

# RETROZINE

Two Fandom  
Elders,  
One More Time!

Spring 2022 No. 4

## In This Issue:



**Original Fiction By:**

Marjorry Donatello \* G. S. Cole \* Niall Shapero \* Eddie Swanson



**Fan Fiction By:**

**The Crew of the USS TROUBLE in EPISODE 2: The Big Deal**

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CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER: Lt. Cmdr. Op "Ratty" Ji

MASTER TACTICIAN: Cmdr. Mark Swanson

CHIEF ENGINEER: Cmdr. Robert Shimbo

CRYPTANALYST: Chp "Chip" Pntshe Dh

And Guest Starring: Harcourt Fenton Mudd



**Non-Fiction and Commentary by:**  
Germaine Swanson



**Filk by:**

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# RETROZINE

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## On Cannon

By Germaine Swanson

Canon means the defining rules of what and what cannot be considered part of an ideology or religion. Canon for the Star Trek Universe is a real thing. Basically, a concept or arc was approved for inclusion in *Star Trek* if Gene Roddenberry decreed it or the subsequent producers/show runners agreed it was within the intent of the creator (Roddenberry). While this has the feel of religious dogma or rules, Canon only exists to instruct the writers how to keep the story lines consistent so that on a whole, everything in the universe would make sense.

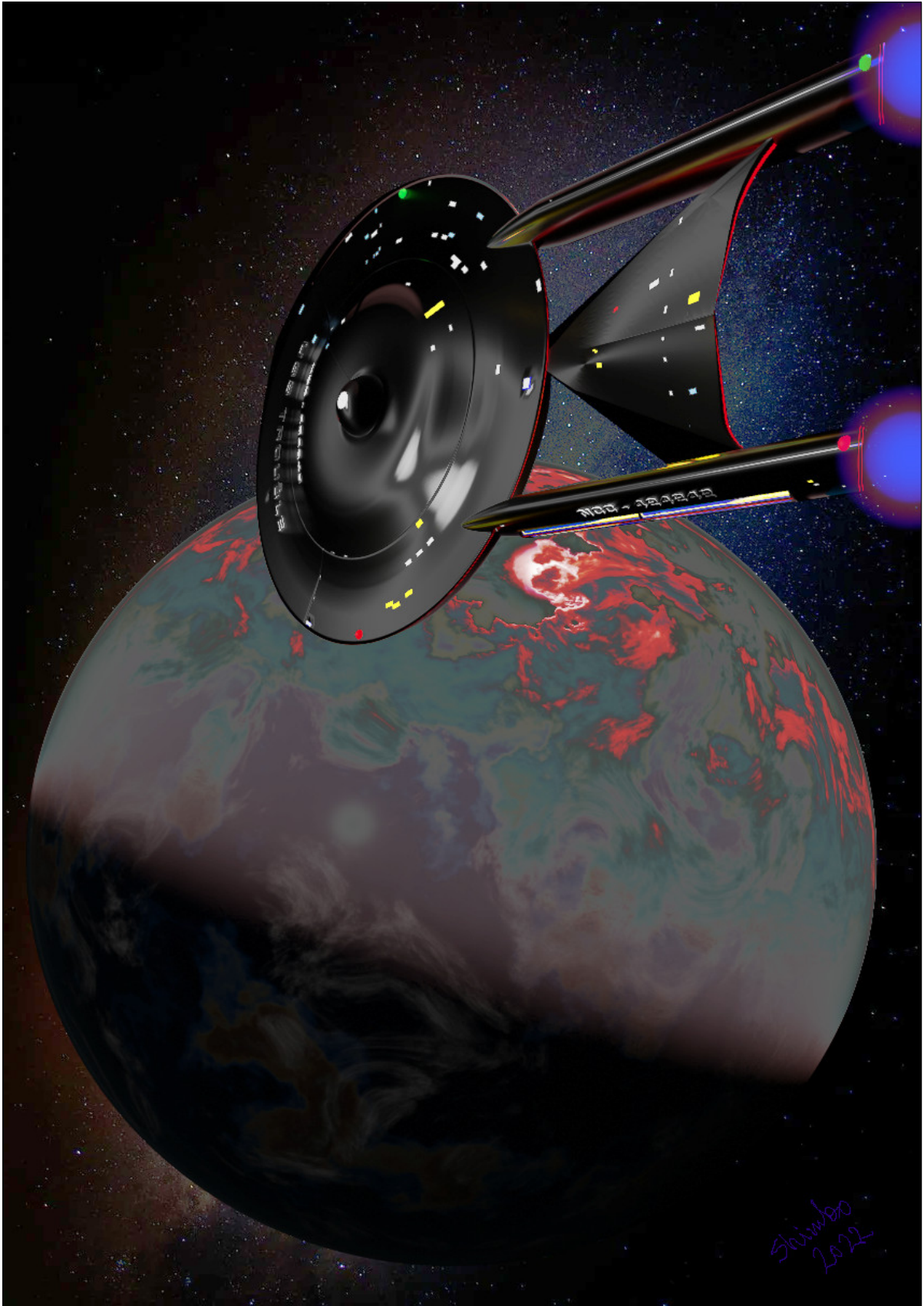
In the March 2, 2022, on-line issue of *Bounding Into Comics*, John Trent describes the petition circulated on Change.org by “Fan G” (no relation) asking that *Star Trek Discovery* and *Picard* be declared non-canon because they ‘blatantly disregard Gene Roddenberry’s vision for a utopian, moral and optimistic future.’”

Decades ago, the same thing could have been said about *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. In fact, I could have circulated a similar petition, raising similar points about it being non-canonical. The original series and movies were the Canon at that time and TNG was approved by the creator. Therefore, that would have been a waste of energy and TNG improved over time. It expanded the canon of *Star Trek*.

Sean Ferrick of [whatculture.com/star-trek](https://whatculture.com/star-trek) created a March 27, 2022 YouTube video about parts of the star Trek universe that have not been fully addressed. In *Why Star Trek NEEDS To Explore The Lost Era* he defines that era as the period between *Star Trek: the Undiscovered Country* (movie) and *Star Trek: the Next Generation* (television series). It starts roughly from the 2280’s to 2363 (launch of the Enterprise D).

Ferrick’s focus is on future films and television. It is an interesting video you might consider viewing. His main point is that canon offers space for the creation of other story arcs using existing characters from the past or new ones. He says the “show runners absolutely love the plethora of Trek that we’ve gotten” and suggests that other Star Treks could be made based on events mentioned in or referred to in canon-approved production. Sean feels there is infinite space for stories, movies or even television shows that are similar in format to anthology series like the *Twilight Zone* or full-season story arcs like American Horror story.

The voyages of the USS *Trouble*, our little piece of the universe, are set during that Lost Era. I am positive that “Fan G” would have her petitions cocked and ready if the voyages of the *Trouble* and its future incarnations were ever to be considered canonical.



# A Direction To Fly

By Eddie Swanson

The clock had just chimed 6 when he walked in. I knew it was Rocko without looking up. First one in the door, just as he had always been since I took over my Pa's diner 15 years ago. He came through that door at 6am, Noon, and 6pm. Regular as clockwork, he was.

He settled down at the table by the window, as usual. He didn't place an order, and didn't need to. Griddle cakes, hash browns, scrambled eggs, and a piping cup of stimcaf, two creams. A creature of habit, a slave to routine, whatever you called him, he was predictable.

Rocko nodded to me as I placed his food on the table. The corners of his lips twitched in a vaguely upward direction, as close as he ever got to a smile these days. "Thanks Raz," he rumbled.

I nodded in return and went back to opening up the diner. I knew I wouldn't have more customers until 8, when the first cargo hauler of the day pulled into town. That suited me just fine, I could take my time as a result.

Sometime later I heard a thump coming from Rocko's table. I looked up from unloading the dishwasher to see that he had placed a metal box on the table. I put down the glass I was holding and scrambled across the room to take a look.

Rocko was a mechanic with the cargo line, and he tended to bring his work home with him. He was arguably the finest mechanic they had, and if the main line techs couldn't figure out what was wrong with something, they turned to him. Frequently he'd still be at it come morning, and if he was he would work on the problem after breakfast.

I took a look at today's contraption. The box was maybe a meter long, and half that in width. It was packed full of gears and rods, and coated with a liberal coating of machine grease. Thankfully he had put an old rag down on the table first. I grunted to myself. He was learning.

"So what's on tap today?" I asked.

Rocko looked up from sorting through his toolbox. "Gearbox," he replied. "It's making a grinding noise when shifting gears. I'm guessing it needs a new sprocket somewhere in here, or maybe some lube."

I looked at the complex mess of metal and plastic and shook my head. "I'll never know how you can make sense of these things," I said.

He shrugged. "I just have a head for it, I guess." He flashed me another semi-smile, his eyes doing most of the talking. "Besides, it's a puzzle. I like puzzles."



Around 7 Rocko packed up and left. By now I was done with my prep, so I grabbed a broom and began sweeping out the sand from the floors.

Ahk'toon wasn't the worst planet to live on, but it was far from the best. It's a world of mostly desert on the Outer Rim, with a breathable atmosphere and pockets of natural water and plant life. It's what the Empire referred to as a "Class 5 Desert Environment", which basically means it was unpleasant to be on, but not overly so. The big business here was mining, tearing ore out of the ground to fuel the Emperor's insatiable hunger for durasteel.

Our little town was officially marked on the charts as Supply Outpost 176, but we just called it home. It was mostly just a place for the crews piloting the cargo haulers, or Sand Rushers as we called them, to rest and refuel their vehicles before crossing the Great Dunes on either side of us. There weren't many of us there, just 253 permanent residents ever since Ginny had her third child a year before. But we made it work.

The town was seated at the edge of a natural spring, which gave us the water we needed to survive and kept the worst of the heat at bay. Most of us worked in industries supporting the Rushers, from mechanics like Rocko to people like me providing them with food, water, fuel, or whatever else they needed to keep the ore flowing. The rest worked to support the town, mostly growing food by the spring. They grew enough to keep us fed, but not much more. We were nearly entirely dependent on the cargo line to survive, which was a precarious place to be really.

Thankfully, the Empire had cranked up its production lately. The miners had more work than ever, which kept the cargo haulers going like clockwork. Say what you will about the Emperor, but he made the Sand Rushers run on time. That kept the town humming, and kept me in business. That was all I needed.

Mostly.

A flash of silver far off in the distance caught my eye. I paused my sweeping and watched its progress as it streaked skywards. A spaceship, probably a freighter bringing the fruits of our labors off to a distant planet. Once I'd thought I'd be doing that too, back when I was a little girl. To see other worlds, and find what the galaxy had to offer me. Maybe even join the Academy and become a pilot. But then Pa passed and I had to take over the diner.

I shook myself from my reverie and resumed sweeping. No sense mulling over what might have been. I had maybe half an hour before the first of the Rushers came, and there was still plenty of sand left to remove. Dreams would have to wait.



"Have you heard? Apparently we're getting a new Governor." Smitty was a Stormtrooper, one of the guards the Empire posted on the Sand Rushers to protect the cargo. Not from bandits or anything like that, but from the crew. Charming stuff, that.

Smitty's official designation was SM-1777, but he'd been through here often enough that I dubbed him Smitty. Less of a mouthful, and he wasn't allowed to tell "civilians" his real name. We got along well enough.

I topped up his stimcaf. He'd placed his helmet on the table while he ate. Almost certainly against regulations, but this far from the Core I guessed he wasn't concerned. "What does that mean for us?" I asked.

“Not much, probably.” Smitty shrugged. “Hard to say though. Sometimes incoming politicians like to throw their weight around, y’know? Make their mark. I doubt he’ll do anything to affect you guys though, you’re not important enough.” He paused, then grimaced. “No offense intended.”

I shook my head. “None taken. It’s nice to be under their radar really.” I set the pot down on his table. “Any word from the wider galaxy? We don’t hear much out here, after all.”

“Nothing of note really. There was some sort of a scuffle with those damn traitors a few systems away, I hear, but we put paid to them.” He grinned at me. “Nothing stops the Boys in White.”

I smiled politely. “We’re all glad you’re defending us,” I said neutrally. In truth I had no complaints with the Empire or love for the Rebellion as they called themselves, but the venom in his words gave me pause. I kept it to myself though. “I’m sure you’ll keep us safe.”

“Damn right.” He slugged down his caf and put his helmet back on. “Have a good day, miss,” he said as he turned to leave. The other Rushers were filling out the door too, heading back to the massive transport parked just outside town.

After the door swung shut behind them I started collecting the dirty dishes from the tables and gathering up the credits they left behind as payment. After that was cleaning, restocking condiments, and prepping for the next run this evening, headed back this time with a full load of ore and another crew. Then I repeated the process, closed the diner, grabbed some dinner and slept until I restarted the whole thing again at 5. Day in, day out, all year long.

I sighed and sat down at a freshly cleaned table. This wasn’t my plan, wasn’t what I had wanted. But the diner was the main business in town, and it kept the Rushers stopping by. For the good of all, I took up the mantle. But it was a heavy burden at times.

The bell over the door jingled, snapping me out of my fog. In walked Rocko, sandy dust covering his coveralls. I quickly jumped up, embarrassed to be caught slacking. “Oh hey! Lunchtime already?”

He nodded, carefully brushing the sand off his clothes at the door. “Everything alright?”

“Yeah, just lost in space.” I tried to smile.

He gave me an appraising look. He’d known me all his life, and I all of his. It was hard to lie to him, but he didn’t let on if he knew. “Alrighty. Just the usual today, Raz.”

I started putting together a grilled cheese sandwich and vegetable soup. “How are things at the shop?” I asked to distract him.

“Not bad. We’re giving one of the haulers it’s 100k kilometer overhaul, so it’s been a busy day.” He gave me a semi-smile as I gave him his food, and tucked in.

I looked at him. He was brilliant, and so good at what he did. The memory of the ship from this morning resurfaced unbidden in my mind.

“Ok, come back down to earth, Raz.” I shook awake, started. Rocko was looking at me intently. “What’s on your mind?”



I considered lying, but truth be told I needed to vent. I quickly locked the front door and turned the sign around to “Closed”, then sat across from him at the table. “I’m getting tired, Rok. I’ve been doing this for ages now, and I need a change.”

He nodded, prompting me to continue. “This wasn’t what I wanted, and I’ve made the best of it, but it’s hard. Sometimes... sometimes, I still wish I’d left. Gone out, seen the galaxy, had adventures. Done something different.”

“You still can, y’know,” he said. “We’re only 34, still got time left on the clock.”

I sighed. “Maybe. But I have responsibilities here; this diner, this town. It would be selfish to set those aside just for the sake of a dream.”

“Taking care of yourself isn’t selfish, I reckon. What you need is a direction.”

A direction. That was one of those things that Rocko was always on about. Having a direction, something to work towards. I always figured it was his way of finding a routine in the chaos of life, by limiting the options to choose from. “I have a direction though, and I don’t need a different one.”

“Are you happy with your current one?” he asked, gesturing with his soup spoon. “You do well enough, but if you’re unhappy then maybe it’s time to find a new goal.”

“But who would run the diner? It’s just me here.”

“I don’t know, but surely someone’s interested. Ginny’s a regular, you could always ask her.”

“Hmph.” I was uncomfortable with this talk. “How about you? If I found a new direction, went somewhere new, what would you do?”

