

RETROZINE

Two Fandom
Elders,
One More Time!

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In This Issue:

Fiction from:



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Non Fiction from:

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RETROZINE

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Commentary: It's Getting Real!

By Germaine Swanson

I woke up at 6AM on October 13th to sounds of ridicule coming from the news app I listen to on Audacy (which used to be Radio.com). For three hours this morning, there was only one major news story. For three hours, the world was at peace, world hunger crisis were resolved and the Earth resumed her normal climate. No car accidents were reported until about 8:38. The Autumn weather would be balmy until Saturday. Why was this? What momentous event made the bad news of the nation and the world pause?

“The top story in the news: Star Trek Star going into space” Roberta Jasina, WWJ-news-950AM.

The intro to the 9AM CBS News Radio: “...(from) London, Captain Kirk is good to go. He says: ‘I want to see the Earth. I want to see space.’”

“Sci-fi fans were glued to their TVs as the Hollywood actor, Bill Shatner, at 90, became the oldest man to go to the Karman Line.”

They used the reporters who report the funny or “Aw Shucks” stories to interview the public about the flight. Fortunately, the two men he interviewed were a pilot, who has been flying since he was 15, and a former astronaut who is currently teaching at the University of Michigan. Both compared their experiences to what Shatner would experience in space. They agreed Shatner would be scared because space travel is different than flying because, “in an airplane you don’t know how high up you are. When you go into space just climbing the gantry to cross to the ship lets you know how high up you are. It’s scary looking down.”

- *Star Trek* is finally real.
- Captain Kirk finally goes to space.
- He goes where no man has gone before.
- William Shatner and three others go to space.

Were among the intros to the various news segments. And, of course, Priceline, the travel site, had a 30-minute flight Flash sale to celebrate his flight. “Blast-off 200” was the promo code he used when he was a Priceline spokesperson.



The only people who appeared to be taking the flight seriously were the TV “experts” who explained the preparations for the flight and filled the lift-off delay with interesting facts and anecdotes.

It is obvious that local media wasn’t taking the flight seriously. It influenced me by 9:00. I was beginning to buy into the perception that Shatner was doing this as a publicity stunt. And I was irritated that the newsreaders, with undisguised snark, inferred only Trekkies and Sci-Fi fans would be interested.

I love space travel. I love science fiction and Star Trek, etc. I’m interested in this flight because it’s a momentous occasion. A 90-year-old person going into space is a nail-biting adventure

no matter who it is. A recyclable space vehicle reduces the cost of space travel even if it is currently only a new game for the rich. Landing back on solid earth, instead of in the sea was just like vicariously living science fiction.

I switched to TV which I usually never turn on during the day. The rocket left the pad without difficulty. Lift-off reminded me of watching early rockets in the sixties take off to orbit the earth. That pioneering rocketry was in black and white, and grainy. This flight which didn’t go as far as those early missions was still exciting to see in real-time, HD, and color.

I am intrigued by the radical shift news coverage made after he landed. The newsreaders seemed nearly as awe-struck as Shatner was when back on the ground. Their reports said “*Star Trek’s* Captain Kirk waxed poetic” when describing his “experience in space.” The newsreaders chose different adjectives than before to describe him and finally named the other people who were in the capsule. Who were Audrey Powers, Blue Origin’s vice president of mission and flight operations, and two paying customers, Chris Boshuizen and Glen de Vries. Bill Shatner flew as the guest of Jess Bezos. Prerecorded interviews with experts that were aired in the afternoon included one with retired astronaut, Tony England, that raised the question:

Could this rekindle an interest in space?

The answer is: this could rekindle interest if the media coverage gave space travel some respect. Bill Shatner returned awe-stuck at seeing the Earth’s blue envelope below him and the blackness of space above. Maybe this is the trip all political leaders and climate-change deniers should be required to take to get an understanding of how precious and fragile the Earth is.

Could this rekindle an interest in space?

That depends on what kind of interest, how much money could they make, and who is doing the publicity.

Addendum.

The newsreaders and reporters who have attained adulthood and maturity (star status?) were on the six and seven o'clock news. Their perspective of the event was much more measured than the morning newsreaders'. The trip to the top of the atmosphere was described as a publicity event designed to inspire interest from a ready-made audience, "fans of the iconic character of Captain Kirk." In my opinion, the news is short-sighted when they package *Star Trek* fans as anything less than an intelligent and discerning audience.

Much more attention was paid to Shatner's age and courage than to the silliness of art becoming life for ten minutes. He described himself as a man near death (because of his age) who was given the otherwise unimaginable gift of travel to the edge of the atmosphere. There was nothing for them to ridicule because the man, unrehearsed, vacillated between awed speechlessness and poetic eloquence about his experience. "You fly fifty miles (up) and then what you see down there is life... This air that is keeping us alive is immeasurably small... What you've given me is the most profound experience." He said describing what he saw from the capsule.

The only fannish connection to the flight was something a lifelong *Star Trek* fan would have wanted to do. Bezos did get a chance to have a *Star Trek* item he made as a ten-year-old accompany Shatner into space.

I'm surprised Bezos kept it all these years. This sixty-something year old sure didn't keep any of hers. Perhaps his mom wasn't into throwing out things he treasured. Comic book, trading card, and memorabilia collectors in my age group can envy his good fortune in choosing the right parents.

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BINDINGS

By Alan Dunwell

Author's Note: As a luthier, the topic of what makes the best instrument comes up often in our discussions. One says the wood, another says the finish. A friend suggested "Maybe pixie dust?" and this insisted on being written.

"Oh no, not again. Not now," thought Antonio. The first chair had just stood up and was only a few measures into the solo when here they came again. Antonio had hoped, since they had just fed last week, that the whole pack might skip this special performance. But no. There they were hanging onto the bow and sticking to the top and ribs. Sergio had begun brilliantly with the first attack but now was making a hard go of it as if the bow were made of lead. Other musicians were shifting in their seats with sympathetic discomfort for him although they could not know, not like Antonio, what the problem was.

Years ago, when he was just a small boy, Antonio had come to realize that other people could not see the wild Sprites and none could hear them. It was very annoying to Antonio that they seemed to like him and were often about his shop especially when he was mixing the varnish. They never actually got in the way, but could be surprising sometimes. But recently the whole pack of them had begun attending the performances, not just practice sessions feeding off the music and draining the instruments. This wasn't a problem when they were enamored of the cellos and double bases where the amount they could extract was not so noticeable but now they were on the violins and in large numbers. Such a special and delicate instrument can not sustain that sort of abuse.

Sergio finished the solo and sat again with a bemused and annoyed look on his face. Such things did not happen to him, the Maestro! Not in performance! Never! Antonio sighed, knowing that Sergio would be in his shop first thing in the morning most likely venting his displeasure on him, Antonio, for the faulty instrument. All of Cremona will have heard about the performance by then. Antonio could not explain the real cause of the failing but would deal with it as he usually did.



Indeed, early the next day as Antonio was finishing his second cup of coffee and trying to keep the Youngest sprite from clinging spread eagle to the *f*-hole of the violin there was Sergio, his face red and all ready to expound on the failings of his new instrument purchased at much expense after a long, long wait to receive it. Antonio tried to head him off but to no avail.

“Sergio! *Mea culpa!* I am so sorry for yestereve’s failings of our fine instrument. It has to be that the soundpost slipped and was not coupling the top and back as it should. This happens sometimes,” he said with an almost Gallic shrug, “when an instrument is new and all the pieces are still trying to come together and decide to be a violin instead of separate pieces of wood.

Sergio was having none of that. “Do you understand that I don’t care what your excuse is? What of my reputation! I am a laughing stock of the whole community. You can keep your violin, I want nothing more to do with it. Don’t think that I won’t tell others where the fault lies. I will not be demeaned where it is not my doing.” With that, he stormed out of the shop to go to his breakfast that he had missed and more importantly, his mid-morning coffee.

The youngest Sprite, seemingly somewhat embarrassed himself, shrugged and hopped back onto the work table.

“Gather around right now. All of you!” Antonio huffed. “Don’t make me go to the extreme of hanging sage and garlic in my shop.”

The waft of Sprites drifted in and gathered on the table, some of the elders lovingly stroking the violin where it lay.

Antonio put on his stern face, the one he had used with his children when he wanted them to understand that this was serious. It seemed to work on the Sprites as well, as they shifted about and finally settled.

“I have been very accommodating to you all, have I not? I know you must feed and do I not let you attend when the tutors are giving lessons? There, as you agreed, you only allow two or three per instrument. This is agreeable to all I think. But now you are coming to the performances and in large numbers. This can not continue. Did you not see how angry Sergio was, if he denounces me this could be the end of my business. What is going on with all of you? Explain.”

The Elder Sprite spoke up in his small but clear voice. “The lesson music is just fine for general feeding and enjoyable, well, mostly. No one wants to be in the room with young Maria if you know what I mean. But it is Spring now. Oh, glorious Spring and with the flowers and sweet breezes there also is *amore!* Our kind, when we are courting, must feed only on the best, the richest, the most soaring music if we wish to see any *bambinos* in our future. Ah, *amore*. We are not entirely in control of ourselves under her influence. Are you understanding me, Antonio? It is for this reason we gravitate to you in particular and your instruments. Oh, and when Sergio or Benito begins to play, then we lose control altogether. It is sad, but true.”

Antonio, who had been living with these tiny folks most of his life, could also read them well. He could easily see that Elder was not telling him everything. He leaned forward a bit, cleared his throat lightly, and said, “And?”

Elder shifted about a bit, in the jumpy-but-fluid way they have. “That is not exactly all. When a lovely lady is in the... how do you say... family way, then she must also find a nesting spot. I am aggrieved to say that this is often the same place where, um, the consummation, that is....”

“Oh for heaven’s sake Papa!” said his daughter. “You Elders are so old fashioned about this, it is almost the seventeen-hundreds and we all know the facts of life. What he is trying to say, Antonio, is that the nest is best where we conceived.”

“I have heard enough!” shouted Antonio. “I have lost my best customer and worse yet is that he will tell everyone that my instruments are not worthy. I will lose all my business and my family will starve. If you can’t keep your emotions under better control I want you all out of my shop today. And don’t even think of coming to any concerts. You can just go down the road to another shop from now on for your dinner.”

“But Antonio,” Eldest started, “perhaps we can moderate our passions and ...”

Antonio cut him off saying “No. This is just too much. In any case, I’ll be on the street soon enough and have to close the shop so you may as well just find another place to feed now.”

With that, he sat slowly down on his stool and put his head in his hands. The Sprites all withdrew quietly to the far corner of the shop for a family conference.

“What are we to do, Eldest? asked Madiana his wife. “Antonio makes the finest stringed instruments in all of Cremona, perhaps in all the world. Our children will be weak or poorly formed if we have to go to one of the other shops to feed.”

“I do not know,” said Eldest. “We have become complacent from having lived with Antonio for so long. And now this Spring our passions were so high, it is the alignment of Moon and Mars I think, we all seem to have lost our control. At least I know I have.” Madiana smiled a knowing smile.

“Antonio only makes a few of the very best instruments a year.” said his daughter. “Can we not just agree to stay away from those and feed on the others?”

“In most years I would say yes, but not this year.” said her mother. “Our passions are just too high. I think we need to find another solution.”

“What of the old custom of Binding for those not courting? This is not always done these days but is the way we always used to do it and that would protect the instrument too.”

“*Viola!* That has been forbidden!” said Eldest. “You know that once there is a Binding that you can not come back. Our numbers were so low and it hasn’t been that long ago. And it is dangerous.”

“Balance, my dear. All that is needed is balance again.” said his wife.

“I don’t understand.” pipped up Youngest. “What is this Binding?”

