



Days on Space Station 13

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| 7.1.1 | A portal to another dimension opens up on the station and strange alien creatures emerge from it. While the crew deals with these enigmatic beings, Kevin travels through the portal and ends up in a different world. He tries to find his way back but accidentally stumbles on something quite unexpected, a strange space station. . | 191 |

Preface

I would skip this if I were you. If you're stubborn enough to continue, let me give you some background here.

SS13 was (and is) a multiplayer computer game created in 2003. The creator is not known, and very few people knew about the game and even fewer actually played it. It wasn't until around 2007 before the game had picked up enough fans that the game was "ressurrected" and different servers started hosting their own versions of the code. I myself didn't play the game until 2012, on a server called *goonstation*.

The game was unlike anything I've had ever played before. The graphics were, of course utter crap, basically it was simply a top-down 2D game with tiny 32x32 pixel tiles. The latency on the servers was also horrible and, together with the very akward and strange controls, made the game virtually unlayable.

When the game did work however, it was great. It was a strange hybrid of a multiplayer online game and a roleplaying game, set in a wonderful space opera theme. The game played over a series of rounds. Each round players would spawn as a character on the station and you would try to "do your job" or help someone else do their job, or generally just explore the station and not try to fuck anything up. This was, of course, unless you spawned as an antagonist. The game could be in one of several different *modes*. Protagonists would know the mode and just tried to get on with their lives on the station, wheras the antagonist had some kind of sinister goal they were trying to achieve. There were traitors who where there to assassinate, sabotage or

steal equipment. There were strange shapeshifting aliens running around on the station. And sometimes the station would be infiltrated by a gang of operatives, trying to steal a “nuclear disk” safeguarded by the captain.

Honestly, I didn’t play the game very much. Twenty hours tops. The controls, lagging and constant gimmicks run by the nutty gaming crowd often made you want to rage-quit. Although I never really got over the idea, it was just such a perfect concept.

Over the years I’ve tried to develop a board game version of the game. I even had my friends play test some of them, but there was always something not quite right. After several attempts, I finally gave up. I had come to the conclusion that the amount of secret information, and hidden communication needed made the game very hard to implement in a sit-at-a-table format.

With the advent of board game apps (started being prevalent around 2016) I realized that this might be just the thing my SS13 board game needed. Also being a programmer, I started on a new version of the game. This one would use pawns, cards and game board more as references than actual gaming components, and a networked app would do all the “behind the scenes” work. In this way, the app could distribute hidden information to the players, in real time! I made an initial version of the app where I took the setting of SS13 but the game rules from the board game *Panic Station* (draws on the theme from the movie *The Thing*. Basically, the story was that there was a “hive” on the station spreading infection. One player starts as the infected one and can spread it to others. The goal of the protagonists (the crew) was to find the hive and destroy it, the goal of the antagonists (the infected) was to kill or infect all the protagonists.

I tried the app/game out with my friends and it was a smash hit, but we instantly felt that the paper board, the standees and my cards were not necessary. People could play the game with their cell phones, or on a computer, they didn’t need to sit at a table.

I then continued to develop the game for several years, adding more content, more modes, more theme from the SS13 original but also ideas from other sources, some of my own wacky ideas and a lot from the people who were constantly play testing the game. After a while we had our own little community which often played the game.

Even though the game was complicated, I often felt like there was a narrative there, waiting to be told. Indeed, many stories from the original SS13 game had made it to forums on the internet. I thought it may be time to try my own hand at writing some fan fiction for this wonderful universe.

The Janitor

Sophia looked at the bald man sitting behind a desk covered by papers. Actually “covered” wasn’t a great word, it rather appeared as though the desk was there only to support four huge stacks of papers. The man was barely visible behind them. He was looking for one particular document though, Sophia’s job application. He finally found it, on the floor, picked it up and read it for a moment. He then looked up, stared into her eyes and cleared his throat.

“Sophia Trenton?” he asked.

“Um, yes. That’s me.” she replied nervously.

“You’re the new janitor?”

“Yes.”

