

# RETROZINE

Two Fandom  
Elders,  
One More Time!

Summer, 2023 \* No. 8

## In This Issue:

-  **What Roxie Said**, by Alan Dunwell
  -  **Unstuck in Time and Space**, by N. C. Shapero & G. S. Cole
  -  **AI Art and Shaky Hands** by Fara Shimbo
  -  **Trouble Brewing: Episode 6, We Got Trouble**  
by the Crew of the USS Trouble
  -  **The Ghost House, Chapters 11-15** by Fara Shimbo
  -  **Commentary by Germaine Swanson**
- And Lots of Other Cool Stuff!**

# RETROZINE 8

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Got questions?

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# In This Issue:

## Commentary:

[A Word and a Challenge](#)

by Germaine Swanson \_\_\_\_\_ 4

[Letters To The Editor](#)

\_\_\_\_\_ 11

## Retrospective (Fan Fiction):

[Trouble Brewing: The Story So Far](#)

\_\_\_\_\_ 41

[TROUBLE BREWING: Episode 6: We Got Trouble, Right Here](#)

By the Crew \_\_\_\_\_ 51

## Retroactive (Original Fiction)

[What Roxie Said](#)

by Alan Dunwell \_\_\_\_\_ 6

[Unstuck in Time and Space?](#)

By N. C. Shapero and G. S. Cole \_\_\_\_\_ 18

[The Ghost House, Chapters 6-10](#)

by Fara Shimbo \_\_\_\_\_ 22



## Retrovision

[AI Art and Shaky Hands](#)

by Fara Shimbo \_\_\_\_\_ 12

# A Word and a Challenge

By Germaine Swanson

The advantage of writing this column is the freedom to write about anything our readers might find interesting. I learned a long time ago to be careful who and how I criticize in print, because behind the topic of every negative critique is the tender heart of someone who courageously put forth their creation into the world.

The first time I ever wrote a critique was of a new fanzine. I had no idea why I was asked to critique it, nor did I realize my comments were not to be for publication. I was young, arrogant, and had access to professional support.

I was student-teaching language arts in a public school. My term project was to teach sixth graders to write, edit, and create a mid-year journal. This is similar in scope to creating a fanzine. Packed with examples of what good educational results should be, I set standards for my own zine. There are many improvements I could have made. My zine work wasn't perfect. But the zine I was given to critique did not approach the standards we (my professors and I) set for my sixth graders.

I ripped that zine up in print. I thought I was being funny, witty, and satirical. I wasn't. That publisher improved his future zines, but never gave me another free one. I have never critiqued a zine again.

My reason isn't a guilty conscience; rather it is realizing how devastated I would feel if some arrogant jerk wrote what I wrote about that zine. My criticism could have been constructive. We weren't competitors. We appealed to two different markets.

What amazes me is the misadventure didn't kill our friendship, even though we lost touch with one another over the years. Well, I've tried to reach him to apologize many times over the years, with no luck. I would tell him I admire his strength to continue doing what he loved even though some asshole made sport of it. Hearing that I would have written something different if I knew it was his did not demonstrate a lack of bias. I would have been more positive or teacherly if I had known. I would also not have been honest but, hopefully, less rude. I have imagined him laughing all the way to the bank when his books were professionally published.



This issue of *Retrozine* contains an article about AI (artificial intelligence). It will generate some thought and comments from you, our readers. We would love to know your opinions about the use of AI and the future effects of AI.

Decades ago, I wrote a story about a primitive interpretation of what AI could be. It was written by one who was ignorant of the nuances of technology, written only to be humorous. At that time, I wanted to be the Science Fiction equivalent of James Thurber (google him). My story described an event where a device learned to

replicate itself. There was no human concern about its function, only about its size. It grew in size and power until human fear had to be addressed.

Our intrepid captain found a way to pull the plug on the problem and restore the device to a manageable size. It was a primitively written story, but fear of the unknown or something making itself more powerful than humankind was the underlying message. It's interesting that now that AI can learn and act independently based on past learning, many of the same arguments have been voiced. Currently, a machine is only as capable as the data it collects and the program that was written. It doesn't have a sense of intention yet. Purpose? Yes, intention to reason beyond its programming? Not yet. Wage war against humankind? Perhaps, if programmed in such a way to conclude, this is the most appropriate (logical) conclusion.

Issac Asimov handled the morality of the AI through his 3 Laws. They allowed humans who feared robots and AI to enslave or kill them.

- A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
- A robot must obey orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
- A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

-The Three Laws of Robotics from the 1942 short story "[Runaround](#)."

I have viewed several YouTube videos that share the fear that AI will destroy humankind, or that the Bible will be reinterpreted by AI or hate groups and will encourage AI to enslave humans. These opinions resonate with the same fears described in that little story. This a challenge to comment or submit articles, stories, or art that reflect your feelings about AI or its future.

Fanzines are a participatory art form. What do you have to say?

# What Roxie Said

by Alan Dunwell

This whole mind link project had been a bust from the start. The dogs just couldn't hack it. Something in their primitive genetic makeup maybe. Who knows.

"What's the matter with them?" Jerry said for probably the ten-millionth time since the first trial link. Jim and Mandy shrugged.

"Man's best friend, my foot," said Jim. Mandy just smiled her Mandy-smile. It had seemed like the next logical progression in the Mind Net. Humans had been linked for years now, ever since the quantum jump in miniaturization with the SOG chips. Semi-Organic Gel had been around and used for memory, but Jerry's thesis showed that it could go from just memory to full compute when laser-pumped. What with nano-scale lasers this made SOG chips/computers and implant a reality. Everyone got them, they were cheap and painless to install and use. Implants created the Mind Net, or MN, just like cars created interstate highways. Anyone with SOG's could snap in or out of the MN at will. Face to face, people still spoke. To link in the flesh was considered rude, very poor form, well . . . except maybe in the privacy of one's own bedroom.

"Maybe they are too stupid," said Jim picking up on his previous train of thought.

"Or too smart," said Mandy. Jim just grinned and deferred to Mandy. They had been over this before and besides she was the shrink here, he was just the firmware assembler. Let her worry about the wetware.

"I don't think it's either one," Jerry followed on, "I think it's the pseudo-sentience that freaks them. As soon as I go back to passive mode and just watch in their minds through the link they come right back. If they can't grasp the reality of another being with the standard issue five senses then it's just too foreign."

"How about using a cat?" asked Jim.

They all burst into laughter and the tension drained out of the room. The concept of a cat link never failed to get them laughing.

"Do you think they would ever condescend to accept a link from a mere two-leg?" remarked Mandy and they all went off into the snickers again. "What we need is an animal that mostly wants to please but has, well, if not sentience, then a concept of itself. Not too smart though." She amended with a grin, "Not more than two neurons."

Jerry smiled, Jim didn't. Jerry could almost see Jim's brain gears whirling. Then it hit him. Mandy too.

"Roxie!" they all said at once.

“It’s perfect,” Mandy said. “Roxie already knows and trusts you, Jerry, and don’t we always joke that she has only two neurons and they never fire at the same time?” Jerry nodded. Roxie, his Arabian mare, just might do the trick.



Two weeks later, he was sure that it was going to work. Jim had done the implant in his usual expert fashion and Jerry had been monitoring in passive mode for ten days. Roxie’s emotion packets were very sharp and pure, the link was the best he had ever had. It was time to say hello. Jim was at his monitors and Mandy was at the emotion tracer watching for that fatal panic spike that was so familiar from the dog links.

“We’re ready?” asked Jim.

Mandy nodded, eyes never leaving the tell-tales.

“OK. Here I go.” Jerry started scratching Roxie under the chin, one of her favorites, and hummed, *Yes Sir, She’s My Baby*. This had been one of their most intimate socialization ever since Roxie had been just a foal.

Roxie’s lower lip started to get slack and droopy and her eyes went to half-mast with pleasure. Slowly, slowly, Jerry eased into the active mode and sent his hum. Roxie showed no difference and Jerry eased up the gain on the link to full.

“She’s registering, even if she doesn't know it yet,” Mandy reported. “Ooops, there she goes. She knows something’s there.”

Roxie’s eyes opened wide and she looked around in a puzzled way.

Jerry eased the gain back to half. “Hello, little girl.” he both said and sent, verbal and link.

Roxie's head came up and her whole body came to attention. “Why doesn’t she look like that in the ring?” Jerry thought to himself with a smile. This time he looked right into Roxie’s eye, scratched her under the chin and sent only: “Hello, little one.”

Roxie jumped sideways, spun and ran off a few steps and then turned and look at him again, making snorting noises through her nose.

“She’s peaking,” called Mandy. “How’s the link look?”

“Solid,” came Jim’s reply. “There’s no connection fray at all.”

“It’s coming down again,” Mandy interrupted. “We’re back to half the peak. Excited but normal considering. Hum to her again, Jerry.”

“HMMMMMM. . . *Yes Sir, that's my baby. No Sir, I don't mean maybe . . .*”

Suddenly there was a rush of emotion packets that overwhelmed Jerry. He stumbled back a step or two and sat down on the ground hard.

“Warm mother, fresh hay, a nose full of ice cold stream water, how the back feels rolling in the Spring grass . . .”

Jerry eased the link gain back to one third. Each emotion packet was sharp and of overwhelming clarity, even human link wasn't this pure. Of course, thought Jerry, humans always keep their personal selves switched out of the MN. Not Roxie! She had clearly identified the source of these new feelings/thoughts and had replied full force. She came right over to Jerry and roughly nuzzled him, giving him her low, full throated nicker that she reserved for special things like alfalfa hay.

"Well, that sure worked! Love you, little one," Jerry sent. More nuzzles and nickers.

"All OK here," Jim reported. "All net links are sound and the connectivity index is ramping up in a nice X2. Looks good."

"Excellent, like totally awesome, wow, like totally..." Mandy could be counted on to be 'totally' incomprehensible in such moments when she was really concentrating. They'd get the full clinical analysis from her later as Jim always said, "... in more detail than you could Possibly Imagine!"



Jerry kept the link active for more than an hour, doing all the usual things that Roxie knew by heart. A little ring work, a good brushing and rub down, feeding, all the reassuring, normal motions, but with link to go along.

"I'm going to have to snap out here," Jerry said. "I'm getting maxed." Most people only stayed on the MN for a couple of hours without a rest, and this was not just a normal link.

"Keep her on monitor," Jerry went on, "so we can follow with instruments for the night. Ready, snap out now." Jerry closed the link.

Roxie visibly staggered. She stepped sideways and banged into the barn wall and then just stood with all fours locked, trembling.

"Whoa! Neural net links in the red!" yelled Jim.

"She's off scale, link up, link up!" shouted Mandy.

Jerry quickly snapped in again and said all the stupid nonsense things that people say to animals to soothe and comfort them. Roxie stopped trembling, became animate again and rubbed her head against Jerry. She seemed much better, if not her normal self.

"Clear."

"Clear." he heard as Jim and Mandy reported monitor status that echoed the stability he was seeing in Roxie.

Mandy spoke again. "What are we going to do? The link is her new normal state. Animals are so accepting of some things, but are loath to give up what they think of as normal and it seems that an hour of link was enough to establish the new norm."

They tried easing out. No good. They tried a series of rapid snaps. No good. Roxie was getting more and more distressed with each try, but Jerry could sense that her end of the link was also getting stronger each time.



Jerry said, “This time I’ll try  
\_”

“No! Lose Me!” It was Roxie and she was registering on Mandy's tell-tales.

“My gods,” whispered Mandy “She’s been going in and out of sentience. Every time you two are linked, Jerry, you are providing enough neural capacity to give her a pseudo-sentience. When the link is snapped she loses it and is animal again, but she must also sense the loss.”

All three were stunned into silence for a moment, then Jerry spoke.

“I don’t know how much longer I can stay on this link. I’m getting tired and if I fall asleep the link will break too.”



Roxie seemed to sense his feelings, if she didn’t understand his words fully. Jerry wasn’t sure how much language she really got. Animals “knew” words but no one had ever been in a situation like this with an animal. Jerry wasn’t sure if he should be guarded like he would with a human or if this was also dangerous for Roxie. She nickered again and softly nuzzled him once more.

“Love you. Not lose me,” she sent. Jerry wasn’t sure if what he was receiving was words or emotions, it was such a rich mix. So unlike human-human link.

Jerry hugged her neck and sent, “I don’t know whether to cry or laugh, little one. And, I don’t know how long I can hang in here.”

“He's sleepy, sleepy Jerry,” muttered Jim. “What about more SOGs? If I can replace the rebistrand nomenclature pin and up the super hyro-gyro metricating dyna-floating packaloomers to . . .” Or at least that is about as intelligible as it was to Jerry and Mandy. They both looked at each other and smiled as Jim did strange magical things with his 4-D CAD designer. The wizard was at it again and all might still be well in the universe.