The sandwich hovered in the air, halfway to his mouth. He looked away and carefully put it back down. “I... I don’t know. I’m comfortable here, and I’ll make supervisor eventually. Old Tom always praises my work—”

“You’re a brilliant engineer, Rok. You could make it anywhere, and your talents are wasted in a backwater like this. If I’m finding a new direction, you should too.”

“I...” He frowned and looked as uncomfortable as I felt. “I’ll have to think about it.” It may not have been a no, but it was as close as you could come.

I stood up from the table and unlocked the diner. I felt a knot in my chest. My worries were out in the open now, and I didn’t know what to do about it. For now, I picked up the sponge and started washing the dishes. At least I could do that much.



The weeks rolled on. Rocko and I didn’t speak about our conversation, and in time it seemed like we had left it behind. I was thankful, but also a little disappointed. I couldn't say why, though.

One day when the morning Sand Rusher pulled into town, it was staffed solely by Stormtroopers. They went around the town placing notices on the door of every home and business, then got right back on board and left. It was unsettling, to say the least.

I grabbed the notice off the door to the diner and read it. It said:

*To Whom It May Be Concerned*

*Due to failure to meet production quotas, the Empire will be taking direct control over the entire mining industry on Ahk'toon effective immediately. Changes have been made to the number of way-stations required, and Supply Depot 176 will no longer be required for daily service. We expect you to continue operations as usual, as you will still be required to function as an emergency repair and supply depot. Make whatever changes are necessary to comply with this directive.*

*Long Live The Empire*

I sat down hard in a chair. This was bad news indeed. Without the Rushers coming through, how would I stay in business? Furthermore, how would the town survive?

I could hear people talking outside. Word was spreading, and no one was happy about it. Everyone was worried, but no one dared to panic. There was nothing we could do about it, and all we could do was make the best of things.

I cinched up my apron and grabbed my broom. Time would tell what the fallout would be.



The first bad sign arrived the following day at 5:30 pm. Rocko came in early.

I rushed to throw together his meal as he collapsed into his chair. It was my turn to give him an appraising look as he stared into space. “What’s going on?”

“I’m being transferred to as-needed status,” he said. “Old Tom can’t afford to have us all in regularly, but he said he didn’t want to fire me. So he’ll call me in to the shop as needed, though I’ll still get my usual paycheck at least.”

He was twisting his hands together, ignoring the meatloaf I placed in front of him. “At least you still have a job, right?” I asked, trying to look on the bright side.

“Yeah, but...” He trailed off, not finishing the thought. “I’m not used to having free time like this.”

“You’ll figure it out. Now eat, before it gets cold.” I turned away, heading back behind the counter. After a moment I heard the sound of utensils scraping the plate, so he was eating at least. I couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling in my gut though. Problems were on the horizon, and I didn’t know what to do.



Things got worse by the day. The Sand Rushers continued running as usual, but rather than stopping they mostly just streaked by our little town. The few that did mostly stopped for maintenance, with precious few people coming through my door. I had to cut back on my menu to stay open and make changes to my recipes to only use local ingredients. Everyone was tightening their belts, and slowly people started losing their jobs as well.

Maybe it was my Pa's ghost inspiring me, but I stepped up to fill the void. After Ginny's husband Hank was laid off at the fuel depot, I hired her on to give them some extra income. I also instituted a discount for locals, which caused many people who had never graced my diner to suddenly become regulars. Business was busy, and I truly felt like I was making a difference.

Rocko, by contrast, seemed like a ship without a rudder. A few weeks prior he had been formally laid off, as business had fallen to the point where even "as-needed" wasn't anymore. For a time he had taken to spending his days in the diner, but eventually, I encouraged him to find other places to be outside of mealtimes. He told me he had taken to driving around the dunes outside town on his speeder bike. He said he was looking for direction, but mostly I think he was trying to stay away.

As the days went by, both of our routines fractured and changed. More and more townsfolk frequented the diner, which kept me going from sunrise to sunset. Thankfully Ginny took to it like a duck to water, and I began to rely on her more and more. Hank came by every afternoon with their three kids, and it was always a treat to see them. My life was busy but full.

On the other hand, Rocko seemed to fall apart. With nothing to do he spent more and more time in the desert and came by the diner less and less. I worried about him, but he assured me that he was fine. His speeder bike, which I had taken to calling Bessie to his chagrin, was holding up well and giving him no trouble. He still wouldn't tell me what he was doing, just saying he was seeking direction.

Then one afternoon Hank burst in. "It's Rocko," he cried, "he's in trouble!"

I raced out in a panic, barely noticing as Ginny said she'd cover things. I followed Hank to the med clinic at a run. "He was found outside town, barely conscious. Apparently, he got stranded and had to be rescued. I came and got you as soon as I heard."

I made my way through the sterile halls in a daze. Doctor Stevens stopped me as I approached his room. "I think he'll be fine, but he is severely dehydrated and sunburned. It seems he was out in the desert all day yesterday with no water. He's fortunate to be alive."

I zoned out as he continued droning on about treatment. Rocko was floating in a bacta tank behind him, motionless except for the current making him bob slightly. The doctor noticed my distress and placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "I expect he'll make a full recovery. Come back this evening at 7, he should be out of the tank by then."

The rest of the day passed in a blur. At some point, Ginny took over and placed me in a chair. I vaguely recall the various townsfolk checking in on me, but I wasn't home. My mind was with Rocko.

At 7 pm sharp I went back to the hospital. Sure enough, Rocko had been released and was sitting in a hospital bed. He seemed in good spirits, though he winced when I hugged him.

“What the hell were you thinking?!” I shouted. Tears threatened at the corners of my eyes, but I held them back.

“Hello to you too,” he chuckled.

“Take this seriously! You almost died out there! What could possibly be so important that you pull such a stupid stunt?!” I felt like a mother scolding an unruly child.

“I found it.” He said simply.

I paused mid-rant. “Found what?”

“I found it,” he repeated, “I found my direction.”



The next day I took a day off work, leaving Ginny to run the diner. I think that was the first day off I'd taken in 15 years. I was overdue.

We climbed on Bessie's back and headed out into the dunes. I had insisted on packing enough water and provisions for a couple of days in the desert, just in case. Rocko grumbled but didn't really complain.

“I've been thinking about what you said,” he yelled over the whistling wind. “How I could make it anywhere, how my talents are wasted here? Well, maybe you have a point.”

“Glad to hear it,” I chuckled.

“I'm serious! Losing my job made me realize just how underappreciated I've been. I could do so much more. WE could do so much more.”

“We?” My stomach twisted. “What do you mean?”

“Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself. What I mean is, I want to give it a shot. Go off-world, find my true calling.”

“What's that?” I asked.

“I don't know, but it's a direction. But it's a direction with a big problem.”

“What sort of problem?” We were solidly out in the dunes at this point, maybe a few kilometers south of the town. I had no idea where we were, I'd never gone this far into the desert.

“With the Sand Rushers no longer stopping in town, I can't get a lift to the city. And even if I could, with me out of work I couldn't afford a ticket off-world anyways.”

“So that's what you've been looking for in the desert? A way off-world?” I joked. We hit a bump and I tightened my grip around his waist. “I'm sure there were better places to hunt.”

“Maybe. But I found it anyways.” At that moment we crested a dune, and my breath caught in my throat. Lying below us in the valley between two mammoth dunes lay a wrecked spaceship half-buried in the sand. It was big, at least 50 meters in length. Two long wings with one engine apiece crossed the body like a shawl tossed across a corpse. It was rusted and there were holes in the superstructure.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” I exclaimed. “*This* is your ‘direction?!’ It’s a rusted piece of junk!”

“Yeah! Isn’t it great?” he enthused as we headed down the hill. “I know it isn’t spaceworthy right now, but I poked around inside. Most of the electronics are intact, and the engines should be repairable. It’ll take some effort, but I could get her flying again.”

“Wait a second,” I said as we coasted to a stop by the rusted hulk. “Was this what you were up to when you got into trouble?”

Rocko looked embarrassed. “Well, yeah, I guess. When I found it I got caught up in inspecting it and lost track of time. It wasn’t until I polished off my water that I realized I’d been out here too long. I tried to make it back, but...”

I sighed. “Ok, well, no more of that, please. But this thing is enormous! I had no idea ships were this big. Can you fly it alone?”

His head jerked in my direction. “Well, yes, in theory. This model was designed for a three-man crew, but it could be run by one or two in a pinch. That should be easy enough for us.”

“Wait, ‘us?’” I took a step back. “Hold your horses, who said I was coming along?”

“Well, you did! You said you hated it here and wished you could go to space! This could be your chance to do so, and mine too!” Rocko looked surprised, and a little hurt.

I twisted a clump of my hair around my finger. “Well, yes, but... it’s a big change, you know? And the diner needs so much work these days... I just don’t know.” My toes dug into the sand as my eyes looked for anything but him.

He let out a frustrated breath and turned to look back at the ship. “Well, you don’t need to decide now. It’ll take a lot of work to fix her up, and that will take time. Just... mull it over, ok?”

“I’ll think about it,” I said quietly. It wasn’t quite a no, but it felt pretty close.



For someone who seemed at times to just float through life, Rocko surprised me with his dedication to his new project. He started coming in at 5:30 in the morning for breakfast and a lunch packed for the road, then he’d be

gone until 7 or 8 at night just out there in the dunes. He'd come in filthy and tired from working all day, but when he sat down he had a proper smile on his face. Still no teeth, but it wasn't a semi-one either.

Over a double helping of meatloaf, he'd gush about the progress he'd made on the ship. He'd started by digging it out of the sand, then started checking the various components and systems. There was a fire to him that I hadn't seen in him, not since we were kids together still dreaming about what could be. I couldn't help but be excited for him.

"And get this!" He exclaimed. "I tested the main computer, and it still had power! The systems have been factory reset, of course, but it gave me a breakdown of the damage it had sustained. It looks like with some parts and work I should be able to get it running again."

"Get what running?" Hank glanced up from feeding his youngest daughter. "You've got a project of some sort?"

Rocko nodded. "I found a ditched freighter out in the dunes. I'm planning to repair it, then maybe see if I can fly it."

"Wow." Hank looked down at his little girl, who bubbled happily. He looked thoughtful. "Do you want some help? I mean, I'm no mechanic or nothin', but I'm handy with a welder."

Rocko smiled. "Sure thing! It's a big job, and I could use a hand. There's plenty that needs welding, that's for sure."

Hank grinned. "Great! I'll talk with Ginny tonight. Hopefully, she'll be okay with it. I'm sure my folks could watch the little ones while we work, they love their grandbabies."

Rocko extended a hand to Hank, who shook it. "Welcome to the project, partner."



Hank was only the beginning. In a few short weeks, almost everyone was involved in the project in some way or another. Most of the able-bodied folk pitched in at the worksite, while others assisted by providing building supplies, provisions, or advice. In a town where everyone had to work to survive, it seemed like everyone had something to offer.

As for me, I had my hands full with the diner. With everyone coming in early and leaving late, that meant the morning and evening rushes were especially challenging. Ginny and I did our best, but thankfully everyone was understanding. We even had folk helping us wash the dishes when things got really bad. It was a nice feeling, seeing everyone coming together.

On occasion, Rocko would take me out to see their progress. With so many hands involved they had the ship dug out in no time. Hank coordinated crews climbing all over the place working on repairing the old metalwork, while Old Tom's crew worked on replacing broken electronics. It was like watching a colony of ants really.

"It's coming along nicely," I said approvingly. We were standing on a dune overlooking the worksite. I hadn't really thought Rocko could pull it off, but every time I came by it looked more and more impressive. "You should be proud of what you've done."

"I guess. Mostly I'm just excited. This could be the start of something big." He turned to me. "But have you thought more about my offer?"

I swallowed. I had to admit to myself that every time I came by I felt the dreaming little girl inside of me who I had thought was long buried stirring, and that scared me somehow. "I'm still not sure."

Rocko sighed. "Well, that's not a 'no' I guess." He turned back to the ship. "Still, I wager that with this level of progress we should have it done in a month or two. Then we have to contact the authorities to get it approved, then after that, it'll be time to go." He glanced at me. "I hope you'll come with me."

The ride back to town was quiet. Rocko was disappointed, I could tell. As for me, I was conflicted. Part of me wanted to go, to see the unknown and do all that I'd ever wanted to do. But another part of me was afraid, scared to change direction and risk it all. That made me hesitate, made me stick with what was comfortably familiar. Even if all I wanted was something new.

I stood outside the diner for a while, watching Rocko's dust cloud recede in the distance. It occurred to me that Rocko had seized hold of the advice I'd given him so long ago, and I dearly wished that I had the bravery to follow him. Eventually, I turned and went back inside, resuming my slavery to routine.



All too soon, the day came. Rocko and his band of workers came in one evening cheering and whooping up a storm. He grabbed me in a fierce hug. "We did it! It's done!"

I hugged him back, even as my heart sank. "It flies?"

"Well, maybe." Rocko released me and grinned, with teeth even. "We've got to get some more fuel in the tanks for a proper flight test, but the engines run and the repulsors work perfectly. We were able to get her into a hover three meters off the ground, so I'd say it's a success! Plus the pressure test went perfectly, the escape pod is functional, and the hyperdrive diagnostics are in the green. Hank and I have been practicing in a simulator, and I think we've gotten the hang of the controls. Once we pass the formal inspection tomorrow, we're good to go!"

"Tomorrow?" I went rigid. "H-how did you get an appointment so soon?"

“Turns out Old Tom has some pull with the bureau, and he was able to get us a priority. They’re even going to bring us enough fuel for the test, free of charge. We’ll have to find funding for future flights, but we can sort that out.” He gave me another one of his appraising looks, then seemed to deflate. “You’re not coming, are you.”

“I—I...” My lip quivered, and tears formed in my eyes. Barely even knowing what I was doing, I turned and raced out of the diner and into the night. I was dimly aware of Rocko calling after me, but I was long gone. The streets were empty and the air was cold.

I didn’t register where I was headed until I came to a stop. I found myself on top of a dune just north of town, the largest in the area. The lights of the houses gleamed below me. I plopped to my knees and wept.

I heard someone crunching up the slope towards me. I could see Rocko's shadowed figure a few meters below me. “G-go away, p-please,” I sobbed, unwilling to deal with him right now.

The dark figure lifted their glowrod to reveal not Rocko, but Ginny. Somehow that made me cry harder.

Ginny didn't say a word, she just sat down and hugged me close. I latched onto the younger woman, crying like a child. She rocked me back and forth, humming a soothing tune.

Eventually, my tears began to slow, and my breathing returned to normal. I realized that Ginny had wrapped us in a woven shawl, of which I was thankful.

“Talk to me,” she said simply.

I did. I told her everything, of my desire to leave, and my fear of leaving. Of my joy that Rocko was moving forward, and my fear of being left behind. Of my obligations to the town, and my secret wish to leave them behind. I talked and I talked until I had nothing left.

Ginny, to her credit, simply listened. When I was finished she hugged me again, which nearly set off a fresh wave of crying. “This sounds like a thorny ball, to be sure. Maybe we can try to unpack it.”

“You make it sound so simple,” I grumbled.

“It’s only as difficult as you make it. Now, just let me ask you some things. All I need from you is honesty, no buts, or concessions. Fair?”