“That’s ‘Yes, sir’, better get used to that right away. Well, not really my place to question CentCom’s judgment. How old are you?”

“I’m nineteen, sir”

“Hrrrm. Well my name is Connor, and I’m the Head of Staff. You’ll report to me during your rotation.” His old office chair screeched as he rolled over to a table and grabbed a large cardboard box which was sitting next to what looked like an ancient personal computer.

“Here’s your PDA, everyone gets one here, a map of the station, try not to get lost. Your ident card - that’s important! You won’t get into janitorial or be able to access any computer systems without it. Oh, and here’s your jumpsuit.” With some effort he pushed the box over the wall of papers. It landed in Sophia’s lap. The jumpsuit was gray with purple details. It was terribly ugly, she thought. As if he had read her mind he quickly said:

“Your station uniform is to be worn at all times. You should change as soon as you get the chance. If you get dirty, just dump it in a laundry chute and put on another one.” At least that seemed convenient, Sophia thought to herself.

“Your duties should be quite self-explanatory. Clean were cleaning needs done. Most often, the bots can do the work, but you need to set them up correctly. We don’t want another renegade window cleaner incident. Contact the station roboticist if you run into trouble. You are also in charge of replacing light bulbs and such things. You’ll want to get acquainted with the quartermaster, he’s in charge of supplying the crew with what they need. What else - let’s see. Oh, keep your PDA on your person when on duty. Often the crew will file reports when you’re needed. Your schedule’s in the PDA. There’s also a crew manifest in there, which you should check. It includes the names of everyone who works here and there profession. It’s important to know who outranks you - which in your case is pretty much everyone. That clear?”

“Yes.”, and with a slight delay she added a “sir”.

The Head of Staff was looking around the room as if he was trying to remember something. She interrupted him.

“Sir, what exactly is it Nanotrasen does here?”

“Oh, that’s right. Don’t ask too many questions. People will think you’re a Syndicate spy. You may sleep in janitorial if you want. That’s what Jack did - the last janitor. Or you can stay in one of the dorms, I don’t really care. Try to behave when you’re off duty. Don’t beat up the clown. You’d think I wouldn’t have to say that, but I do. And don’t bother the Captain, she’s got enough on her mind without every crew member accosting her with their petty complaints. I think we’re almost done here. You should go down the hall now and talk to Bill, the bartender here. Bill will let you into the theater and put on the info film for you. Now scoot, get out of here. Oh, and one more thing. Welcome to Space Station 13.”

Sophia exited to the hallway, hugging the box to her chest with one hand and holding her backpack with the other. The lighting was slightly dim and she could see dust bunnies being whisked around by the gentle breeze coming from the air ducts. At the end of the hall was a panorama window. On the other side was the blackness of space contrasted only by a few tiny specks of light. Behind her, in the adjoining corridor, some crew members were passing in the hallway. She wanted to stop them and ask for directions

but decided not to interrupt what seemed to be a heated discussion about genetics - or something. A flickering light caught her attention - a neon sign. The letters "B" and "A" were glowing, and an "R" was blinking on and off in a disturbing nonrhythmic manner.

"Are you Bill?". The man behind the bar had his back to her. When he turned around she realized that it wasn't a he but rather a she. A large woman, with a very dirty cloth in one hand and a beer glass in the other.

"Yeah, I'm Bill." The woman responded and smiled. "Actually my name is Lara. You must be the new janitor. Sophia right?"

"Uh-huh. Why did Mr Connor call you Bill?"

"Because that's what everybody calls me. Nobody bothered to learn my name when I first came out here six months ago. The crew just called me Bill from my first day. Later on I found out that it was the old Bartender's name, and he had been on SS13 for a long time. Only the Captain and the Chief had been here longer than him. I guess everyone missed him so much, and were so used to having a 'Bill in the Bar', that I just sort of took over the mantle when he was gone."

"What happened to him?"