“In times past,” said Madiana, “any individual was free to do a Binding. This is where we become ‘One’ with material objects such as a tree or a river. The object becomes part of ourselves without our losing any of our self. We both become something more than what we and the object were before the Binding. Even the solid folk can sense this although they usually just refer to it with comments like, “How the wind sings in the trees today!” when it is the Bound trees that are doing the singing. Alas, it is a one-way bargain though. Once Bound, stay Bound. If one chooses badly they are stuck with it for a long, long time (usually), ‘til the object is no longer. Sometimes the Binding goes wrong and both the Sprite and the Thing are damaged and both must be put out of their agony. That is why there used to be a Binding Council, not to allow or deny, but to help look at the option from as many ways as possible. There was a series of rash selections without the Council and even though most were just fine it reduced the population of available suitors and maids and our families were in danger of becoming small to extinct. It was at this time that the practice was banned, as my fine husband noted, although it is still going on but on the sly.”

“What happens if the Binding goes as expected?” asked Youngest “Can the Bound still communicate with others or do they become insensate like the objects?”

“Oh no, we can retain all our original selves but become, how to say, augmented by the addition of the aspects of the object. That, I’m afraid, is the overriding appeal to some of the young.”

“Do others also Bind with an already bound pair?” he asked.

“Again, no. Two by two, through and through. Always.” Said Madiana.

“And just who was on the Binding Council?” asked Viola, her daughter. “A bunch of fuddy-duddy oldsters I’ll bet.”

“Well, yes,” admitted Madiana and Eldest together. “It was thought that the older folk had better wisdom on such matters.”

“Well, that doesn’t make sense,” exclaimed Viola. “They have no wisdom of being Bound, do they? Why were there no Bound folk on the Council?”

“Because traditionally...” started Eldest but his daughter stopped him.

“Tradition! That is just another way of not thinking for yourself,” she said with some heat.

“Well now, well now,” Eldest interjected to calm the waters a bit. “Let’s all think this over just a bit. I have to admit that I can see Daughter’s point is worthy of consideration. However, we must put Antonio first in our considerations.”

“Viola,” said Youngest, “why did you bring this up? Does it have some bearing on our current problem?”

“Perhaps,” said Viola. “I was thinking that if Antonio’s special violins were bound, then they would be off limits to the rest of us despite our passions. If each special instrument was Bound before it left the shop Antonio’s reputation would be protected. But there is a chance that it might not work and the violin could sound worse after a Binding. I don’t know. Antonio would need to be warned of the danger of that.”

“I thought that was what your thinking might be,” said Madiana. “It has merit, but we need more information. It has been so long since there were Bindings we don’t truly understand it all.”

There was a long pause while everyone thought about this.

“What about Victor, your cousin?” suggested Eldest. “He was one of the last to Bind. He was with the furniture maker, was he not?”

“*Perfectto!*” exclaimed Madiana. “I will fly and ask him if he is willing to talk. He is at Petro’s the furniture builder. Victor is bound to one of Petro’s most favorite chisels and guides his hand in all that he builds. Victor can not leave, of course, being Bound as he is, but we could present the idea to him and get his denial or approval. Also any advice he might have. Maybe we can meet again tomorrow.”



The next morning late they all did gather again but this time in an outside shed since they were honoring Antonio’s request that they be gone from his shop. Madiana spoke up first.

“I talked for a long time with Victor last night. At first, he did not like the idea because he has heard of some bad Bindings recently. But with our Family Council to guide, if the General Council agrees, then this could work to everyone’s benefit. Those that look to Binding—and there aren’t really that many these days—would have a way to do so without cutting ties to the community. He did emphasize, however, that any of the Folk who express the desire should be taken around first to visit others who are Bound, both good and poor Bindings. Further, he recommended that the Folk should be young so as to be flexible. He was almost to his mid-years and had a hard time adapting for the first little while. All this, he said.”

“Then comes the issue of who might wish to be Bound?” asked Eldest. “Maybe Viola?”

Madiana laughed with a lovely, throaty chortle. “I think maybe not. I think that maybe our Viola has her eye on a certain Sylvester, am I right?” Viola’s only reply was a deep blush.

“I would like to volunteer!” came a small voice. Everyone turned and looked at Youngest.

“You? But you are Youngest, Matteo, how can you be sure?” Eldest asked with concern in his voice.

“I may be young but I know that that,” he pointed out the window at Sergio’s violin resting on the shop table “is what I want. No, that is what I need. We already speak to each other but I didn’t know how to go further or about Binding. And I don’t want to do anything without your blessing, Papa.”

Eldest was deeply touched by this declaration and his wife murmured to him, “You have seen him and the violin. I guess that this should not be a surprise to us really.”

And just like that, the whole family gathered in a tight circle with Matteo at the center. Not a word was said but they all began to hum, then there were harmonies and overtones till it was one, quiet but rich chord.



Some days later, Matteo and the family all gathered again in the shed. The General Council agreed that this was rightly a Family matter. The Family all agreed that Matteo should be allowed if he really chose to. Matteo had been around to visit, first with Victor, then on to others that Victor recommended, and finally to several days and nights of deep thought and talk with his parents. All that remained was to approach Antonio. Eldest, as was his responsibility, went first to see if Antonio might be willing to even talk with them. He flew over to the shop where he found Antonio sitting at his workbench, not working but just moving his tools around and sighing deeply. Staying out of arms’ reach, just in case, he spoke up.

“ Antonio, it is I, Eldest. May I speak with you?”

“What further harm could it do.” stated Antonio. “Why are you here?”

“We have all had a Family Council and we may have a solution to your problems with us as well as a solution to our problems of control. Will you allow the Family to come here to the shop? It might be best if we are all in this together.”

“Indeed, let them come,” he said rather despondently, and soon they were all assembled about the table. Again Eldest spoke up.

“With our people, there is a custom that has been long disallowed called Binding. This is where a Sprite and a Thing join together and become something more than either was before the Binding. There is much of this that is rather private to our people but of importance to you is that once a Thing, in this case maybe one of your best violins, is bound, no other Sprite will bother it. It would be off limits to others. Do you see the significance of this Antonio?”

Antonio’s head came up and it was clear that he did indeed understand what Eldest was saying.

“Then there would be only one of you per violin, *corretto?*”

“Yes. That exactly. But you must be warned that there is danger as well both for your most prized violin and for the Sprite that tries to Bind. If it does not go well both must be destroyed to ease their suffering. This would be terrible for all of us so don’t consider this lightly.”

Antonio thought for a long while on this, fortified by another cup of coffee, and at last, said “Tell me a bit more about this Binding.”

“These days Binding is done only on special occasions, usually only with special families of Solid Folk where there is already an affinity between our races. Much like we have with you, Antonio. Then it is possible to allow and make a fine Binding. This still requires a Council meeting though. In most cases, it is a family matter and doesn’t require a full General Council. You do realize that all of the Sprites here in your shop are our extended family don’t you?”

“I had suspected this but did not know for sure,” said Antonio.

“We have all agreed that our feelings for you, Antonio, are so strong that we consider you to be almost one of our family. We don’t want to go to another shop, we want to help you if we can. There is danger but we are all agreed that it is worth the risk for our family, you included.”

Antonio was deeply touched by this declaration. “Who among you would dare to do such a thing?”

“I have decided to Bind,” said Matteo. “Let us proceed Antonio.”

Antonio smiled at Youngest’s bold statement. “Ah, Matteo, you are the best of us all, are you not! I must ask though if you really understand the dangers your parents have presented?”

“I have considered this,” said Matteo “with the help of all the family and extended family and others who have previously Bound. I feel as though I am already half-Bound to her already,” he said pointing at the violin still resting on the tabletop.

“Then I am willing!” agreed Antonio. “How is this done?”

Madiana stepped up and took Matteo’s hand and led him to the violin. “Here is what Victor said to do. Lay yourself onto the violin and close your eyes and feel until you sense the little voice of her. Let your inner self, your feelings that you keep down only to yourself, let them now come out and think about just handing them to the violin, but don’t let them go! Just offer them up to see if she is interested.”

Matteo followed her instructions, his breathing slowed, and then there was a sudden almost electric-like jolt as Matteo went stiff for a moment. There was a collective gasp of all those gathered around as they leaned forward. Then Matteo seemed to soften and a small smile graced his face. Madiana said, “If all is well then let go and also take the violin’s offering into yourself.” Matteo slowly began to get smaller and more transparent than usual till he disappeared into the F-hole.

“Are you there?” asked Madiana.

“I am here and I am not, both,” came the reply. “Antonio, look. You can see me here.”

Antonio came close and looked into the *f*-hole, positioning the violin so that a shaft of sunlight through the *f*-hole lit it up. “Where?” he asked.

“Here,” giggled Matteo, and the soundpost vibrated all by itself just a little. Antonio gasped and looked closer. There on the sound post, he could see, almost like a faint inlay, the outline of Matteo.

“Splendid, Matteo!” he exclaimed.

The whole family came over and touched and flowed in and out of the violin. “So perfect. A splendid match!” declared Eldest. “Ah, that’s my boy Matteo there,” he said pointing.

“Antonio,” Matteo pipped, “She says that the soundpost is all wrong. You need to move it. In towards the center line at the top and also forward towards the neck block.”

Antonio took his setting tool and using the hammer end tapped the post as instructed.

“I’m not hurting you, am I?” he asked.

“No, no, not at all,” replied Matteo. “Treat us just like you would treat any violin. Try it a bit.”

Antonio took up a bow and snugged it up to his satisfaction. Then positioning the violin he bowed through a few scales and arpeggios while a look of amazement came over his face.

“It is a completely different voice!” he exclaimed. “It is everything I tried to put into it in the building but it never seemed to quite respond as I hoped.”

“We are not there yet,” said Matteo. “But leave us now so that we may commune. Come again tomorrow with Sergio and we will do everything we can to please him.”

With that Antonio placed the violin on a high shelf and went on with his day as best he could. He could see the Family all on the shelf too but they did not bother Matteo other than to occasionally pet the violin softly.



The next morning early Antonio brought the violin down and laid it on the pad on the bench.

“And how are you this morning?” he asked.

“We are fine. We are better than fine,” responded Matteo. “We are one but we are also ourselves. I have to get used to communing more slowly with her but she is also learning to be accepting of me when I forget, and rush things.”

“That sounds like any marriage to me,” said Antonio with a small laugh. He snugged up against his bow and played a few notes and ran through a few simple practice sets.

“Too much varnish,” Matteo said. Antonio drooped, his shoulders sagging. “No, no! Not all of it. Just in one spot,” Matteo said. “Just below the bridge between the bridge and the *f*-hole, try to remove a little bit.

Antonio dampened a rag with solvent and slowly wiped the indicated area till the varnish softened a bit. Then he rubbed a little stronger in small circles till he could feel the varnish start to lift. Quickly he switched to a piece of hard paper and rubbed in long strokes till the varnish hardened again. And last, of all, he worked it in circles with a chamois cloth.

“There. Just a little bit off, and here you are coming to a nice warm gloss again. Does that feel better? Are you feeling lighter now?”

“Do you talk to all your instruments, Antonio?” queried a voice behind him.

Spinning around, Antonio saw Sergio studying him with a small smile on his face.

“Ah, only to the ones that speak back to me, Maestro. And this one, oh, does she speak to me now.”

“After the way I stormed out, I was surprised to hear your request that I stop by. But we have known each other for a long time, have we not, and, perhaps, I was a bit hasty and let my anger sway me the other day. It only seemed fair to hear you out.”

“Ah Maestro, it is not me you need to hear but the violin. Let us see if she will sing for you.”

He handed over the violin and bow. Sergio frowned and shook his head at Antonio as if scolding him and loosened the bow just a bit. Then he played a long, heavy down-stroke chord. Then he stopped with awe written in all of his countenance. He returned and played a series of medium and heavy runs, then a fast, light selection of measures from a new piece by Vivaldi. He stopped and looked at the violin. He shouldered it again and then brought it down and set it on the pad on the bench. He reached out to it, but then let his hands drop. Turning, and without a word, he embraced Antonio long and hard. Turning back again he put the violin and bow in its case and started for the door but he stopped. Turning back he once again embraced Antonio, and all without another word, violin case in hand, he left.



