncomfortably a couple of degrees to the left. Roger hadn't the faintest clue how to operate this—the description had probably been given in one of the many class lectures aboard the Academy that he had slept through.

It was all ad-lib and improvised, therefore. It took Roger a good five minutes to get the controls under hand, and when he noticed how much time he'd spent messing around, accomplishing nothing, he panicked briefly and felt perspiration cascade over his brow.

He checked the radar on the front of the dashboard. Although the radar computer was running at a sterling 1200 megahertz Pentium X processor with thirty-two gigabytes of RAM and an impressive 90 megabyte graphics adapter, and the graphics were immensely detailed and painstakingly enumerated, the impossibly small LCD display screen made everything look like two small blips on a green background.

There was a green blip a short distance south from the center—that had to be the Eureka, Roger surmised. The red blip, which was a considerable distance to the north, was slowly moving further north, which could only mean that that was Cliffy.

Roger pushed both the throttle and the motion stick forward, and was immediately pushed into his seat with a force much greater than what is considered healthy. In a flash of panic, he ripped the motion stick to the sides, trying to avoid the oncoming asteroids, while clasping for the throttle stick. He found it and lowered the speed.

He discovered that his action had an upside and a downside. The upside was that he was now sitting directly in front of Cliffy, and the small LCD screen was trying to display the words, TARGET IN SIGHT. The downside was, there was a minuscule amount of fuel left in the pod's fuel tank, and an ominous beeping sound didn't help much either.

Roger made a quick decision and decided to get on with it, keep going, and run on fumes if necessary. Wasting more time would just further diminish his chances of ever making it back.

He hit the CLAWS button on the motion stick and grappled Cliffy in the two clutches of the EVA pod. Cliffy didn't exactly look comfortable in that position, lying vertically across two sharp claws meant for external construction and repairs, but it'd have to do.

With Cliffy now in the protective care of the pod, Roger turned the pod around ninety degrees and began the trek back to the Eureka.

\* \* \*

The pod glided safely into the Eureka's airlock bay, guided by the Eureka's refuse recovery system tractor beam. The beam had been temporarily modified by Droole to be an automatic docking system, since the pod had given up a couple of hundred meters away from the Eureka and had just plunged into a deep and disconcerting silence. After a rather embarrassing dialogue exchange with the DeepShip bridge, Roger convinced them to help him out.

Now, the pod was gliding back into its position on the smooth rails. It came to a halt and the exit hatch swooshed open. Cliffy was squiggling like a newly caught fish in the metal pod's grasp. As soon as Roger exited the pod, however, all internal systems shut down and the claws released their grip on Cliffy, sending him crashing onto the floor in a panting and disoriented heap.

Cliffy hurriedly took off his helmet and looked up at his Captain. "Thanks, Cap'n," he said, breathlessly, "that's two I owe you."

Roger smiled. "Don't worry about it, Chief."

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“Okay, I won’t,” said Cliffy. Roger frowned, but Cliffy didn’t notice. “You go ahead up to the bridge,” Cliffy continued, “I’ll just stay here and rest for a while.”

Roger nodded and headed into the turbolift.

# 19

Roger's thoughts were wandering uncontrollably as he walked through the door to the bridge. The rest of StarCon were undoubtedly unaware of what was going on, and they would probably remain that way until it was too late. It seemed that the only hope for StarCon was if he could stop the pukoids himself.

As he sat down, he wondered how to go about the problem. What he needed was to find the cure, and for that he needed a lead. For some reason, he kept thinking of the colony...of Klorox II. The canister he had found in the cave.

The Genetix Research Corporation.

Hell, they *made* the damn thing—maybe they had a cure for it? It was the only lead he had anyway, so what harm could it do to try?

“Droole, set a course for Genetix,” he ordered.

He only hoped he wasn't wasting time.

\* \* \*

“The Genetix Research Corporation is one of the most prized, and most secretive, research and development installations in the Star Confederacy,” WD-40 blurped monotonously. “They

## **“The Next Mutation”**

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work primarily with genetic researching and improving a colonial way of life. Their work is much appreciated, but—for safety reasons—the location of the installation is kept in secret, and few people know of its whereabouts unless they are high ranking StarCon officers.”

Roger didn't bother asking how WD-40 knew this; he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

“The installation consists of three domes,” the robot continued, “each dedicated to a certain branch of genetic researching. Lately, the two remaining domes have been shut down and transferred to storage due to the progress of the corporation's advancements in their current project.”

“Current project?” Roger asked.

“Yes. The information concerning the project, however, is top classified, so access to it was impossible.”

At this point, Droole turned around to inform, “We are approaching our destination, Captain.”

“Good,” said Roger, killing the connection to WD-40, “go to regular speed and enter standard orbit as soon as possible.”

Droole acknowledged. The ship's engines cut down audibly, and a small spot in the distance grew in size and detail until a dome-shaped space structure filled most of the view-screen.

Roger was puzzled. He said to Droole, “Why is there only one dome? I thought WD-40 said there were three...!”