“F-fair.” I sniffed.

“First, what do you want?”

I paused. “That’s a broad question.”

She smiled. “That’s a broader answer. What do you want?”

I swallowed back the lump in my throat. “Freedom... and—” I found I couldn't finish my sentence.



“Fair enough,” Ginny replied. “Next, what keeps you from pursuing that?”

“T-the diner, and m-my obligations to all of you.”

“Let’s unpack that. I’m sure at this point I could handle the diner if you wanted to pass it on. Not that I’m pushing for you to do that, mind. As for everyone else, well, we’re hardy folk. We can handle ourselves, and we all just want you to be happy.”

I bit my lip as a fresh wave of tears threatened to spill over. “H-how are you doing this?”

“Three kids, remember? Plus helping folks sort out their troubles is something I enjoy. Now,” she held me at arm’s length. “What was the *second* thing you wanted?”

I swallowed hard, the knot in my chest feeling extra large now. “Must I?” I whispered. It was like I was a kid again.

She nodded. “You have to admit it to yourself, as much as to me.”

I took a deep breath. “Rocko. I don’t want to lose him.”

She smiled. “I figured, you two are like peas in a pod. So, you don’t want to lose him. How can you keep him, then?”

I shook my head. “It’s not that easy—”

“Only because you *make* it so! Now, no excuses, no nothing. *How can you keep him in your life?*”

“...I go with him,” I breathed. Everything seemed in focus now, but the knot stubbornly refused to untie. “Can I do that? Can I leave all I’ve known behind, just like that?”

“Only you can answer that, Raz.” Ginny stood up and offered me a hand. “But you’ve got until tomorrow to decide.”

I nodded mutely and took her hand. We trudged back to town in silence.

Sleep didn’t come easily. I spent most of the night staring at the ceiling. Finally, around 2 am I screwed up my courage and grabbed my holopad.



The town was closed the following day. Everyone, young and old, made the trek out to the ship. A jubilant atmosphere prevailed over the crowd.

Rocko was the star of the day. He smiled and laughed, more than I had ever seen him do in his entire life. I hung back, unable to get the courage to approach.

The ship had been painted a brilliant red with yellow racing stripes since I last saw it. Eye-catching, but what caught my eye was the name painted on the bow.

“*RazHope*,” I whispered. The old fool had named it after me. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that.

Around 11 a shadow covered the proceedings. A shuttlecraft descended from the clear blue sky, settling on spindly legs a little ways away from us. The landing ramp extended and a weaselly-looking man in an officer's uniform stepped down, flanked by a pair of Stormtroopers.

He looked at the ship and sniffed audibly. “*This?* This is what I’m supposed to appraise? This is a heap of rubbish.”

I saw Rocko bristle, but Old Tom stepped in before he could torpedo his chances. “Perhaps, sir, but the necessary forms have been filled out. This is just a brief test of flight capability and systems.”

The inspector gave him a sharp glare. “Don’t tell *me* how to do my job! Humph, you yokels are all backwards. Well, the sooner you begin the sooner I can get out of this hellhole. Get on with it!”

Rocko, Hank, and the inspector climbed aboard the craft while we all moved up the dunes to get a better view. After twenty minutes or so the inspector and his entourage emerged and joined us. He wiped his brow while the Stormtroopers set up a sunshade.

I took a deep breath. “Excuse me, sir, but how did it go?”

He gave me a look of distaste as if I were a pile of dung. “It passed, but barely. But I suppose that’s not surprising, given the *circumstances*. That said, I will be very surprised if it gets off the ground.”

“Why? What’s wrong with it?” I asked.

“What’s *wrong* with it? It’s an outdated, half-junked relic pieced together by *natives* who don’t have a single shipbuilder amongst them. Ah, no offense intended,” he added with an insincere smile.

I gritted my teeth, restraining myself from wiping that smug smile off his face. “You may be surprised.”

“And I may not be. I just hope it doesn’t cost them their lives. That’s extra paperwork.” The smug little man settled down under his shade.

Now, more than anything, I needed that ship to fly.



It took another ten minutes for Rocko and Hank to finish the preflight checks. Soon though, a loud klaxon echoed through the dunes.

“What’s happening? Are they in trouble?” Ginny asked me.

“Hmph. That’s just a warning sound to clear the area.” The inspector leaned forward in his seat and grabbed a clipboard. “Seems the show is about to begin.”

Steam hissed from the sides of the *RazHope* as it creaked ominously. Then slowly it rose into the air hovering just a few meters off the ground. It carefully spun in a circle, making one full revolution.

“Good, good,” the inspector muttered, scribbling something on the pad.

Next, the ship rose higher, sweeping past us until it cleared the dunes. It did a barrel roll, then pitched forward making another loop around its last axis.

“Excellent.” The inspector seemed pleased.

The humming engines roared to life suddenly, and the craft raced towards the sky. Over the next few minutes, it executed a number of sharp maneuvers, pitching, rolling, and diving through the air. It was exhilarating, and I was so proud of them for what they’d accomplished.

Then as they finished another sharp roll the ship seemed to pause, followed by a deafening crack echoing around us a moment later. The ship’s right-wing sagged downward, as though smacked hard from above. The engines flared to life, but to my horror the wing sheared clean off, spiraling away from the doomed vessel.

“What’s happening?!” Ginny cried in a panic. My heart felt like lead, but I didn’t hesitate. I flung myself down the dune, sprinting towards the worksite.

High above, I could see that the remaining engine had been cranked up to maximum power. The ship was struggling, but with only one thruster left the outcome was inevitable. It fell to earth, gaining speed with each moment.

At the bottom of the hill, I grabbed onto Bessie. Kicking the old girl to life, I rocketed towards the point I knew the ship was headed. Suddenly, with a flash of light and a roaring whoosh, the escape pod fired, arching away from the falling craft. I adjusted my course instinctively, headed for the pod.

One hundred meters to my left, the *RazHope* impacted the ground, dissolving into an orange ball of flame and shrapnel. I could feel the heat of the fire searing my flesh, but my focus was on the tumbling pod far ahead of me. A cloud of sand announced their landing, and I silently willed Bessie to go even faster. Soon I caught up and pulled her to a stop.

The hatch was open when I arrived. Hank was climbing out, looking a little battered but alright. I shoved him aside and climbed in myself, eyes struggling to adjust to the sudden gloom. “Rocko? Are you ok?”

Sobs answered my call. He was curled up in a ball, or near as he could be in his safety harness. I carefully unhooked him and checked for injuries, finding none. Wordlessly I pulled him close and held him as he cried.

Hank poked his head inside. "Is he ok?" I nodded. "I'll... give you some time, then. Someone should be headed over to pick us up soon."

I hugged Rocko closer. He cried like his world was breaking, and it broke my heart to hear it.



Rocko didn't come by the diner for a long time after the crash. Neither he nor Hank was seriously hurt, thankfully, but he stayed in his house anyways. Oddly I was the most seriously hurt, having taken a direct hit from the fireball, but after a couple of days in the med clinic, I made a full recovery.

I had food sent over to him, to make sure he was fed. He wouldn't come out, and wouldn't talk to anyone, but he was eating at least.

Ginny took a couple weeks off work. I didn't blame her. It took a while for her to feel comfortable leaving Hank's side, and their poor children took even longer. The town too was grieving, mourning the loss of their shared dream.

From what I heard later, the inspector was a real snake. Apparently, he had spotted the broken support spar in the wing earlier, but didn't say anything so he "wouldn't spoil the show." I regretted not giving him a pounding, but it wouldn't have helped anyways.

Finally, I had enough. Ginny was back at work, so one morning I packed up some food. Griddle cakes, hash browns, scrambled eggs, and a thermos of stimcaf, two creams. I packed it all in a to-go box, grabbed my holopad, and headed down the road.

I knocked on the door to Rocko's house. I heard shuffling in the room beyond, but the door stayed closed. I took a deep breath. "I owe you an answer," I called.

With a click the door opened. Rocko was in his pajamas, and from the smell, he hadn't changed them since he got home. His eyes were red and puffy, and behind him, a wastebasket overflowed with tissues. "Raz," he sighed, "You shouldn't see me like this."

"The hell with that," I said, sweeping past him into the small house. I set my burdens on the table and began unpacking the food.

"What are you doing here, Raz?" He followed behind me like a lost puppy. "You didn't need to bring me this."

I fished out a pair of plates and set them down on the table. “Enough. Sit down and eat, or I’ll eat it all myself.” I began dishing out eggs onto my plate.

A quiet chuckle rolled through the living room. “You’re a force of nature, Raz,” he said as he settled into his chair. A semi-smile teased at his lips.

We ate in silence, only broken when he asked me to pass the salt. I had made up my mind, but now I felt like I was losing my nerve and the knot was tighter than ever. Ginny’s words came back to me, *It’s only as difficult as you make it.*

After we finished eating, I took a deep breath. “Now, I promised you an answer.”

“Kind of a moot point now, isn’t it?” Rok grumbled bitterly. “I crashed the ship, nearly got myself and Hank killed. Hell, I nearly killed *you!* It’s over and done with, ok? Besides,” he looked down at his plate, “you already gave me your answer.”

I picked up my holopad and tapped it awake. “Maybe. Or maybe you’re not done with that direction yet.” I slid it across the table, and Rocko picked it up.

He poked the screen. “What am I looking at?”

I smiled. “An acceptance letter, from the Imperial Academy.”

His eyes bulged out. “What? When? How?!”

I twisted my hair around my finger. “I applied a while back, before the accident. I wanted to tell you after the inspection, but...”

“Yeah.” He took a deep breath. “So, you’re leaving?”

“No, silly, *we’re* leaving. They need engineers too, and you’d make a great one. I say we go through basic training, stay on for a tour or two, then retire to explore the galaxy at our leisure. What do you say?”

Rocko looked down at his plate for a moment more, then nodded. “I’m game to try.”

“Great!” I tapped my holopad and slid it back to him. “You just need to finish filling out this application.”

He shook his head, full-on smiling now. “You’re something else, Raz. But thank you.”

I started putting the containers back in the box. I felt the knot untying at last and smiled. “Psh, I’m just a good friend helping someone she cares about, nothing more. Just bring the pad back to the diner when you’re done.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “Fair enough.”

I picked up the to-go box and headed for the door. I paused on the threshold. “You’ve got a direction now, you know. No more wandering.”

“Yeah,” he replied as I headed out the door, “and even better, I’ve got the best compass in the galaxy.”

## Epilogue

“Double check the cargo, make sure it’s lashed down tight,” I say.

“Yes sir!” Ensign Theo gives me a salute, then rushes towards the cargo bay. I watch him go. There’s a youthful exuberance to him that makes me feel old.

My mind drifts back a few years. Rocko was accepted to the Academy, same as me. I gave the diner to Ginny and we left Ahk’toon for good. Sadly things didn’t go as we planned after that. Turns out the Empire isn’t as decent as I had believed, or perhaps more accurately I had just thought that all we went through was normal? I guess I had to experience how the Empire worked directly to see the truth. Either way, we didn’t fit in and got kicked out within a year.

Thankfully I had picked up enough piloting experience at the Academy to land a job as a cargo hauler. A Space Rusher, I suppose. I took to it with ease and managed to get Rocko a job there too.

That led us to our next direction. After Alderaan bit it, we realized that we didn’t want anything to do with the Empire any longer. Fortunately one of our crewmates knew someone in the Rebellion, and we soon found ourselves joining up. We proved ourselves and rose through the ranks.

Rok pokes his head into the cockpit, breaking my daydream. “It’s green across the board, we’re set to go on your command Captain.”

I give him a playful shove. “Just Raz thanks, save the Captain stuff for someone else.”

“I think you should be proud of it. You’ve come far from that weary tavern keeper I used to know.”

I slug him in the arm, then grab his chin and kiss him. “I’ll show you weary.”

“*Proceed with the countdown. All groups, assume attack coordinates!*” Admiral Akbar’s voice crackles over the comm.

I sigh. “Duty calls.”

“Rain check then.” Rocko flashes me a wide grin as he heads aft. They’ve been more common lately. “See you after we smash the Emperor.”

I nod and focus on the controls. Ensign Theo climbs into the copilot's seat. “Are we ready?”

“Yes sir, all stowed and secured, sir!” Theo salutes again, then pauses. “Do you think we’ll pull it off?”

“I don’t know,” I say, “but we’ll do our best. We win this fight, and maybe we beat the Empire once and for all. Then maybe we can retire and can help the people of the galaxy find their own direction.”

*“All craft, prepare to jump into hyperspace on my mark!”*

“Direction?” Theo looks confused. “What do you mean?”

The light on my console flashes green. “I’ll explain later.” I pull back on the hyperdrive lever and the stars seem to stretch. “But trust me, it’s a good thing.”

With a snap the *RazHope II* blasts into hyperspace, off on one last journey.





## Special Preview!

*Interesting Times* has been nominated for the Ursa Major Award in the best novel category for 2021. Jarlidium Press published it in March of 2021. Both **Interesting Times** and **Red Skies** (book 1 in the series) can be purchased at: [https://store.jarlidium.com/collections/the-chinese-curse?sort\\_by=best-selling](https://store.jarlidium.com/collections/the-chinese-curse?sort_by=best-selling). This link is to the Jarlidium online store.

The Ursa Major Awards website has the current nominees up at: <https://ursamajorawards.org/nominations.htm>. Nominations are currently closed, but voting for the awards begins on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022. What follows is an extract from Chapter 1.

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# Interesting Times

(Book 2 of the Chinese Curse series)

by G. S. Cole and N. C. Shapero

*Tuesday, August 3, 2094, Marina Del Rey, Los Angeles Monad*

The message on Carl's machine from Detective Jorgensen was short and frightening. "Don't come in, don't get near any police for the next week. Cache supplies for at least three days, three weeks if you can. Turn on the news. Good luck." The other was tense, miserable, and concerned.

Carl switched on the comNet monitor, and set up his search to gather all local news. He let the monitor run as he dressed and washed up. Fifteen minutes into the computer voice reporting, the key news item came up, turning the half kilo of TunaDeLite he'd had for breakfast into lead in his gut.

"An unknown Uplift is being sought by the LAMPD for the brutal murder of one of their own," the computer voice said. The video displayed bloodstains and chalk outlines on alley pavement, before

seguing to a morgue shot of Officer Mancuso's body. The head and shoulders of a grim-but-satisfied Asian man of late middle age filled the screen next. "Deputy Assistant Coroner Kim Phan confirmed officially it was Uplift claws and not, as some had suggested, a heavy butcher's knife or a machete, that nearly decapitated Officer Mancuso late last evening. The depth and length of the claw wounds suggest a large Uplift perpetrator, likely ursine or tiger uplift. Dr. Phan provided this assessment to this INNS reporter last night." The video sequence jumped to a late-night, on-site interview segment featuring the Deputy Assistant Coroner.

"The distance between the initial blood spray and where the body came to rest suggests the killing blow had to have been tremendously powerful," the Deputy Assistant Coroner said. "That much momentum transfer would have required an attacker massing at least three hundred kilos. A full-body swing from a Kodiak-derived Uplift would account for the damage and the displacement."

"Aren't such Uplifts relatively rare?" the reporter asked from off-camera.

"Yes, but there are a few who have been released from military service loose in the civilian population. Uplifts were created for military purposes; and they should remain subject to governmental direction rather than be released into the civilian populace, where tragedies like this can occur," the Deputy Assistant Coroner said.