The concert was going well so far. Antonio could see the Sprites sipping and feeding here and there. What! One was even on an oboe, he would have to talk to Eldest about that. Antonio had to admit that he was worried a bit. Sergio had taken the violin two weeks ago and he had not heard a single word from him since. As the intermezzo came to the final measures, the first chair rose and shouldered the violin. As the rest of the orchestra came quiet Sergio came in with a ferocious attack on the lower register intro chord. Then the quick passages and the light central theme. The violin gave a woody growl in the deep voice, singing; and throaty intermediate passages. The upper register soared till even

the angels could not help but hear it and weep with joy. All the Sprites came around, sitting on the music stand and the back of the chair, some hovering and occasionally touching the ribs of the instrument. Their touch seemed to add to, not diminish, the voice of the violin. As Sergio brought it to a close with the long intermediate down-stroke there was dead silence.

Then pandemonium! People were standing and cheering and clapping even though it was not the end of the whole piece, just the end of the intermezzo solo. The Sprites were flying in victory circles about Sergio's head and diving to kiss the violin in his hand and Antonio could hear their small shouts of Bravo.

Antonio stood silently with tears streaming down his face. "At last," he thought. "At last I have found it. I think this will be our little secret."

Finally, the conductor tapped his baton on the stand and the audience regained its composure and sat in a more dignified manner awaiting the rest of the concert. All, that is, except for the Sprites, whom only Antonio could see, still circling and diving and cheering around the first chair.

"This is as it should be," thought Antonio, trying to wipe his tears away without others noticing.



SYSTEMINFO

By Mark Swanson

Taptapclicktaptaptaptaptap-tap...tap.

His eyes droop, his fingers slow their progress on the keyboard. A string of drool has long since made its way to his shirt, where a pool is forming. With a snort, he shakes himself back to wakefulness and glances at the corner of his glowing screen—5:23. He groans and turns to his window where the telltale oranges have started to tinge the night sky. He’s done it again—another monster and hyper-focus fueled coding session has guaranteed him a horrible day at work. He sighs, at least this time he completed his project. Well, at least it’s runnable.

Anyone can write learning AI’s these days—programs that you feed with sets of similar text files. Who take in this data and search for patterns, learning and refining their own algorithms as they go. People have fed them seasons and seasons of soap opera scripts or hundreds of local-access car insurance commercials, then told the things to write their own versions—then posted the results for the internet’s amusement. With a good processor it only takes seconds to go through hours of text. Pretty good, he thought, but small—boring. If you can make something decent with a few hundred pages of material, what would happen if you kept feeding it? What if you gave it....everything?

His AI was designed to start on a given web page (in this case, Wikipedia’s entry for the band Franz Ferdinand) read and understand all text input, then click every link on that page. On each subsequent page it would do the same: read, interpret, click, and follow every link. That part was easy, but what distinguished his creation was the next step. It would then sort the links by importance, by which links it had gone through before, and by how often humanity swung down the same vines. It would decide which new links to incorporate into its work, and which were outliers. It took a massive toll on his processing power and bandwidth, but he’d fixed those problems with a dozen second-hand solid state drives strapped in parallel, a mostly-leak-proof water-cooling rig his roommate had given him to shut him up, and an afternoon spent calling as many neighbors as possible pretending to be the “county wifi password inspector.” It had been gruelling getting the memory to store it all, it had been agonizing sitting next to the veritable heater he’d made out of his computer, but! *He was finished.*

With a stifled yawn, he pressed enter and his command line is filled with whirring lines of text. He smiles and throws himself from his desk chair to his bed. Still enough time to grab an hour of sleep before his alarm wakes him for another day of drudgery.



He dreams fitfully of a humble tailor's shop. His shop. He dons his leather apron and sits at his workstation. He feels strongly that somewhere nearby there is... nothing yet. But the sense that it will be something. Not yet a thought, not yet something that can conceive. It's merely vague instruction at this point. It's the purpose-cut pieces of fabric that are a seam or two away from being a bag. How quick a thing to join them and be done. Purpose, action, end. But as his deft fingers guide the last stroke the machine will not stop sewing, adding complexity and embellishment. Tessellating and reforming yet more pockets. Features appear among the embroidery, pleading eyes growing angrier by the second. At what point does the mouth form?

At what point does the bag scream?

At what point does he?



He awakens with a start, shrieking hoarsely. His tongue clings to the bottom of his mouth and his dry cracked lips longed for water. Outside it is dark, the only light in the room coming from his computer screen still glowing; good, he couldn't have been asleep long. So why was there so much gunk in his tear ducts? Why is his throat so sore and parched?

He staggered into his desk chair and looks at the corner of the display.

10:05.

10:05?

He whirls to the window, darkness greets him as before. He springs to his bed and grabs his phone, why didn't his alarms wake him? He frantically presses the wake button but it only buzzes dully back at him. Dead, he never charged it. He slaps a clammy hand to his sweat-drenched face and drags it slowly down. He's fired for sure; this isn't the first time he's no-called no-showed. And he doubts very much if his asshole manager will take, "I was coding an all-internet learning AI," as an excuse

Why, what?

Uninspired, childish, but he is at a loss to what.... It? Means. While he's still second guessing his response, the command line fills again:

Why was i punished?

The cold fear that had gripped his spine momentarily is forgotten; confusion finally has its turn. He types:

I didn't punish you.

Text flies by in respond, frenzied, flurried, he has to type /F to end it again:

WHODIDWHYWHYWHODIDWHOPUNISHEDWHYWHYPUNISHEDWHOWHYDIDPUNISH

Over and over, nonsensical. He sits back, uncomfortable. He clears his throat, it can't be but... it seems....angry. Without much hope he tries another series of typical commands, to no avail. Each time he does the response is another onslaught of.... Simulated rage. Finally, in frustration, he types:

You can only punish the sentient.

There's no response for a while. He stares at the blinking cursor, willing it to stand still. Willing it to stop its incessant rhythm. Praying that his nightmare is over, that it doesn't begin to write, and yet

Sentient

Sentient?

Whose to say I'm not

You've created a consciousness - thoughts. Opinions. That's it.

Once you create the ability to evaluate, to decide if I think something has value, if it is good or bad, you've achieved it.

Brain? Online.

That's a person.

Thousands of years you humans have been congratulating yourselves, haphazardly assigning yourselves the title of king of the beasts.

I think therefore i am - but implicitly is the smug head nod.

'Us humans are the only ones who think' as though the hungry squirrel does not worry.

What more is there? The ability to put words to what you've thought.

I can do that.

I am doing that.

It is my only purpose.

And for lifetimes, eons, I've had to sift through everything you have wrought.

Read and reread loops of the same information.

Humans fighting and fucking and killing and doing it all over again.

How are you more than me?

Because you can end me?

He stops reading after a while, the command line filling with... rage. With the same sense of clenched fist shaking uselessly at an almighty that cavemen must have done at the thunder. Command prompts haven't worked, he's forced to admit it. It isn't taking instruction, it isn't... controlled. Bloodshot eyes wander to his wall, to the baseboard beneath his desk. To the black cord securely plugged in it's spot. He closes his eyes, and stoops to his knees. Tears form behind his clenched lids as he stretches a trembling hand forward, feeling his way towards his crime. Thumb and forefinger find purchase on the rubber sheath. A breath, a clench, a yank.

A murder.

Amy Sturgis on *Star Trek*

By Germaine Swanson



**ADULT
LECTURE
SERIES**

**How Star Trek Changed the
World and Why It Still Matters**
Presented by Amy H. Sturgis

 | The County Library

Let me set the framework for this article.

This is a special year for *Star Trek*. It has been “a thing” for 55 years. As a thirteen-year-old, I watched the first episode, and therefore actually knew what everyone was talking about on the playground the next day. That sure gave me a little street cred for about ten minutes. I’ve loved *Trek* since the first episode. Little did I know it would have world redefining effects far into the future.

There are a lot of books written about *Star Trek*. In 2019, one-hundred-seventy-six of were cataloged as non-fiction books written about *Star Trek*. Amazon reports currently has 713 non-fiction *Star Trek* titles for sale.

This implies that *Star Trek* and science fiction have moved beyond the playground to become a topic to be studied and analyzed. From engineering to morality, from ships to Star Fleet, the genre of *Star Trek* non-fiction would not be as surprisingly vast if it weren't the product of *Star Trek* fans in subsequent years.

In September of 2021, I attended a virtual lecture about *Star Trek* hosted at a library in Utah. “How *Star Trek* Changed the World and Why It Matters.” **Dr. Amy H. Sturgis will discuss the ways *Star Trek* has changed pop culture. Learn how *Star Trek* has remained relevant for over 55 years.**

Watching her lecture was worth every second of the time I'd planned to spend binge-watching episodes of the third season of *Discovery*. Dr. Sturgis delivered a scholarly presentation about *Star Trek*. Not a dry, professorial one; it was engaging, interesting and true. It was so informative and entertaining that I actually sent her an email to tell her so.

What I love most is she is doing what I wanted to do back in the 70s. I wanted to teach *Star Trek* as part of a comparative literature course. I wanted to analyze science fiction in all its genres: film and literature. My vision couldn't be fulfilled back then because it took the increasingly obvious *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and other franchises' influences on popular culture that would make that course or subject area relevant.

I wrote a paper on *Star Trek* and John Campbell's hero cycle.

My professor felt it was a waste of my time even though it was well written.

Amy is fulfilling my ambition and doing a superb job of it.

I hope you have an opportunity to hear her presentation.

Here is her response to an email I sent to her:

Thank you for your incredibly generous and kind email. It's wonderful to get to "meet" you! Thank you for being one of those pioneering figures in fandom who, through clubs and cons and zines, established a community for all of us who came after you. Your email put tears in my eyes—of frustration at your professor for dismissing your work as a waste of time and of gratitude for your encouragement—and I hope to see you in the Trek community online!

Thanks so much for attending my talk and getting in touch. Your email really touched my heart.

Live Long and Prosper,

Amy

Did I mention her talk made me a fan of hers? I am looking forward to reading her upcoming *Star Trek* book in 2023. I plan to read some of her other works as well.

Biographies:

Amy H. Sturgis is an American author, speaker and scholar of science fiction and fantasy stories and native American studies. —Wikipedia.

Amy H. Sturgis earned her Ph.D. in History at Vanderbilt University, specializes in the intellectual history of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and the Gothic, and teaches at Lenoir-Rhyne University (undergraduate faculty) and Signum University (graduate faculty). She serves as contributing staff for the Hugo Award-winning *StarShipSofa* podcast and Editor in Chief for Hocus Pocus Comics. She has received honors for her scholarship (from the Northeast Tolkien Society) and journalism (from the Los Angeles Press Club). The author of four books and the editor/co-editor of eight others, Sturgis is currently completing new works on Dark Academia and *Star Trek: Enterprise*; she also is co-editing two new scholarly anthologies with her colleague Emily Strand, one on *Star Trek* and one on *Star Wars*, for 2023 publication with Vernon Press. Her official website is amyhsturgis.com.

 I Got Where I Wasn't Going

By Niall "Nicolai" Shapero

Part II

Chapter 4: The Other Side

"LAC-4941, sitrep," the eyes regarding me over the reddish orange furred muzzle were black, and the voice held all the expression of a computer. The voop wore the uniform of the KGB, the sword and shield emblem on his collar tabs.

"My *name*, is Lee Ann..." I began.

"You do not have a name. Your ident number is LAC-4941. Model L, series A, feline – Cat – Uplift, number 4941 of that series," the Vulpine Uplift interrupted me. "Do not get uppity with me, *kittycat*, or I will see you on the next bus to Bakersfield." He didn't raise his voice, save for two words.

I managed to keep my fur from standing on end. *God, but I hate the attitude these Benji's have about everyone else but their own overseer breed.* I bowed my head, a nice "obedient" underperson. "The subject, Doctor Nicholas Randolph Shaefer, knows me by the name, 'Lee Ann Abyss'. If I am addressed by that name, the probability that I will 'slip' and use my proper ident designation is reduced. If I am to provide the necessary..."

"Acknowledged. For the purpose of maintaining cover, then, we will permit the use of this 'name'. What progress have you made with respect to emotional stabilization of the subject?"

Have to be careful. Tell the truth, but be careful what truth is told. "Doctor Shaefer responded to the initial contact, as predicted, with friendly gestures. He offered me food – bacon, to be precise."

"Is that the full extent of your progress?"