Jerry was just about nodding off when Jim shouted “I’ve got it! It should be coming out of the designer in a minute.” It was nothing like what Jerry expected, no little bitsy packet like the implant. This looked like two briefcases.

“It's huge, I can’t lug all that around,” he said.

“You don’t have to, it’s for Roxie. A mere back pack for her. I downloaded your original wetware scan from when you applied for link and built it into 3,742 SOGs. It’s shaped like saddle bags so Roxie can wear it. I can soft connect it without hard wire into her link so that it will look sort of like you and let the flesh-and-blood you snap out. It’s not the real you by a long shot, but it should look to her like a ‘Sleepy-Jerry’ and with luck she won’t go into ‘Lose Me’ mode. It should keep her sentient, just, . . . I hope. I don’t suppose she can really understand, but try to explain it to her.”

As Jim strapped on the SOG Pack, Jerry sent out on the link to Roxie, “Sleepy-Jerry in the saddle. Keep you company when I’m gone.” He repeated it while he scratched her under the chin and on the chest.

Jim switched in the link to the Sleepy-Jerry, which in typical engineer/computer-jock mode he had already turned into the acronym of SJ. “SJ coming on line, . . . Now,” he said. The real Jerry, who was wondering whether he should now be called the ‘F&B’ for flesh-and-blood Jerry, felt the link like waves of *deja vu*. Roxie clearly thought two Jerrys were even better than one and F&B eased out of the net. Roxie was quite happy with the arrangement and without further ado ignored the three humans and returned to important things, namely eating. The monitors showed she was in link with the SJ at a steady state and all was stable.

Mandy said, “A sentient horse, I’m going to have to rework all the software to integrate this.”

Jim said, “I think that I can reduce the SOG Pack and SJ by a factor of 10 once I’ve done a real design and laser drive the gain to de-garble the link nodes. Do you think that an implant in the lower neck will be OK Jerry? Jerry . . . ?”

Jerry said, “Zzzzzzz” over and over again while he sat on the ground, back against the barn wall, a smile on his face.

What Roxie said, only SJ knows.



# Letters To The Editor



# AI Art and Shaky Hands

by Fara Shimbo

Back in the good old days, which weren't that good and definitely weren't that old, I used, under my old name (Anji Valenza), be a zine artist of some note. Ah, I was young and my hands were steady then. Also, my eyes worked... Lesson: Don't get old. It's a trap.

Now I find myself old, and having gone through such exigencies of life as have left me ... uhm... let's just say elderly. As those who remember my art from back in the day can attest, looking at the previous page, which I drew in July 2023, those days are long behind me. So... what's a Crazy Old Bat to do if she wants to keep creating, and make a zine that looks nice?

Well, she turns to a brand new tool: AI Art.

Firstly, as someone who's been a professional artist for the last 50-odd years, let me say I've heard a lot of invective aimed at "AI Art." "It's going to replace artists." "It's a means of forgery and copyright evasion." "It's just plain inferior in every way and so is everyone who uses it." And, of course, "It's CHEATING." Well, fine, if that's your opinion you're entitled to it. But just let me state that I have heard all this before. About Photoshop, to name one of the latest examples. Before that, photography was going to make painters obsolete, and photography was Not Art. Animated movies could once not be nominated for an Oscar because they weren't "legitimate cinema." When I was doing pottery, the "Giffin Grip," an automatic centering tool, was looked upon with scorn: "real" potters centered things the old fashioned way!

One argument against AI Art that I've heard repeatedly is that AI Art lacks imagination. It just draws on what was there before. Well, uhm... Learning to paint by copying masterworks is a very old tradition. (In fact, I don't know if this is the case now, but there used to be a rule that you could make as many copies of the *Mona Lisa* as you wanted—in the Louvre itself—so long as the paintings weren't the same size as the original. I've seen the original. It's not that big.) Making paintings out of photos from *National Geographic* is also a time-honored practice. My point is, nobody creates anything out of a vacuum, "artist's statements" (how we loathe writing them!) often to the contrary. One needs to see something that already exists, feel something that already exists, know something that already exists, in order to strike out on one's own. Just like AI bots like Midjourney.

Since I am now, according to one of my nieces, "old enough to knit," can no longer hold a fork steady, much less a pen or a stylus, I've turned to Midjourney, fondly referred to as "Midge," so that I can keep creating without embarrassing myself. Midge has proven to be a blessing, and I thought some of you might like to see how it's done.

In "The Ghost House," I wanted to show a picture of a painting of dogs, in an ornate frame, hanging on the wall in the Ghost House. So, to get me started, I asked Midge to:

imagine: an oil painting of foxhounds and horses on a green field in the French countryside, in a gilt frame. It hangs on a wall in an abandoned house.

Midge thought about it for a while, and gave me four options (Midjourney always gives you four options unless you specify otherwise). This is what I got.



Uhm, no, Midge, not quite what I had in mind. But interesting. The half horse-half dog in the top right option... the dog with no neck, and the push-me-pull-you dog in the bottom-right, are... different.

I went through a few iterations of this, but failed to get a painting on a wall without dogs standing in front of it. So, I changed the prompt to:

imagine: an oil painting of foxhounds and horses on a green field in the French countryside.

It gave me several options, including a horse with five legs... but I liked this one best:

One of the complaints I often hear is that “It’s just stealing another piece of artwork.” Well, apart from the fact that most artists would put *four* legs on a dog, I decided to use Google’s Reverse Image Search to see if this was a copy of an existing painting. This is what I got:

So, at least in this case, I think we’re good here.



Google

Find image source

Visual matches

- etsy.com  
Three Hounds - Oil Painting, Nancy Noel...  
In stock
- lindavolrath.com  
Linda Volrath - Portfolio of Works: Animals
- artworkarchive.com  
Art Collection from Cross Gate Gallery [...]
- art-prints-on-deman...  
John Emms art print: Two Hounds in a...  
In stock
- mutualart.com  
Andre Pater | A COUPLE (1991) | MutualArt
- pixels.com  
Two dogs Round Beach Towel by CSA Images ...
- fineartamerica.com  
Pair of Foxhounds, 1900 Painting by John Emm...
- chairish.com  
Original Vintage Edward Tomaszewicz Equestria...  
Used
- forestgallery.com  
Top 10 Animal Artists | Original Wildlife...
- wernerrentsch.com  
Artist Werner Rentsch | Dogs In Art | Domestic...
- artfinder.com  
On the scent by Magdalena Palega...  
In stock
- radnorhunt.org  
Bryn Mawr Hound Show - Radnor Hunt
- fineartamerica.com  
Two dogs Drawing by CSA Images - Fine Art...
- bethparcell.com  
Eyes on the Huntsman

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Now, there was the matter of the frame on the wall of an abandoned house. I wanted an old, ornate from that was probably gilded at one time, but not now. So I asked Midge to:

imagine: an ornate, gilded picture frame, with no picture, hanging on a wall in a very old house.

Midge gave me these, and the top left was just what I wanted.



The only problem here is that when I used the GIMP (GNU Image Manipulation Program, a free version of Photoshop that does everything Photoshop does except crash every 15 minutes; you can download it from [gimp.org](http://gimp.org)) to paste the painting into the frame, the painting looked too new. So I used GIMP to dirty-up the painting somewhat, and ended up with the illustration you can see [here](#).

Getting the picture of Madame Léonie that you see in *The Ghost House* was a lot more involved. I had a vague idea of what I wanted (which is odd, because historically, I wrote stories to illustrate the pictures I drew rather than the other way around). So I asked Midjourney to:

imagine: a ghostly older woman, standing in old house. She is shining, and beautiful. She is smiling, and very happy.

Midge gave me the following:

None of these were exactly what I needed. The girls visiting the house had candles, but I had already specified that most of the light was from the windows. Also, Léonie could not be holding anything, being a ghost. I liked a couple of the effects, though, so I asked Midge to combine the two I liked best, the upper right and lower left.



This (left) was the result. Still not exactly “ghostly,” but I can fix that, as they say, in post. To be honest, I do an awful lot of fixing in post.



This is more or less how I was imagining Léonie in my mind, but it still wasn’t exactly what I wanted, so I told Midge to “re-roll,” or to try again. Then I got these.

And, as Léonie herself would say, *et voilà!* Upper left corner, there’s our old gal!

Well, sort of. Midjourney isn’t really sure about “ghosts.” I’ve tried before to get Midge to make translucent ghosts, but Midge is young and doesn’t understand yet. So, I enlarged the image I like best, and brought it into GIMP, where I added extra ghostly goodness to it. You can see the result [here](#).

For work regarding recurring characters, I’ve taken a different tack. The last actual job I had (ah, I do so love being retired!) was as a professional 3D designer and animator. For this job, I used Blender, another fantastic tool that you can download for free from [blender.org](https://blender.org). Blender has so many features that even after using it for almost 25 years, I still haven’t mastered even half of them. But what I *can* do with it is pretty amazing.





Like all the illustrations I've done for the adventures of the USS *Trouble*, I used Blender to design everything from characters, ships, planets, cats, textures etc. But while having Midge make me a picture can take maybe an hour if I'm being very picky, the stuff I do in Blender can take a week or more. The process is long, involved, and convoluted, but I only have to make each character, thing or place once. I'll go into how it's done if anyone's interested.

So, there you have it. That's how I "Do Art" anymore. Is it "art?" I donno. My "three-score years and ten" have already passed me by, and I have still found no two people who can agree on what "art" is. My personal definition is that "art" is something you look at, or hear, or touch, and go, "Oh... hunh." Doesn't matter who did it or what tools they used. If it gives you ideas, then it's art.

And like C being for Cookie, that's good enough for me.

# Unstuck In Time and Space?

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

Prologue:

## ***The Past is Present***

He could not find any emotional energy; Richard knew he was on the verge of dying. He'd long passed through tunnel vision and graying-out to blindness; the scents of struggle and illness had long been blotted by the oxygenation tubes. He no longer heard sounds, whether from the hissing in his nostrils or the beeping of the monitoring machinery or from the rales of his tortured breathing or the fading pattering of his heart.

Fear had passed; anger, like the adrenaline that had supported him, had likewise faded away. The most that he could manage now in the way of emotion was a gentle, lingering, sense of regret.

There was that last flare of the neurons, one final pulse of the organized holograph that embodied the sense of self, before the terminal dissolution. *Just like when I was a child—a sickly child—only this time, why fight it? Time to rest...*

## ***Another Present***

Walls of polished black stone towered over him, surrounding him. Names and dates, row on endless row, were carved into the stone. The walls curved in gentle concentric arcs. Overhead, the sky was a brilliant blue, marred by only a few puffs of cloud; it was warm, uncomfortably so; the heat and humidity both strange and yet someone familiar.

Dominating his view was a part of 'himself' that could not be, yet it was clearly attached to his self and had aspects strange and yet familiar. Surprised, Richard blinked—his vision was sharp despite the absence of his glasses.

Scents were familiar, yet strange, their intensity heightened almost to the limit of tolerance. He blinked again, and staggered slightly, feeling as he did an entirely different somatic kinesthesia. He began to look down at himself, but stopped as soon as his gaze reached his hand, a hand now resting against the hot black stone.

He had four fingers and a thumb, but they were not “his” fingers. Flexing them, he started, as the tightening motion triggered the emergence of sharp, ivory-colored claws. They disappeared the moment his extensors flexed again, straightening them.

Richard shook his head; a single, heartfelt “damn” escaped his lips. The shock of hearing a different voice was subsumed in the greater shock of feeling the motions associated with and stimulated by his head shake. He reached up and cupped his hands over his eyes; there was a sensation of fur-on-fur, and his fingertips brushed against large, mobile and sensitive ears as he ran his hands over the top and back of his head.

“I get the same feeling, every time I recognize a name on the Wall,” a voice said, from behind and to his left; there was a richness of sensation to the words—overtones, and undertones, emotions and logic—a sense of deeper communication beyond the simple sense of the words. As he turned towards the source, he caught brilliant sunlight directly in his eyes; he flinched, dropping his head and blinking as his eyes began to tear.

“Reason enough to cry, as well,” the other said. The speaker was bipedal, and while humanoid, clearly not human. The face was more that of a fox than a man, but the eyes were bright and intelligent, and the speaker wore a uniform and the insignia of an air force captain. “We lost nine in ten; the tango tangos lost one in five. The humans got off easy, barely one in ten.”

“Y-yah,” Richard stammered. “I ... sorry.” He squeezed his eyes shut and turned his head back towards the wall. “It’s just ... overwhelming.”

“Especially when you find the name of someone you knew,” the fox being said, and reached out to touch the monument. “David Alan Reynard, my older brother.” He reached into his jacket, pulled out a small flag and stuck it into a nearly invisible slot by the name. “To absent friends. I’ll leave you to your memories,” he said, turned, and walked away.