Carl didn't pay much attention to the rest of the segment, as his mind ran furiously over the events. He didn't weigh more than seventy kilos—a good fifty kilos less than Mancuso. But he'd both been moving fast and using their combined momentum in that brutal moment. That unusual combination had sent the coroner off on the wrong track. He sighed in relief. It was going to be hard for Uplifts for the next several weeks, as the police reacted to the death of their fellow; but at least they would be looking at Kodiak and Tiger Uplifts, and not every Uplift feline.

Thanks to this morning's surprise interrogation by Agent Quarm, Carl felt pretty certain that he was in the clear with Internal Security. At least for now. "If they don't find a solid suspect, things will change," he muttered to himself. And shut up and looked about the room with a guilty start. *ISF has had access to my apartment. I'd best presume that they'd bugged it as well. Not the time or place to talk to myself,* he thought.

*Where can I go? Carl wondered. Not the precinct. Especially with Jorgensen's warning. The library? They won't be as quick to trace my scans there and, who knows, there might even be a few books that no one's transcribed onto the net. Not that I'll find a book by any of the authors Brother Tom or the Old Man mentioned. But I might find something that might give me some insight into the thinking of URM's leaders.* He chuckled at the thought of finding something like *A Revolutionary's Primer* or *Ten Easy Steps to Anarchy*. *Texts like these have long been "disappeared" by ISF. At least the library is a safe place to sit and think.*

Stepping outside, Carl decided to run the three kilometers to the library rather than take the tram. The sky was clear, the air a pleasant 20° C, and a light breeze off the ocean carried the smell of the sea inland. He started out at an easy fifteen kph pace, letting the flow of air over his muzzle and fur

soothe and relax him. He let go for the moment worrying about the future or the past, reveling in the sensations of the present.

Within the Marina Del Rey ghetto most Uplifts walked or ran their errands, since few could afford cars. The wide streets and sidewalks allowed easy access, and with their heightened reaction speed most Uplift adults could easily avoid the heavy sub-container pack vehicles that distributed goods to the local stores. The largest vehicles ran along the automated central strips; and the rest either had avoidance sensors or Uplift crews.

Outside the ghetto the vehicular traffic quadrupled in density, forcing pedestrians to use only the sidewalks. Any Uplift running on the sidewalk, even one moving with the flow, became the object of fear and suspicion. Carl remembered some of his Human colleagues' remarking that "any running Uplift is a perp; drop 'em and only ask questions later."

But an Uplift running in the street became fair game for any driver with a grudge, real or imagined. Even with superior reflexes and speed, being sideswiped or hit by a ton or more of composites and metal would cripple or kill. It had been a long time since Carl, along with his peers in the early teens, had played "Dare Me" in the streets. *Safety first*, Carl thought. He slowed to a walk and shifted off the streets as he left the ghetto.

By the time he'd covered four blocks Carl rediscovered something else he'd forgotten: the Stare. Three years in Burglary, two in the Academy and Training; ten in the Army -- those uniforms had served as insulation for his nerves, muffling or even negating the impact of the glances and looks he'd received. Moving through the mostly-Human crowds with only his fur and normal clothing, Carl was the recipient once more of that hurtful, anonymous, emotional-laden interaction. The Stare.

Lone women shied away from him, giving him greater-than-necessary personal space. Women with children shepherded them away, while bristling with intensive defensiveness towards the perceived potential threat to their offspring. Men shot hard, suspicious, impersonal glares at him. Some gave him wider berth; others tracked his every step until he was past and clearly moving on. Carl could not walk along anonymously, as part of the crowd; he felt them separating him out, isolating him in their midst, readying a host of emotional and physical reactions for anticipated violence, hazard, danger. And he fought to remain at ease, calm, and unresponsive to their hostile body-language signals. The scents of anger, fear, and hatred stung his nostrils.

*This is West Los Angeles, Carl thought. Uplifts are a natural part of the urban environment, we're not freaks or rarities. This isn't like parts of the Midwest, Scotland, or Siberia where the average person only sees an Uplift on the net or in the news. This isn't Orange County, Connecticut, Greater Detroit, or any of the Australian monads, where no Uplift dare walk alone. Still the eyes tracked his motions, the frowns and stern glances were mirrored about him. Shying-away and jerky, hesitant motions were the norm of the reality about him. Like a body tissue sensing an intruder, the mass of Humans grew more tense and hard.*

Carl realized that the same patrol car had now passed him three times in while he had walked a block and a half; and he saw it pulling over and parking at the end of the block ahead. Near it, the crowd movement was normalizing; but close to him, it had grown harder, jerkier still. He gave a quick glance about. *There are two other Uplifts near me in the crowd. There, that canid Uplift, standing quietly by that building entrance. The canid was watching both Carl and the crowd, with a quizzical expression on his face. And there, passing the police and moving towards me, with her hands full of packages and wearing a nanny's uniform, there's another feline, a tabby. But people aren't reacting to them the way they are to me. Why?*

Carl slowed his steps while he tried to puzzle it out. The squad car's doors popped open and two patrolmen piled out. The one on the far side was already speaking into his shoulder mike, requesting backup; while the one closest to Carl had his hand already on his pistol butt. *Open holster flap means he's really ready to draw—trouble. Then the realization hit. He is! And on me!*

Carl stopped short, five meters from the patrolman. The two waves of Humans in between evaporated, leaving clear line of sight (and fire) for the LEO. "What's the matter, officer?" Carl asked -- just as he realized he was not wearing his Detective's badge. Instantly he recognized the depth of his mistake as the other jerked out his pistol and took up the proper firing stance, feet spread, left hand straight, right hand slightly bent, left hand supporting right.

"ASSUME THE POSITION, FUZZBALL!"

*Damn, Carl thought. Then he nodded and started sliding down to his knees. No matter what happens next, they're going to be upset. If I show them my badge, they'll call it in, and they'll likely pound on me for "impersonating an officer". If I claim my status with ISF, I blow my cover. If I don't get down real calm and quiet, this hair-trigger is going to shoot, and that'll be even harder to live down. Pragmatism won out -- Carl flattened on the pavement, face-down, hands and legs spread wide. His mind kept ticking over the probable course of events.*

*If they put me in the squad car and run an ID check, one or more of those 'special' records is likely to show up. Or someone at the substation is going to ask these jokers why they're hauling me in, and they won't have a good answer. Then it's either Embarrassment City, or Made-Up Claims. Which I don't see Captain Talbot letting run very long before quashing, which will make them even less happy. He stayed quiet and still, hearing the officer come close for a survey, then moving in for a quick pat-down. The check along Carl's ribs came from a none-too-gentle boot, forcing him to grunt. All I wanted to do was walk to the library!*

"What's your name, fuzzball?" The close-in officer was standing behind and to Carl's left; since he hadn't heard the snap of metal-on-leather, Carl assumed the other's gun was still in his hands, and probably still pointed at him.

"Carl Siam," he replied.

"Run a check on a Siam, Carl," the first officer snapped.

"Can do." The second officer repeated the name. "DNA scan?" he asked.

“Lift just your left fingers, catshit,” the close-in officer ordered. Carl flipped his uppermost ear in acknowledgment, and then lifted the fingers of his left hand. Despite the strain, he made sure that his claws remained fully sheathed. There was a momentary feel of plastic-and-composite beneath his fingertips. “Got it; transmitting now,” the close-in officer said. His voice moved, showing that he was standing back away again.

“Where’s your codekey, fuzzball?” he asked Carl.

*Idiot! Be polite!* “Sir. In my left breast pocket, sir.”

“All right. Roll onto your right side, keeping your right arm down. Use just your left arm, and pull out your codekey and set it on the pavement at waist-level,” the officer snapped. Carl did so, keeping his motions easy and slow; then moved his left hand back flat against the ground and rolled flat again. Despite the pressure of his curiosity to turn his head and watch, he did not do so.

“What’s your job status?” the close-in officer asked suspiciously.

“Uh ... unemployed, sir,” Carl said. He was pretty certain he’d brought along the new fake codekey provided by Captain Talbot. *That’s something I forgot to ask about, he realized. We were thinking about what would sound right to URM. But how likely are they to check up fully on my background?* Right now Carl was suffering from the far more likely circumstance of real authorities checking up on him.

“Yah? Then what’re you doing heading downtown, fuzzball? Why aren’t you at a work-hall?”

“I was heading for the library, sir. Thought that if I studied hard, I could qualify for a better job; or at least make me more employable, sir.” Carl lied without hesitation.

“Where do you live, Siam?” the officer said, his tone less hostile.

“Marina Del Rey area, sir. On McConnel, between Louise and Washington.” *Which also explains why I’m on this street, if you know the likeliest routes between there and the public library,* Carl thought.

“Uh-hum.” Carl could hear the clicking of the police scanner/reader as the officer checked his codekey. He could imagine the display on the scanner, with his address and breeding status highlighted. “Why the library and not your home terminal, Siam?”

“Sir? The library has much broader coverage, including job listings on a paper bulletin board from all over for temp or short-term positions, sir.” *From employers who don’t want the Net to track their offerings, because too many are below-minimum-wage or payments-in-commodity. But that’s still more honest than out-and-out criminality. Or the criminals are the employers, not the workers.*

A few more questions-and-answers and the officer ordered Carl to sit up facing him. And less than three minutes after that, Carl was told to be on his way. Carl made sure that he went straight to the library. The patrol car visibly followed him for the first two blocks. *They’re likely monitoring my route through the multiple street and building security cams facing the street.*

*At least I can use the library, like any other citizen. Glower though you may, he thought as he smiled back at the doorkeeper, you can't keep me out -- much as you might like to, or like your grandfather would have. The sidelong glances from the other Human patrons included both hate and surprise -- some found it hard to believe any Uplift was literate. At least the glares aren't followed by blows or shouts. At least, not in the library's "sacred quiet".*

Carl's first stop inside the library was the Uplift washroom. In the privacy of a stall he let out a long, shaky breath; and felt his emotions wash over and through him. *Is it really this bad for most Uplifts? If so, URM's ability to mobilize ordinary citizens is no surprise. I just wonder how many such petty annoyances my job and uniform protected me from. It isn't the big violations of our civil rights, or our dignity as citizens that truly degrade us. This "death of a thousand cuts" corrodes from within and without!* Carl looked at the shredded remnants of an entire roll of toilet paper which he had clawed at to vent his frustration. *From just one encounter, on one day. Maybe I've spent too much time in uniform.*

"Is this what Brother Tom meant, when he said 'sorely divided society'? Is this what the struggle is against, to establish more justice?" Carl asked himself. "My God! How did we come to this pass?" *How blind have I been? Blinder than Brother Tom, that's for certain.* An uneasy suspicion that he'd gone into Burglary to avoid seeing, or participating in, like scenarios lurked in the recesses of Carl's conscious and conscience. "However blind I've been, I don't have to stay that way. Here and now's the place and time I can do something about it," Carl said resolutely. "To work!"

Carl returned to the center of the library searching for an unoccupied comNet cubicle. It took him nearly fifteen minutes, and he was unable to get one of furthest from the more public and noisy areas. He wondered how far he would get before he encountered a gap, a block, or a demand for his codekey.

The large flat panel screen filled a quarter of the wall facing the Human-form seat. He settled his tail as best he could and set the background and search space windows. After customizing the interface to his satisfaction, and testing it with a quick skim of the sports scene, he began his serious study.

"Topic: background, history and personalities, Uplift Rights Movement," Carl said. The searching icon changed to an image of a filled bookshelf. Terabytes of storage, most of it vid-and-sound from the color and texture of the patterns on the "volumes" on the shelf. "Add filter references: Joseph Tabby, Crimson Sky." The search icon appeared to be quickly replaced by an image of four slim volumes. Carl set "reverse chronology" ordering, then requested a semi-log time metric. Sure enough, there was nothing under his second reference, and of the items which mentioned or discussed the first, none was dated later than one symposium five years ago in Berkeley. The one political panel discussion Carl had decided not to attend. *I must have been pursuing Marcia at the time, rather than an education. I wish I'd gone to that meeting. Sour grapes? Maybe -- Marcia did end up dumping me for ... who was it? Some bioengineering student. Joseph Tabby was officially "old news", or so it seemed. He's dead history, right?*

The back of Carl's neck prickled and his ruff started to rise. He snapped his head around, too fast for the other to react. A Human standing fifteen meters away at the end of one of the book stacks

hurriedly raised the volume to conceal his face, but it was too late. Carl memorized the face even as he turned his head back. They'd made brief eye contact, confirming that the other had been watching Carl. *ISF has tagged this subject and wants to know whenever anyone examines it.* Carl turned his head back to the screen, but left his ears slightly flattened and tilted backwards. If anyone was going to approach, he'd have a few seconds warning. *Let them report me. Sooner or later, any inquiry will reach Captain Talbot's attention and be quashed. It might even serve to measure the Eyes sensitivity. I can argue that I'm doing them a favor. But pursuing URM directly now may do more than bring in a bigger watchdog. One that might bite.*

"New search: Author, TomCat Paine. Title: Common Sense Again, commentaries, rebuttals, related'," Carl ordered. The search icon changed into the display of a single page of text; Carl hissed in frustration. *A reference to "The Mark of Zorro", a 20<sup>th</sup> century flat-screen video. This goes way beyond a simple screw up—someone is censoring the net's index.* As he glared at the screen even that reference and page disappeared. *Reactive Net agents!* Carl almost hit the screen. He was sure that the next time a similar search was run by anyone, even this one reference would not appear.

*But to have the censorship as visible as that? The Administration is panicking—not reacting sensibly. What would happen if I searched for any pro-Uplift publications of any sort? I'd at least discover the limits the Administration is putting on protected net speech. But what sort of a response would **that** query provoke?*

Carl looked around the room, slower and more carefully than before. *That Human's gone into hiding, at least. But he—or someone—is casting a shadow near where he was.*

For the rest of this chapter, go to Jarlidium's online store, and buy a copy. Then, if you like it, consider voting for it for the **Ursa Major Award** for Best Novel of 2021.

# **Trouble Brewing**

## Episode 2: THE BIG DEAL

FADE IN:

1 INT. CAPTAIN'S READY ROOM, SUNRISE OR SUNSET OUTSIDE 1

Outside Captain's Ready Room. There is a sliding door, and a scraggly palm tree in a pot sitting outside it. ENTER: ADMIRAL, carrying a notepad, and CAPTAIN





## ADMIRAL: GERMAINE SWANSON

Admiral Swanson (nee Serrano) hails from New Panama and initially studied Cadre Management for Federation councilors, specializing in maintaining shipboard inter-species harmony, at an experimental school off-world



(a branch of the Vulcan Science Academy) for children with exceptional psi talents. After her acceptance at Starfleet Academy, she showed remarkable aptitude for field assessment and communication with non-Terran cultures. She graduated early with the rank of Commander. She was soon assigned to the U.S.S. *Guam*, a training ship for new graduates of Starfleet Academy, and a recruitment vessel for potential cadets. She won great acclaim for her handling of the Zeon Seven affair, after which she was promoted to Admiral and later put in charge of admissions at Starfleet Academy. There she oversaw the development of analytical instruments and programs designed to assess an applicant's suitability for both teamwork with all members of a ship's complement, and for independent work and ethical leadership when needed. She spearheaded a program for deep study of cultural bases and biases suitable for future negotiations. She ascended to her rank of Admiral as a result of the success of various classified missions. Admiral Swanson had just announced her impending retirement when ordered to the USS *Trouble* by Starfleet Command.