“I don't know, sir,” Droole responded, equally baffled.

To Flo, Roger said, “Can you hail the station?”

Flo tried. “Ahead of you there, sir. There's no response,” she said quietly. “I guess nobody's home.”

Roger was beginning to really, really hate the picture forming in his mind now. He called upon WD-40 again, who did a quick scan of the dome interior and deduced that there were no humanoid lifeforms in there. She also recommended

that an away team should beam down to the station to investigate.

Roger had an even worse feeling about this.

“When you say ‘away team’,” he began, his voice feeble, “you really mean *me*, don’t you?”

WD-40’s voice was completely factual. “Yes, sir.”

# 20

When Roger saw the sparks fly up from the jury-rigged cables at the base of the transporter, he immediately suspected this was going to be troublesome.

His suspicions were immediately confirmed when he materialized on the surface of the dome and saw his own body waltz away, flapping its arms moronically, behind a set of rocks.

The first notion that came to him was the changed head shape of his body. It didn't look human. It looked more like...a fly?

This didn't help on Roger's nerves.

When he then noticed he was airborne, his nerves waved a nice little white flag and finally gave up completely.

*He was a fly.*

Roger could only assume that the transporter had malfunctioned, and intermixed his molecules with that of a fly. He had no desire to contemplate why precisely it had to be a *fly*, but such was the choice, and it was one he was going to have to live with. For now. He certainly didn't intend to stay this way.

He took a little flight around the complex. He almost began to enjoy the sensation of being able to fly, although should

it come to a fight, he'd still vote for his old bipedal self.

But he was consistently amazed and impressed with the setup the Genetix boys had put up here. The place resembled not so much a space station as a tropical resort. The ground was mostly grass—maybe it was fake, but there was no telling. A small pond lay close to where Roger had materialized, and further to the east he could see a waterfall cascading into a stream, which fed into the pond. Brief flashbacks of his (mis)adventures on Kiz Urazgubi flashed before Roger's eyes, but they were quickly jettisoned, and he chose to concentrate on the immense beauty of the whole scenery. The waterfall came from, seemingly, nowhere—possibly a concealed water supply in the ceiling. Trees and growths were strewn around, creating a perimeter-lining of the walls. And these were real, judging by the various insects and other lifeforms that jumbled around. Where bushes and trees weren't placed, rocky formations took over instead—and there were quite a few. The walls surrounding the complex were Plexiglas windows, facing out into the nothingness of space. One could question if this fit into the serenity of the scenery, but as far as Roger was concerned, it was just yet another stylish touch to the near-perfect surroundings.

During his entire tour (even though it only lasted five minutes or so), Roger found no trace of his body anywhere. It had, seemingly, vanished into thin air. *Dammit!* he thought.

When he returned to his original beam-in point, he noticed something metallic lying in the grass. He flew closer, studying it.

It was his PCD.

It was lying on the bank of the pond, nestled safely between two small grassy knolls.

Roger flew down and landed as hard as he could on the TRANSMIT button, hoping to be able to reach the Eureka and find out what the hell was going on.



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But his weight wasn't sufficient, and the PCD didn't react. Nothing happened. He sighed a pathetic fly-sigh.

Suddenly, a looming shadow appeared over him. It was growing in size rapidly. Roger, puzzled, turned around, looked up, and nearly went into shock.

A frog-like creature had suddenly appeared from the confines of the pond, noticing a scrumptuous potential meal sitting on that metallic device, and even so conveniently near its resting place. In an untrained kamikaze-attempt, it had leapt straight up and apparently planned to squat Roger under its sheer weight.

This didn't happen. Roger, relying on reflexes and the incredible speed attained in his new form, flew away and narrowly missed the beast's collapsing belly, which came crashing down onto the PCD.

The frog rolled off the communicator and disgruntledly trudged back into the pond with a massive headache and a lost appetite.

The PCD beeped and Flo's face appeared on the screen. “Hello?” she said, puzzled at the fact she was looking at nobody.

Roger flew onto the speaker. “Hi, Flo,” he said, as loud as he could. Because he was so tiny, he had to speak up loud in order for the microphone to pick up his words.

Flo almost visibly went into a state of shock. “Aaaaahh! A monster!”

“No no no no, calm down, Flo...it's me! It's Roger!”

“Captain?” she panted. “Captain...what happened to you? You're a...a...”

“Oh, you've noticed, have you?”

“Kind of hard to miss, sir.”

“Could you put Cliffy through, please?”

“Sure.”

The screen crackled for a moment or two, and Flo's face

disappeared. It was replaced with Cliffy's, looking rather startled.

"Cliffy, it's just a hunch," said Roger, "but I think there's something wrong with the transporter."

"Could you describe the problem, sir?"

"Will you look at me?!" Roger snapped. "I'm a *fly!*"

"You sure are, sir," said Cliffy. "How did that happen?"