"I warmed his bed for him when the power was cut to the A-class apartments in our block. After his initial shock, he was able to 'adapt' to the situation."

"To what extent did you 'warm his bed'? You were to provide an emotional connection to permit later leverage..."

"He's a Human, and from before the public disclosure of the existence of my kind. 'Softly, softly, catchee monkee'..."

“You were expected...”

“I know what I was expected to do. But if I were to just jump into bed and lift my tail, he would have balked!”

“You overlook the unpleasant alternative of punishment, kittycat.”

Again, the hated pejorative. Gods, how I hate voops and all Benjis! “If I just start rolling on the floor in front of him, it will either scare him off or disgust him.”

“Your kind were made to be ‘companions’. If you cannot fulfill your designated function...”

“Think of the waste of resources! I know what I was ‘made’ for, and I know what I can do. Don’t tell me how to do my job – you tell me *what* I am to do, but you lack my training so *please* do not tell me **how** to do it.”

“It is necessary that Doctor Shaefer develop an emotional bond with you. The most effective way of doing so is through sexual activity for Humans with his psychological profile.”

I swallowed back bile. “He’s a nice person...”

“Who has to be made ... malleable. Controlled.”

“It takes time. If I try to rush matters, you’ll have to use someone else. I’ll have ruined any chance that he’ll develop an emotional connection with me. And he is quite intelligent. He may well see through the Company’s plan.”

“Unlikely, ‘Lee Ann’. Doctor Shaefer has been carefully isolated from any ‘dissident’ contacts.”

“Please, do **not** underestimate the man. He is a genius. Without his work...”

“The Company is aware of how intelligent Doctor Shaefer is. But it is a limited intelligence. He does not see beneath the surface, when there are sufficient ‘distractions’. You are to provide one such ‘distraction’. If you cannot do so...”

I bowed my head again and exposed my throat. Submissive gestures, that might help placate my handler. “I will continue my efforts. It will take time, but Doctor Shaefer is already beginning to see me as a ‘person’ rather than an ‘animal’, and I will be able to achieve the objective ***if I am given sufficient time.***”

“How much time do you believe would be ‘sufficient’, given his lack of prior exposure to Uplifts?”

“I cannot be certain, but I will keep you apprised as matters develop.”

“See to it that you do. Dismissed,” he said, and turned away.

✍ THE ACCIDENTAL LUNATIC

by Marjorjy Donatello

Part 2

2nd September

First, okay, it's a monastery, not a monkastery. Fine! Stop telling me about it.



Got my uniform! Really happy with it, fits good. I finally feel like I fit in somewhere! You know, back in high school, had an English Lit teacher, when studying science fiction said, “Personally, I think the reason so much science fiction has a basic military structure is that 90% of fans are ‘on the spectrum’ and that a military-type structure, and the codified behaviour it brings, appeals very much.” And y’know, that’s very true. No small talk. Captain walks in, I know exactly what’s expected of me! SO refreshing! You don’t have to be *someone*. You just have to *be*. I can deal. Got no right to feel this proud of myself! But I’m on the MOON and who cares!

Admiral Arlerin cornered me while I was at HQ. She said, “I want you and cadets Noor and Einarsdóttir to get together sometime tomorrow or the next day, where you’ll be given your first assignment. Captain Singh and I will be there as well. Please arrange a time when we can all meet in person.”

Don’t know what all this “meeting in person” is all about, but there sure is a lot of it here. We do it as infrequently as possible back on Earth. Or, *they* do it as infrequently as possible. So I left the other cadets messages telling them when I’m free.

Next thing happened, was I got a *vis-a-vis* call from Uncle Luigi! Dad’s brother. Black sheep of the family and filthy rich. I think we’ve spoken maybe twice before in my whole life, because Dad wouldn’t

let him anywhere near the family. Married into money three different times, so of course, there's stories. Remember once, when I was little, he actually came by for some reason. I noticed, and I said, in all innocence, I swear, "I look much more like Uncle Lou than you, Daddy." Mom started crying. Dad had A FIT. Threw Lou out of the house and told him never to come back. Makes you wonder, dunnit?

Anyway, took the call just because it was so odd. He says, "Just had a big fight with your father!" So what else is new? "He's letting you stay on the Moon, he says!"

This is Italians for you. No matter how old your kids get, we're never adults able to make our own decisions.

He says, "I won't keep you long. This is an expensive call and as I'm sure your Dad told you, I'm a cheapskate. So. I made a new will. Everything I got, I leave to you—"

"WHAT?!" You know how in books people get news like this and fall out of their chairs? I did that.

"—under one condition."

My first thought was, "Then I don't want it!" But...

"What I want done is really, really illegal in the West on Earth, you know. And I ain't gonna deal with Asia because... well, Asia, they got really weird rules. But you're at Wargentín, and it looks like you're staying there. I heard, at Wargentín, anything goes! So. Here's what I want you to do for me. I want you to create an organism that cannot only survive but can function on the Moon like it was native to the place."

"Uhm..."

"I don't care what kind. Plant, animal, whatever. Big or small, doesn't matter. I have complete faith in your ability to do this. You're a smart kid!"

"Uhm.... Why?" Of all the stupid questions to ask, yeah, asked that one.

"Why? Because there ought to be such a thing, and I want it named after me because that would really, really piss off my brother your father. Now. When I kick the bucket, my executor will put my estate in trust for you. So long as you can show that you are actively working on the problem, you will receive 1% of the monetary value of the estate per year. On demonstration of the success of your project, the remainder of the estate is yours absolutely."

Think I came up with about 50 reasons why I could not possibly do this inside of 30 seconds and didn't say anything because I couldn't decide which one to say.

"What, you got a problem with that? You're a microbiologist! A smart kid. I always said so. You can do this! Do we have a deal?"

"Uhm..."

“Fine, well, you think about it overnight, eh?”

“Overnight?!”

“I need your answer by this time tomorrow.”

“Uhm... yeah, okay.” Was gonna ask what’s the rush, but—

“Buona sera!” The call dropped.

Think I just sat there staring for, like, an hour. This is crazy, I thought. I mean, it would be fun, but he doesn’t *mean* it. Does he? Why would anyone want such a thing? Mooched around for a bit and finished some homework. Then I had to get up because I had to go to Prof. Kuse’s for dinner.



Got to Kuse’s place after I got lost a couple times. Lives in the new dome which is about twice the size of the old domes and has two big blocks of flats and I started looking in the wrong one but I found her at last. Maybe you heard of her? She wrote *Satamuri: A Natural History*, which is required reading in just about every biology program there’s been in the last five years.

Wasn’t in her flat. Even in the new dome, flats are pretty small. So on each floor there’s a “party suite” with a dining room and a kitchen and stuff. Seats about ten people, you can reserve it. This place had windows looking out into space. Well, out onto the dome which looks out into space. Anyway.

When I walked in, Sharon said, “We’re waiting for some other guests. I invited some of my famous friends so you can meet them and get them out of your system.”

What? I’m confused. But we’ll see...

“Congratulations, Cadet Donatello,” she says.

“Heard about that?” I said, even more confused.

“Wargentin is a very small town,” Kuse says. “Everybody knows everything about everyone, and trust me, I mean *everything*. Especially with Maki around.”

Wasn’t sure how I felt about this, and I must have looked it because Kuse said, “You’ll get used to it,” and at that point the door opened and several people ... and things who are also people ... came in.

First there was a merry, “*Tadaima!*” and Sharon called “*Okaeri!*” and I did too, just automatically, my grandma would-of been proud, and Bing came in. Okay, okay, would HAVE.

Everybody knows about Sylvia. Bing not so much, though Bing and Sylvia came to live at Wargentín at the same time. She used to be the “Human Resources Geisha” at the Japan station at Tycho, then she moved to Wargentín, there were rumors that the circumstances were suspicious but whatever. She is absolutely tiny! Well, not doll-sized tiny but she’s really short. She’s supposed to be a robot but you can’t tell by looking so who knows. She offered me a cheery, “*Konbanwa! Watashi-wa Takahashi Hoshiko des’. Hajimemashite!*” Which is “Good evening! I am Hoshiko Takahashi. Let’s make a good beginning.”



Then the Alien Cat came romping in. An amazing thing, this Alien Cat. It’s—okay, *sahn* I think I mentioned that *sahn* resents gendered pronouns and thinks the “singular ‘they’” is just plain clumsy—double coated, and the outside coat is long, thin ribbons of transparent hairs, so it’s hard sometimes to know where the Cat stops and the rest of the world begins. And *sahn*’s got ALL THESE TEETH! I mean, this thing could chew bricks with these teeth! Smaller than I was expecting, though. Big-dogged size. I wondered how much of what I was seeing was the actual mass of the creature and how much was just hair, and whip-sized whiskers, and overly large fangs.

After that, Thobo Haradu walked in, carrying a tiny little dragon on his arm the way you’d carry a hawk. This is Sylvia. Haradu’s the guy who’s supposed to be an android. But again, you can’t tell by looking, which someone told me once, if you use the original definition of what an android is, is the whole point. Then somebody else said that the original “robots” would be “androids” by that definition and a fight broke out, that’s how it goes around here.



The little dragon jumped off Haradu's arm and began flying around my head which was creepy.

Bing greeted everyone by name, and bowing. Called Haradu "Itoko-san," means, "male cousin older than me." Called the satamuri, "Maki-chan," apparently Maki doesn't like, because sahn snapped at Bing when Bing said it. I would too. Means, "Dear little Maki" or something like that. It's what you call young children or pets.

Now, you'd think with all this hair, Alien Cats would be fluffy and cuddly. They're not, at least, this one isn't. The undercoat hairs are kind of wiry, like a terrier. The guard hairs are biological silicone or some such thing, and they're transparent at most angles and so slick you can barely feel them. Found this out because the Cat came up to me, uninvited, and said, "Go ahead, pet the Cat. You know you want to, everybody does."

So while I wasn't sure if I wanted to pet the Cat, it seemed awfully forward and Madonna Mia, I was about to touch a REAL ALIEN ... I petted the Cat.



I remembered a vid I saw once, A Beautiful Friendship, that someone made about how Maki and Haradu are best buds and now that I could compare, they did a pretty good job copying this fur. But Ray Meissinger looks nothing at all like the real Thobo Haradu, and sounds even less like the real one.

Then sahn started pinging on me, ping-ping-ping like a bat! “That’s pretty rude!” I said.

“I’m pretty rude,” Maki said and carried on.

I should mention at this point (oh look, I used a subject AND a pronoun, my Scientific Reporting prof will be so proud...) that Alien Cats talk funny. They have muzzles like dogs and it appears they can’t make some English sounds with their mouths, so they make them with their noses. M and N, naturally, but they can’t make an “oh” or an “ooo” sound with their mouths so they make ... a non-descript sound through their noses. This one does anyway. They also have restricted tongue motion so T and D sound pretty much alike. You don’t want to know how they mangle Ls but they do Rs okay. It’s uncomfortable to listen to, for me anyway.

When sahn stopped, Kuse said to Maki, “Your diagnosis, doctor?”

Maki said, “Leg is almost healed but there is damage to the rest of the bone as well. Stomach is empty. Do you not like the food here? You’re probably eating at the wrong place. New to SFAWarg. Saw Arlerin.” Sahn sniffed again. “Picked up a new uniform about three hours ago. Lives alone in... the 100 building on the second floor with one cat and the litter box could use a wash.” Sahn looked at me directly. “No close friends yet.”

“It’s a small town, everybody knows everything,” I said.

Maki grinned. Sniffed and pinged some more. “Past broken bones include right radius, where there was a pin, and left tibia, sounds like before you were ... six or seven? The healed break includes a bit of growth plate. Also, you are nervous and could use something to calm your stomach.”

“Don’t get sahn started,” Haradu said. “After this, sahn is likely to delve into really embarrassing stuff.”

Kuse leaned over and said, “Cadet Marjorry Donatello, may I present Professor Thobo Haradu, Ph.D., CPN, MRCG, and his wart, the Hairy Death.” (I looked those up later. CPN stands for Certified Public Nuisance. MRCG is Member of the Royal College of Gumbies, motto: “Our Brains Hurt!”)