"Well, it's a bit embarrassing really. Apparently, he had saved up quite a bit of money - you know, from tips. And he was going to retire. Had a cabin picked out on Vesta. He was gonna live out his days like a king in the old Solar System. Toward the end, he was talking constantly about it, telling everyone how he was gonna up and quit - shove his resignation in Connor's face. He even bragged about it in front of the Captain. The Captain then informed Bill that tips received by the support staff is shared. That this was Nanotrasen regulation, and that if Bill didn't hand over the cash to Connor to distribute, he'd put Bill in the brig. Well, Bill didn't like that, but he realized that he wouldn't be able to smuggle the money off the station. So what did he do? He went to the quartermaster, he's called Lars by the way, but I doubt that's his real name, and told him to 'invest' the money for him. Lars quickly spent the money on whatever cargo he could come by on short notice, and specifies that it should be delivered to SS13 and stored in the Bar. Lars didn't look too closely at the actual contents of the cargo but it happened to be eight crates of Gorilloids."

Sophia had been so engrossed in the story that she didn't even notice the man who had entered the bar and was now standing next to her. He was tall, and was wearing a white lab coat.

"Hey Bill." The man said. "The usual. Who's the kid?"

“Hey there Mac.” Lara responded. “She’s the new janitor.”

“Oh” Mac said, in a rather bored tone. Lara served him a beer and he sipped it carefully.

“I was telling her about the old Bill.”

“Ah, good chap old Bill. Always listened to a man’s problems. Too bad those Gorilloids beat him to a pulp. Kind of ironic, since he spent his life savings paying for them. By accident, of course.”

“Yeah. That pretty much sums it up.”

“Mac’s the doc here. He’ll patch you up if the Gorilloids get you.”

“Cheers.” said Mac.

“I’m kidding of course. The Gorilloids were all put down by security. Bloody mess I heard it was.”

“Mhm.” Mac agreed.

“So. What can I do for you, Sophia? Oh, right - Connor probably wanted me to show you the info film. Just go straight through that door. You can leave your things here if you want.” Lara pointed to a doorway with a few curtains drawn hiding the darkness within. “Glad you’re here, we haven’t had a janitor do some proper cleaning in weeks.”

Sophia started to turn, but then turned back to face Lara and Mac.

“So, what happened to the old janitor?”

Mac was silent, looking dully at his now half empty beer glass. Lara, started cleaning a glass again with her dirty cloth. After a while she said.

“Nobody knows.”

There was popcorn on the floor of the theater. Sophia was thinking to herself that somebody should clean that up, then she realized that this was her job now. She sat down on one of the suede seats. A couple of seats away an elderly man was sleeping soundly. He looked almost dead in the strange light coming from the movie screen. But she decided he wasn’t.

Suddenly there was a audible click and the screen changed. Sophia assumed that Lara had started the info film. A slide show of pictures from the station appeared on the screen and a female voice smoothly presented information. Sophia was surprised that the man did not awake and was somewhat disgusted by the now glistening drool coming from his jaw.

Welcome most anticipated and respected employee! Nanotrasen welcomes you to the warm embrace of a corporation of honor, tradition, wealth and stability. Nanotrasen was founded in 2496 and is one of the most dominating and influential corporations in the galaxy...

History had never really been her favorite subject so she quickly lost interest, and her mind wandered as it often did.

She wondered what she had gotten herself into. Just a few months ago she was studying to become a mechanic at a semi-respectable academy on Pondiataros. Then, with just a few ill-placed words to a certain headmaster, a headmaster who now she realized had an eerily resemblance to the Head of Staff here on SS13, and she was out on the street. At that point she really had no place to go, but somehow she got by for a couple of weeks. It was just by chance that she strolled by the Nanotrasen recruitment office and saw the flier in the window "Support staff needed on remote space station. No skill required, Pays moderately. A great experience!". It was definitely true that no skill was required. The recruitment officer didn't even ask to see any references. 'Pays moderately' turned out to be a partial truth. It was less than half of her allowance at the academy. A 'great experience' seemed to be more of a 'great exaggeration' so far. She was starting to regret her decision to take the job. But it was better than starving and/or freezing to death on that moon.