Admiral Swanson interacted with her future husband on various missions, and had admired him for his bravery and ability to think on his feet. Having been offered a position in the parliament of Casa Vista Verde on New Panama, she found herself having to make a choice between politics and her love for her work with Starfleet. She married Mark Swanson later on.

The Admiral met Capt. Shimbo while both were cadets at Starfleet Academy, and the two began a fanzine together.

ADMIRAL  
(pointing at the palm tree)  
Are you Captain Morton or Mr. Roberts?

CAPTAIN  
Depends on whether or not I've had any donuts in the last couple hours. But if the palm tree ever gets shoved out an airlock, I know I'm doing something wrong.

CAPTAIN growls at the door and it opens.

SELF-SATISFIED DOOR  
Please enjoy your trip through this door.

ADMIRAL is ushered in by the CAPTAIN; she looks at the door quizzically but decides to find her answer another way. ADMIRAL and CAPTAIN enter the Ready Room, which is outfitted as the Captain's Quarters of a pirate ship. There is a large, dog-like creature (named Van Gogh and called "Vinny") lying on the desk.

CAPTAIN  
Oh.

ADMIRAL  
(Considering the room carefully)  
Oh?

CAPTAIN  
(after a brief silence)

Oh... uhm... last time I was in here, I told the replicator I wanted a glass of water. [NB: Captain speaks in a thick Brooklyn accent, so "water" comes out "WAU-da"] Replicator says, "There is no Warder on the *Trouble*." So we went back and forth and finally I said, "No, you idiot, I want water! W-A-T-E-ARRRRRR!" And the room turned into this! I guess I forgot to tell it to change it all back when I left.

ADMIRAL

It suits you. It has an air of high-seas mischief. What colors has the replicator got you sailing under? Jolly Roger? Kazinti Pirates (no, too violent). Section 31?

Admiral chuckles at her own attempt at humor.

CAPTAIN sits down on the edge of the desk. VINNY turns around and puts his head in Captain's lap and gets a smooch and an ear rub.

ADMIRAL

(pointing to VINNY)

What is that? I've never seen one before.

CAPTAIN

This? This is Vinny Van Gogh. Followed me home one day. Seemed to like me, so I let him. He's a big sweetheart. Keeps me honest.

ADMIRAL

He's... he? Right? Is quite handsome and such an unusual color! What breed is he? I'm thinking some equivalent of an Earth or Mars dog? Where did you ... where did he find you?

CAPTAIN

(A little evasively)

Oh, you know, around, as one does... SO. What's the big deal?

ADMIRAL

You mean this?

## CAPTAIN: FARA SHIMBO, Ph. D.



Captain Shimbo was born Fara Tumbarello to a very large family in Giarre, Sicily. The family was forced to leave after the eruption of Mt. Etna in 2260, which destroyed the city and of much of Sicily's eastern coastline. They

settled in what was to become "Little Sicily," Brooklyn, NY; Shimbo was seven at the time. Always a precocious and independent child, she joined the Academy's astro-zoology program immediately after high school, winning small amounts of praise for her work and raising a good many eyebrows along the way. Her abilities to almost immediately establish a rapport with any and all animals, regardless of their planet of origin, stood her in good stead, and led to her becoming one of the leading experts in the evolution of color and patterns across animal species of all planets, and their relevance to behavior. Along the way, her talent for collecting good people and keeping them interested and engaged as a team, honed from being the oldest of a good many siblings and dozens of cousins, began to show. Because of this, she rose through the ranks, although at a sedate pace—mainly due to not wanting to rise at all.

While working on her PhD dissertation, she became very active in science-fiction fandom, and met then First Lieutenant Robert Shimbo at the 42<sup>nd</sup> Off-WorldCon. They were married two years later. Shimbo was assigned to several small research ships before finally being promoted to Captain, upon completion of the *USS Trouble*, an experimental vessel, in 2234. She insisted that at least half the crew not be humanoids, intending to add as much varied experience as possible to the complement.

Although she calls the *Trouble* "home" at this point, she does maintain a *pied a terre* in the old neighborhood in Brooklyn, and loves to spend an afternoon "haunting" Prospect Park.

ADMIRAL indicates a 5 by 7 by 1 inch package that bears the Starfleet insignia and turns on the notepad. Both ADMIRAL and CAPTAIN open a file on the notepad, and a voice, redolent of both authority and annoyance of having to be bothered with this nonsense, speaks.

VOICE OF NOTEPAD

Good day, Admiral Swanson and Captain Shimbo. Since you are reading this, you have now arrived at Beta Kerrotyn. Once there, you shall seek out this person.

A mugshot, or something, appears on the notepad.

VOICE OF NOTEPAD

Pictured here is Ruba Lacincia, whom we believe is known to both of you. Intelligence tells us that Lacincia is believed to be on Beta Kerrotyn, or to have been on Beta Kerrotyn within the last decade. In the time since she was last spotted, Lacincia has not been seen or heard from.

VINNY wags his tail, knocking a (fake) kerosene lamp onto the floor. Turns around and looks at it as if betrayed by it.



working, or to have been working, on a project of especial interest to Section 31, They would like to have this person be retrieved from the planet and brought back to Starbase Alpha-9. We will take full responsibility thereafter. We have reason to

## Captain's Log, 2217.02

Been a long time since I had any news about Ruba. She was better at getting into trouble than I was, and that's a stretch! She would have done really well if only she didn't have such a temper. I remember that she started out full of "sensa-wonda" and over the years at the Academy, she just got more and more bitter about, well, pretty much life in general. No idea what soured her; I assume there must be an interesting story in there somewhere.

I wonder what she's up to now. Last time I saw her, the Admiral and I were resuscitating her after that explosion on Summa Nulla. I heard she was kicked out of the Academy after that. I guess I can't say I was very surprised.

The crew all seems pretty happy and engaged in their work. They're all very different, in lots of ways large and small, but they seem to be getting along just fine. And when they don't, well, I have ways of dealing with that (which fortunately I haven't had to use yet. I suppose word got around.)

There's a lot to learn yet about the *Trouble*, and a lot of bugs to work out—like that giant hairball in Jeffries Tube 6 that all the cats love so much—so while they're always busy, they're busy with stuff they enjoy doing, which is half the battle. I like it quiet.

Getting back to Ruba, I've got to wonder why Starfleet wants her back. They were so keen to get rid of her when they had her. Getting her off this planet is going to be fraught.

I've got a bad feeling about this.

VOICE OF NOTEPAD

Lacincia is believed to be working, or to have been working, on a project of especial interest to Section 31, They would like to have this person be retrieved from the planet and brought back to Starbase Alpha-9. We will take full responsibility thereafter. We have reason to

believe that at least one of you will be the only person Lacincia is likely to have any reason to want to deal with. Once you have apprehended Ruba Lacincia, Admiral, the final disposition of the planet, and its inhabitants, should there be any, is in your hands. We at Starfleet will respect your choices. You and the Captain have *carte blanche* over this mission. But, if any of your or your crew are caught or killed, the Federation will disavow any knowledge of your actions. This communique will self-destruct in 30 seconds. Good luck.

As the ADMIRAL turns off the notepad, smoke seeps through the seams and the device melts. ADMIRAL and CAPTAIN exchange questioning looks.

ADMIRAL

I didn't know you knew Lacincia.

CAPTAIN

(at the same time)

I didn't know you knew Ruba.



VINNY

"YAT-YAT-yat ... YAT ... YAT-YAT-YAT"

CAPTAIN (to VINNY)

'too' has two O's.

VINNY

snort.

ADMIRAL

Was that sound meaningful?

CAPTAIN

I taught him to bark in Morse Code. He says "Me To."

ADMIRAL

Of course. Makes sense to me but I'm not sure why. I'd love to hear the story about how you two came together. He's definitely sentient and mischievous.

ADMIRAL scratches VINNY behind the ears. VINNY expresses his approbation by wagging his tail and rolling onto his back for belly rubs.

CAPTAIN

Oh, he showed up one day, decided he liked me, and he liked the shipboard life. A couple of people tried to take him away. Ended rather badly for them, so here he is. Anyway...  
How do you know Ruba? I remember her from way back, forget where we met. For the longest time I thought her name was "Rubala Cincina." Used to raise fancy skunks. Deadliest poker player in the Galaxy, could even win against Minbari Adepts. I liked the kid. Had potential.

ADMIRAL

Potential? Potential for what? Trouble-making? I knew her when she was applying for a position at the Academy. She had hoped to fill the xeno-biology position. I liked her personality and her bravery for doing research in so many unusual areas. But she horrified the old guard with her theories and research. I was surprised by how many disparate cultures with different belief systems could agree so thoroughly. She had a different perspective on life and how it evolves or doesn't. In another time they would have taken up tar, torches and pitchforks and set her ablaze as if she was a mage or something.

My assistant and I got her off-planet before the festivities began. They might not have physically attacked her but they certainly planned to rip her and her science up and ruin her chances of being ta-ken seriously in known space.

No matter what Starfleet says, I am mostly along for the ride. This is your caper because you are more of a personal acquaintance than I. I don't think she knows we saved her ass that day. What's our next step?

CAPTAIN begins to reply but thinks better of it. She has no intention of being left holding the bag for this caper. The two of them exit.

SELF-SATISFIED DOOR

Please enjoy your day on this starship.

(The door closes a little too quickly as the Captain walks through. CAPTAIN snarls at it. The door slows and seems to make a smug hiss as it completely shuts.)

FADE TO:

## COMMANDER MARK SWANSON

### Master Tactician

"Mark Swanson" considers himself to be an experienced First-In Scout (e.g. someone who goes in first to check out a new planet or place or society to see what it is and how it will try to kill him). He is rather more experienced than most: the saying is "There are old Firsties and there are bold Firsties, but there are no old, bold Firsties." But he seemed to be lucky. He also heals fast, especially so with the aid of Federation meds.



As with most Firsties, he has problems with certain authorities and a tendency to under report strange events. Senior commanders in the Firsties spend a lot of their time keeping their subordinates out of the way of Federation officials. He met his wife, the admiral, one of the times where that wasn't practical. He had gone down to the planet labeled "D-567-Z." (Z means it has a record of visitors, leaving no particular evidence behind). Some very big Federation interests were intent on establishing a mining colony. He encountered the "Dragons" there. (The forest ecology of this place is on the wall of his cabin.) They liked him, an unusual reaction. (Eventually they told him that his Luck was very good for them. Or maybe it made their Luck stronger? Or the combination is just too funny? The communication channel between Mark and the dragons isn't really good. Or maybe the dragons don't want it to be.) Some highly unlikely events resulted in the colony's equipment not getting down and several fabulous yachts being destroyed. "Mark" thinks that something else was destroying the yachts, and that he and the dragons managed to get all the colonizers safely down to a wonderful resort-like island with fabulous pink sand beaches. All of them bare-ass naked. Much confusion, threats, complaints, etc ensued. It appeared likely that "Mark" would be dismissed. However, the Admiral was part of the mix as an Inspector General. She and he met on the pink sands and agreed to cooperate. More unusual things happened. They got married to keep him from being expelled as a menace to morality. Eventually things got sorted out. The Federation's scandal sheets had a wonderful, popular time. The pink-sand beaches are now a fabulously successful but rather primitive resort. Mining is postponed till the Federation interests can prove it won't harm the beaches. (It has proven difficult to do the studies. Embarrassing things keep happening. Like the fully automated robotic ecological study team that ended up partying in string bikinis on the pink sands...) Since then Mark and Germaine have stayed married. They still have active careers as part of the underlayer that keeps the Federation going, and end up sharing about half their missions.

2 INT, SWANSON'S CABIN, DAY.

2

Master Tactician Mark SWANSON is sitting in a chair, alone. He is frowning and looks disgusted.

SWANSON, M  
 "... the Federation will disavow any knowledge of your actions." Right, the usual.

SWANSON flips his hand by the small microphone near his face.

SWANSON, M  
 Jeeves: get me the Logistics AI.  
 (after a stage wait)  
 Good day, Sun Tzu...  
 No, I don't want a sudoku glitter-trap: that's for all the Federation bio-sophonts who won't do math because computers do it better. I'm part computer, remember?  
 Nice of you to observe the ceremonies. I guess. We're going down. I need a stealth blood beacon. Full shields and instruments of Federation moral suasion, please. Thanks. And tell the AI Blood Bunch I think this is an Old Alien trap planet...

Of course they thought so also. I still have to say it to grant the needed rights, right? And good Luck to you too and to all of us.

3 EXTERIOR, PLANET, DAY. 3

ADMIRAL, CAPTAIN (on horse "Mel,"), CHIP, SWANSON (tactician) and DORCAS, and a couple of Red Shirts, eating cookies, have beamed down. They are in a valley surrounded by mountains, off the snow-capped peaks of which the light of two suns appears like a Maxfield Parrish painting. Since not everyone can breathe the atmosphere efficiently, some characters are wearing environmental suits.



CAPTAIN

No roads? Swanson, getting any signals?

SWANSON, M

(pointing forward and to the right)  
Not much. The worst Luck is in that direction.

CAPTAIN

And that's all you're getting?

SWANSON, M

Pervasive jamming noise on normal frequencies. Very reactive.

CAPTAIN

Anyone else got a clue? (pause) Does anyone read any signs of civilization? No one? any buildings, or ... shuttlecraft, or any kind of structure down here?

Various people indicate that they have not.

CAPTAIN

Chip, feel anything in the ground?

LIEUTENANT FIGNI DORCAS EPPRI  
ADDOMÉCAROI  
Communications



Simply called "Dorcias" onboard, the Lieutenant is a Master Communications Analyst. She studied at the Bohgu Ottoh Academy on her homeworld of Shzhēt and was awarded top prize in her class. Her stay at the Academy was brief, and she was considered a very average student. Captain Shimbo, however, specifically requested that she be assigned to the *Trouble*. She is still adjusting to the ship's atmosphere and gravity and has been steadily losing feathers, which other crewmembers highly prize.

Dorcias' ability to quickly decipher "all frequencies" looking for hidden messages was instrumental in the Federation victory at the Battle of the Anthill, when her then ship, the ill-fated Waterloo, was called to rid Gamma Guido of an invasive colony of Zinger ants which had taken over the life-support system of the university there. For this, she was promoted to Second Lieutenant and awarded a jelly donut.

glowering and DORCAS is sneering)  
Oh, all right.

(To comm badge)

Somebody send down Teddy please.

Another hologram horse appears. As ADMIRAL mounts up, someone in the group, mutters something about some planet's kind of slime worm that attracts its prey by emitting the sound and scent of frying donuts.

CHIP  
(helping DORCAS to use a theodolite to scan the mountains in the distance)  
Ants. Hate them.

CAPTAIN  
Anyone else got any ideas?

Shrugging all around.

CAPTAIN  
Groovy. Swanson, set up a beacon here and let me know what your dragons find. The rest of you, look around, but keep in touch.

ADMIRAL  
(To herself)  
No military discipline;  
nothing military about this team.

ADMIRAL starts to question the captain about this then decides not to, since she had previously decided she's not in charge.