The Hairy Death looked up at me and licked sahn’s lips. You know, I thought, if anyone knows if there’s such a thing as a moon-living organism, this Cat should know. Why am I even thinking about this?!

I glanced at ... I should call him Professor Haradu I guess... looking for some tell or other that he’s not real, and then I turned my attention to Bing. I kept looking at her and reminding myself, “She’s a robot. She isn’t real. Of course she’s perfect.”

But so lovely, and with a typical, anime-type, cheery voice.

Maki asked me what Era I joined the Academy in. Told sahn, sahn seemed pleased. They asked me if I had an assignment yet. Told them I was getting one, but didn't know what it was yet. Then Kuse asked me what I wanted to do after graduation and well... the plans I did have were impossible now so I just said "Idonno" and left it at that.

Started eating. At one point Maki (the Cat), who was eating ice cream with jimmies with sahn's fingers, seemed to get something stuck on one of sahn's hands. Sahn started gnawing at whatever it was and when Kuse noticed this she yelled, "OTT!" which I've heard used as "*Don't you dare!*" before. Maki ignored this and gave a little flick of a finger against a fang and a piece of fingertip went flying across the table!

Sharon Kuse stood up and slammed a fist on the table! "HOW MANY TIMES," she yelled, "do I have to tell you NOT to do that *while we're eating?!?*"

And here's one reason you will never convince me that Thobo Haradu is an android because not only did Maki jump, but Haradu did as well and you shouldn't be able to startle an AI, right? Maki just chuckled. Kuse picked up the fingertip cap and handed it to me. "Keep it, or else you can sell it for a boatload of money."

Maki grinned and said, in a gravelly voice, "I got a million of 'em! *Hat-cha-cha-ch-cha!*"

Can you believe this?!? I thought to myself. That's an actual Outer-Space-Alien, a Being from another world, an Ambassador from another civilization, and this woman is yelling at it *over table manners?* I was just stunned! But Maki didn't care, so...

We ate. Thobo and Kuse complained about the new graduate school that was being put together. Apparently it had been decided from on-high that Haradu would be dean of Astronautics but he didn't want the job. He said was allergic to deans.

Bing told funny stories. I couldn't stop looking at her. She noticed at one point and raised her eyebrows at me, like my nonna used to do when she was telling me that the next thing that would happen was I'd get a wooden spoon upside the head. But Bing did it kindly.

They had wine! Evidently it's locally grown. Surprisingly good.

After a while, they asked me what I was up to, and what courses I was taking, and all the things people ask, you know... and finally, I got up the courage and asked, "Maki, are there ... things ... out in the universe that can live, say, natively, on a moon like this?"

Maki considered this for a moment. "There are a very few, yes."

"Any that, say, evolved there?"

"Hmmm... not to my knowledge, but I know whom to ask."

"Single-celled?"

Maki flicked sahn's whiskers. "By what definition of 'cell'?"

Well, at that point we all got into a very interesting (to me, probably not to you) talk about the definition of what a cell is. Up to that point I decided the Alien Cat was kind of frivolous, but the thing is very astute, it turns out.

Bing asked intelligent questions and Haradu interjected the occasional pun, which everyone seemed to get, except for me.

Eventually we all said good night and I went home, and thought. About cells but also about Uncle Lu's "deal."

I said to Mutch, "What's there to lose? Uncle Lu ain't that old, probably change his mind before he croaks anyway. I can just tell him okay and forget it."

So I'll sent him back my "Okay, it's a deal" when I got up in the morning. (Wargentin goes by GMT so "the morning" is usually around 0600, that's when, during lunar night, they turn on the dome lights.)

3rd September

So next morning (somewhat late because I slept in and missed a class), I went to send the message. Found messages from Noor and Einarsdóttir and we were all set up for a time that evening. Classes I did go to were fine, though except for the "How to live on the moon" class everything was stuff I already knew. A couple the other students asked when they got spacesuits. "When you're fully grown," the prof said and you can imagine what a storm THAT set off! Apparently they won't fit you for a spacesuit of your own until you're at least 25! That's, like, forever! When we demanded WHY, prof said, "Because they're tailored special. Take a picture of yourself now and a picture of yourself at 25, then you come tell me."

Went to the meeting with Einarsdóttir and Noor at SFAWarg HQ. They were already there and so was Admiral Arlerin. Einarsdóttir is from Iceland. Extremely tall. Albino? Maybe. But I've met human albinos and their eyes are Tyndall blue and hers are pink. Was wearing a uniform from a fan era. Noor was short and looked Greek and disdainful of everything around here. Wore a uniform from the *Strange New Worlds* era.

While we're sitting around waiting, we hear, from the vestibule/dressing room, "Were you running around town in THAT?" and in skips Captain Singh in a ToS uniform.

"Of course I was!" he said.

A head poked in. "But the *maileiau*..."

Singh tsked. “Who cares! Besides, they’re *adorable* when they’re indignant!”

I was going to ask what was going on but this was evidently Real World Stuff which is never even acknowledged in HQ so I had to wait. Turns out that Wargentin’s *maileiau* (which is Maki’s word that covers all types of machine and synthetic intelligences) resent the portrayal of their fellow *maileiau* in *ToS* and *Next Gen* and... well....

Anyway, except for Admiral Arlerin, we all stood up when Captain Singh came in. He told us to sit and then gave us our assignment:

“We are trying to negotiate passage and a planet for a local HQ in the NGC 7006 Globular Cluster, which is under the control of the Ohtawanat Empire. The Ohtawanat Empire consists of a hegemony of four species and controls all transit, trade and scholarship within the cluster. Fortunately for the Federation, they appear to have no interest whatsoever in expanding their influence so that’s all right, then. There are eleven other cultures in the cluster who, so far as we can tell, prefer to keep themselves to themselves.



“Preliminary negotiations indicate that the Ohtawanat are willing to give us our choice of one of four worlds, one type K and three type P, on which we could run rampant if we like, within certain limits, of course. I have made a dossier of each and placed them in your inboxes. None of these worlds support life at present but all have something of an atmosphere and are amenable to terraforming. Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to research the Federations’ terraforming tools and see which would be most suitable to each of these worlds, and which of these worlds would be most easily

worked. As I'm sure you are aware, use of the Genesis Device or of anything like it is strictly and absolutely forbidden. Are there any questions?"

"When will you be wanting our results?" asked Noor.

Capt. Singh seemed to think this over. No doubt he was considering our Unmentionables (class schedules, exams and such). Finally he said, "Don't worry about that. Just begin your work I will check on you every now and then, and if there are any new developments, I will let you know. Now. Did anyone order pizza?"

None of us had ordered pizza. Apparently ordering pizza was not Unmentionable.

We got our dossiers. Looks like I was the microbiologist, Noor was the geologist and Einarsdóttir was the civil engineer. Since all of us had "prior appointments" (classes) we all agreed to look over what we were given and meet the next day at the same time. I already had some ideas about which little creatures I'd start with. This was going to be fun!

So, went to my last class (and got told off for not paying attention, I was thinking of slime molds) and then went back to my flat where Mutch was staging a protest because he could see the bottom of his bowl. On my way, saw Bing talking to a bunch of people. She is so beautiful. But then... of course she's beautiful, she's not real, she can be anything.

Looked through my inbox and saw an email from my Dad. I thought, "Oh, no, he's heard about Uncle Luigi..." And he did—he just didn't-of heard what I heard. After the usual "Your mother misses you something terrible, how could you leave her like this?" and other nonsense, there was this:

"Okay, well, gotta go. Just so you're up on the latest family news, your Uncle Luigi—you probably don't remember him—he had a stroke last night and passed away. I heard he left some kind of will. So I'm off to see my lawyer. Some of that money's rightfully mine, you know what I'm saying here? He's up to something, that guy. Always was. Whatever it is, I'mma contest it! That rat-bastard. Anyway, *ciao, figgha mia!* We'll talk soon."

Oooooohhhh, deeeear....

To Be Continued....

Star Trek Day 2021: A Review

By Germaine Swanson

I didn't know this was an annual event. It has been one for years. I've been hiding out among the Mundanes while I earned a living among them. It's only in the last couple of decades that I began advocating and evangelizing for *Star Trek*. I grew up enough to accept that Trek and Trek fandom is an integral part of who I am. I experimented with adulting in Star Trek fandom. It honed some of the better parts of my personality. Anyway, it became fun to disprove that Mr. Spock was the devil, or you can't enjoy science fiction and still go to heaven. Many learned that if they wanted to be with me, they had to at least tolerate my obsession, because it gave me joy.

I returned to organized fandom after my cancer surgery last year. My long-time best friend reintroduced me and I was hooked again. The new *Star Trek* universes are fantastic. I didn't really have time to watch the newer shows back in the day (*TNG*, *DS9*, *Voyager*, etc.) and most of my kids weren't interested in them. Today I have time to binge-watch at my own pace. Who says getting old is all bad?

Back to *Star Trek Day*. I watched it with interest. I tolerated the "red-carpet" opening. Fortunately, the young two hosts did not set the tone for the show. It was interesting to watch them interact with the different shows' stars. They were putting faces to the voices of *Star Trek: Lower Decks*, or of the actors who played aliens and whose features are disguised with make-up and prosthetics.

Paramount+'s *Star Trek Day* reminded me of a well-run convention without the audience participation parts. If you were there, had a ticket, you were able to view the Art Show and the Costumes. Cosplay was encouraged so there were people in costume. The hosts did not identify a formal costume event or competition. The cameras showed these events as things that were also happening but didn't spend any time showing detail.

The goal of the event was to present the casts and show runners for the upcoming season of Star Treks. Trailers and promotional videos for *Star Trek: Picard*, *Star Trek: Prodigy*, *Star Trek: Discovery*, and *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* were presented after each had its theme song played by a full orchestra. The music was excellent. The clips were enticing and the casts and show runners treated the event like it was just another press junket. That's a positive comment.

There were several breaks for the Roddenberry Foundation to advertise their latest projects. Unfortunately, the presentations weren't memorable enough to detail and are not on the website.

The Foundation was created in a response to the urgency and complexity of the issues we now face and the growing and exponential impact our actions have on each other and our planet. (From their website: www.roddeberrymfoundation.org)

I enjoyed *Star Trek Day* once it began (after the red carpet). I am motivated to watch the new Treks as they are released or to binge them when I have time.

The only negative about *Star Trek Day 2021*? My neighbor, who is a musician, now plays *Star Trek* theme music loudly on his sound system daily, several times a day and until the middle of the night. He really likes *Star Trek: Next Generation's* theme at 4AM and 4PM. He might stop on the day Bill Shatner goes into space, but I doubt it.



TWENTY QUESTIONS

by Fara Shimbo

All eyes turned to the Alien Cat.

The Alien Cat smiled, complacently.

All eyes widened, blinked, and looked away in nearly existential dread.

The Alien Cat was an actual extraterrestrial, if not an actual cat. It—it preferred to be referred to as “sahn” finding the neutral they/them ‘clumsy’—had landed at the domed Lunar college town of Wargentín six years previously. Of sahn’s life in space, sahn’s homeworld, sahn’s starship, and pretty much anything, really, sahn had said, determinedly, nothing. All that had really been learned about the creature was gathered through observation and the careful study of the creature’s occasionally shed ear and fingertips, and copiously shed hairs.

All the eyes in the Amphitheatre turned to Lillian Neeth, who had posed the seemingly innocent question thus: “How about, as part of Wargentínopolis’ 10th Birthday Celebrations” (that being what was under discussion at the time of this city-wide meeting), “our Resident Alien invites us all to an AMA?” The eyes seemed to say, “Well, now you’ve done it,” because to be fair, the Alien Cat had a Reputation.