The info film had continued to talk about different ranks and procedures on the station. Sophia realized that she didn't really know that much about Nanotrasen at all. Just that they were some kind of super-corporation which owned a bunch of space stations and did a lot of cutting edge research within the fields of plasma, genetics and AI. Apparently they also did a lot of regular mining, manufacturing and had dealings in many other businesses. What was most surprising was how militaristic they seemed to be. According to the film, this had something to do with how the company had evolved, deterring competitors, xenomorphs and so on. She had lost interest again.

She thought about the Nanotrasen pilot who had ferried her to the station from UltraDome City. After an hour of passively studying him at a distance, she had decided that he was seriously cute. Shortly before arriving he had taken a lunch break and heated some soup. He then approached her while she was listening to her music player. He asked what kind of music she liked and asked to borrow the device for a bit. When she handed it to him he had clumsily dropped it into the cup and it immediately shorted it out. She expected him to apologize, but he surprised her. What could have been a romantic meet cute fell flat when he simply laughed, fished it out and threw it on the floor. He then talked for half an hour about why certain space narcotics should be legalized while annoyingly slurping his soup.

She could tell by the tone of the narrator's voice that the film was ending.

...such, and other instances of suspicious activity should be reported directly to your commanding officer. Remember: "Stay vigilant - stay safe." We hope that your rotation on Space Station 13 will be a good one, as we work together for a brighter future for humanity!

She left the theater by way of the bar. When Sophia came back to the bar, Lara was busy with several patrons and simply gave her a courteous nod as she grabbed her things and passed by. Standing in the hallway again she didn't quite know what to do with herself. This was a really strange job. *Don't you usually get more of an introduction?* she pondered. *Usually, somebody shows you around and introduces you to everyone.* But then again, this was her first real job so she couldn't really compare it to anything. She set the box down and pulled out the map of the station. She was amazed at how many different labs and rooms there were. She certainly hadn't expected an arcade, an indoor pool, an owl house and there was even a room marked "barber". It took her quite a while to figure out what her current location was. Janitorial was close by. It was down the hall, to the left and then the second door on the right.

The sliding door opened automatically when she approached, revealing a dark room within. She fumbled for the switch on the wall and found it only after touching something gooey, it was gum. With the quite large room illuminated it was clear that there was at least one room on the station completely exempt from cleaning, namely janitorial itself. There was junk on the floor, magazines, candy wrappers, beer cans and what appeared to be a half eaten sandwich, completely covered with mold. The walls were lined with shelves, crowded with cans, bottles and containers containing who knows what. Over in a corner, one bottle had tipped over and a blueish liquid had started to drop onto the floor. The room was mostly filled with bins of different sizes. Some seemed to be filled with trash, others with random mechanical or electrical parts. There was also a sofa, a dirty pillow laying there sadly seem to indicate that this was where Jack had slept. There was a desk and a rusty office chair. Next to the desk was a wall of large bins, and next to that there were several holes in the wall. There were no windows.

Sophia sat down on the sofa and sighed slightly. She collected her thoughts for a few minutes and then pulled the jumpsuit out of the cardboard box. She held it up in front of her. It simply said "JANITOR" above the right breast. The purple details ran along the sleeves and legs. On the back, in washed-out contours read "SS13", within a thirteen-pointed star.

She got out of her old rags and threw them on the floor. The jumpsuit was surprisingly comfortable after all. With her hands on her hips she looked out over the room. It really seemed like someone was living here just up until recently. It was quite an eerie feeling, where had the old janitor disappeared to? As she started picking up the room she half expected to stumble onto a corpse, but she didn't. Instead she found another door, a closet. Inside were six squat robots of different types. Above each one was a small sign, "Floor-Bot", "RapidCleaner", "SuckBot", and so on were their names. Sophia bent down to the FloorBot. It had wheels and barely stood a foot off the ground. It was wide and had two short mechanical arms and a small digital display in between them. Below the display was a narrow slot. The slot together with the display actually looked a bit like a face looking blankly up at her. She could only find two buttons on the robot, right next to the display. Neither of them had a label so she pushed the left one. Something shot out of the slot and hit her cheek hard, then fell into her lap. It was a disk of some sort. She swore and stuck the disk back into the slot, then pressed the other button. Characters started to appear on the display and the mechanical arms were flailing violently in the air, Sophia had to move away not to get struck, and fell onto her bottom. The bot started whirring and then after a short chime declared in an electrical voice:

"Floor Auto-repair enabled! Roaming!"