Richard’s ears tracked the sound of his steps; he opened his eyes, blinking in the brilliant morning sun. He stared at the little flag for a moment. *Eighty-one stars?* he thought. He shook his head, and began walking as he tried to establish his bearings.

‘The Monument’, as the collected structure had been described, was an ordered layering of circular walls ringing a center, with breaks for passing between the layered rings at what seemed to be the cardinal compass points. Subtle markings in the form of brass metal fittings at each break indicated the compass point; comparing them to the position of the sun made the time either morning or afternoon, depending on the hemisphere.

At the center of the Monument was a simple plaque that read, “Lest we forget”, at its top, and “In memory of all those who died, that we might live in peace”, at the bottom. The dates – as a self-starting audio explanation informed him – ran from 15 March 2071 through 2 June 2096, ‘VA Day’. Along the walls were little memories that visitors had obviously left – flags, photographs, tokens, indecipherable objects. *Eight million names*, Richard thought, and shuddered.

The others at the Monument were all bipedal and bilaterally symmetric—even, he suspected, purely mammalian. Variations on canine and feline predominated, and among the former, a mix of coloration and somatic blending that to Richard suggested both ‘fox’ and a similarity to himself. The clothing, most of it marked with that unnamable stamp that yelled “uniform,” was not all that different in style from what he had been used to: pants, shirts, and jackets. The markings on the uniforms were even readable, for the most part.



The “fox beings” seemed to fall into two groups; at least, what appeared to be the adult “fox beings” did. There were those considerably shorter than the current human norm, almost a foot shorter; and a smaller group that were several inches taller. The former all wore blue uniforms that screamed “air force;” the latter wore suits, and shoes that fair screamed “detective”. *There is something eternal about “flat feet” - and policemen’s shoes,* Richard thought, as he categorized the animal-men by profession: soldiers and police.

He began working his way outward from the center of the Monument, along the path that the majority of individuals seemed to follow on their outward-bound path. It took time—longer than he’d

expected—to work his way out. *How many feet of black marble does it take to engrave eight million names? How many jelly beans in the jar?* he thought, and shuddered.

It took nearly an hour to work his way clear of the Monument, and to the half-anticipated transition point. *There are only so many ways that you can design a subway station,* he thought, *though with the “Underground” sign, this is more like England in markings than American. At least there’s no crown, and no Union Jack on the flag,* he thought, as he stared at the entranceway.

He stood back for a few minutes, and watched the other travelers depart. Each took out a small rod and inserted in a waist-high slot. Credit card or memory stick, he thought, and reached up around his own neck to find a fine chain, and a similar small rod hanging from it.

Standing back and looking over the passers-by, he spotted what could only be another watcher. Watching intently—and wearing that set of formal but not high enough quality business clothes that again screamed “cop”, to Richard’s mind. *Not a uniform, so more likely a descendant of the FBI or Homeland Security than a simple policeman,* Richard thought, revising his first estimate of the individual’s profession.

The watcher rubbed a spot at the back of his jaw and began to work his jaw even as Richard looked away. It was yet hours until nightfall, but the Monument was obviously too emotionally haunted and too bleak to be a comfortable stopping-point; past a certain time, remaining would raise more questions than would leaving.

Sideways glances, quick and subtle observations, and a minimum of fumbling (hid-den by placing the bulk of his body between the entrance slot and the spotted watcher), allowed Richard to insert the stick-on-the-chain into the proper point and then put one palm flat against the smoothly shaded surface of the angled surface. A monitor lit up and on the surface a keyboard appeared. With only a few fumbles, Richard was able to call forth some basic information about ... himself.

*It's going to be an interesting ride*, he thought, as he quickly read up on "his" back-ground, and purchased a "ticket" on the subshuttle. *Definitely an interesting ride.*

# The Ghost House Chapters 11-15

by Fara Shimbo

## Chapter 11. Léonie Explains

It almost seemed that the distance to Léonie’s house was shorter from Jade’s own cottage. Every ten steps, she dropped a clove to mark the route. Shiro sniffed at them, but, fortunately, did not eat them.

Very soon, she was at Léonie’s house and seated at the piano. She began to play, and soon, there was the presence, there was the vision of her face in profile as Léonie sat—or whatever ghosts did—beside her.

“*Bonjour ma chère,*” Léonie said. “*Comment allez vous?*”

“*Bon,*” Jade said.

“*Non, chère, vous dites ‘je vais bien, merci.’*”

“*Zhuh vay be-on, mercy,*” Jade managed to croak.

“*Alors!*” Léonie said, and Jade could hear the sigh in her voice.

“*Léonie, Maddie, dit-moi, chateau...*” Jade ran out of words, and made punching motions with her hands.

“*Comment?*”

“*Oui! Chateau...*” Jade searched for a piece of paper and finding a loose bit of wallpaper on the wall beside the piano, she ripped it off, then ripped it up, dropped it on the ground and stomped on it.

“*Someone wants to destroy my house?*” Léonie said, incredulously.

Jade saw her own face begin to fade. “*Oui, madame! Maddie dit-moi.*” (Maddie tells me.)

“*This of course I cannot permit,*” Léonie said. “*I must find my gift. Mon petite cadeau, from my husband.*”

Jade tilted her head. The vision was still fading, becoming blotchy. “*Petite gift?*”

“*Play for me for a while,*” Léonie said. “*I will explain.*”

Jade turned back to the keyboard, and oriented her hands. She played *The Beautiful Blue Danube*, or at least, as much of it as she knew. As she played, her vision—or Léonie’s vision—changed. Jade found some parts of the music very technical; she had to concentrate on just how far she was moving her hands to hit a suddenly high

note. Other parts came so naturally that she could rely solely on muscle-memory and could lose herself in the beauty of the music. At these times, Jade saw herself most clearly; saw the piano, saw the wallpaper, where she had torn it. There were designs on it. There were colors, too, if she were guessing right, but she had no idea which colors they were. As she played, Jade repeated, “Zhuh vay be-on mercy,” and “on petite ka-doe” over and over, trying to memorize it.

When she was done, vision was clear again. “*Petite cadeau?*” Jade asked.

Léonie seemed to sit on the piano bench beside her. “*Oui, mon enfant,*” she said. “After my husband, Georges, built this house, and after our children were born, he told me that he had hidden a present—*un cadeau*—for me, somewhere in the house. I have never found it. I do not even know what it is. And now, of course, I cannot look for it, because I have no hands, non? But I will not leave this house until I find it.” She looked around again. “I know my son, he always disliked this house. I don’t know why. But he never visits.” Jade saw her own face full on, saw her funny nose and her eyes, with color—some color or other—in them. “But no one must demolish this house until my present, it is found.”

Shiro got up and began sniffing around, and Jade realized she had probably already spent more time here than she’d meant.

She stood up, and pointed to herself, then to where she assumed Léonie was, and then made “binoculars” with her hands and pretended to search through them. “*Oui?*”

“If you can help me search for my present, that would be *charmant!*”

Jade gave a thumbs-up. “*Je vais,*” she said. (‘I go.’) She grabbed her cane, her bottle of cloves (now almost empty), and Shiro. “*Je reviens! Bonjour, Léonie!*”

“*Bonjour! Revenir bientôt!*” (‘Come back soon!’)

“*Oui, oui, oui!*” Jade said, all the way home.

## Chapter 12: The Secret Spreads

“So. How’d you do it?” Phil asked as he came to sit beside Jade later that day.

Jade turned to him and tilted her head to one side, and patted the fridge.

“Yeah, the refrigerator. So what? How’d you do it?”

Jade snorted and turned away, and mimed pushing something.

“I know you moved it,” Phil went on. “I saw the tracks in the linoleum. The stuff’s soft, you know, and it left grooves in the floor. They weren’t there yesterday. I know because Mom made me mop the floor. I didn’t move it. Mom and Dad didn’t move it. So. That leaves you.”

Jade sat as still as a stone.

“It’s okay, I didn’t tell anyone. I just want to know how you did it.”

Jade sighed. Big brothers could be so dense.

“What’s goin’ on here?” said Maddie as she joined them, flinging her backpack to the ground. Behind her, her mother and Evelyn carried great armloads of cakes into the Quiros’ car. “I heard about your fridge dying. See? An ice-box wouldn’t have died like that!” She folded her arms and nodded sagely.

“A what?” Phil said.

“Nothing,” Maddie said. “Is my dad back yet?”

“Not yet,” Phil said, “but I got a feeling they’re gonna get a surprise when they move the fridge, aren’t they, Jade?”

Jade stuck her tongue out at him.

“Well, maybe I’ll just tell Dad when he gets back.”

Jade turned toward him and growled. She grabbed Maddie by the sleeve, and walked away with her. Phil walked back into the house, occasionally looking over his shoulder and, Maddie could see, grinning. Once he was inside, Jade turned to Maddie and very painstakingly tried to explain what had happened earlier that day.

“You are one sneaky kid!” was all Maddie could say at first.

Jade looked extremely pleased.



For the next hour or so, Jade tried to explain to Maddie what Léonie had told her about there being a secret in the house, and how Léonie would not leave the house until her *petite cadeau* was found.

Maddie was still quite skeptical. “I don’t know about you,” she said.

Jade shrugged. She figured that by now, she had the strongest shrugging muscles on the planet. With much effort, she whispered, “*Un chateau ne va pas.*” (‘A chateau does not go.’)

“OH!” Maddie suddenly said, reaching around and rummaging through her backpack. “I’ve been waiting for this all week, and the library called and said they just got it in! I saw you have *The Little Prince* in Braille; well, the library found you *Le Petit Prince*, in French, in Braille! Now you can compare them. Probably a good way to learn. I got myself regular copies of both of them so I can learn too!” She put the book into Jade’s hand.

Jade felt it all over, carefully turning the pages and running her fingers on each one. It made no sense.

“*Je ne sais pas,*” she said at last. (‘I don’t know.’)



"I'll tell you what you do," Maddie said. "We'll go over it sentence by sentence. I'll read the English and you read the French, you know? 'Cos they'll mean the same thing, right?"

"Oui..." Jade said, still unsure of the concept.

"I mean, your pronunciation will probably be awful. My grandparents always complained when I tried to talk French. But I kept telling them, 'At least I'm trying, and that's something!' Right?"

Jade nodded.

Phil returned at that point. "Talking to yourself, are you? You know, that's the first sign that you're a psycho. 'They're coming to take you away, ha-ha!'"

Jade sighed and Maddie rolled her eyes.

Phil leaned over Jade's shoulder and said, "Oh, a French book, eh? Another language we're not speaking, eh?"

"We," Maddie said with grand hauteur, "are teaching each other French."

"Why? I mean... I took a semester of French last year and nothing is pronounced the way it's spelled so there's no hope of getting anything right anyway."

"Yeah," Maddie said, "But did you actually learn any French?"

Phil shrugged and said, "Zhe no says poss."

"What?"

"I think that's all anybody in that class learned. Our teacher was a complete nutcase. I dropped that class next semester. Now I'm taking Spanish where everything is pronounced just like it's spelled except they mix up 'I' with 'ee' and 'e' with 'A' and stuff but at least all the consonants are the same, so there's that."

Maddie turned around to face Phil. "Well, teach Jade all the French you do know, it's important."

"Why? Are we going to France? Or Quebec? I don't think so."

Maddie turned to Jade and took her hand. "Should we tell him, do you think?"

"Tell me what?"

Jade made the pinkie-promise sign with her other hand.

"Right. We'll swear him to secrecy first."

Jade shook Maddie's hand.

Maddie turned again to Phil. "Do you solemnly promise on your oath as a big brother to keep and to protect the secret we're about to tell you, and keep it only between our three selves absolutely and in perpetuity?"

"What? Yeah, okay."

“No, not ‘yeah-okay.’ Pinkie-promise, and say you promise to keep our secret so we both can hear you! Now do it! Or don’t, we don’t care.”

There was, for a while, only the sound of birds and frogs, and wind in the leaves. Then Jade heard hands touching and Phil said, “I promise on my oath as a Big Brother that I will divulge this secret to no one.”

The hands came apart. “Now promise Jade,” Maddie said. “Hold up your pinkie, Jade.”

Jade held up her hand for Phil to take. Again, there was just, for a moment, the silence of a forest and a bicycle going by on the road.

Then Phil locked pinkies with Jade and repeated, “I promise on my oath as a Big Brother that I will divulge this secret to no one.”

Jade turned around to be facing her brother, and Maddie sat a little closer to her. She put her hand on Jade’s shoulder, and said, “Would you like to tell him?”

Jade nodded. She cleared her throat. She said, “*Je parle Français, mon frère.*” She touched his face, to see if his jaw had dropped. It had. It was very satisfying.

Phil sat gobsmacked for a few moments, and finally said, “Is that ... is that your voice?”