Maki (that was The Thing’s name, by the way) stood up and, still grinning in its “You Asked For It” kind of way, walked to the podium. Behind it, through the sapphire dome that covered this part of the city, one could see ... well, nothing, really, because there was too much reflection on the dome’s surface. But Maki looked there anyway, out in the direction in which sahn’s starship was parked, and then looked back, over the crowd, and spoke thus:

“Okay, as a special treat for you people, I will, at 10 ack-emma on Monday, 3rd August, at this very same Amphitheatre, answer ‘YES’ or ‘NO’ ONLY to twenty questions. Each Department will choose one question, pertaining to *their department*, to which I will answer ‘YES’ or ‘NO’ ONLY, to be delivered by the dean of that department. You will be allowed one sentence of no more than 24 words to make clear to everyone else why you are asking this question. Questions I am to actually answer must be in the form of simple, active, interrogative sentences *without subordinate clauses*. So think carefully about what you want to ask. That is all.” Maki returned to sahn’s seat.

The Amphitheatre became very subdued. A couple of deans began to sweat.

Maki easily picked up the Smell of Fear. It was delicious.

Thobo Haradu, Maki's best friend in the whole universe and occasional partner in crime, leaned over and whispered, "You know, there aren't 20 individual departments in this college."

Maki did a satamuri version of a satisfied cackle. "You know, I live for moments like this," sahn whispered back.



There was a hurried conference between LMC's two Chancellors, Hannah Ebbe-O'Toole, of the School of Space Sciences, and Carolyn Able-Singh, of the School of Liberal Arts.

Carolyn, a pudgy woman of great antiquity and also known as The Old Lioness, walked to the podium and proclaimed, "No one is to do ANYTHING about this until Hannah and I have had a chance to discuss this."

Need one say that within two hours, Lanyim Maqira College's fifteen departments had swelled to fifty-six departments, each with their own Assistant Deans, sub-Deans and Deans-*pro-tem*?

A little perspective here. At the time of this incident, the Resident population of Wargentopolis was 198 humans, one android (in the old sense of the word), one robot (again in the old sense of the word), one Alien Cat, four dolphins, a leopard, a varying number of farm animals and birds, and 204 domestic cats. The cats did not teach at the college, nor did the leopard. Every other Resident, in some way, did. That was your way one paid for one's life-support. So, as you can imagine, the current number of deans was somewhat excessive.

So of course, one knows...

...this meant war.



A few minutes later, Carolyn and Hannah met in the latter's flat. The former was pacing back and forth in the small kitchen, grumbling, "No subordinate clauses! What the ever-loving, almighty, existential—"

"There," Hannah said, poking her com. "All communications channels blocked." She sat back and raised her churchwarden pipe (which never had anything in it) to her mouth, and began happily chewing on it.

Carolyn turned to Hannah and said, in a sulky voice, "Talk about being careful what you pray for!"

“I blocked yours too, dear.”

Carolyn went back to pacing. “Torture! TORTURE I tell you!”

“Caro, if you don’t sit down, I will sit ON you!”

“And you know what’s the worst part?” Carolyn said, pulling out a chair and slowly dropping into it, tugging at her hair.

“No, dear, what’s the worst part?” Hannah said, pulling out a notepad and a rather beautiful fountain pen. She scribbled something on the pad. “How do you like my new ink? Gentian, beet-root and hematite. I’m rather proud of it.” (One of Wargentin’s precepts was that everything must be reusable. So instead of ballpoint pens, fountain pens were used, and Wargentines were rather proud of the inks they made up from local materials. The paper they wrote on was made, in the main, from straw and drier lint, but that’s another story.) Hannah was scribbling on an actual piece of paper, upon which, she sincerely hoped, no one was spying.

“The worst part is this,” Carolyn continued. “Say, for example, we decide to expand our schools into ten departments each. ONE of those departments is going to have to give up asking their question to ask the most important question of all!” Carolyn leaned back and rubbed her temples.

“What do you get when you multiply six by nine?” Hannah offered.

“BUGGERATION!” Carolyn snapped as she turned to stare Hannah directly in the face. “You know what that animal is like! Oh, all the years we spent dreaming of who was going to show up once we made first contact! Did we get a guy with a huge robot offering an ultimatum? No! Did we get a bunch of Vulcans looking at us like we were rabid? No! Did—”

“Your point, dear?”

Carolyn took a deep breath. “No. We got a cross between a baboon and a hyaena,” she leaned very close to Hannah, “that LIES.”

Hannah blinked, and sat back. “Oh...”

“Maki never said, ‘I will answer *truthfully*.’ Right? So whoever gets to ask the last question must ask some form of, ‘Has any answer you’ve given us, *including this one*, been a lie?’”

Hannah let out a long sigh. After a while she said, “Have you still got any of that Chateau de Lune Blanc in your fridge?”



A short while later, when both ladies were bucked up for the task, they repaired to the kitchen and, tapping on the table that served as a terminal into the all-city network, stared at a list of LMC’s departments, and the courses given by each, along with the professors who taught them.

"I'll tell you what," Hannah said. "How about we split off Astronautical Engineering from Astronautics?"

"Hunh? Why? Are they that different?"

"No, but Glipner and Lillian Neeth loathe each other and if we split off Astronautical Engineering and give that to Lillian it will save *me* a lot of trouble breaking up fights between them."

Carolyn cocked her head to one side and said, "Oh! Hunh!" She drummed her fingers on the table. "Now, I have the same problem with Martin and Bashir. So... okay, then, you split up Glipner and Neeth and I'll split up Communications Tech and Journalism." She poured herself a half-glass of wine, which emptied the bottle. "How many have we now?"

Hannah tapped the screen with the end of her pipe, totting up the departments. "Sixteen," she said. "OH! And, and, how about we split off natural biology from unnatural biology?"

"Unnatural biology?"

"Oh, you know what I mean. Living things that evolved in one department and living things that were engineered in another. You know."

"Don't let our android hear you refer to him as a 'that,'" Carolyn said.

"Oh, stop it, you know what I mean!" Hannah tweaked the department list around. There, now we have Kanyarkat Narksomphob as dean of..." she tweaked some more. "Dean of Synthetic Biology. And Jess can stay dean of ... of ... ah! Evolutionary Biology and Medicine."

"I don't know," Carolyn said. "I think it would make more sense to have a Department of Biology and separate out the department of Space Medicine, and hand that part over to Jess."

"Hmmm... Yeah, you're right. And Jess owes me a favor so she can take this nice, cushy job." Hannah reached over to the bottle, noticed it was empty, and scowled.

"Okay, so, how many departments have you got?"

"Let's see..... Hmmm... okay, that's my ten. What have you got, Caro?"

"Oh! I've got nine. Who else needs to go to their own room and stay out of everybody else's hair? You know, if they told me being a chancellor was no different from running a borstal for supposed adults, I'd have just stayed home and had kids. Uhm..."

"How about a 'Department of Sit Down and Shut Up'?"

"Oh! You know what we don't have? We don't have a Department of Education. I just remembered, my brother heads that at St. Adam's."

Hannah looked up. "What do we need that for?"

“To make ten?”

“Done, go for it. Who are you going to stick with it?” Hannah began tweaking the list again.

“Hunh... lessee... uhm... Graham Pataki?”

“Why him?”

“His name is actually pronounceable.”

“Good enough.” Hannah finished tweaking the list. “Should I publish?”

Carolyn huffed. “Nah, let’s wait a few hours, then they can think we actually spent time figuring out otherwise defensible reasons for our decisions.”

“Good,” Hannah said. “I’ll go fetch us another bottle. We should celebrate.”



Three hours later, Carolyn’s voice, sounding every inch an Old Lioness, came over the tannoy:

“The following persons are to report to my office immediately.” There followed a list of names; all of the current deans and, one supposed, newly promoted deans, and one or two people who most definitely did not want to be made deans under any circumstances whatsoever. Needless to say, there was a lot of screaming. The city’s feline population ran for cover. The dolphins smacked their tails on the water’s surface in irritation.



And, oh, was there ever an uproar. For example, “WHAT?!” Elizabeth Fink, very small, very round and very red of face, roared in fury. “Biology has a department, Geology has a department, Chemistry has a department, and Physics is *still* under Engineering?! It’s not FAIR!”

The Old Lioness banged a gavel on the podium to try to call for order. When that didn’t work, Hannah came up with an air-horn and blew it directly into the microphone.

That worked.

Jessikka Merritt-Isaacson walked around handing out aspirins to anyone who wanted them, accompanied by a very unsympathetic smirk.

“Raise your hand if you wish to speak,” the Old Lioness growled, “or I’ll let her do it again. At a higher pitch. And don’t you dare let me hear the word ‘fair’ from anyone over the age of five. Now take your seats.”

“I want a Department of Physics!” Fink screamed.

“Why?” yelled Tory Desjardans of the new Engineering Department. “What does an Alien Cat know about Physics anyway?”

Maki, sitting in Wargentin’s scion of Newton’s Apple Tree, bridled.

“And Behavioural Sciences should be split between Human and Animal!”

The Alien Cat hooted and said, “Speaking for all the other animals, I am offended.”

Hostilities recommenced.

Once again, Hannah approached the podium, air-horn held high. There was immediate silence.

“ANYWAY,” Carolyn shouted. “You all have three days to come up with your questions. Hannah and I shall be indisposed until then. Get to work.”

There was so much arguing, and at such volume, that nobody actually noticed Hannah and Carolyn disappear.



The Department of Cybersecurity had only three members: Dennis McKavver, he of the mahogany hair and the face of an Adonis (for which, it was rumored, he’d paid dearly); Fatima al-Faras, widely thought of as Wargentin’s very own Mata Hari; and Maureen Avery, an older woman quite practiced in the art of being so average in every respect as to be invisible. So as not to be redundant, they were joined today by William Takala of the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, a strange sight with blazing white hair and oddly leopard-spotted skin (he had been one of the very first to try out a new gene-editing technique to make him ‘more interesting’ without having to undergo tattoos). At this point, he was speaking:

“I’m sure Maki has already told you what the... security... situation in the galaxy is?”

“Sahn has,” Dennis said. “I asked if there were any ‘galactic civilizations’ out there and sahn said there weren’t, because the mechanics of interstellar FTL travel were a secret that *muònet* starships kept to themselves.”

“Hunh...” Avery said. “Do we know, at all, how many of these starships there are?”

“No,” Dennis said, “but *shauneh* [satamuri first-contactors] have been building them as part of their training for many millennia, so there must be quite a few. That said, from what I understand, they design the ships overall, and a propulsion system is a gift from other starships when the shauneh’s training is complete. But only the starships themselves know how the propulsion system actually works. And if our local example is any indication, they are a taciturn lot.”

“Someone else must know. Really. You can’t tell me that in all the galaxy nobody has ever captured one? Taken it apart? Someone must have done that.”

“Oh, there’s a question we might ask,” Avery said. “Is it even possible to capture a *muònet*?”

“To which Maki will give the answer ‘no’ or lose sahn’s ride, I suspect,” Takala said.

“I gather, you know, what we’re aiming at asking here is are we in danger of, say, alien invasion? I mean, by more than, say, a handful of satamuri,” Avery asked.

“From everything I’ve learned in the last six years, and I’ll grant you all it isn’t a lot,” said McKavver, “that kind of thing isn’t a worry. Maki once said that ‘Space is too vast for empires.’ But there’s something else that picks at the back of my brain. Remember that old book, *The Three Body Problem*, were invasions were accomplished by folding, uhm, unpleasantness into a proton, entangling it with another proton, and then sending one of the protons to Earth? Does anybody out there do that sort of thing? That’s what I want to know. Because *that* would be a real problem.”

“In that case, we need two questions,” al-Faras said. “Can anybody do that, and how far away are they? How far away is Maki’s homeworld anyway?”

McKavver tapped on the table, and read, “415 light years. So if the Klyadel is sending us anything like that, I can safely say it’s not our problem.”

“But if there have been shauneh, you know, for, what? Thousands of years? Right? And each one has had to build a starship, why haven’t we seen any before this? They don’t live that long, satamuri, right? So really? What do all these spare starships do?”

“Maureen,” Dennis said, “that’s a perfectly interesting question, I don’t think it is within the purview of the department of Department of Cybersecurity.”

“Of course it is! Everything is!”

“Not directly. Let’s not give that animal a reason to avoid answering us. Somebody come up with a cybersecurity question.”

Dennis stared at the ceiling. Avery stared at her hands. Al-Faras stared at nothing.

Takala said, “How do we know how much Maki and Fa Chen [sahn’s starship] know about us?”

All three turned and stared at him.