It then pushed passed her with great speed out into the larger room. Sophia yelled after it.

"Hey! Get back here!"

But the bot had already escaped into the hallway. She could hear it repeating the previous statement.

"Floor Auto-repair enabled! Keep clear please!"

Then there was a loud crashing sound and a woman screamed.

"Auto-repairing floor! Please keep your distance!"

When Sophia came out of janitorial the crazed robot had already torn up five or six of the floor tiles and had knocked down a woman in a lab coat. She was gathering some papers which were now scattered on the floor. The bot was now in the process of replacing the tiles which had been removed, but part of the work area was covered by papers. The bot therefore promptly started picking up the papers and devouring them. Before it could gobble down the last paper though, the woman in the lab coat grabbed it and was now in a tug-of-war with the robot.

Sophia sprinted over to the scene, but didn't really know what to do, so

she kicked the robot in its face. She must have hit the ejection button again, because the disk shot out like it was on fire and hit the other woman in the face. The robot then started flailing with its arms again and set off down the hall even faster than before and was now shouting some nonsensical error message.

“Sabotage detected! Please notify security! Sabotage detected!”

Sophia was catching her breath and saw the bot zoom down the hall and disappear, all the while shouting in that ridiculous electronic voice.

“Hey, are you okay?” Sophia asked the lab woman.

“Yeah. I think so. What was that?” she replied, got up from the floor and adjusted her glasses. She had blond wavy hair and a green-blue jumpsuit underneath her lab coat.

“No idea.” Sophia lied. “I just got here. Just trying to figure out what’s what”.

“Oh, okay. I’m Denise Wilthorn. I’m a biologist.”

“I’m Sophia. Is Denise your real name?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“Never mind. I better get going.”

“Hang on a minute. Aren’t you the new janitor?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Good. Just the person I wanted to see. I have some light bulbs which need replacing in the green house.”

“Alright. I’ll get on it. I think I saw a couple of spare bulbs in janitorial.”

“No. I don’t think you quite understand. You’re going to have to place an order with Lars.”

“The quartermaster? Why?”

“Well, unless your sitting pretty on a few thousand spare light bulbs, you’re going to have to order some. And he’s the guy for that. Make it three thousand bulbs, just to be sure.

For an instant Sophia tried to imagine how much time it would take to changing a few thousand light bulbs.

“Hey, are you dreaming? You need to get on it. I have a particular sun thirsty strain of hydrangeas and they’ve been starving. Starving I tell you! Now, tell me you’re gonna get on this right away.”

“Yes. Yes, sir.”

“Good. I wouldn’t want to do to you what I did to Jack.”

Sophia swallowed in a dry throat.

“What did you do to him? Did you kill him?”

“What? No! Whatever gave you that idea? No, I filed a complaint with the head of staff. He was reprimanded for that.”

“Well, what happened to him afterwards?”

“Good god girl, I don’t know. I don’t think anybody does. It wouldn’t surprise me if he just disappeared in a puff of calujana smoke. Stranger things have certainly happened around here. Now, I’ve got to go, this report is due tomorrow and now I have to rewrite half of it because of that moronic douche-bot.”

“Wait. Can I ask you one more thing?”

“Fine. What is it?”

“Where do I find Lars?”

* * *

“Three thousand light bulbs? Are you kidding? That’s gonna cost a small fortune. Not sure I can do that - nahuh.”

Sophia didn’t really know what to tell Lars. The man was looking at her intently from behind the glass. Lars was sitting in a glass booth facing the hallway.

“You better step into my office.”