“Whose else would it be?” Maddie said.

“It... it doesn’t sound like you.”

Maddie shifted, leaning in toward him. “When was the last time you heard her voice?”

Phil squirmed. “Must’ve been, I donno, when she was three or four or something?”

“Oh, oh,” Maddie said huffily. “And now she’s ten and she should still sound like a toddler, eh? Yeah, right.”

“No, but... no, but... when did you ... I mean ...”

And with that, and reminding Phil that he was sworn to secrecy, Jade and Maddie (mostly Maddie, who was unstoppable once she got going) told Phil about the Ghost House in the woods, and grandmother Léonie, and why on no account must the old house be torn down.

Phil did not believe in ghosts either, but as he was about to voice his objections, the Jolies’ truck drove up with a huge box in the back. It parked as close to the house as it could. Paul got out and said, “Phil! Come give your old dad a hand.”

All three of them got up, and went to the truck. “Oh! New fridge! And in a huge box too! That’ll be fun!”

“Well, we have to get the old fridge out first,” said Mr. Jolie. “Let’s go do that. Should be a hand-truck in the shed. Go get it for us, Phil, would ya?”

Phil was shuffling off to get the hand-truck when Maddie and Jade came in to watch.

Mr. Jolie and Paul, with a lot of grunting, tried to rock and jiggle the old refrigerator away from the wall, without the mechanical help Jade had used. Jade kicked off one shoe and felt along the floor with her toes. Sure

enough, there were shallow grooves where the feet of the fridge had scraped. She decided to stand behind Maddie.

Phil returned with the hand-truck, and the two men were able at last to pull the fridge out of its spot against the wall.

There was a moment's uncomfortable silence. Then Mr. Jolie said, "Hunh, look at that, the fridge is unplugged!"

"WHAT?!" came Evelyn's voice.

"Yeah, look!"

"What the... and I... plug it back in!"

Paul did. The fridge hummed back to life.

"Oh for cryin' out loud!" Paul said.

"What the... why didn't we check for that, Paul?" Evelyn wailed.

"Well... it's an old fridge. Look, you expect an old fridge to go bad, don't you?"

"And we went all that way," Mr. Jolie said. "Now how could it possibly've gotten unplugged in the first place?"

There was a silence again, and then, Phil said, "Must have been raccoons."

The adults began arguing and whining, and the kids decided to just go outside and leave them to it.

## Chapter 13: There's Always A Way

"I'm not allowed near the place," Maddie huffed.

"I am, but I don't know where it is," Phil said.

"*Quel dommage*," Jade concurred, in a voice still croaky with lack of use.

Shiro grunted.

They were all sitting on the Quiros' porch, bemoaning the state of their world.

"There has got to be a way," Maddie said. "I've never seen Léonie, and I'm her own granddaughter even!"

"*Moi aussi*," Jade agreed. ('Me too.')

Phil tried his best to remember the tiny bit of French he'd picked up last semester. He said, very slowly, carefully, and, Maddie and Jade knew, very, very badly, "*Vous ne view jamais Madame Léonie ever?*"

“Non,” Jade said. “*Je ne vois... seulement ... que Léonie voit...*”

Maddie picked up her tablet and typed this in. “I not see only that Léonie sees,” she said.

Jade thought it over and eventually nodded.

“Okay,” Maddie said, “that’s technically *‘Je ne vois que ce que Léonie voit’*.”

Phil considered. “That’s ... ‘I no see what this what Léonie sees.’ That can’t be right.”

“It’s idiomatic,” Maddie huffed. “‘*Que ce que*’ means ‘that which.’ But,” she said, turning to Jade, “you’re seeing through Léonie’s eyes then! How cool is THAT?! Have you seen you?”

“*Oui!*” Jade said, nodding happily. “*Léonie m’a dit que... je suis jolie!*”

Maddie laughed. “I think you need a different verb form there, but that’s good for now.”

“Léonie thinks you’re jolly?” Phil said.

“No, dummy,” Maddie said. “‘*Jolie*’ means ‘pretty’ in French. And you said you studied. Sheesh!”

“So your family name means ‘pretty,’ then,” Phil said.

“Pretty, fair, pleasing, whatever,” Maddie said. “But yeah, pretty much.”

“Wow... I wonder if she’d let me see through her eyes,” Phil said.

“Or mine,” Maddie said. “But I can’t go there and Jade is grounded and you’re under suspicion of sabotaging the fridge...”

“Yeah, I am,” Phil said, turning to glower at Jade.

“We need to get there all three of us,” Maddie said. “Somehow.”

“*D’accord,*” Jade said. (‘Okay,’ or ‘Agreed.’)

There was quiet for a while. And then Phil turned to Maddie. “Is there any chance you can get out of the house at night when your parents are asleep?” he said.

There was that manic gleam in Maddie’s eyes. Phil could see it, and Jade could hear it in her voice. “Why, yes, in fact... do you have an idea?”

“Yes,” Phil said, quietly. “Come tonight and meet us here and bring a phone or a tablet or something you can record yourself on. I have a plan!”

“I will SO be here at 11:15pm on the dot!” Maddie said.

“We will meet you right here. In the meantime, I have ... something to do.” Phil got up and actually ran to the house.

“Oooooo, we are going to get into SO much trouble!” Maddie said as if this were the greatest event in the history of the galaxy.

Jade fought herself to look on the bright side...



“M-O-O-O-M!” Phil called as he lumbered down the stairs.

CLANG went a metal bowl on the linoleum floor. “PHIL! How many times do I have to tell you NOT to shout in the house?” Evelyn said, picking up a bowl of flour that she had dropped when Phil’s voice came booming in.

“Oh. Sorry, Mom. Anyway, me and Maddie and Jade are rehearsing a podcast up in Jade’s room, so don’t bother us for a couple of hours, right, Mom?”

“You’re what?”

“And please tell Dad too, right?”

“Phil... oh, whatever, fine.” Evelyn got to cleaning up the spilled flour, figuring that right now, the sooner Phil got out of her sphere of influence, the better.

“Thanks, Mom, you’re a champ!” Phil ran out of the room again and charged up the stairs.

At that point, Paul walked into the kitchen, looked around for the trouble, saw the flour on the floor, and said, “Oh, well, I’ll leave you to it, then,” and walked out.

Evelyn decided that at that moment, she hated everyone and everything.



A couple of hours later, she happened to be walking past Jade’s door. There was a sign on it that read, “ON AIR. DO NOT DISTURB.” She put her ear to the door, and heard Phil saying, “...because that many would just not fit in an M&M. Don’t you agree, Maddie?” and Maddie answering, “Oh yes, absolutely. I think you’d need at least a volleyball to hold that many.” “And what do you think, Shiro The All-Knowing?” Shiro gave a short bark.

Oh well, Evelyn thought. Shiro was there so Jade was there, and at least they weren’t causing trouble.



“*Je mets des épices dans le chemin. Je sens les,*” Jade said, touching her nose, as she fairly charged ahead.

“Are you studying?” Maddie asked.

“*Oui, dans l’internet,*” Jade said. She smelled something very strong, reached down and picked up a clove. “*Ah! Regardez! Ici l’épice!*” She held it up and eventually Maddie took it.

“Oh! A clove!” Maddie said. “I could tell you what it is in French but my tablet is in your room.”

“I can’t smell anything,” Phil said. “Anyway, we don’t have much time, let’s get going.”

“And I think it’s ‘*sur*’ you want, not ‘*dans*,’” Maddie called trying to pull Shiro away from something that definitely smelled of skunk.

They scrambled down the path, with Shiro, figuring out at last where they were going, trotting on ahead.



Once inside the house, Jade warned them all to be quiet, and went to the piano, and began to play. Soon she could feel Léonie’s presence, stronger than ever before.

“*Bonjour, mes enfants!*” Jade heard Léonie say. “And who are these lovely children?” With a little concentration, Jade could see ... Maddie! And Phil! For a moment she was speechless. Even though to her they were not very clear, there they were! Maddie, skinny, grinning widely, eyes that might fall out of her head. Phil, lanky and somehow uncomfortable.

“*Madame Léonie,*” Jade said, “*Ici ma amie, Madeline Jolie.*”

Maddie waved. Jade waved back, and Maddie gasped. Quickly, she held up a hand and asked, “Jade! Jade! How many fingers am I holding up?”

Jade stared; but Léonie’s gaze was wandering. “*Léonie, s’il vous plait...*”

Léonie’s gaze went back to Maddie. She must have been concentrating, because Jade could clearly see that Maddie wasn’t holding any fingers up.

“*Ma amie, non... pas de ...*” She held up her hand in a fist, not knowing the French word for “fingers.”

Maddie held up three fingers. “And now?”

“Hey!” Phil called. Léonie’s gaze turned.

“*Il est mon frère, Philip,*” Jade said. “*Et trois, Maddie.*”

“Grandma Léonie,” Maddie said, “is there a mirror around here? I want to see you!”

Léonie looked again at Maddie. “*Ma petite fille, vraiment?* You look like my grandmother.”

“I do?” Maddie said.

“And there is a mirror upstairs somewhere,” Léonie said, and Jade passed along.

“I’ll go find it!” Maddie said, and raced for the stairs.



Maddie ran to the second storey and began her search for a mirror. Where could it be? She opened a door. This room had been a bedroom, she guessed. Whose had it been? Her grandparents? That would have been their bed, and this, then would have been their chest of drawers. What did they keep in here, she wondered. And look, there was a little pile of fabric on the floor, all neatly folded and with a depression in the middle, as if a cat had lain there. What kind of cat had her grandparents had? Did they love it? Did her father love it? Or her uncles and aunts? Did they live here? Or only come to visit sometimes?

And as she wondered all these things, she began to see... or imagine she was seeing... the piano downstairs, and hands playing it...

Maddie gave a little shriek—and the vision vanished.

Thankfully, nobody appeared to have noticed. She carried on looking for a mirror. Ah! Here was one, in the top drawer of the chest. She ran downstairs with it.



When she returned to the group, Maddie recounted what had happened, and handed the mirror to Jade. “Grandma, please look in the mirror,” she said.

“*C’est nécessaire, vous pensez, très fort,*” Jade said. ‘It’s necessary you think, very hard.’

“Think about what?” Phil said.

“Tell them,” Léonie said, “to imagine what I look like. You say, ‘*Imaginez à quoi je ressemble.*’”

Jade told them. Through Léonie, she could see their faces, with their eyes squinted, and Phil biting his lip, something she’d heard her mother constantly nag him about doing.

As they did so, Jade could see them more clearly.

“Tell them, to think of what I am wearing, and how I wear my hair. Say, ‘*Pensez à que je port,*’ think of what I wear, and ‘*la façon dont je coiffe mes cheveux,*’ how I wear my hair.”

It was a lot for her to remember, but Jade tried her best.

The more they imagined, the clearer Jade could see them.

“Hold up the mirror, *ma chère,*” Léonie said. Jade did.

And there she was. Léonie. She was very old, with round, bright eyes, a large mouth with a wide smile, white hair in a bob, and wearing a lace-trimmed nightgown and what may have been a shawl, once. She looked thrilled to see them; so kindly, like someone one just ought to hug.

Phil seemed taken aback. “You don’t look French,” he said.

“I thought, if you became a ghost, you got to be younger,” Maddie said.

But as they stopped imagining, their visions of Léonie faded.

“Grandma, I can’t see you anymore,” Maddie said.

“Me either,” said Phil.

“Because they have stopped imagining,” Léonie said to Jade. “And it is getting late. You will be missed. But I have an idea, *non*? You can see me, all of you, and help me find my missing present! Here is what I want you to do. Can you remember this? It is not a lot but it is tricky.”

“*Je peux*,” said Jade. ‘I can.’

“*Bon!* Listen carefully. And then you all must go.”

Jade listened with all her might.





## Chapter 14. A Bit Of News

“She wants us to tell her stories about things that happened in each room,” Maddie clarified for Phil.

“Because,” Phil contemplated, “when we’re imagining stuff, she ... Idonno, maybe she has more power?”

“Or maybe she has the same amount of power all the time but we can only get at it when we’re being creative. Spooky, innit?” Maddie said with some relish. She grabbed her tablet and turned it off. “That was a pretty sneaky idea you had there, Philip!”

“Glad you approve.”

Jade came in with Shiro in tow. She pointed downstairs. “*Ne va pas la!*” she said. ‘Don’t go there.’

“*Pourquoi?*” Phil asked.

“*Maman,*” Jade said. She lowered her head and stomped around. “*Elle est ...*” She growled. “*Car elle aller au magasin pour acheter...*” ‘Because she to go to the store to buy...’

“Oh, good!” Phil said. Both of them turned to him.

“I startled her when she was carrying a big bowl of flour and she dropped it and spilled it so I guess she had to go buy more and that was good because it gave us more time.”