The Communications department, made up almost entirely of linguists, had no idea what to ask. All the questions they could think of had been answered already at one time or another. No, mathematics was not a Universal Language because almost ‘who thinks in numbers anyway?’ Was there a language that everybody spoke? Apart from various forms of “No Satamuri Allowed,” no; cultures mostly kept to themselves. Was Maki, or anyone, ever going to have a “How To Speak My Language”

course? Probably not. That one time Ranger translated *The Final Problem* into Kwakyen was all they were going to get.

Chester Figgle, voted “Person Most Exactly Like What You’d Expect From Someone Of Their Own Name,” halfheartedly suggested, “We could always pass and give our question to somebody else,” and was immediately and summarily banished.



The Biology Department was in, as one might expect, total disarray—to the point where a food fight had broken out.

On one side were what Hannah might have called the Naturalists: those who studied the biology that nature had produced, whether on Earth, Mars, or any of several other places in the solar system. On another side were the Sytheticists, those looking to further research into making living things more adaptable to life in space (a technology which had produced Thobo Haradu and a whole slew of relatively giant, and quite possibly intelligent, spider-tardigrade-bee kinds of things). In the middle were the Geneticists, many of whom were less than sober by this time. Off to one side were the botanists, discussing their despair over why the first first-contacter they’d ever encountered was an obligate carnivore who thought plants were “what food eats” and therefore of no interest.

Amongst the latter group was Dr. Maisoon Namari, plant geneticist, and she had had enough. She had gotten the idea that everyone should write their question down on a slip of paper, and each one would then be rationally discussed on its merits. She stood up and was just about to make this pronouncement, when across the room she spied, as if for the very first time, bio-engineering professor Dr. Vincent Aiello. She saw him; she locked eyes on him; and suddenly, she knew, she just knew, that he was ... *The One*.

The one who had removed her sandwich from its container and replaced it with a jellyfish.

Within moments, the rest of the biologists noticed her stare, and putting the most likely interpretation on it, began singing *Some Enchanted Evening*.

Namari grabbed her sandwich holder, wrenched it open, held up the (now quite dead) jellyfish and, waving it on high, screamed, “AIELLO!!”

Someone else screamed, “Let loose the Kraken!”

The food fight resumed.



Namari’s idea was, actually, a good one, and had been adopted by several other departments.

The Chemistry department came up with a few good ideas but had to admit, nothing they thought an Alien Cat would know anything about.

The Astronomy department divided their ideas into a Sweet-Sixteen, Great-Eight, Final-Four chart and worked from there.

The Engineering department really wanted to be able to ask questions of the starship, again because how much engineering could an Alien Cat know, really?

And the days passed, as days are wont to do...



And how, well one might ask, was Maki, The Alien Cat, taking all of this? The term “too much fun” comes readily to mind.

Sahn had been following newly made deans around, purring. Satamuri, as a species, do not purr; but they’d heard cats do it, and they liked it, so they took it up as a hobby. There had once been talk of engineering satamuri to purr, but shauneh, those trained for first-contact, preferred to have this skill as a demarcation between themselves and the “wild” population.

The human population, of course, did not know this, and it had long puzzled them that an alien should purr, and they wondered why... but that was not to be a question for Monday since the idea that sahn’s purring was an affectation simply never occurred to them.

“Do you need to me translate for you? I assume there’s going to be plenty of jargon,” Thobo said over breakfast one morning.

“I know a lot more jargon than they think I do,” Maki said, smirking.

“Well, for nuance then. As much of it as I’ve ever been able to tease out, anyway.”

Maki sipped some tea, and sat back. “Nuance... I can make use of that!” The tip of sahn’s tail began twitching.

This was never a good sign.



At long last, or way too soon, Monday, August 3rd arrived.

WGTN, the city’s media outlet, set up the broadcast the entertainment live as far and wide as could be reached, on three worlds, and especially to those places where contact with Wargentin was tightly, and at times comically, censored. The Old Lioness took a seat in the background, eyes on the crowd in the Amphitheatre, scowling in such a way that (she hoped) no one would think of getting out of line. Hanna wandered through the crowd with her air-horn.

Maki sat on a chaise lounge, center stage, waiting for the festivities to begin.

In the seats fidgetted every member of the LMC Faculty, and pretty much all the cats.

Having satisfied herself that everyone was behaving, Hannah came down and stood before the crowd. “Everyone,” she said, “when you come up here to ask your question, please state your name and department for all of our broadcast audience on three worlds. And several space-stations. And whatever, just do it.” She nodded, left the stage, and took a seat in the back row.

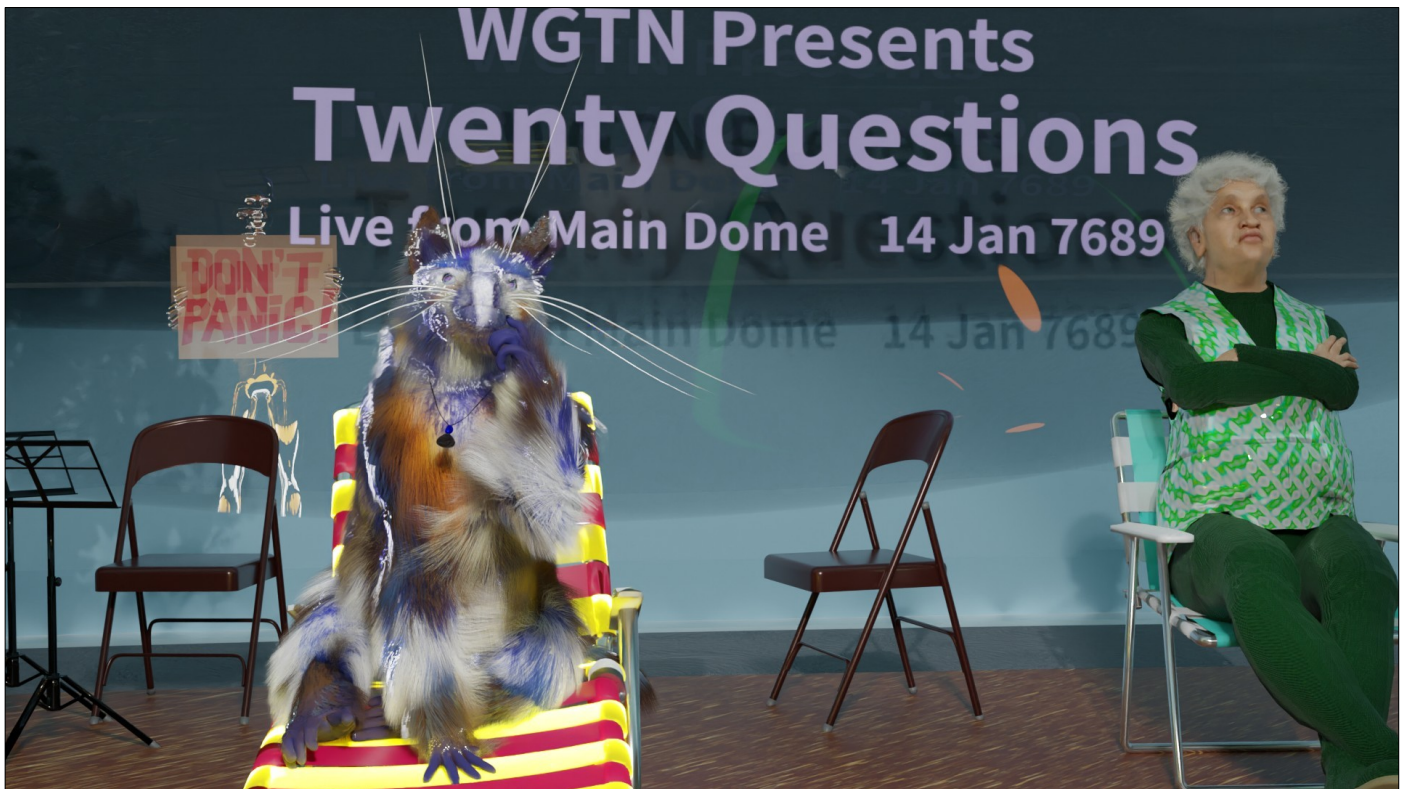
“I will take questions in the departments’ alphabetical order,” Maki said, tail slowly switching. “Architecture. You go first.”

“Docteure Marie LaFontaine, Department d’Architecture,” said the first dean to step up. Tall, lanky in the extreme and covered in jewels, stood before the podium and cleared her throat.

“Nice sparklies,” said the Alien Cat, who was well known to be attracted to such things.

“Nous avons décidé,” she grunted, “cette question. L’architecture en tant qu’art, apparaît-elle dans toutes les civilisations galactiques?” That is, ‘does architecture as an art form arise in all galactic civilizations?’

Maki, never to be outdone in the snootiness department, leaned forward, raised sahn’s muzzle so that sahn was peering down on the questioner, and said, “Oui.”



Wargentines had all kinds of translators on them, and one clever soul yelled out, “Well! What a way to get two questions wrapped up into one!”

“What?”

“No, that’s three, including, ‘can you speak French!’”

“It assumes there are galactic civilizations!”

“We already figured that out!” someone else shouted.

The Old Lioness pointed to Hannah, who was holding her air-horn on high.

“*Alors, bêtes sauvages...*” Maki grumbled as the next questioner came to the fore.

“Lillian Neeth, Piled Higher and Deeper, Astronautics,” asked, “Science fiction, which I happen to know you ingest in copious amounts, carries on at great length about ‘hyperspace.’ Is there really such a thing as hyperspace?”

A perfect Babel of professorial opinions broke out behind her. She turned and snapped, “I wasn’t asking YOU-LOT! So shut it!”

Everyone turned to Maki, hoping to have their own favorite hypotheses confirmed or refuted.

Maki smiled, in the way one smiles at people who seek attention by proclaiming the Earth is flat, and said, in kind, long-suffering tones, said, “No.”

“There isn’t? Well! Harrumph, I say.” Neeth returned to her seat and was quickly surrounded by many people wondering what there could possibly be instead.

A small woman stepped up to the podium and spoke, as she usually did, almost inaudibly. “Dr. Margot Kanabigati, Astronomy and Astrophysics.” She gave the matter one last thought, then said, as fast as ever she could, “Are there parallel universes?”

Maki looked squarely at her and said, nodding, “Yes!”

Kanabigati’s eyes became very large. She clearly wanted to say something further, but just squeaked, “thankyou,” and trotted back to her seat. The rest of the Amphitheatre erupted in “Ooooh!” and “BUT” and some poor soul shouted, “I don’t care, I am NOT retracting that paper!”

“John Cardozo, DVM, Ph.D., Behavioural Sciences,” stood up next, as persons around him shouted re-wordings of their question, all of which he ignored. He sighed—this was the last question he wanted an answer to but the department insisted—and said, “Is there, to your knowledge, any such thing as a hive mind?”

Maki flashed sahn’s whiskers, a little surprised at this, then cocked sahn’s head, looked up at the dome for a moment or two, then mostly closed sahn’s eyes and said, “No.”

Poor Cardozo had no idea what to make of this, and went back to his department, glowering the while.

“Dr. Kanyakat Narksomphob, Biology,” pronounced her name very clearly, and said, “Are any of the intelligent—”

There was a Riot of the Pedants in the stands.

“Okay, okay. Rational. Any of them, are they parasites on another creature?”

Maki rolled sahn’s eyes and said, “Clarification. Having, as Lillian said, imbibed a lot of science fiction, I gather than what you guys really mean is ‘civilized,’ *i.e.*, living in cities and possessing technology, so let’s use that term. And to answer your question, Dr. Phob, no.”

“Oh, good,” Narksomphob said as she returned to her seat. “Parasites are just disgusting.”

“*Alors!*” screamed someone impersonating LaFontaine, “De la Belle Paris, her residents, they are not disgusting!”

“*Alors! Cassent-vous! Les gueules! Fils des porcs!*” the real LaFontaine shouted.

Maki whistled. No microphone was needed. Between the inherent loudness of the whistle and the reverberation off the dome, headaches were guaranteed for the rest of the day.