"The stupid transporter! It short-circuited just when I was transporting to the surface, and I ended up splicing myself into two persons. You're looking at one of them now, and the other one—my body—went off to who-knows-where." Roger's agitation had reached unprecedented levels, and he sighed to calm himself down. "This is really freaky, Cliffy. You've got to beam down here and help me."

"I'll try, but I've got to do something about the transporter first. It'll probably take a minute or two."

"That's good. I need to find out where my body went, anyway."

Cliffy appeared to be looking at a readout somewhere beyond the screen. "You know, our sensors detect a computer in operation somewhere to the east of your current location. It might be worth checking out..."

"I'll do that. Wilco out."

Cliffy's face disappeared.

\* \* \*

Roger's initial search of the complex hadn't revealed anything that could be described as electronic, and certainly nothing that looked like a computer. The whole place was an oasis landscape concealed in a space dome—as far as all the technical wizardry operating in the background, it was well concealed. Even as he gave the place another tour, this time searching more in-depth, he had to admit that there was noth-

ing.

The thought that Cliffy might have made a mistake came to mind, and Roger was seriously contemplating on waiting around for Cliffy to show up and then tell him. That is, until he found the card slot.

It was nearly invisible if you weren't looking straight at it. It had been concealed so effectively that it genuinely looked like a sliver in the rock. But, as Roger flew near it, he could see that it wasn't just a sliver—it was too perfect; too straight.

He flew through the opening and found himself inside the mechanism of the lock. As he passed under infrared scanning beams, various parts of the lock clicked on and off. At the end of the narrow passage, a faint light was escaping. Roger flew through...

...and found himself in a secret laboratory.

The Genetix lads sure had quite a set-up here. Expensive computer components, high-tech research paraphernalia, and top-of-the-line specimen containment equipment were all around. The room wasn't exactly large, but nevertheless spacious. Roger flew down the stairs, gaping at all the equipment. He hadn't the faintest clue what most of it was, but it looked cool. *Man, Cliffy would love this place*, he thought.

He rounded a corner and was now hovering around the back of the stairs. It was a small alcove which looked like it had been converted into a small office cubicle. It mostly consisted of a desk and an office chair. A computer had been left on. Writing utensils and papers were strewn carelessly around the desktop. Drawers had been left open. Roger noticed a sense of dread creep up through him. Whoever had occupied this desk certainly left in a hurry. As Roger took an extra glance around the room, the dread didn't leave—it lingered. He noticed, for the first time, that the room wasn't exactly immaculate—several of the test tubes and devices were broken. Some were lying on their backs, abandoned

hastily by their users. One test tube had fallen on the floor and shattered on impact. Someone had left this place pretty damn fast. But why?

Roger took a closer look at the computer. A red text message read:

Dome Jettison Sequence Engaged.  
Jettison Will Occur In  
00:00

Jettison Sequence Complete.  
Have A Nice Day.

On the side of the screen was a sidebar with menu options. The only one available was REBOOT. The screen was touch sensitive, so when Roger landed on the button, it lit up for a brief millisecond. Then the screen cleared.

It was replaced with a schematic overlook of three dome structures. Only the third was highlighted. Roger found this odd. That meant the other two domes were no longer in operation. They had been jettisoned. But why?

When clicking on the third dome, the screen cleared once again, and was replaced with a blue background. The **Genetix** logo was prominently featured at the center of the screen, and below it was their slogan, WE PLAY GOD SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO. Four menu items presented themselves: "Security", "Activity Log", "Projects" and "Accounting".

Thinking that he could use the security cameras to search for the whereabouts of his body, Roger hit the Security button immediately. The first screen that flared up showed the back of a rocky outcropping; where Roger hadn't been yet. An old-fashioned dumpster had been stashed here. Flies were circling the unsanitary refuse heap, doing whatever flies usually do with garbage. To his slight surprise, Roger noticed some

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familiar-looking boots jiggling up and down inside the smelly container. Once in a while, he would notice a flash of red sticking up. Evidently, his body—with its new fly-mentality—had found some equal minded friends, and was now merrily playing with them at their favorite playground.

Roger looked at his menu options. There were two other cameras. Evidently, security was not a big concern around here—or, the complex wasn't nearly as big as he had first thought. (His fly-perspective had, perhaps, made the whole place seemed larger than it really was.)

The second camera showed nothing of particular interest. It was the lakeside, where Roger had first materialized. He could see his communicator, still lying on the grass.

The third camera showed the waterfall area. He could see the rock on which the secret card slot was located. From this angle, the card slot was completely invisible. Once again, Roger marveled at the technological wizardry that had been employed here.

Then, he noticed two flashes of light at the far end of the waterfall. *Transport-beams!*

A few seconds later, Cliffy and WD-40 had materialized onto the complex. *Finally*, Roger thought, *Cliffy got the transporter fixed. I'm really gonna bug him about this for a long time.*

\* \* \*

“How did this happen?” Cliffy said. He was understandably astounded to find his Captain, in fly-form, currently sitting on the bridge of his nose, demanding to have his molecules reinstated.