The door next to the booth opened and Sophia reluctantly entered. She stepped into the small room behind the booth. It was hardly an office. It was more of a closet with a computer. Lars swiveled around on his chair and faced her. He had a trimmed red beard and hair cropped short. His jumpsuit was yellow, brown and purple.

“You’re new here so I’ll tell you how this usually goes down. People come to me and want stuff. I give them stuff, but naturally I must ask something in return.” Lars smiled curiously.

Sophia didn’t understand really. It wasn’t like they were in prison and she was asking him for a shiv and he wanted cigarettes in return. Or was it? Or maybe he was just hitting on her?

“Or maybe this is completely different.” His tone suddenly serious. “Are you telling me you want to order something big, *change the mood?*”

She really didn’t get him. Was he nuts? Then again, this was the guy who accidentally ordered a bunch of wild animals and set them loose on the station. What a weirdo. That really seemed irresponsible. Why would they let him keep his job? Wasn’t it rather risky having someone like that handle

the station's acquisitions? He was still looking at her intently. What had he asked her? Something about the mood?

"Hey. Is your name really Lars?"

"Uhm, yeah. Why do you ask?"

"Well, Lara told me..."

"Who?"

"Uhm, the bartender - Bill. She told me the story about the gorilloids."

"Oh, don't listen to her. She's a compulsive liar. That story doesn't go that way at all. If you want I can tell you about it."

"Na, that's okay. What were you saying before?"

"Do you want to *change the mood*?"

What was he getting at? Oh well, she decided to play along. Best case, it's an innocent flirt which pans out in three thousand light bulbs coming her way. Worst case, he gets slapped.

"Yes. Sure. Go for it... sir"

"That's fantastic! I tell you, I've been waiting for you for some time. What's the plan? Oh, wait, better not tell me. And I'm not telling you mine. Tell you what, I'll go take a dump for a while and I'll leave the terminal logged on here so you can order WHATEVER you want. Just keep it under a million credits and I can fiddle it away in the records later. I don't expect you to be here when I get back. Have fun!"

The quartermaster got up and left.

"Oh, one more thing. The security officers really like to flash you. Try to watch out for that."

She was now alone in the little room and quite confused. She sat there thinking for a bit. What the hell had just happened? What had he meant when he said *whatever* she wanted? And why would the security officers want to flash her? Was that some kind of fetish or something? She shrugged and sat down in front of the computer screen. It took her some time to figure out the interface. The system was an interstellar marketing system "unBay", where merchandise could be bought or sold in real time. It seemed that placed orders were either teleported to the station or dropped off in the station's vicinity and then towed. She finally found what she was looking for under "appliances". It was really easy to make a mistake, she had already accidentally ordered two crates of soap and one antique saxophone. Fortunately those purchases barely made a dent in the station's finances. She placed the order for the light bulbs, and they were expected to arrive within 6 hours.

She stepped back into the hallway. By now, her stomach was grumbling terribly. Luckily she could smell food coming from a kitchen. A cafeteria must be close by. She literally followed her nose and arrived in a large room with many tables. It reminded her of the cafeteria at the academy. Same line to get food. Same white plastic trays. Almost by routine, she got in line.

“Hey, new girl. What’ll it be?”

Were all chefs fat? This one was anyway. He wasn’t very tall. He had a fancy chef’s hat, an apron and a little blond goatee.

“I’m Goran, in case you’re wondering.” He said while serving her up some glop on a plate. “Today’s special, Ziktonia soup. Real Ziktonians in it. Ha ha!” He had a burly laugh.

Sophia smiled and turned away.

“Hey. It ain’t free you know!”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I’m...”

“New, yeah. I just said so. You don’t really listen, do you?”

That certainly was one of her flaws, she knew that.

“Hey. Maybe we can make some kind of a deal? I don’t have any money on me. And I’m not sure when I get payed.”

“Ah, don’t worry yourself. You can pay me back tomorrow.” he then quickly added “With a million percent interest! Ha ha ha ha!”

Sophia chuckled nervously.