ADMIRAL  
(to CAPTAIN)  
I'm not going to second guess your landing party style but if we are going running off over all this ground, I'd like one of those "all-terrain vehicles" of yours, too.

CAPTAIN  
All-terrain vehicles all around, then!  
(Noticing that CHIP is



CAPTAIN  
(wistfully):  
donuts...

CAPTAIN and ADMIRAL ride off into the sunrise.

FADE OUT

**4 Fade in. Exterior, Later same Day 4**

The two groups, one who has followed the water and the other following a more direct route, meet up. They decide to continue following the trail which coincides with the downstream direction of the river. Fortunately, both clues match faint readings Mark is receiving on his instruments.

Over the next rise they find what appears to be a cloaked, partially buried, abandoned shuttle.

SWANSON  
Lots of bad Luck. Some Fed technology still active in the shuttle.

CAPTAIN  
What about your dragons? Any news from them?

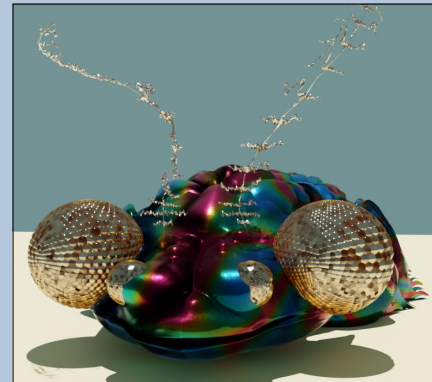
SWANSON  
Nothing. They said the planet is disgusting and have withdrawn behind their Gate.

CUT TO:

**5 INTERIOR, TROUBLE ENGINEERING SECTION, 5**

Chief engineer and assistant are standing around a table with The Hairball on it. They are encircled by what appears to be the entire complement of ship's cats, all declaiming (rhythmically), telepathically, or something, "You Shall Not Pass."

**Lt. COMMANDER CHP PNTSHE DH**  
Senior Cryptanalyst



"Chip" is the only representative of her species in Starfleet thus far. In her own quarters, she is aquatic. When elsewhere on the ship, she moves with a side-winding movement like a snake. Opinionated almost to the point of being dictatorial, Chip likes to keep herself apart from the others on the ship for the most part. She did not attend the Academy as facilities were not available to accommodate her there (or at least, none that were up to her standards). She is a thoroughly competent cryptanalyst and invents new encryption methods in her spare time "just to be annoying."

The Chikshu race has been dying out on its home planet for some time, for various reasons. Some Yantarru visitors to the planet, noting this decline, offered to try to save the species by hand-rearing the young (Chikshu are not, as a rule, interesting in their young, or any other Chikshu really), and with the, not exactly blessing but, "Here, you want these things? Fine, have them, we don't care" typical of their kind, started a "New Chikshu" colony and school. Chip is one of the first graduates. Chip, while middle-aged according to her species, is about two hundred Earth years old, and at the time of her selection to the crew of the Trouble had just produced a large clutch of young. She opted to bring a handful of them along. Captain Shimbo keeps them in an aquarium in her (Shimbo's) quarters.



ENGINEER  
(flustered)

... but yeah, I know the Captain left orders to get this thing out of the Jefferies Tube, but she didn't say what to do with it now we've got it. Xeno-science lab doesn't want it. They asked me if I was playing some kind of joke. Even if I knew what to do with it, these cats... they... I don't think they will let me take it anywhere.

CHIEF ENGINEER  
(annoyed, and a bit disgusted)

Well, it can't stay here on the table. It is taking up space which I require for other purposes.

ENGINEER  
I don't like the way it's pulsing...

ENGINEER  
(reaches to pick up the hairball)

CATS  
Grrrrrrrrrrrr

The Hairball moves, ever so slightly. Individual hairs waft in the air like tendrils.

CATS  
Purr!

CHIEF ENGINEER

I've got a bad feeling about this...

FADE

6 PLANETSIDE, EXTERIOR, DAY.

6

Most of the landing party is standing outside a large cave. A shuttlecraft is in the distance being explored by a couple of crewmembers. Inside the cave, sections of the shuttlecraft are apparently in the process of being stripped for parts. There is a curious, irregular circle of stones set about a meter apart around the entrance. A small, startled-looking bot keeps turning back and forth from the cave as if awaiting instructions.

CHIP

Landmines, I expect. How crude.

LACINCIA, over a loudspeaker

That's close enough. One more step and you'll be blown to dust. Get out of here. No milk today.

ADMIRAL

Any chance we could just talk?

LACINCIA

No! Leave!

CAPTAIN

Right! You don't know who we are or why we're here. We could be bringing chocolate.

LACINCIA

No! And I don't want to know. No more talk. Just go before I start shooting.

CAPTAIN

(to comm link, seized with a sudden idea)

Somebody go find Van Gogh and send him down, please. I think he's still in the ready room. Password today is "Klaatu Barada Nikto."

A few seconds go by; then suddenly there materializes, beside the Captain, VINNY the Hndaru, jumping for joy and acting decidedly puppy-like.

CAPTAIN

(to Vinny, and in a high, and seemingly unnecessarily loud, voice)  
Who's a good boy?! Hunh? Who's a GOOD BOY?

The ADMIRAL is puzzled but amused.

VINNY  
(Just about losing it with joy)  
YAT-YAT yat! YAT-YAT yat! ("Me! Me!")

There is possibly the suggestion of a hint of movement in the cave. Perhaps a small rustling sound.

CAPTAIN  
(pointing to the cave entry, but shaking her head severely at the dog. Still almost yelling)  
"Go in there and find our friend Freckles! Go on, boy!"

VINNY  
[makes a bark that sounds suspiciously like "Roger!"]

Vinny begins running in circles around Mel and the Captain.



CAPTAIN  
(still too loud and saccharine)  
Aww, look at him-

LACINCIA

VINNY! NO! STOP!

LACINCIA runs out—very carefully—past the ring of stones, touching a few of them as she goes, and at a motion from the CAPTAIN, VINNY sits and stays. At that point, so does Lacincia, and she looks around at everyone who's gathered there. She is almost happy to see the Captain, decidedly wrong-footed to see the Admiral, and appears to simply be puzzled by everyone else.

CAPTAIN

Freckles, old buddy, long time, no see!

LACINCIA

(Ignoring CAPTAIN completely)

Oh, Vinny! I thought I'd never see you again!

The CAPTAIN looks a little wrong-footed, but there's no turning back now. She and the ADMIRAL dismount. The hologram horses stand much too still.

ADMIRAL

'Again?' You know this ... this animal?

ADMIRAL looks from the CAPTAIN to LACINCIA and again decides to hold her peace. She senses there's more to this than meets the eye?

LACINCIA

(after some quick thinking)

Fine. Come over here and have some ... uh ... donuts. Yeah, donuts. Then you and your team, squad, whatever, need to go away.

CAPTAIN

Chip and Dorcas, be dears will you, and help Swanson to complete a scan of the area.

CHIP

Aye aye.

DORCAS

Oy, oy!

LACINCIA will not let CAPTAIN and ADMIRAL enter the cave. She stands in front of the entry.

LACINCIA

The mines are off, for now. Sit.

The little robot who was worrying before brings out a small table piled with donuts. It does not bring out chairs. Everyone sits.

ADMIRAL

COMMANDER ROBERT SHIMBO,  
Chief Engineer



Commander Shimbo was born on the Motown Colony. After obtaining his Ph.D. in General Engineering from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, he joined the Academy. Originally assigned to the USS *Epsilon*, he was transferred to the USS *Trouble*, which he was instrumental in designing. He and the Captain met at the 42<sup>nd</sup> Off-WorldCon, and were married two years later. Shimbo's talents include being able to build computing devices out of virtually anything, although starship design is his forte. He also is a designer of unusual weaponry. He is a carpenter of some note, and is beloved by all the shipboard cats.

We're just here for a peaceful meeting. My—our—team is just here to study this planet. It's supposed to be uninhabited and unable to support complex life.

LACINCIA  
(dismissively)

Obviously it isn't uninhabited if I'm here. Why are you really here? Is the Federation planning to put an astral shipping lane or a hyperspace by-pass through here? Or, perhaps it's blocking someone's view of the Nebula so they want to blow it to smithereens, I guess.

I know you (pointing to the ADMIRAL) as the woman who blocked me from heading Xeno-Sciences at the Academy. I don't care what your Vulcan sidekick said. There is no way that group of graybeards could even understand the work I was doing.

ADMIRAL  
Perhaps. But usually it is the people who don't understand something new that react to it so violently. And, if my

associate told you something, accept it as fact. Vulcans don't lie, or at least that one doesn't. I got into a heck of a lot of trouble for saving your butt.

CAPTAIN  
(stepping in to stop an impending argument)  
So, what brought you to a place like this, anyway. The two stars are nice but the climate has to be an absolute mess. Happy here?

LACINCIA  
(snorting)  
Who cares if I'm happy here. It's nobody's business. Especially the damned Federation.

CAPTAIN  
(After some thought, to ADMIRAL)  
May we have a few minutes to ourselves, Admiral?

LACINCIA

"Admiral" is it? How the mighty have risen.

CAPTAIN

(as if commanding little brothers)

That's enough, Ruba.

ADMIRAL

I'll go tend to the all-terrain vehicles.

FADE

7 INTERIOR, CAPTAIN'S READY ROOM, or possibly quarters

7

The CAPTAIN is there, contemplating a plate of maple-iced donuts. The Admiral is also there, drinking tea. MUDD enters and sits down in one of the chairs. MORIARTY follows him in.

MUDD

I did what you told me to. And successfully, I might add.

CAPTAIN

Good. And?

MUDD

(making himself comfortable)

Well, you see, I have a friend who has a friend-

CAPTAIN

Get to the point, *szu miu*. ["uncle mine" in Sicilian]

MUDD

As you wish, as you wish. Now. Have you ever heard of two entrepreneurs named Ebbet and Chang?

CAPTAIN

I only know from Ebbets Field.

MUDD

Different Ebbet. Anyway, to continue. Ebbet and Chang have a very lucrative and, shall we say, extra-legal business in the trade of exotic animals. Very exotic animals. Long extinct ones. Ones-of-a-kind, one might say.

CAPTAIN

So do lots of people.

MUDD

Yes, but it seems these aren't the usual piecemeal reconstructions, and they're not robots, not of any kind.

Furthermore, they are fully capable of reproduction—within their own kind, of course—which, as you know, is...

CAPTAIN

Banned by the Federation, and all \*ahem\* right-thinking people, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MUDD

Exactly! Exactly! Now. Ebbet was originally a xeno-botanist. Chang was a chemist but actually a polymath with experience all over the place, and you know how rare that is nowadays, what with science being so specialized. They are associated with Lacincia because Ebbet was once a Starfleet Cadet but dropped out.

CAPTAIN

Dropped out or was kicked out?

MUDD

Let us say drop-kicked out.

CAPTAIN

Why?

MUDD

Argument with a Vulcan over... something.

CAPTAIN

We've all been there. Any idea who the Vulcan was, or what the argument was about?

MUDD

I heard that cat hair was involved, but my source, you know, exaggerates a little. And there you have it. That's all I've found out so far.

CAPTAIN

(pushing the plate of donuts in Mudd's direction)  
Well done. You deserve a donut.

CHIEF ENGINEER (via comm badge)

Captain, please come to engineering.

CAPTAIN

Find me any more dirt and I'll give you canoli.

MUDD

As you wish.

FADE



The CAPTAIN, the CHIEF ENGINEER and a CREWMAN are standing around the table with the hairball on it. The hairball appears to be fidgeting.

CREWMAN

When I came to check it out it was all fuzzy and quiet. As soon as I put down my tricorder and reached to touch it, it started to shake and give off a sound that I could barely hear. But the cats heard it. I think maybe all of them, every one, came galloping after me as I moved it onto a trolley, but they still won't let me leave the room.

The crewman is shaking. Some of the cats are caterwauling, others are just staring at him meaningfully.

CREWMAN

I never knew cats could gallop! So much for "the fog comes in on silent cats' feet!" They sounded like a herd of something gigantic. I think they buckled the deck!

CHIEF ENGINEER

Are you okay? I think you ought to go have a nice lie-down. I'll take it from here.

CREWMAN departs, with obvious relief. The cats part like the Red Sea and let him pass. As she walks out, we notice Moriarty peering in the door echo-ranging and sniffing.

CHIEF ENGINEER

(annoyed)

Is there something I can do for you?

MORIARTY

Moi? No, no, just passing.

MORIARTY runs off. As sahn does, the CAPTAIN reaches down to re-adjust a boot (same boot she was wearing when she was planet-side). As she lifts her foot in the air, the Hairball suddenly quivers, and a tentacle is formed, and reaches toward the boot. It hovers there for a moment, then retracts, and the Hairball is still. All the cats wander off.

CAPTAIN

(regarding the boot)

I wonder what I stepped in?

CUT TO:

MUDD and MORIARTY are in conference over a bottle of Saurian Brandy. Mudd's quarters are spartan save for a very large safe, full of drawers of various sizes.

MUDD

A ball of hair, you say? Interesting. Very interesting. Why, I had just been mentioning some such thing to the Captain. Coincidence, I'm sure.

MORIARTY

I don't believe in coincidence.

MUDD

I know, all you believe in is Shiny Things. And it was moving, you say?

MORIARTY

Well, it was doing something. Then the Captain came in and it stopped. There was a weird smell on her boot. Interested the hairball. Didn't bother trying to get into Engineering, though.

MUDD

Well, you know, discretion is the better part of valor. But it reacted to something that the captain brought up from the planet? Now, you know, that's very interesting, because transporters are supposed to make sure you don't do that kind of thing.

MORIARTY

Yeah, well.

The two of them consider for a stage moment.

MUDD

You don't believe in coincidence.

MORIARTY

No.

MUDD

(counting on his fingers)

Ebbet. Chang. Hairball. Questionable trade in one-of-a-kind previously extinct animals. Ruba Lacincia. Something on the Captain's boot.

MORIARTY

All these things are related.

MUDD

But how... and do I tell the Captain, or should we try to find out on our own?

MORIARTY

(Looking daggers at Mudd)

Remember why you're here, and not—

MUDD

Why do you have to keep bringing that up and spoiling my beautiful dreams?

10 PLANETSIDE, OUTSIDE LACINCIA'S CAVE

10

The lighting is different, perhaps only one star is in the sky. LACINCIA, CAPTAIN and ADMIRAL are sitting around the table again. VINNY is in LACINCIA's lap.

LACINCIA

Who told you that?

CAPTAIN

Harcourt Fenton Mudd. And I have a feeling he didn't tell me everything he knows. As usual. But be that as it may, can you elaborate on what he said?

LACINCIA takes a while to consider.

LACINCIA

Never heard of him. ... He told you about Ebbet and Chang?

CAPTAIN

Only what I've told you.

ADMIRAL

(kindly)

Why don't you tell us about Vinny?

LACINCIA

(hesitates at first, but warms to her subject)

Vinny was my favorite project. We started with a fossil of *Pakicetus attocki*, which is one of the predecessors of whales. Hooved predators. We had a little success, and then one day Chang came and said he'd told a "client" of his about *Pakicetus* and the client immediately ordered one. So, I got to work, and the result after a few false starts was Vinny.

By the time I got him I guess I'd fallen in love with him, which made it a real relief when the new owner refused to pay.