“Another good one! You show promise, boy!” Maddie chortled.

Phil snorted. “Anyway, we probably better go downstairs and act all normal and innocent.”

This time Jade snorted, and Maddie howled with laughter.

“OH!” Phil said. “Another idea!”

“Yeah?”

“*Quoi?*”

“We’re supposed to be making podcasts, right? Well, to, as my dad says, add verisimilitude to our alibi, we could make these stories into actual podcasts!”

“Oooo, yes!” Maddie said. “And if they become popular, Dad can’t have the house torn down because it will be famous!”

“I am brilliant!” Phil said, as they all tramped down the stairs.



Jade had a good idea. Maddie had about eight “great” ideas. Phil had perhaps two. So, the problem now, of course, was to see to it that they could all go to the Ghost House together without arousing suspicion.

Phil bounced down the stairs and found his mother in the kitchen. “Mom!”

Evelyn looked up from stowing the things she’d gone into town to buy. “What now, dear?”

“Well,” Phil said, putting his hands on his hips, “we’re gonna make podcasts.”

Evelyn put down the egg she was holding. “‘We’ being who?”

“Me and Maddie and Jade.”

“Sounds fun. Knock yourself out.” Evelyn went back to baking.

“So we’re gonna be locked up in the attic where it’s quiet for a few hours, you know, now and then, ‘cause it’s quiet up there for recording, you know? So just in case you don’t see us and you wonder where we are we’re up there, okay?”

Evelyn, who’d been a mother for many years and a Big Sister before that, smelled, as they say, a rat. “Why don’t you just do it in the garage? There’s nobody in there.”

The milliseconds it took Phil to think up, “Because the acoustics in the garage suck,” which set all Evelyn’s Mom-Alarms ringing. “So,” she said, sitting down. “What are these podcasts going to be about?”

“Oh, just things, you know. Ghosts and stuff. You know. Stuff teenagers want to hear about.”

“I see,” Evelyn said, sighing. “Ghosts and stuff.”

“Yeah!”

“And you’re involving your sister in this?” To the best of Evelyn’s knowledge, podcasts were generally audio.

“Oh, yeah! She’s going to edit the scripts and write all our bumper music and stuff.”

“Okay...”

“We’ll be out of the way, right? And you’ll know where we are so there’s nothing to worry about, right?”

Evelyn looked directly into Phil’s eyes. Usually she could tell instantly if he was prevaricating, but this time, she couldn’t be certain.

“We’re not doing anything suspicious or nothing,” Phil said.

Evelyn sighed and got back to work. “Fine. Have fun.”

“Great!” Phil shouted, and ran off.

Evelyn watched him go. “We’re not doing anything suspicious” was exactly what he had said when once he and Jade had tried to raise white squirrels in the cellar. She’d be keeping an eye on that lot.



The next time Evelyn walked past the door to the attic stairs, there was a large sign on the door reading:

RECORDING!

QUIET!

Absolutely NO Admittance!

Recording indeed, Evelyn thought. She stood and listened for a moment. There was Phil saying, “Sound check... sound check... okay, that’s good, leave it there. Let me see now...”

“I think you should use this music clip,” came Maddie’s voice.

A short bit of bumper music.

And a snort or sneeze from Shiro.

Okay, they were all in there. Off to fold the laundry.



Trouble was, they weren’t all in there. Only Phil was actually in there, carefully listening at the door, and making sure his parents heard *something* as they walked past, and would keep hearing things, which he recorded on his tablet for playback, in order to give the others time.

Maddie, Jade and Shiro were in the Ghost House.

“*Je vous racontes mon histoire ici, dans le salon. Maintenant, je pense...*” (‘I will tell you my story here in the parlor. Now, I will think...’)

Jade walked around the perimeter of the room, touching everything to make sure she knew exactly what was there. A bookshelf, with books so old the pages crumbled when she opened them. A chair rail all around the room. A fireplace, with a dusty mantel, and a figurine, probably china, on it. Above the fireplace, almost out of reach, she could feel a frame.

“*Il-y-a ici une image?*” Jade asked. (‘There is a picture here?’)

Maddie had been trying to study French, but here brain kept rebelling. “You’re touching a frame,” she said, after giving up trying to figure out how to say this in French. “There is a painting in it.”

*“Une image de quoi?”*

Okay, “what?” was something Maddie knew. “Oh, you know, just a painting, of dogs. They’re all trotting toward the painter. Just dogs, and some grass and trees and stuff.”

Jade snorted.

“Sorry,” Maddie said.

*“Je veux toucher l’image,”* Jade said. *“Donnez moi une chaise.”*

“What do you want to touch a grotty old painting for?” Maddie said, as she pulled a chair across the bare floorboards, and put Jade’s hand on the back of it.

*“Pour toucher les chiens,”* Jade said. *“Je veux savoir de quel sorte sont les chiens.”* (‘To touch the dogs. I want to know what kind of dogs they are.’)

“They’re just ... dogs,” Maddie said as she guided Jade onto the chair seat. “Doesn’t matter what kind they are. They’re white and brown and black and they have long tails. They’re not Pyrs.”

Jade, who had long ago gotten into the habit of not taking anyone’s word for something, reached out to touch the painting, rubbing her fingers gently across its surface. The paintings in Jade’s home all had a lot of impasto for her to explore. This had very little, but there was some. There was a small tear as well, and this Jade explored carefully, but found nothing but what may once have been a beetle.

*“Ou est les chiens?”* Maddie asked; ‘where are the dogs?’

Maddie sighed. “They’re right in the middle of the picture! There!”

*“Parlez français, je dois apprendre!”* Jade huffed and she rubbed her hand over the spot.

She didn’t feel a dog. She felt something like an eye, but it was probably tree branches. And she felt a place, further to the right, where the paint seemed to be flaking off.

“Juh nuh puh pah frenchie,” Maddie said, exasperated.

Now it was Jade’s turn to huff. She hurriedly rubbed her fingers over the rest of the painting.



“Will you hurry up?” Maddie said. “We can’t stay out too long you know, what if your brother gets bored or something? You can’t trust brothers, you know.”

Jade got down from the chair, and quickly explored the rest of the room. When she went to the piano, to hopefully have a chance to talk to Léonie, Maddie pulled her away. “I can describe the rest of the room to you if you need it,” she said. “Come on, let’s go.”

They got to the kitchen window, which they were still using for egress and ingress, and came to a sudden stop when they both heard men’s voices outside the house. “Yeah, I see what you mean,” said a voice belonging, apparently, to an older man.

Shiro growled, and both girls quickly shushed him.

“It’s just too dangerous to leave up, with the kids and all.” That was Maddie’s father.

“Shame, you know? Cos it’s a nice house.”

“I want it gone.”

“Well, I’ll tell you this for free. Knocking it down, piece of cake. Like you said, it ain’t safe to be around. Trouble is, you don’t got no road into here. Gonna be hard to get equipment in, you know what I’m saying? So if I gotta knock it down, first I gotta clear some kind of a road.”

“There used to be a road,” Mr. Jolie said, his feet shuffling through leaves. “Right ... here.”

“Oh, yeah, there’s been a road, but it’s got all these bushes and saplings on it now. Not paved, was it?”

“No, just ... well, there was gravel in front of the house but the rest was just sort of a cleared path.”

More shuffling. “Well, I could probably mow it all down. But you know that’s gonna really add to the cost of the whole thing.”

“I’m not worried about the cost, I just want it gone.”

“Yeah, so you said.”

“So, will you do the job?”

“I’ll send you an estimate. I can probably have my kids start in, say, a week.”

The voices went on, but fainter; the men were walking away.

Maddie climbed out the window, and made sure they were gone, then made clicking noises, signalling Jade to follow. “A week?!” she whispered, as Jade jumped to the ground, Shiro falling out of the window after her.

Both girls thought they heard someone, somewhere, saying, “*Cretins! Bêtes sauvages!*”

“You got that right, Léonie!” Maddie said. She led Jade and Shiro home.



Upon reaching the Quiros' house, Maddie threw a rock at the attic window. Phil went to the window, looked out, nodded, went back in, went to the staircase, yelled, "OOOOWWW!" and pretended to fall down it with an alarming amount of noise. His parents came running, and while they were thus occupied, Maddie, Jade and Shiro came in through the back door.

"What happened?!" Evelyn screeched. "Are you hurt?"

Phil was about to say no, but seeing an opportunity he said, "Yeah. Ow. I hurt my back."

"Let me see!"

Phil immediately regretted his choice. "No, Ma, it's not that bad, really, it's just—"

"What did you do?" Paul said, leading his son to the couch and having him lie down.

Now, this question, Phil was ready for. "I tripped on a USB cable," he said, pointing; he had one conveniently wound through a shoelace.

Both of his parents looked at him suspiciously. "Well, I had other stuff in my hands and I thought well... but you know after I was done with that I guess I forgot I had it."

Evelyn whirled to face the girls. "And neither of you... well, of course, Jade, you wouldn't know but Maddie, surely you must have noticed."

Maddie, not to be outdone in the prevarication department, said, "I'm sorry, Ms. Quiros, I was busy editing the bumper music. Headphones on, and it takes a lot of concentra—"

"All right, all right," Evelyn said. She pointed to Phil. "You lie there and I'll get you some aspirins." She ran off.

Paul just shook his head and left the room.

Maddie mentioned that she had to get home, and whispered, "Email incoming" to Phil as she left.

## Chapter 15: The Story Of The Parlor, By Jade Quiros, Age 10

Once upon a time there was a girl named Beth and what Beth really wanted was to live in the woods in a haunted house with ghosts and lots of cats.

But, Beth was a city child. Her parents said that she could not live in the woods because the schools in the woods were bad for her and besides if she went into the woods there were bears and snakes. And there were poison plants. And there were probably dinosaurs that would eat her.

But Beth didn't care at all! All her friends at school went to the country for summer vacation and they loved to talk about it. It made Beth feel very left-out and also lonely in the summer.

So, when Beth got older and her friend Richard asked her to marry him, she said she would but only if they could live in a haunted house in the woods. Richard loved Beth very much and they got married, and moved to a very old house far away in the woods.

Beth loved the whole house. But she loved the parlor best. It smelled of old wood, and wood polish, and old curtains, and warm sunlight came in the windows, which were nice and big. There were birds in the trees outside and not pigeons either, real birds that were wild and sang. There was an old rug made of real wool and it felt so, so nice under Beth's toes, she wanted to walk on it all day and especially sleep on it in the sun, listening to the birds.

Beth spent lots of time rummaging around the parlor, imagining people who lived there long ago and the must have been a lot because the house was a hundred years old!

She decided to make a nice cozy spot for a Ghost Cat. She made a nice cozy bed, and put a candle on either side of it because ghosts like candles. She made it all very pretty and very nice.

But then, she wondered, if a Ghost Cat really came, how would she tell?

Beth never felt a ghost. Or even heard a ghost. She was sure you couldn't smell a ghost. So how would she know? This was a pickle! And she needed to figure it out!

She sat in the big, soft chair that was in the parlor, and soon it got really quiet and she fell asleep. Beth dreamed.

Beth dreamed about her altar. Sitting on the other side of it. There was a Ghost Cat. She could smell it. She could hear it purring. It sounded like a very big cat. In her dream, Beth sat down opposite the Cat.

And the Cat said, "I am The Cat. I will come to see you in your dreams. Did you know, there is a secret in this house? Well, there is a secret in this house, and I am going to tell you it. Are you ready?"

Beth said, "Yes, I am ready."

"Good," the Cat said. "Now I will tell you the secret. When I was a kitten, I was given a beautiful collar. It was very soft, and it had bells on it that made a nice sound. Anyway I thought it was a nice sound. So I made the bells jingle whenever



I walked. And then one day, the lady in the house decided I was making too much noise! So she took off the collar and hid it in this room. If you find my collar for me, I don't have to be a ghost anymore. But I will send a living cat to be your friend. Will you find my collar for me?"

Beth said, "Yes! I will find your collar. When I find it, I will put it right here."

And then Beth woke up.

All day the next day she searched the room, and guess what?! She found the collar!

She looked everywhere, even in the fireplace. She climbed on a chair and looked in the chandelier. She knocked on the walls to hear a secret compartment. But the collar wasn't in any of those places. It was in the decoration-part above the door!

So! That night, Beth put the collar where the Cat had shown up in her dream, and then she went straight to bed, hoping the Ghost Cat would be there in her dream. But she didn't. In the middle of the night, Beth got out of bed and checked to see if the collar was still there.

It wasn't!

But a real cat was! And that real cat had four little kittens with her!

From then on, Beth always had plenty of cats! She had her whole dream house and she was happy for the rest of her life. She always left candles in the spot where the Ghost Cat had been, and once, a long time later, the Ghost Cat, wearing the jingly collar, came to her in a dream, and told her how happy she was to have her collar back.