“Na, I’m kidding of course. We support staff need to watch out for each other. Bottom of the barrel and all that.”

Sophia didn’t know if he was kidding about the interest, or if the food actually was free. But she didn’t want to encourage another half-assed joke, so she didn’t ask.

“That being said.” He continued. “There is one thing you could do for me.”

She felt like he wanted her to ask. All she wanted to do was sit down quietly and eat her Ziktonia soup, whatever it was, and make her stomach stop grumbling. But apart from Lara, Goran was the only person she’d met today who hadn’t been rude to her, or seemed mentally deranged, so she felt obligated to answer.

“How can I be of service, sir?”

“Oh, you don’t have to call me sir. Support staff are all considered untouchable, but equally so. Well, since you asked, please come into the kitchen.”

Sophia abandoned her tray and followed Goran into the kitchen.

“You see it started a few weeks ago. It started as a faint odor but now there’s this awful smell in here. Normally I don’t mind a bit of a whiff, in fact I’ve might even be the source of it sometimes. But this, this is something else. Here, come stand over here.”

Goran indicated the space he was standing in. Sophia came over and stood by him. In her mind she had been picturing that a piece of poultry or an egg had been dropped or forgotten somewhere, but now she understood that this was not just food gone bad.

“Yeah, it’s pretty bad.” She said.

“Yes. I can’t really figure out where it’s coming from either. Oh, it’s really disgusting. And it’s probably not good for hygiene. You know with the crew eating here and all. Will you look into it?”

“Of course.” She said. Although she didn’t have an inkling of what the smell was, where it was coming from or what to do about it.

While sipping her soup her mind wandered again. What if the smell was coming from a corpse in the kitchen? Maybe the old janitor’s corpse? Maybe Goran, who seemed nice, was actually a psycho who *did* put real body parts into the food. She suddenly caught a glimpse of something floating in the soup. It must have been a big pea or something but now she couldn’t get the idea out of here mind that Ziktonia soup was made with Ziktonian eyeballs. She pushed the tray away from her, sat back and pulled her knees up to her chin.

“Psst! Hey you. Janitor-girl.” The quartermaster was standing near the doorway and was trying to get her attention. He nodded discretely with his head, indicating that they should meet in the hallway.

Sophia didn’t really feel like thinking about what was going on so she just went with it.

“Hey, have you had some fun yet?” Lars asked.

“Uhm, yeah, sure. I placed a big order on your computer. ETA 4 hours.”

“That’s great! I got my stuff done too. Now it’s time to shake things up. Hey, hide over there behind that fern. I’m going to show you a great trick!”

Sophia wasn’t going to argue with him, so she went over to the corner. Actually she was quite curious of what Lars was going to do. Of course, none of this seemed normal, but the whole day had been nothing but a long string of strange events and she wouldn’t want to miss an opportunity to get weirdness bingo.

Lars was standing in the middle of the hallway and looking around for something. A man was coming around the corner and Lars suddenly cried

out and collapsed on the floor. While laying there he winked at Sophia. The man shuffled up to Lars. He had a black and gray mullet and was wearing a brown coat. Sophia suddenly understood the situation. It was an obvious trap of some kind. Lars was going to pounce on this poor guy as soon he was close enough.

That didn't happen though. Once the man was close enough he pulled out a revolver from under his coat and shot Lars in the leg.

"Aaaagh!" Lars squirmed on the floor, blood streaming out. "You shot me you asshole!"

"You had it coming Lars, and you know it."

"I did not! I'm innocent! I'm ..."

Lars suddenly lunged at the other man, with something flashing in his hand. Another shot was fired and Lars tumbled to the floor again. He landed face down in a heap.

"Hey you, come out of there." The brown coated man removed the bullets from his revolver and put it away in a holster hidden under his coat. "It's okay, I'm a cop. Name's Jeremy."

Sophia came up to him. "Is he dead?"

"No, I don't think so. Don't worry. He'll survive - unfortunately."

"Uhm. What was he going to do?"