I kept him for a while but he eventually preferred to be with Fa. Of course, she wasn't a Captain then (nudge, nudge with her elbow into the Captain's side).

ADMIRAL

What about Ebbet and Chang, then? Were they working with you from the start?

LACINCIA

They were, but they were in Starfleet at the time.

CAPTAIN

So how'd you end up here?

LACINCIA

Britsa oil. An extremely fine oil, it can seep into anything. It's really, really expensive and there's no way we could afford to buy it in the quantities we needed. But there's plenty of it here on Beta Kerrotyn. Our computer could follow the paths it took between mineral crystals in the fossils and that's partly how we were able to "read" the fossils and start the de-extinction. Everyone thought the mineralization was random, you see, but I knew it couldn't have been and once we thought we had figured that out... And then Ebbet came up with that "hairball" computer and that made the work so much faster.

LACINCIA gets up, goes into the cave, and returns with a glass fishbowl with some beautiful, jewel-like trilobites in it.

LACINCIA

These were our first successes. Only they were hard to keep track of since they were mostly brown or black, so we gave them colors to make them unique, like this. Then Ebbet and Chang went off to start a business, and I stayed here to carry on the research. Chang even made a company slogan: "If life can't find a way, we can!" All very hush-hush, you know. They told me very definitely that on no account was I ever to let anyone near any of our equipment. That was what, four years ago now. I've been working away and heard nothing.

CAPTAIN and ADMIRAL exchange unconvinced looks.

LACINCIA

First we had to find a place that had the britsa oil we needed, and that turned out to be Beta Kerrotyn. So Ebbet and Chang ran the business and I settled down here. Then one day, Chang showed up and grabbed our computer and ran off with it. Told me to destroy everything. The next day Section 31 showed up. They said they'd heard what I was doing and that I needed to stop because it was "unethical," and "unregulated" and all the crap they give you. I told them, "That's the Federation for you! 'Infinite diversity in infinite combinations' EXCEPT for things you make yourself, and things we don't like, and people who cheat their way through the academy!" All the machinery I needed had been powered down anyway so they couldn't find it. Well hidden. I only brought these guys (indicating the trilobites) up a couple of weeks after they left. Ebbet and Chang said to lie low here until I heard from them again, but I've never heard a thing. And now you guys are here. Why are you here? What do you want?

CAPTAIN

We don't really want anything. We're here on a mission to find out what's here and decide what to do with it. Right, Admiral?



ADMIRAL

(making herself sound very official)

We don't have any specific orders about what will eventually happen to the planet.

LACINCIA

And, what about me? Am I supposed to be clapped into irons and delivered to the nearest starbase?

CAPTAIN starts to answer, remembering that their mission was to bring her to Starbase Alpha-9. Then she looks over at ADMIRAL.

ADMIRAL

No decisions have been made about that as yet.

LACINCIA

Well, you're here, you found me, surely something is supposed to happen next. You'll be good girls and report back to Starfleet. What are you going to tell them?

CAPTAIN and ADMIRAL turn and look at each other. CAPTAIN has a "This can get really ugly really fast" look.

FADE

11 SHIPBOARD CORRIDOR, OUTSIDE SICK BAY

11

Lt. COMMANDER OHP "RATTY" JI  
Chief Medical Officer

Dr. Ji, known as "Ratty" by much of the crew, hails from the Itwa Ahf warren on Hiffa (Gamma Auriga 6). She had planned an academic career once recruited by



Starfleet as the first of her species, but was so annoyed with the snide comments of humans behind her back that when the *Trouble* was commissioned, she almost begged for the job. She and the Captain had met one day while on break, and had agreed together that there was indeed, "Nothing half so much worth doing than simply messing about in boats." Soon "Ratty" and "Fatty" became good friends. When off-duty, Ratty enjoys goldsmithing, and has made some lovely jewelry for members the crew. She also enjoys writing sonnets.

CAPTAIN enters the sickbay doors. CHIP is lying on a rubbery pad on one of the beds. The Medic (RATTY) is with her.

CAPTAIN

Yo, Ratty! How's the noise?

RATTY

Yo, Fatty, how're the boys?

CAPTAIN

How're you feeling, Chip?

CHIP

(dourly)

How I look like feeling?

CAPTAIN

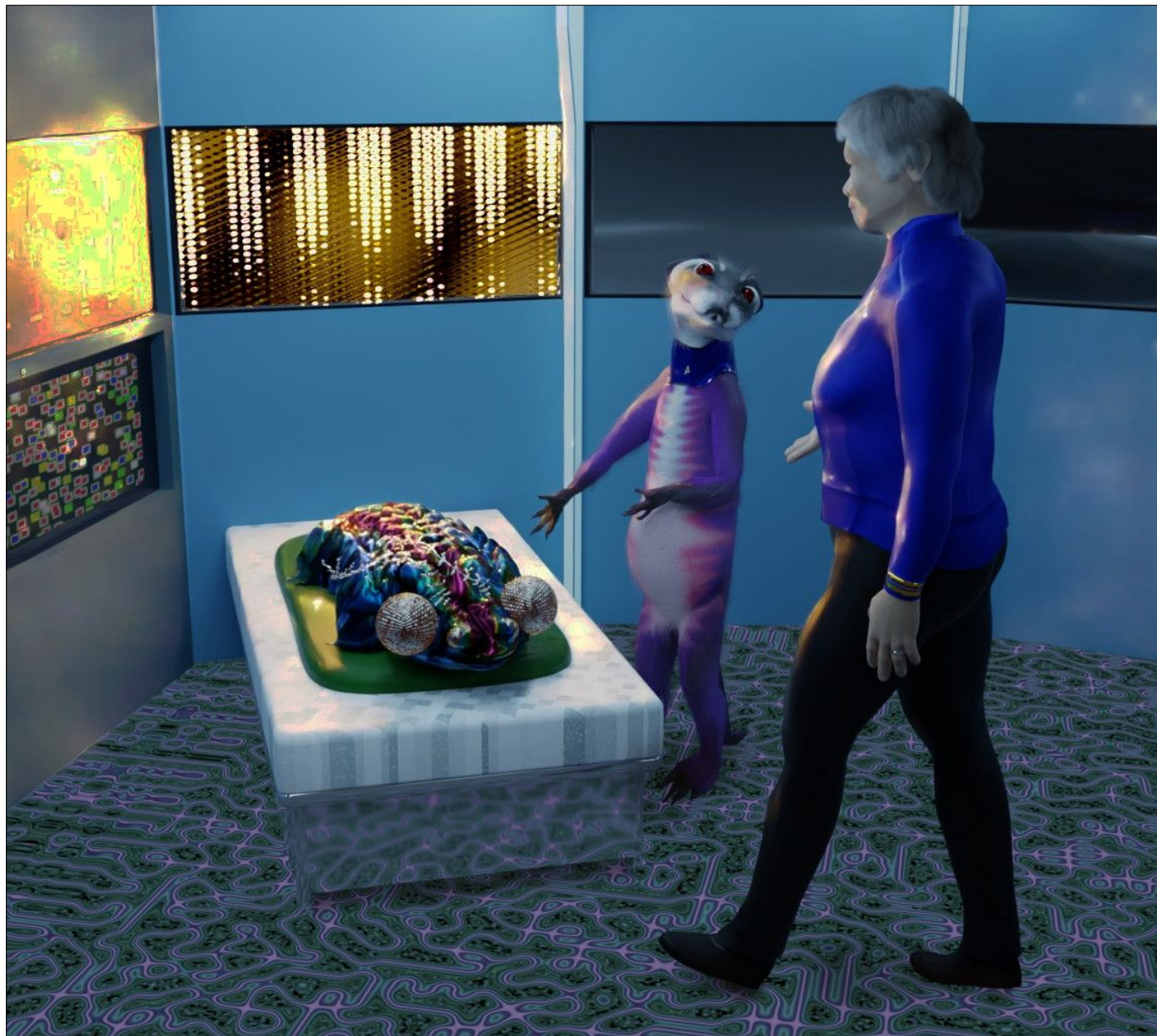
You look mah-velous, dah-ling.

CHIP flashes her antennae and makes a sort of irritated buzzing sound.

CAPTAIN

(to Ratty)

Any ideas?



RATTY  
(puzzled)

At a guess, I'd say an allergic reaction. So I got this old burn mat and put Chip's version of an anti-histamine on it, since it's her whole underside that's affected. But nothing on the ship would cause this.

CAPTAIN  
Were you able to isolate whatever it is?

RATTY

## Cryptanalyst's Log, 2217.02

### Lt. Commander Chp Pntshe Dh recording.

This Self wishes she could say that she has had a comfortable journey and an interesting time. This Self has most definitely not. Why I was required to beam down in the first place I cannot understand. There was nothing for me to do there. And all that happened there was that I must have wound through some kind of contaminant to which, it turns out, This Self is highly allergic. That is, of course, the major problem with the Universe at large, one is allergic to nearly everything and, I do believe, the Universe takes a great deal of joy in this.

My latest project, the Tchjaw code, is progressing well enough. Already this Self has found three ways to "crack it" as the Terrans say, so more work is required. It is based on "one-time pads" generated in two places at once by cunning means known only to me. So don't ask. If you really want to know, then consider yourself on my List Of Suspects.

My offspring, which the Captain has in an aquarium in her quarters, are growing nicely. They should outgrow their tank in three or four years, and then I will have to send them back Home. All in all, this is a far better arrangement than having to carry them around on my back continuously, and the Captain seems actually to like the little brats. So it's a win for me all around.

Not yet. But I have to ask, to your knowledge, was there anything on the planet that she could have picked up? Perhaps something odd you noticed on the ground or in the water? Or on ice or whatever's down there?

CAPTAIN

(cogitating)

Well, hunh... That hairball thing was interested in my shoes, but you know the transporter is not supposed to transport foreign microbes and stuff.

RATTY

Well, we all know how good it is at that... Tell you what, can you leave your boots here? Maybe get whoever went with you to do the same so I can make a comparison? And anything else that was set on the ground?

CAPTAIN

(removes boots)

Sure. I'll let them know, and send Vinny in. Let me know what you find out.

(to Chip)

Better now, kiddo?

CHIP

(acidly)

Obviously not.

CAPTAIN pats CHIP and walks out.



I need to get down to the surface. Tell me now, do you think the Captain would let me go down there if I, ahem, asked very nicely?

MORIARTY

No.



MUDD

But if you're right, and you smelled britsa on everybody's shoes and feet and whatever they move about on, and we could just get even a little of it, just think!

MORIARTY

Remember, you have to be a good boy or back to Stellas Nos. 1 through 500 you go.

MUDD

Well, yes, that is past bearing. Well past bearing! And she'll do it, too! Now, on the other hand, maybe you can go down there.

MORIARTY

And do what?

MUDD

Just find us some of that oil. You know. Get a diamond vial and fill it up. I'm sure I have something quite fit to the purpose here in my safe. Even if you only get a kilo of the stuff, we shall be comfortable for life! And besides, with that nose of yours who knows what else you could find.

MORIARTY  
(pensively)

I suspect that can be arranged.

MUDD

Just remember, you're supposed to be a "pet."

MORIARTY

Tell me, Harry, do you really think anyone believes that? In my own universe, I am quite a public figure. And besides, I brought a dæel with me. Who's gonna know?

MUDD

Will both of us fit in there?

MORIARTY  
(annoyed)

No, it's a self-propelled spaceship/spacesuit, dummy.

MUDD

And you can tolerate atmospheric re-entry in it?

MORIARTY

Of course I can. Remember, I am not a biogenic, thank the Ael Rahin!

MUDD

The who?

MORIARTY

The Ael Rahin. In my universe, they are the Gods of Space, Time and Luck. Not "gods" in the sense used here. And of course they may or may not actually exist. But we attempt to both propitiate them and avoid them *just in case*.

MUDD

Quite so, quite so. Well, my good beast, I shall leave it to you, then. Carry on, carry on.

MORIARTY  
(grinning)

I'll be back.

*Tune in Next-Ish for EPISODE 3: BIG TROUBLE!*

## ♪♪ Help a filksinger finish a song!

I (Fa) wrote and recorded this Klysadelian Drinking Song sometime back in the 1980s, on an Amiga computer with good old Deluxe Music software (ah, the good old days...) This is as far as I ever got with it; who'd like to take it from here? You can listen to the music [here](#).

Who are the Ael Rahin? Well, nobody's sure. They're often called the "Gods of Space" but they are not considered actual deities. Actually, nobody is sure they actually exist. What is generally accepted is that they are very old, very powerful, and able to utterly wreck any luck you may possess if you tick them off—or give you astonishingly good fortune if you do something that pleases them. It is felt that, like the Olympian gods in the Illiad, they sometimes just meddle with you to show off amongst themselves. In any case, here is (what there is of) their song.

### The Ballad of the Ael Rahin

Frack! Frack! Our screens went black!  
Our ship had cut out in the open void.  
Fear! Fear! Begone from here!  
We must rescue ourselves, lest we be destroyed.

We were out on a run to the Emerald Star  
Where we'd trace spice for gems at the Shrao Bazaar  
But an enemy found us and chased us far  
To the depths of the void, and Death's Black Star.

*(Chorus)*

Drink! Drink! Raise your glasses!  
Drink up a toast to the Unknown Race!  
Laugh, sing, throw wild songs up!  
Here's the the luck of the Gods of Space!

Whirl, whirl, our swift old girl  
Our starship was wracked by the Black Star's storm.  
Fly! Fly! How she did try.  
But then off of her hull our magnificent shields were torn.

We'd made good our escape just to end up here  
In a whirlpool of time where no hope appeared  
When the last engine blew, and we could but drift  
To the depths of the storm in the Black Star Rift.

*(Chorus)*

We felt so helpless. We felt so hopeless.  
We were about to give up on ourselves, our fate had engulfed us.

But it was then we saw her face:  
The Ael Shennah, the Queen of Space!

"Run! Run! The way is clear!"  
She called out to us from her sapphire throne.  
"Try! Try! I told you! Fly!"  
And she held our her hand and our engines began to drone.

We all drew ourselves up to our good ship's bow,  
And the ship, she lurched forward, we don't know how.  
Then the Goddess before us, she led us on  
And we went, though our strength and our fuel were gone!

*(Chorus)*

She led us to an isle in space  
Where we could come to land  
The world was small but clear and bright,  
With jewels and gems for sand.

And there we saw the Galactic Host,  
About a hundred strong,  
Of species we new naught at all  
A mighty, glitt'ring throng.

They looked o'er us bemused,  
They laughed and shook their heads.  
And then a red one pointed, saying,  
"Why not leave them dead?"

*(Chorus)*

“Nay! Nay! Hear what I say!”  
Said the great Ael Shennah who was standing alone.  
“They’re there from bleak despair.  
“Let us give them a chance for to earn their own way back home.”

Then the Ael Rahin gathered among themselves  
How their arguments flared, and their voices swelled.  
When the fracas was done, there were only five  
Who intended to see us go on alive.

(Chorus)

The great Ael Shennah came forward,  
And with her the other four.  
“Each one of us provides a test,  
“And if you can endure,

“You will find what you need to race home,  
“And your ship shall once more fly free.  
“But if not, you will stay and serve us,  
“As long as We are We.”