The End.



When Jade finished reciting this story—in French, as best she could—to Léonie, she suddenly noticed that she could finally see Léonie herself, clearly and brightly, although she had no adjectives to describe her. Only Phil was with her this time, and he was speechless!

Jade found that she could even see, a little, when she and her brother left the house. She was in what Phil considered far too good a mood for the rest of the day!

When they got home, they told Maddie, who had been pretending to direct them in their podcast, what had happened. All Maddie could say was, "The next person's story had better be *hecking good!*"

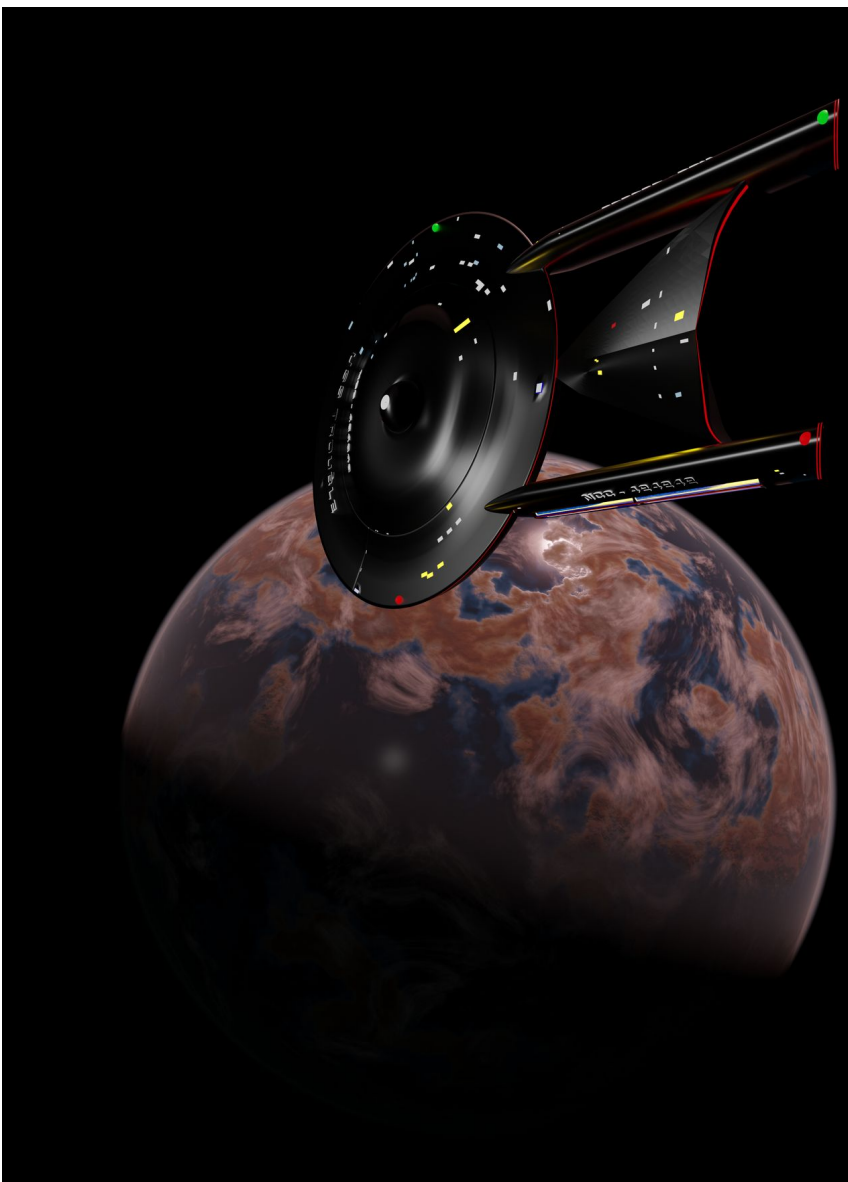
**TO BE CONTINUED...**



# The Adventures of the *USS Trouble*

## The Story So Far....

### EPISODE 1: Here Comes *Trouble*



Starfleet has just sent a brand new ship, the *USS Trouble* (a poor translation of an alien term, but somehow apropos), out for its shakedown cruise. The *Trouble*, a purely science/exploration oriented ship, is small as starships go, but it is crewed by an extremely varied lot; everything from the typical “upright bipeds” to crustaceans, and creatures like theropods, trilobites and centaurs. It is commanded (often in the loosest sense of the word) by Captain Dr. Fara Shimbo, who hand-picked much of the crew. First Officer Figni Dorcas Eppri Addomecaroi, usually just called Dorcas, is the communications specialist. Lt. Chp “Chip” Pnthse Dh, an aquatic reptile is the chief cryptanalyst, and often shares her quarters with Hiue, a La Plata River dolphin. Cmdr. Opp Ji, affectionately called “Ratty” by the crew, is chief medical officer. Ensign Istvan Sandor is the propulsion specialist. Cmdr. Mark Swanson and, by extension, his dragons, is the Security Officer. Vinny van Gogh is the Captain’s Dog. Also on the ship is the Captain’s uncle, Harry Mudd, and his

“pet” satamuri. Mudd functions as the Captain’s personal Digger Up Of Buried Bodies. There are about 100 crew in all.



There is a problem, though. Because the crew is so varied, the Starfleet brass have deemed it “unnecessarily expensive” to build and maintain, and almost certainly doomed to failure, since so much of the crew has nothing in common—except a love of science, good food, and as little drama as possible. The captain and admiral counter-argued that building just such a ship—even if only one is ever built—will show members of the Federation that indeed, Starfleet is willing to include them, which, of course, would be a public relations coup well worth the price.

What with Capt. Shimbo being very good at *not* wanting to be dealt with by the brass, an old friend of hers, Admiral Germaine Swanson, has been sent to take part in the first flight of the ship. She says that the trip was a “going away present” from the brass, as this will be her last flight before retirement. But not everyone is convinced that her presence is just a present.

## EPISODE 2: The Big Deal

Admiral Swanson and Captain Shimbo meet in the captain’s ready room—which is fitted out as the captain’s cabin on a pirate ship. Lt. Sandor is experimenting with a new technology, a “Holography Room,” which he saw on *Space Battleship Yamato* (a.k.a. *Star Blazers*) as a boy and thought was a good idea. Unfortunately, it’s still very experimental, and its contents tend to “leak” into nearby rooms.



The Admiral presents the Captain with official orders from Starfleet: the *Trouble* is to fly to the planet Beta Kerrotyn, and pick up a fugitive: one Ruba Lacincia. Ruba had been a cadet at the academy, but was expelled after she was found—by the Admiral’s Vulcan *aide de cam*—to be engaging in experiments in biosynthesis not permitted anywhere in the Federation. She is believed to currently be living on Beta Kerrotyn. The *Trouble* is to get her and bring her to Starbase Alpha-9, where “we will handle everything from there.”

Upon arrival at Beta Kerrotyn, a search is made for Ruba. She does not respond to anyone’s calls, and in fact, has been jamming all signals on and off the planet. After a while of coaxing, the Captain sends Vinny into the cave in which they believe Ruba is hiding. Ruba has planted mines all around the cave entrance, and comes racing out to save Vinny from running into them.

As for everyone else, Ruba wants them gone. She’s where she is, she’s happy about it, and just leave her alone.

The Captain, claiming, correctly, that Federation rules forbid kidnapping, decides to leave Ruba where she is.

Getting back to the ship, the Captain consults Uncle Harry. All Mudd knows about Ruba is that she was once associated with two “entrepreneurs” named Ebbet and Chang. These two were also at the academy once, but they, too, left under a cloud after an altercation with “that Vulcan.” Cat hair, Harry says, was involved. At this point, the Captain is called to Engineering.

Gus, the chief engineer, has found what appears to be a giant hairball in one of the Jeffries Tubes. Unlike most hairballs, this one is basketball-sized, vibrates, and makes odd noises which scare the cats.

Moriarty, Harry Mudd’s “pet,” has been watching from a hallway, and runs to tell Mudd the news.

Back planetside, Admiral, Captain and Vinny return to Ruba’s cave, and the Captain inquires about Ebbet and Chang. Ruba disavows all knowledge of Mudd himself, but eventually tells part of her story:

She, Ebbet and Chang had come to Beta Kerrotyn in search of a rare mineral, “Britsa Oil.” While this extremely super-fine oil can be synthesized, “wild” britsa is considered a luxury item in some circles. And it has other uses, too: Ruba has been using it to follow the deposition of minerals in fossils many millions of years old. By watching how the extremely fine oil follows crystal deposits in the fossil, she can discover which proteins were mineralized, and in what order. She had started working on this at the Academy; Vinny was, in fact, her first de-extinction “proof of concept.” Since then, she has been working on Terran trilobites. Chang left with the only shuttlecraft to find a buyer for the britsa, she says. And Ebbet... one day, Ebbet simply disappeared.

Back aboard ship, Chip has ended up in Sickbay with a severe allergic reaction. Ratty is quite unable to isolate the irritant, and suggests that anyone who was on the surface, along which Chip has had, of necessity, to crawl, bring her their shoes and anything else that touched the planet so that she can isolate the allergen; which theoretically the transporters should have rejected. Chip, normally rather grumpy, is extra displeased about all this.

Mudd—confined to the ship by his niece as a condition of getting away from 500 copies of his wife Stella (see TOS: “I, Mudd”)—and Moriarty conspire to get some more of the extravagantly valuable “wild” britsa.



## EPISODE 3: Big Trouble

Unbeknownst to anyone, Moriarty has taken sahn's own tiny spaceship and gone down to Beta Kerrotyn to find britsa oil. Sahn finds it, and something else: a large, ornate, egg-shaped ... something, which sahn puts in sahn's pouch and brings back, along with several vials of oil.



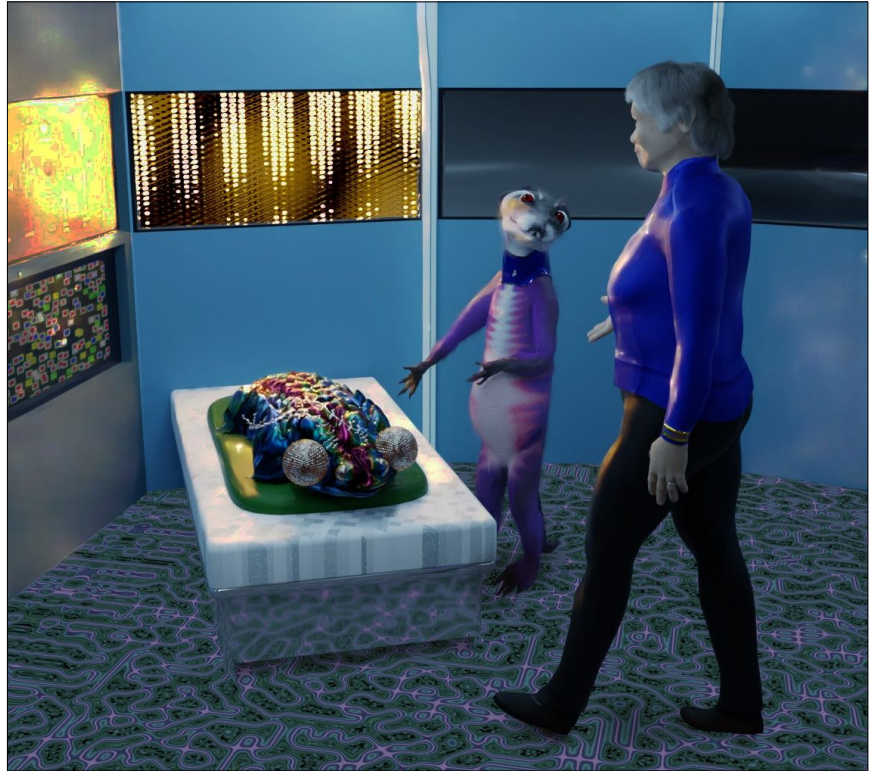
Meanwhile, Captain, Admiral, Security Chief, and Sandor meet in the captain's ready room, which this time is outfitted as the office of Sam Spade. Captain explains Sandor's work to the others, then asks Security for a report.

Cmdr. Swanson reports that, from his studies and scouting performed by his team of little dragons, Beta Kerrotyn is a "trap planet," meant to lure and collect specimens of whatever happens by. The dragons have also reported that the place is full of "bad luck."

The conversation shifts to Ruba. So far as anyone can tell, she isn't doing anything illegal, so just arresting her and bringing her on board is right out. On the other hand, the Admiral, noting the Captain's skill with guile and subterfuge, suggests that she might have some reason to want to come aboard herself?