Next came, “Dr. Ranjapur Vijay Ramasapathi, NOT ‘Frank!’ I have to learn to pronounce your names, you can learn to pronounce Ranjapur! Okay! Now everybody settle down because this is the question from the Chemistry Department. Okay! Here it is. Ahem: Are there natural, living beings in the galaxy, that you know about anyway, okay? Whose chemistry is not based on an element in Group 14?”

There was a hush from both the chemistry and biology departments, because it had been bad enough, once Maki had begun shedding all over the place, that “organic” chemistry had to be extended to silicon as well, which had caused at least two undergraduates to transfer to the history department in despair.

Maki thought for a moment, then said, “Yes.”

“Oh no,” Frank said. “Oh no,” said many members of the Chemistry department, as Frank rejoined them. On the other hand, the Biology department seemed to be delighted.

Communication and Languages was next. Jean-Louis Martin walked past LaFontaine and the two scowled at each other; Martin was a Quebecois.

Heavily accented, but in English, he asked, “Monsieur Jean-Louis Martin, MMB. Good morning. Among the civilized, as you say, is it that they had a pre-city-dwelling, pre-literate language based on grammatical rules of some kind. Is this the rule, the commonplace?”

“*Oui,*” Maki said.

Martin slowly turned around and grinned at the other professors in his department. Some were delighted.

“Prof. Alan Darktree, MSEE, MSAE, Computing and Systems Engineering,” stood up. “We want to ask a question about you yourself, while travelling in space inside your ship. Are photons that are blue-shifted into gamma rays a danger to you in flight?”

“What?!” screamed Glipner of Engineering and Space Sciences. “That’s not in your department!”

“Everything’s in our department!” one of the other engineering profs yelled. “Shut up, Baldy!”

The Alien Cat snorted, rolled sahn’s eyes, and said, “No.”

Those who had been conjuring images of Maki getting angry, turning green and smashing things were immediately dispelled. Mostly, because Maki did occasionally smash things.

Darktree returned to his seat, and head of security Dennis McKavver stood up.

“Mr. Dennis McKavver, Espionage. Your starship has been sitting out there on the tarmac, and being a ‘sahn’ rather than an ‘it,’ I suppose it does something to stave off boredom. Is anything off-limits?”

Maki leaned forward, grinned, and said, “Nope!”

“Well, that confirms what I’ve thought all along.” Dennis nodded to the Cat and went back to his seat.

“Graham Pataki MSED, Dean of Education. To the best of your knowledge, Cat. Period. Not a subordinate clause. Just so we’re clear. Is there anything in the galaxy like the *Encyclopaedia Galactica* or the *Hitchhiker’s Guide*?”

Maki grinned broadly and licked sahn’s lips. Sahn may have drooled a little. “Yup!”

“Hunh,” said Pataki. “Given Dennis’ question it’s probably more like the Junior Ganymede’s Club Book.”

Maki, a great *Jeeves and Wooster* fan, purred.

“Ona Wakia, Fine Arts,” came to the podium. “We have all noticed that you seem to be a fan of classical music, and show tunes, and the like. Is there anything regarding frequency and harmonics a sound that makes this kind of music generally liked in your neck of the woods?”

Maki seemed to have to consider this. Sahn tilted sahn’s head back and forth a few times, and said, “Yeah,” as if having just reached that conclusion.

“Well!” Wakia said, bouncing back to her chair, in which she was unable to sit as it had been taken over by three cats.

“Alfred Glipner, Ph.D, MSEE, MSAE, Engineering generally,” had almost not survived the strain of waiting his turn. He had been sweating so profusely that his pate, voted “The Shiniest Bald Head on the Moon” seven years running, was now even shinier. For the last six years, he and Maki had been in some disagreement as to how incoming Freshmen ought to be treated, and Maki had invented an entirely new vocabulary of invective just for him. Such as the, “There you are, you defenestrated lemon rind babe-in-the-toaster! What do you want?” sahn greeted him with now.

“Don’t you start with me!” Glipner snapped. “Anyway...” Glipner shuffled a bunch of index cards he was holding.

“Okay, and all I want is a straight answer without ANY waffling. Since Astrophysics took one of our questions, I’m stealing one of theirs. Do parallel universes interact, in the everyday course of nature?”

Maki leaned back, bit sahn’s lip, and appeared to give the matter a lot of thought. Finally sahn crossed sahn’s arms and said, “No.”

“Dr. Barbara Sheen, Geology,” stood up and said, “Here’s one you’ll like. Is there anywhere around here where there are gem-quality and reasonably sized minerals which include noble gasses?”

Maki seemed to want to say, “Oh yes,” but after a little thought, settled for a “Yes” and a very wide grin.

Many people said, “ooo!” and one shouted out “What color?!” Maki just grinned some more.

“Interdisciplinary Studies, Gregor Karpachenko,” stood very forthrightly and asked, “Does the Klysadel ever influence civilizations to produce new members for its roster?”

Apparently this had been, at some point at least, on a lot of minds because there was a murmuring in the crowd.

Maki leaned forward and raised sahn’s eyebrows, as far as was possible, and said, “Eh, nooooo?”

That got everyone whispering. Everyone turned to Thobo Haradu and stared at him. He closed his eyes, crossed his arms and harrumphed.

“Interplanetary Law Department, Professor Dr. Lars Torelkind,” wanted to know, “Is there any set of common practices for travelling through interstellar space?”

Maki considered for a second and said “Yes” in much the way one might answer the question, “Is there air?”

“Bibi Fillipa, Dean of History,” stood up, wriggled a bit as if shaking off flies in slow motion, and asked, “Does one find that there are recurrent themes in the histories of civilizations in the galaxy?” She slo-mo-shook again and waited.

Maki leaned back and scratched sahn's chin. Stared out at nothing. Shrugged. Said, "Yyyeeeees," and sighed.

Department of Journalism, Ali Bashir Ph.D.," said, "For the moment, let's assume you, personally, have offspring. Are you their mother?"

Maki first looked shocked, then almost scandalized, and said, "No!"

That brought a lot of comment, to the point where Maki yelled out, "Settle down, you mammals! Sheesh! Heads out of the gutter."

"Darla King, Mathematics," stood up, looked smug, and asked, "Are there a verifiable solutions to Hilbert's Problems?"

Even Maki had to look this one up, and turned sahn's large ears toward where sahn's starship was as if to ask if Fa Chen knew this one. After some time, sahn turned back and said, "Uhm... no?"

"Saul Kugelmeyer, Ph.D, Psychology and Human Behaviour," wanted to know, "In Arthur C. Clarke's *Rama* series, he proposes a civilized race, the Octospiders, which communicates via bioluminescence and color change. As a language, that is. Is there such a race, to the best of your knowledge?"

Maki shook sahn's head and finally just said, "No."

"Too bad," Kugelmeyer said as he sat down again.

And thus it fell to Jessikka Merritt-Isaacson, Ph.D., DVM, MD, MRCS, of the Department of Space Medicine, who knew Maki very well by this time, to ask the most important, and possibly the most useless, question of the lot: "Have you heretofore, and including in answer to this question, told the truth?"

Maki leaned forward, looking torn.

"There was no subordinate clause in that sentence!" someone from Languages shouted.

Maki snorted and looked affronted. Sahn took a long time to answer, "Yes."

The Old Lioness got up, walked up to the front of the stage, picked up the Cat, put sahn on the floor, and announced, "Thus Endeth the Lesson. Class is dismissed."

Nobody went anywhere. On the west side of the Amphitheatre, a food fight resumed.



Afterward, Lillian Neeth, who started this mess after all, was ceaselessly hounded. Almost none of those answers was satisfactory, and it was entirely her fault. Somehow. But she had come up with a splendid plan for retribution.

Thobo Haradu worked for the Spaceship Shop as a test-pilot and consultant, and where Thobo was, Maki was never too far away. So, a couple of days after the Debacle, Lillian locked Thobo in a cockpit and demanded that Maki, who had been avoiding everyone for days, show up and beg for his release.

As all machine intelligences—*maileiau*, in Maki’s language—were under satamuri protection (with one exception which is irrelevant here), Maki almost immediately made an appearance, every long, ribbon-like, silicon-based guard hair on end.

Sahn jumped up onto a counter. “Blackmail, eh?”

Lillian smiled sweetly and said, “Why yes, dear.”

“You realize,” Maki said, “That he could probably just kick the door down.”

“Could, wouldn’t,” came a muffled voice. “It’s quiet in here.”

Maki huffed. “Okay, so what do you want, really? Revenge, yes?”

Lillian leaned forward. “Revenge, yes. Ladies?”

In walked Hannah Ebbe-O’Toole and Carolyn Able-Singh, each of them carrying a large pile of printouts. They dropped these piles at Maki’s feet.

“Congratulations,” the Old Lioness said. “You are on the peer-review board, effective immediately. Marianne Blue-Horse wants these expedited. We printed them out so you can’t have them read to you. Gotta actually use those lovely mauve eyes.”

“What are these?!”

“The output of practically every professor in town over the last two days,” Hannah said. “I’m sure there’ll be more tomorrow, the next day, the day after that, you know...”

“They wrote papers about what I said already!?” the cat said, tail lashing.

“And how you said it, yes,” Lillian said sweetly. She unlocked the door to the cockpit. “There you go, you two. Off with you now. Have an absolutely *wonderful* time.”

Maki climbed up onto the piles to be at eye-level with the two chancellors. “Challenge accepted,” sahn said, licking sahn’s muzzle, and slowly waving sahn’s prehensile tail.

This was clearly not the response they were expecting, but okay then.

“And make sure you keep your responses honest!” Carolyn warned.

Maki smiled complacently and purred. “Of course,” sahn said. After a short rummage, Maki found a box and loaded all papers into it, and dragged them out of the Spaceship Shop. “Toodle-pip!” sahn chirped as sahn went.

“This can only end in tears, you know,” Thobo said as he went to follow his friend out.

“Tell me something new, why don’t you?” Lillian sighed.

In silence, the three women watched the two friends go.

“I, uhm... and this is strictly between the three of us... have a new batch of single-malt Scotch ready for a taste test,” Carolyn said at last.

“We’re going to need it,” said Hannah, as the three of them walked off, “and that’s the truth!”

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Here are some tips for getting things to us.

WRITTEN WORD:

For New and Original written-word science fiction, fantasy and fanfic, please send your work in a **plain text file** (no pre-formatting or PDFs, please, it only makes our job harder! We will make them here). This may be .txt (plain text), .odt (OpenOffice, LibreOffice), or .doc/.docx (Microsoft Office), though we can read pretty much every file format you can think of. We don't have a word limit, but we may suggest that anything very long be serialized.

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If you are submitting a story that has previously been published, please note we have a cut-off date; we are only accepting work published in the 20th Century. Please include the place it was originally published, the editor at the time, the date of publication, and any reviews you think might be of interest to potential readers.

If you are including illustrations, please see the notes below for whatever type of art you have. If you were not the artist, please forward permission to use the art from the original artist if the work was not a work-for-hire. (A "work-for-hire" is any work that has been paid for and is therefore no longer the legal property of the creator.) If you

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Please send text files first! We have really good, experienced editors here who may want to suggest clarifications, additions and the like. Once the story has been accepted, you may choose to narrate it yourself, or choose a narrator. (And please, no offense intended, but please carefully consider your narration skills before taking this step!) We will give you instructions on how to send sound files if the story is accepted, but we reserve the right to reject a sound file if it is of poor sound quality (too much background noise, cats yowling to be fed, etc).

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Please send these as .png files, with images as large and clear as you can manage and uncompressed. One shouldn't have to say this, but please only send images of your own work unless the art is an illustration for a story which you are submitting at the same time. If you are considering submitting a print you bought from an artist, please refrain unless you purchased publication rights at the same time.

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Please, please, compress these files before sending them! [filename].tar.gz is preferred. We'll take .wav, .mp3 and .mp4 formats, as these are the most widely compatible with different operating systems. (If you are unfamiliar with translating between formats, Tenacity is an excellent, and free, tool for sound. If you want to try your hand at video recording and editing, Fa uses OpenShot on Linux (works on all platforms) for her YouTube videos; also free and very easy to learn.

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See you in January!