(Chorus)

Time! Time! Please give us time!  
To discuss of ourselves what we would see done.  
Time, Time? It took no time,  
To decide we must answer the challenge to which we’d come.

And so tell us the first test, and you will know  
We do not fear to run where you’d have us go.  
And the five, they came forward, and one stood clear,  
And said, “Hear my Challenge! Now, all of you, hear!”

(Chorus)

### THE BALLAD OF THE AELRAHIN

By Fara Shimbo, 1986

The musical score is written in 4/4 time and consists of eight staves of music. Each staff includes a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a common time signature. Chord symbols are placed above the notes. The notes are primarily eighth and quarter notes, with some rests and a final double bar line at the end of the eighth staff.

Staff 1: Am C G Em Am C G Em  
Staff 2: Am Em Dm Am Bflat Am  
Staff 3: E Am Dm Am Bflat E  
Staff 4: E7 Am D7 Am E Am  
Staff 5: Am Dm G C C7  
Staff 6: F B E E7 Am  
Staff 7: Am Dm Am G C E7 Am G Bflat E  
Staff 8: A7 Dm G C F B E Am



# The Accidental Lunatic

by Marjorry Donatello

Part 4

6th September

Leg is bad today, so I am wearing my support boot-socks again. I hate them, but I got nobody to blame but myself, so...

Solar storm passed. Moment hatch to “Upstairs” opened, came a rush of hot, humid air, like when you walk on top of the subway vent gratings in NYC and a train goes by. Somebody said, the CME interacted with the gold coating on the dome, heated it up, so all the plants wilted and half the water in the dolphin’s races evaporated. Now it’s all falling off the inside of the dome in really enormous drops, like, marble-sized because that’s what water drops do here. Like a Hal Clement novel I read when I was a kid.

We all noticed the fans when we got up there. Wargentin has huge circulation fans and they’re on all the time. Make a huge racket. But the racket’s constant so after a while your brain starts ignoring the noise. But after you don’t hear it for a couple of days, it really hits you when you hear it again.

The gold on the dome got charged and lots of dust stuck to it. This was deliberate, not sure why. So, a reverse charge got sent through it. Most of the dust fell off. There are hectares of wheat and rice and stuff growing on the surface in huge flats. Ranger, our *maileiau* robot, is out there now directing a bunch of plain old bots to dig these greenhouses out from all the dust they piled onto it before the CME hit. They’re okay, we think. I mean, the greenhouses and the robots, all that stuff.

Whole population got put on Damage duty. I got Dead Plants Detail. Plenty of dead or dying plants to pull up and throw in the compost. Unfortunately, a few dead or really sick birds and rats too. You can ring that “come in for a treat” bell all you want, but some just won’t come. These go for necropsies or vet care. Donno know what happens to them after that.

Heard one of the other freshmen asking why they couldn’t get some of the thousands of little robots up here to deal with this depressing stuff. Resident said to him, “Because you are living on a moon that spends all its time *trying to kill you*, and you need to see what can happen, and handle it firsthand. Just drumming it into your thick heads over and over again doesn’t work.”

It does effect you, I can say that. Even effected Bing, I think. Whenever she found something that died, no matter what it was, she would bow twice, and clap twice, and bow once, and say a short prayer to the *kami* in Japanese. (The *kami* are the gods, or spirits, that are in all things.) I remember my grandmother doing that, but only at shrines. *Sobo-san* would be scandalized if she saw this.

Why can't I take my eyes off her whenever I see her? I mean, I don't have a crush on her or anything stupid like that, but there's something fascinating about her. Really. No idea what.

And we really didn't take all that bad a hit. It was just sunset here when the CME hit. Most of the Near Side of the moon did all right. Far Side (as opposed to Farside which is a town) got the full force of the thing. All the big telescopes there are down.

And as for Earth? Earth is an absolute mess. Satellites down all over the place. There's a rumor that someone set off a mini-nuke and is trying to say it wasn't them, it was the CME. Nobody here is buying that.

Some people called to make sure our *maileiau* are all okay. A few of the outside little cleanup robots were damaged, but Haradu, Ranger, Bing, Orhauder and Sylvia are okay and besides, those guys all have tenure so yeah, they're immortal.

So anyway, my meeting with the lawyer got pushed back a day because his ceiling leaked and he had to clean up his office, on the bottom floor of the Admin Building. Went to see him today. Donno what I was expecting, but J. Wilberforce Wensleydale, J.D., Ph.D., Dean of the Department of Interplanetary Law, was not it.

Ever read P.G. Wodehouse? Know from Uncle Fred? Here I am, waiting in the office for a lawyer, and in walks Uncle Dynamite, in person *and* in period costume. Full head of white hair, voluminous beard, moustaches that would make Hercule Poirot bow down in worship. Tweed jacket, silk waistcoat, knee boots... I wonder if he keeps a pig? Oh, no, wait, that's Lord Emsworth. Anyway. Stood up and greeted me with "old world civility" when I walked in. Sat me down. Leaned forward and said, "Now tell me, my child, how can I help you?"



My first thought was to yell, “I’m no child!” but okay, in these boots I look like I’m twelve and this guy’s got to be at least in his seventies.

There is a rat on his desk. A live one. On his desk.

So, I told him all about Uncle Lou and his project and how my father—who I was sure didn’t realize that I already know about the will—was determined to contest the thing. Showed him the copy of the will I had, and he read it carefully.



Curiously, I thought, he didn’t say anything about the project itself. Guess being here all these years has gotten him used to this kind of stuff. I bet it’s mild compared to other stuff the students have been up to.

“This situation can become tricky...” ‘Uncle Wen’ said eventually. “I’m sure they’ve told you by now that at Wargentín, only the laws written in stone on the wall of City Hall apply. Wargentín recognizes no other laws of any other entity. When something like this comes up, a person may do whatever they like with their own property, now and after their demise, you see. So, as far as we are concerned, my

dear, there is absolutely nothing that can possibly be contested about your uncle's will. He stated, quite clearly and precisely, his wishes. Soundness of mind hasn't anything whatsoever to do with it, since at least up here we are wise enough to accept that 'soundness of mind' is mythological. Since nothing else was said, we must assume nothing else was meant. So for us, here, at Wargentín, the matter is settled absolutely.

"Earth is different, alas. Your father wants to contest the will because he feels he has, or ought to have, a claim to your uncle's money, I take it?"

I nodded.

"Has your uncle, to your knowledge, ever himself made any claim that any of that money was not his own legal property?"

Had to think about that. "Donno. Uncle Lou was never mentioned in the family if anyone could help it."

"He never visited in any way?"

"Only once, in person. That was when I was really young. That I know of. I was at boarding school a lot as an older kid."

"You never found any, for example, documents relating to him while living in your parents' house?" he said with a definite twinkle in his eye.

Did I? Who knew? "Don't think so," I said. "Dad had an office, he kept documents there. Never brought them home."

"And you never went to his office?"

"Never wanted to."

"I see. So your father then, and my dear child, please do not consider me as laying a smear upon his name—at least not at this time, mind you—may have an Earth-legal claim to this money, or he may be, shall we say, doing a bit of spite-work."

"Dad's known for spite-work with his brother," I said.

Uncle Wen considered. "Are you aware of any particular reason behind this propensity upon your father's part?"

I shook my head. "Bad blood since they were kids, so far as I know."

"Interesting. Quite." He leaned forward and patted me on the knee. "Well, have no fears, I shall definitely represent your interests in this matter. It shall make a most welcome change from patent cases! It may take a few days to make meaningful contact with anyone on Earth, but as soon as I have any news I will be sure to call upon you. In the meantime, my dear, you go and design your creature,



and the very best of luck to you! And if it works as specified, and you find you want to patent it, you come right to Uncle Wen!”

Stood up and shook hands (something they still do here at Wargentin), and I went up into the dome again.

Went to City Hall to see the laws that were written in stone on the wall. Seen them there, stopped and read them once but not all the way through.



When I got there, Bing was sitting curled up on the couch. She didn't have an exhausted expression, because of course she wouldn't, but there was something about her that just looked tired. Maybe how she sat.

I walked over to the couch, and said, “*Konnichiwa, Bing-san, genki des'ka?*”

Bing turned to look up at me, and closed her eyes. “*Hai*, I am *genki* [in good health]. Please sit. It has been such a long day.” She pointed to the couch. I gave her my *arigato* and sat. After a while, I said, “I saw you asking the *kami-sama* for help.”

“Yes, I did.”

Thought for a bit. “I never envisioned a ...” how to say this politely. “I didn’t think someone like you would be interested in the *kami*.”

“Oh, but of course I would be,” Bing said, brightening a little, which I didn’t expect, really. “Everything has its *kami*. The moon has *Tsukuyomi-sama*, a great *ōkami*. I choose to understand that all people have a *kami*, and all animals too. Anything that is an individual.”

“Even you?” I said and immediately felt embarrassed.

“Of course me,” Bing said. “And you.”

“A ‘guardian angel.’”

Bing nodded. “But unlike guardian angels, our *kami* can be mischievous, and we must pay attention to them.”

That, I thought, was true enough! Thought of something to say. Then thought better of it. Guess my indecision showed because Bing, who is, I’m told, the “Human Resources Geisha” of Wargentín, picked up on it.

“You said, just now,” she said, “that you didn’t think ‘someone like me’ would be interested in the *kami*. Meaning, may I not guess, that you don’t think an estroid would be spiritual.”

“Uhm... yeah, but... ‘estroid?’”

“Well yes, ‘android’ means ‘like a man.’ So, ‘estroid’ for ‘like a woman.’”

“Okay...”

Bing gave me a charming, if long-suffering, smile. “Perhaps you thought my focus would be more on the scientific or technical aspects of life.”

“Well ... You have to understand, I’ve never really spoken to a truly independent AI. They’re so...”

“Rare, let us say. Yes, on Earth that is true, since now we are all classed as ‘munitions.’ It is a shame, but there it is. But in any case, please do speak to me as you would to anyone else. Well, anyone else you liked.”

“Okay,” I said, trying to relax. Bing has a beautiful smile. “But... you actually believe in the *kami*?”

“Believe’ is not a word I would use. I take nothing on faith. But there is no reason not to *accept* that the *kami* are around us, and so I honor them and ask for their guidance.” She tilted her head. “Would you not do this?”

“Since nobody can prove a negative, I do the scientific thing and start from the null hypothesis.”

“And so you should, for most purposes.”

“But you aren’t. You’re assuming the *kami* exist.”

“I am choosing to accept that the *kami* exist in my personal world. I accept that I may be wrong about them. It is my personal world-view, and relies on no one else. The *kami* are my anchor. Even we who are machines need an anchor, you know.”

She didn’t say it hesitantly. Didn’t say it proudly. It was just a thing that was.

And it’s true, I guess. Here I was, up on the Moon, would probably never be on Earth again, no anchor, no rudder, just here.

“Do aliens have *kami*?” I asked.

“Of course they do.”

“Where do all these *kami* come from?”

“Well, there *are* eight-million of them, you know,” Bing said, with a mischievous smile. (“Eight million” is a Japanese way of saying, “an infinite amount.”) “But my idea is, that when something becomes an individual entity—physically separated—a *kami* is there for it.”

“They just pop into existence like quarks?” I said, trying to be mischievous too.

“It’s a kinder idea than thinking that boy-fetuses get a soul at 40 days and girl-fetuses having to wait for 80 days.”

I hadn’t heard that one.

“So Maki has a *kami*.”

Bing smiled. “Well, that’s an interesting case,” she said.

“Oh?” I said because I got the feeling I was supposed to.

“Maki does not consider sahn’s self a ‘separate thing.’”

Okay, that’s different... “But... sahn’s not attached to anything, so...”

“Ah, *so des’ ne!*” Bing said, this time grinning broadly. “Earthlings of all stripes have a deeply ingrained, instinctive idea that things that are not physically attached to other things are individual

things. Satamuri don't have that. For example..." She leaned over and picked up a wad of cat hair that was sticking to the couch. "How many wads of cat hair have I?" she said, holding it up.

"One."

She pulled on the wad until she had two separate wads.

"If I ask you how many I have now, you will say I have two, *ne?*"

I nodded.

"Maki would say, after giving up trying to explain that I have a cat, that I still have one."

"But—"

"This is how I found out about this! One day, I asked Maki if LUCA, on sahn's homeworld, had ever been identified. After having LUCA explained to sahn, Maki announced, 'What's to find? I am here.' You can imagine how this conversation got convoluted quickly! I said, 'When you spawn, is that egg someone new?' And sahn said, 'No, that's me.' I said, 'And your parents?' 'That's me too.' You see? Though generations may pass and species, as we know them, may evolve, in Maki's mind they are all one thing because the innate concept of physical separation is not there for them. Well, we got onto the subject of *kami* and I said, 'In that case, you must be a monotheist,' and Maki got a snarky look and said, 'We are all the dream of Vishnu.'" Bing sighed. "So we drank ourselves silly for the rest of the night."

After that we both got up and went back to pulling weeds.

Later on, I met Admiral Singh, and asked him what this "dream of Vishnu" was, and he looked at me funny and said, "Why ask me? I'm a Sikh! And by the way, Cadet, where's your report on your planet?"

Today gave me lots to think on.

I went home and watched cat videos. I will think on them tomorrow.

*To Be Continued....*

**Got a story to tell, in words, pictures, or sound?**

**WE WANT YOU! Yes, YOU!**

**Deadline for the next Issue (No. 5, Summer) is 21 April 2022.**

Submissions can be sent to [editor@retrozone.net](mailto:editor@retrozone.net) or to [submissions@retrozone.net](mailto:submissions@retrozone.net).

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 ordered from an artist and paid for, and is therefore no longer the legal property of the artist.) If you wish to use a work which you have purchased from an artist, such as a print, make sure you purchased publication rights as well.

#### 🗣️ SPOKEN WORD/READ FOR YOU:

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).

#### 🖼️ TRADITIONAL MEDIA ART:

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

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Same as the above really, but here we will accept .psd (Photoshop) and .xcf (GIMP) as well.

### 🗑️ 3D/3D PRINTABLE:

If you're just sending a static image (or a collection of different views of a 3D object you've made, the guidelines are the same as for Digital 2D. We'd much prefer either .blend (Blender), .skp (SketchUp) or .stl (stereolithography, the standard for most 3D printers) formats for these files. One of us (probably Fa) will likely print your model to make sure that there are no holes, that supports work, and to determine approximately the amount of time and how much filament a print takes. I (Fa) print on a Lulzbot Mini.

### 🎵 MUSIC and MULTIMEDIA:

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.

### 🗿 SCULPTURE, CERAMIC and GLASS:

Pictures of same only, please. We cannot be responsible for the way objects subjected to the post may be handled (trust us, we can tell you horror stories). See the guidelines above. Please include the size and medium/media of your creation, and anything else you might think cromulent.

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If you've got something that just doesn't fit into the categories above, please email a description, and we'll see if we can work something out.

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You may only contribute **your own work!** You may not "agent" for someone else, or "surprise" someone by trying to have their work published for them. If you don't own it, don't send it. Fa has been bending computers to her will for almost fifty years now, and both of us have taught, and raised kids. Trust us, we know all the cheats.

Got it? Good! Please send submissions to [submissions@retrozine.net](mailto:submissions@retrozine.net). We will send you a note letting you know your submission was received, but we cannot guarantee when we'll get to look at it in depth.

See you next time!