The Captain suggests that since Ruba is de-extincting trilobites, she might like to meet Chip, who could certainly pass for an extremely large, fancy one. And since Chip can't leave the ship because of the medication. The Captain clears this idea with Chip, and then goes to talk to Ruba. Her idea: if she *obviously* has an ulterior motive but won't say what it is, and insouciantly carries on like nothing at all exciting is happening, Ruba's curiosity would compel her to take up the offer.

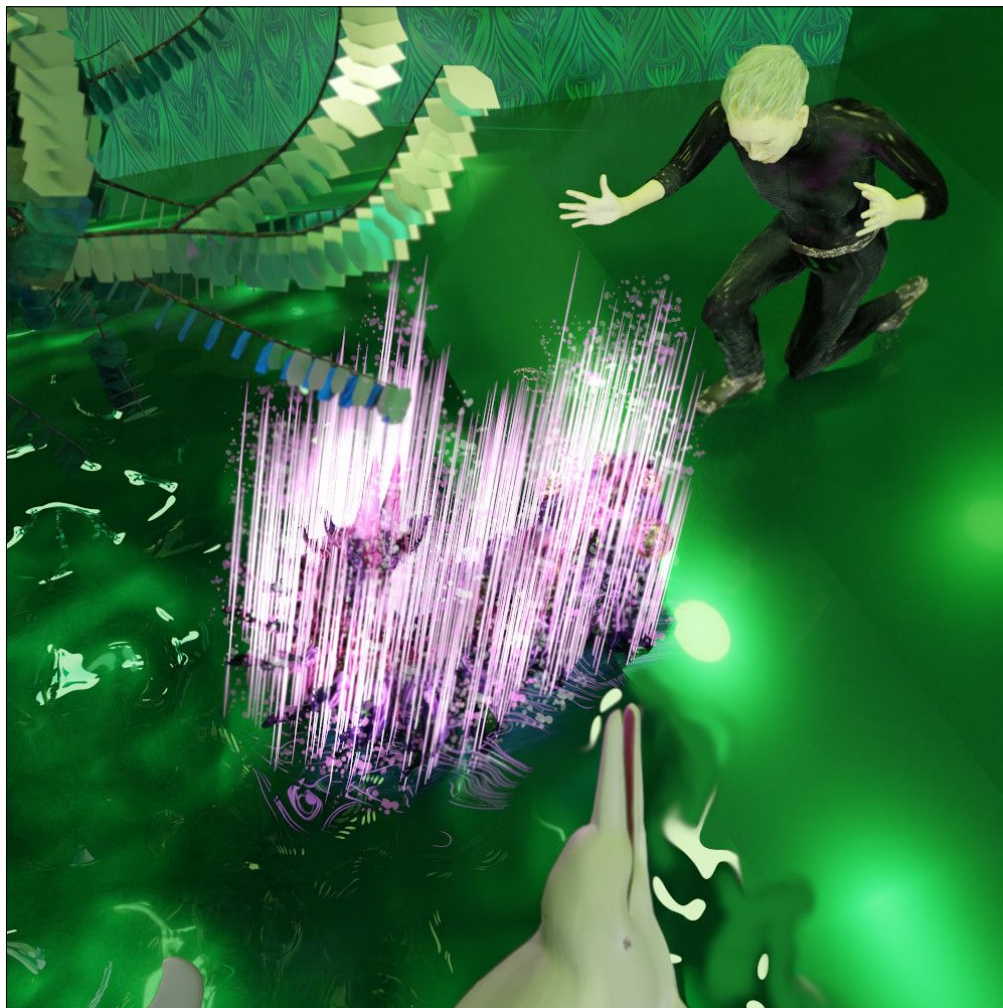
While waiting for Ruba to make up her mind, Mudd and Moriarty are looking over Moriarty's finds. The "egg" is apparently hollow, but they can find no way to open it. The super-fine britsa is already working its way through the quartz vials into which Moriarty has put it, so they put all the quartz vials into a quartz bottle, and, for the moment, hope for the best. Besides, there's more where that came from.



On the bridge, Max, the geologist, and sahn's symbiotic "Stingers," little ameboid critters with a very unappreciated sense of humor that has given them their shipboard name, has come to the bridge to ask the Captain's permission to take a landing party down to do some geology. The Captain grants this request, but also pulls the Stingers aside and reads them the Riot Act. Her crew, she says, are not toys.

A short time later, Captain and Admiral meet in the Captain's small kitchen. The Admiral, after much cogitation, explains to the Captain the real reason she was sent on this "farewell" trip, which heretofore she had said was a gift before her retirement. She and the Captain had pushed for this ship, which the Starfleet brass had claimed was, on the basis of all the different types of accommodations needed, was too expensive, and doomed to failure. Yes, it was a good way to show non-upright-bipeds in the Federation that Starfleet is inclusive; and building it got the crazy old "Sicilian Spitfire" Captain to shut up about it. The Admiral was to report on how the ship was ... well, failing. She is somewhat surprised to see that, in fact, it does seem to be working. The Captain just wants to be left alone to do her job.

Ruba eventually comes aboard, and is introduced to Chip, and Hiue, the La Plata River Dolphin member of the crew. But when Ruba leans out to touch Chip, there is a flash of light, and Chip is, apparently, beamed away to who-knows-where.



## EPISODE 4: *Trouble Spot*

Swearing she did absolutely nothing, Ruba is hauled off to the brig by Security. The Captain and Admiral, who have both long known her but hold rather different views of her trustworthiness—once, long ago, they and the Admiral’s Vulcan *aide de camp* had saved her life after an experiment went horribly wrong—and the Admiral demands Ruba be interrogated. The Captain disagrees, and says she can get better information elsewhere.

Elsewhere is Uncle Harry’s quarters. Mudd still maintains he knows nothing about Ruba, but hints that he could find out by ... various means ... if that’s what the Captain wants.



The Captain notices the britsa, and the egg, on Mudd’s table. Mudd confesses that yes, he wants “wild” britsa. He’s not convinced it actually is “natural” britsa, but if marketed the right way to the right people, he and Moriarty would soon be wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice. The Captain, being cautious, confiscates all the stuff “for study,” giving Moriarty ideas no “pet” should have.

The Captain, now technically off duty, goes to visit Dorcas in the latter’s quarters. Dorcas and Shimbo have been friends for quite a while, and are accustomed to sessions of mutual kvetching. Captain is worried that this incident may have given the Admiral bad news to take back to headquarters. Dorcas is upset that Shimbo is carrying around objects without having first put them in a quarantine box, and, producing one, makes the captain put the britsa and the egg inside.





At that point, a message from Ruba arrives on the captain's foldable tablet. This, it reads, is the only statement she (Ruba) intends to make. She explains her de-extinction project, and why Beta Kerrotyn was chosen as a base. She does mention having found a "large, black egg kind of thing" and a "hairball computer" which enabled them to open the egg. Chang apparently went off in their shuttle to look for economic backers for their project. Ebbet, after having handled the egg and then touched the hairball, just disappeared.

Ruba is returned to Beta Kerrotyn.

Captain takes the quarantine box to Engineering. Gus, Max, some Stingers, and a cat are examining the hairball and some samples that Max has brought back. As soon as the quarantine box is brought near the hairball, the egg opens with a flourish.

A Stinger and the Cat, Iggy, both jump onto the table to see what has happened. Gus picks them both up and hands them to the Captain, who, upon taking them, is also beamed away.

Gus, prone to anxiety at the best of times, is convinced he is cursed.



## EPISODE 5: *Trouble Brewing*

The Admiral calls a meeting of the command staff to discuss how to find the captain, Chip, Iggy and the Stinger and get them back. Nobody has any idea where they are.

Meanwhile, the Captain finds herself, Iggy and the Stinger on a transporter platform, situated on a small island, on a planet which appears to be inside a star cluster. After a short wait, a small boat appears. In it is the missing Ebbert, who informs the Captain that she, Iggy and the Stinger have arrived at a planet run by graduate students.

## And now, EPISODE 6:

### We got *Trouble*. Right Here.

# Trouble Brewing

## Episode 6: *We Got Trouble. Right Here.*

### 1 THE BRIDGE

1

The ship is still in orbit around Beta Kerrotyn. The bridge crew is passing the time (and trying not to worry too much) by playing Dungeons & Dragons (or something similar). In front of the captain's chair, there is a large game board on a stand, full of brightly colored figures of characters and monsters, some walls, and other cool stuff. Some crew members stand around it, others are in their seats but turned towards it. There is a whistle, the lift doors open, and ADMIRAL SWANSON enters.

ENS. CHAMBERLAIN  
Admiral on the bridge!



The crew all stand. DORCAS waves an arm, and the game equipment disappears.

ADMIRAL

Status Report.

DORCAS

Still investigating, Ma'am. We hope to have an update soon.

ADMIRAL

(Looking at Dorcas)

You're in uniform, I see.

DORCAS

Aye. No feathers, too cold. So, shirt. But we have hope. Very important. Many reasons.

ADMIRAL

Oh?

DORCAS

Many reasons. We like Captain. Captain likes us. We like each other. Good place to work. And if I may speak frankly?

ADMIRAL

Please do.

DORCAS

Captain not found to fight for Trouble, Trouble gets scrapped. Too costly, they say. We-us-all not worth it. You understand this? Captain says, you have heard argument.

The lift whooshes open and GUS runs, and MAX slithers, onto the bridge. Max's stingers are jumping up and down and generally behaving like monkeys on speed.

GUS

Commander, Admiral, we have something!

## 2 EXTERIOR, PLANET OF THE GRADUATE STUDENTS

2

The small boat carrying EBBET and CAPTAIN SHIMBO docks at a small wharf on the side of an island. You can pretty much see the whole island from anywhere on it. There are tree-like things, and a kind of a cabin, a well, and lots, and lots, of birds. There is an almost overwhelming number of stars in the background, many very bright.

CAPTAIN

Ah, so this is Ebbet's Field, is it?

EBBET

Ebbet's what?

CAPTAIN

(rolls eyes)

Philistine.

EBBET

(almost talking over the CAPTAIN, to whom he is no longer paying attention)

No, I call it Elba, actually. Saint Elba's Home for the Bewildered.

Captain sets the cat on the ground. The Stinger, still on her shoulder, is fidgeting.

CAPTAIN

You've been here all by yourself?

EBBET

Not usually. Boodry will show up. I am their personal project. Hands, you know. When Boodry shows up, your hands will be the subject of much fascination. They think hands are weird.

CAPTAIN

(Looking around)

They're not wrong.

CAPTAIN picks up the Stinger and puts it on the ground. The Stinger immediately jumps onto the cat, and the Cat, being mortally offended, begins racing around.)

CAPTAIN

Anyway, lovely planet. I like all the stars. We're in a globular cluster, I take it?

EBBET

I assume so. Although which one it is and where it is I cannot possibly guess.

EBBET walks toward his cabin. The CAPTAIN follows.

CAPTAIN

Say, you haven't seen a really colorful, isopod kind of thing about ... yay-big?

EBBET

Isopod?

CAPTAIN

Kind of like a roly-poly, we used to call them "tank

bugs" back in Brooklyn. But bigger, and iridescent  
and irascible.

EBBET

(looking somewhat shocked)

Uhm, no. No bugs here. I hate bugs. If I ever saw  
a bug I would squash it, right enough!

CAPTAIN

(shakes head and sighs)

Anyway, I have a ship to catch and a missing crew  
member to find. How does one get off this rock?

EBBET

Oh, you poor lass. Were you never a graduate  
student? The rats never make it out of the lab.

CAPTAIN

Mine always did. I took them home and made them  
cool little Rat Paradises and gave them pizza and  
everything.

EBBET

(Turning and looking at the CAPTAIN suspiciously.)  
And they let you?

CAPTAIN

"Let," Gracie?

EBBET

What?

CAPTAIN throws up her hands in despair, and the two of them walk into EBBET's  
cabin. As Ebbet is about to close the door, a tentacle reaches out and pulls  
it back open again.

EBBET

(sighing and turning around)

Captain Doctor Shimbo, may I present Boodry, the  
Murchee.

CAPTAIN

(distracted)

Kinda Spartan, don't ya think?



In walks BOODRY, the Murchee, perhaps a cross between a spider and an octopus, with all kinds of gadgets strapped to one of sahn's legs. Boodry walks to the center of the room, closing the door as sahn goes. Sahn raises all sahn's non-walking tentacles, and flips sahn's fins(?).

EBBET

Boodry says "hello." I assume. Do this.

EBBET holds his hands up as if surrendering, and wiggles his fingers.

CAPTAIN

(bowing in greeting, then copying EBBET; otherwise absolutely unfazed)

Well, aren't you interesting! Good to meet you, Boodry.

EBBET

(Very wrong-footed as he expected CAPTAIN to react the way he did upon first seeing a Murchee—i.e., to panic, or at least be nonplussed.)

Uhm... yes, well, Boodry. What are you here to measure today, then?

BOODRY does not appear to respond, just consults some of sahn's gadgets.

EBBET

To be honest, I don't think these Murchees can hear, you know. Or else they are experts at the art of pretending one is not present, much less accounted for. I say, Boodry-

(reaches down to tap the Murchee on a knee)

I have a guest. (Shouting) Guest, Boodry.

CAPTAIN waves, knowing it won't accomplish anything. Nevertheless, she is fascinated by the creature, and sits down beside sahn, examining sahn closely. IGGY, the cat marches off in disgust. However, the STINGER, who has been sitting on the CAPTAIN's head like a weird hat, jumps off that perch and lands on BOODRY's back. BOODRY jumps up, flailing sahn's arms and making very high-pitched barking noises. Sahn runs around the room, trying desperately to dislodge the STINGER. Finally, CAPTAIN walks up to BOODRY and grabs the STINGER, and puts it on her shoulder. BOODRY deflates somewhat, slaps CAPTAIN, slaps EBBET, tries to slap the IGGY, and points at least three arms at the STINGER, barking loudly. The STINGER suddenly goes rigid, and begins humming. The CAPTAIN's hair stands on end. BOODRY, too, goes rigid for a moment, then races out the door, slamming it resoundingly as sahn goes.

EBBET

Well, now look what you've done!

### 3 ABOARD THE TROUBLE, IN THE CAPTAIN'S READY ROOM

3

GUS, MAX, several STINGERS, DORCAS and the ADMIRAL are gathered around the table. GUS, in his usual flustered style, is carrying on at length, and GUS and DORCAS are translating for MAX-not necessarily arriving at the same translation.

DORCAS

(Makes a series of yipping noises at the STINGERS).

Turns to the ADMIRAL)

There, I warned them. You behave. Or else. They know from else! Now.

(turning to Max)

Max, you tell. Thank you.

MAX

(haltingly, and in highly accented English or whatever)

Stingers... connected. All. Every one knows where others are. Direction, if only that, you see? Stinger Cobalt go with Captain. Neo...needy...

DORCAS



(to Max)

Neodymium?

(to Admiral)

Max has named the Stingers after the elements they're most drawn to.

MAX

Neodymium, Helium, Argon, they say, that way.

MAX points down and to the left. Everyone turns and looks at each other. Dorcas fiddles with a tablet.

MAX

Too far to...

MAX begins squeaking in Max-Speak.

GUS

Max says if we start going that way, the Stingers will get better reception.

DORCAS

And adds that Gus's cat is with them. As is the Captain. And someone else.

MAX

Yes, yes! All are well.

GUS

(nearly wilting with relief)

Oh, he is with them, now I can relax!

ADMIRAL

The Stingers are attracted to different elements? That's very interesting. Is there any way to find out if there is a high concentration of ... what's the element?

GUS

Neodymium. Are you suggesting, perhaps, that where the Stinger is there might be found some Neodymium?

ADMIRAL

Perhaps there is a noticeably large concentration of the element in that (Admiral waves her arm) direction. Scan for it. It's a start. Before we move this ship "that way" we need you to meet among yourselves and calibrate your frequencies, or whatever, so you can communicate better with everyone else.

Ensign, do you wear a translator device somewhere on your person?



DORCAS

Not needed here. Not often. Captain speaks to all of us. Otherwise just use general translators in rooms. Not wear, get lost too much. Cats steal, you know. Translators bad with non-human perspective, we find. Perspective is important.

ADMIRAL

We need to get information transferred to one another more efficiently. Dorcas. Are there main translators in the ship or that can be issued to everyone?

DORCAS

No need before. Captain understands. Language sponge. Very annoying. Deeper than knowing the words. We have the mind pictures in each other's language. With no Captain, very few mind pictures.

ADMIRAL

Hmm. So if the Captain were here, would Max communicate better?

DORCAS

Max translating for Stingers. Upset, you know. Aloof, effects his fluency.

ADMIRAL

We need to get this crew communicating well enough with less emotion so that anyone listening can understand. Dorcas, get Fabrication and Engineering on creating or adapting something. As soon as possible.

DORCAS

I'll relay those orders.

ADMIRAL

Now, what do we know about the Stingers? I am unfamiliar with them. Can we speak directly to them?

GUS

Well, they are symbiotes of Max's people, we do know that much. And there have been experiments done which show that members of a family group, like Max's, know where the others are at all times. It's very uncanny. Very uncanny. But you can take one-if you dare-and bring it to another city, and the rest can tell you where the missing Stinger is. But how? We have absolutely no idea. We only know how it *doesn't* work. For example, subspace and hyperspace are not involved. Honestly, we would love to find out how they do this, but so far, nothing. It's very sad. Whatever it is, it could be very useful. But no. We don't know, and that's that. For now.

ADMIRAL

In your opinion, is this skill reliable?

MAX

Oh, yes, absolutely reliable, yes.

ADMIRAL

(to DORCAS)

Is there anything noteworthy in that direction?

DORCAS

(consulting a tablet)

Not anything explored. Nobody gone that way, so we know of. Used to was, Apto Territory. Apto gone now, is thought.

ADMIRAL

Set scanners in "that direction" for long range sweep for large amounts of Neodymium and any disturbances that might indicate a transporter signal. The Stinger who was attracted to that element may have been selectively transported with

the Captain and the cat. It's a start.  
I need to meet with all the department heads in the  
ready-room. In fifteen minutes. Dorcas, can you  
arrange that please?

DORCAS  
Aye, Admiral.

**4 EXTERIOR, on EBBET'S WORLD, OUTSIDE THE CABIN**

**4**

The CAPTAIN is sitting alone on a rock, outside Ebbet's cabin. Deep in  
thought. Staring into the middle distance. Sits a while, sighs, gets up and  
walks to the water's edge. Stares at her hands for a moment, flexing her  
fingers. Goes back to the rock and sits down again. BOODRY has left.

CAPTAIN  
(unnecessarily loudly)  
HEY, EBB-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-T!

EBBET  
(racing up, out of breath)  
What?! What?!

CAPTAIN  
Oh, nothing, I just felt like saying that. Couldn't  
resist.

EBBET  
(looking dubious)  
Are you all right?

CAPTAIN  
(still staring into the middle distance. The  
Stinger is crawling all over her, comes to rest once  
again on her head.)  
Oh, yeah, I'm fine.

EBBET  
You don't sound fine.

CAPTAIN  
Nah, I sound Italian-American...

EBBET  
You know, uhm, you being Starfleet and all, aren't  
you supposed to be fretting about First Contact  
Protocols and all that?

CAPTAIN

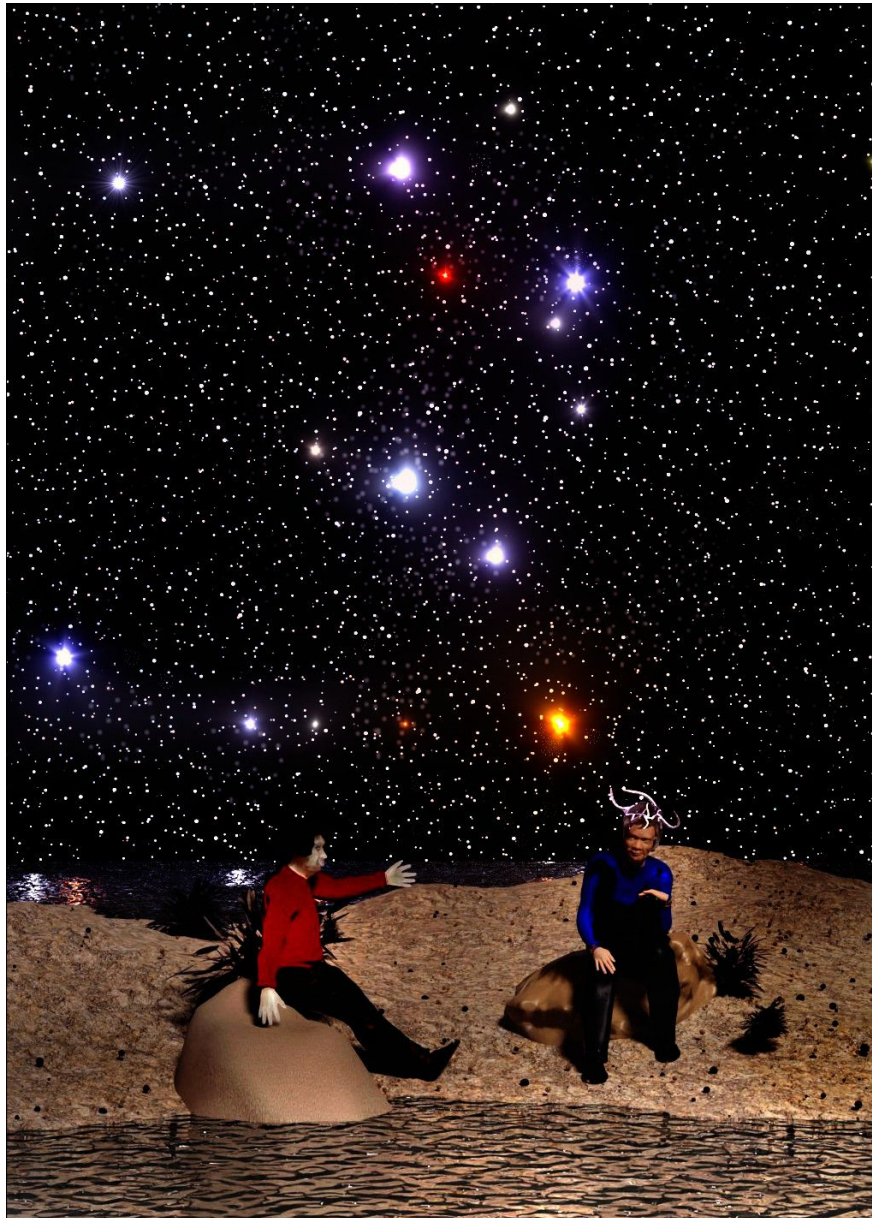
(Suddenly, and impatiently, turning to face EBBET)  
Do you believe in the Golden Rule?

EBBET

What? 'Do unto others as you'd have them—'

CAPTAIN

Yeah, that's the one. I believe in it too. And I assume everyone else does, so... I'm treating them the way they treat me. Works both ways. They're first-contacting me, so... That's my First Contact Protocol.



EBBET

(after a moment's cogitation)

How did someone like you ever get to be a Captain?

CAPTAIN

Bad luck.

EBBET

On whose part?

CAPTAIN

Ah, there you have me.

EBBET

(Sitting down beside CAPTAIN, pointing to the  
STINGER)

Apart from congenitally irritable, what is this  
thing?

CAPTAIN

Right now, it's a hat. Tell me something. What do  
you know about Ruba Lacincia?

EBBET

Oh ... oh, Ruba, yes. Do you know her?

CAPTAIN

Oh yeah, I know her. I was just talking to her not  
too very long ago. She told me some interesting  
things about Britsa Oil and fossils. And a guy  
called Chang?

EBBET

(turning away and considering, with a wry smile and  
a snort, perhaps)

Ah, yes, Rubella Cynthia. Old Greenie. Is she  
still on Beta Kerrotyn?

CAPTAIN nods.

EBBET

Making a fortune, I suppose.

CAPTAIN

Not really. So far as I can tell she's just playing  
with trilobites. She gave me a couple for my  
aquarium. It's just her and a wrecked shuttle, as  
far as I ever saw.

EBBET

Sounds like her. She could never keep her mind on  
her work.

CAPTAIN

You feel like telling me all about it?

EBBET

(resignedly)

There were three of us in it. Me, Chang, and  
Lacincia. Looking for "wild" britsa, because you  
know—

Suddenly there is a roiling in the water, and several MURCHEES leap out of  
it. They push the CAPTAIN down, grab the STINGER, and disappear into the  
water again.

CAPTAIN

HEY! THAT'S *MINE!* Why, I oughta—

CAPTAIN runs toward EBBET'S boat and jumps in.

CAPTAIN

(in Big Sister Command Voice)

You! Get in!

EBBET

But—

CAPTAIN

*NOW!*

EBBET

But it's almost dinner time! And the food here  
really is rather excellent—

CAPTAIN gets out of the boat, grabs EBBET, nearly throws him in, and the two  
are off after the MURCHEES.



TO BE CONTINUED...



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

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

Deadline for the next Issue (No. 9) is **21 November 2022**.

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

**NOTA BENE:** Initial submissions of longer works must be at least 1,000 words so that we can properly decide if your work is going to be a good fit for our audience. If you're at 1,000 words or less, just send the whole thing.

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 at the same time. If you are considering submitting a print you bought from an artist, please refrain unless you purchased publication rights at the same time.

#### 🖨️ DIGITAL 2D:

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.

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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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**LAST BUT NOT LEAST:**

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!