"Oh. He was going to cut me with this light stiletto." Jeremy picked up the little gadget and pressed a small button. A flashing beam of light extended from the hilt about four inches long. "This is standard Syndicate equipment. They market it as 'An elegant weapon, for a more civilized age', but really it's no match for a good slug thrower by your side."

"He was a spy?" Sophia asked, nudging Lars's body with her foot.

"Yeah. He's been working with the Syndicate for some time. Nanotrasen started investigating him since he *accidentally* set some wild animals loose here a couple of months back. I've been following him for some time, trying to figure out his mission. It seems he's been laying low, waiting for an opportunity or maybe a meet with a contact. You're going to have to come with me to the station now for questioning. Did he say anything about..."

Suddenly a floating black-metallic sphere appeared in the hallway. It had flashing blue and red lights and was sounding a klaxon. Sophia recognized it from the info film. That was a securitron, a member of the station's police force. It moved up next to the detective.

"Jeremy Cortez - you are under arrest for assault and attempted murder."

"Oh jeez, not this again." Jeremy yelled. "I'm on your side you dumb ball!"

The Securitron nimbly put some handcuffs on Jeremy.

“The guy on the floor! He’s the one you want to cuff!”

“You are being detained, do not resist. Please remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a Nanotrasen court of Law.”

“You idiotic thing, I AM the law-aw-a-w-a-w-aw-aw-aw.” Jeremy was shaking violently. The Securitron was jabbing a stun baton into his side.

While this was happening, Sophia realized her PDA was chirping from her thigh pocket. She picked it up. “Incoming Call - Head of Staff”. She hesitated for a moment, watched the securitron make off with the detective, then looked at Lars. He was bleeding quite seriously by now.

“Hello, sir.”

“Sophia. What the hell are you doing?”

“Uhm. Nothing. Lars has been shot - twice.”

“What!? What the hell happened?”

“A detective shot him. Said he was a spy.”

“Hmm, well no shocker there really. I’ll send the MedBot. It’ll get him to sickbay and Mac can patch him up.”

“Maybe it’s better if you send a human? The robots here seem kind of unreliable.”

“The bots are fine. You on the other hand have some explaining to do. One of your floor bots have been going nuts in the main hall. It’s been rushing around, yelling fanatically and bumping into shit. Some security officer finally smashed it with a crowbar. What the hell did you do to it?”

“I really didn’t do...”

“You know what. I don’t even want to hear it. Just go pick it up. Get it to the workshop and let the roboticist repair it and have its disk reprogrammed.”

Sophia suddenly remembered that the disk had shot out when she had kicked the robot earlier. It was probably still laying where it landed.

“Will do boss.”

“Don’t call me boss. It’s ‘sir’. And Sophia, clean up that blood.” The PDA went silent. Sophia looked around. With that last comment, it sounded like Connor was looking at the scene. Up in a corner, she could see a small camera. So there was surveillance here. She hadn’t noticed them before, but now that she knew, she spotted several in the ceiling. Good to know someone might be watching you.

A white box-like robot came wheeling down the hall. It had one mechanical arm extended and was towing a levitating stretcher. As it came closer,

she could hear it making soothing comments like “There there” and “You’re gonna be okay”. They were obviously on a loop and the fact that they were very general made them feel very impersonal and not in any way directed at the man who had been shot. Because of this, the robot sounded just like a genuine doctor.

She didn’t want to disobey the direct order of cleaning up the now smeared puddle of blood that remained, but she just couldn’t abandon Lars to the bot. If this one was anything like the others, Lars could end up in an airlock, be injected with Clorox or simply neglected and left to bleed out. She wasn’t about to let that happen so she followed the MedBot closely as it towed Lars down the hall.

On their way to sickbay they passed what must have been the main hall. It was obvious from the fact that there were a lot of people there, most in uniform but a few with civilian clothes, a familiar robot laying in a broken heap, and a huge sign which said “Main Hall”. The hall was brightly lit and had a large ellipsoidal couch in the center. On the other end of the hall was the shuttle gate where shuttles docked with the station. Down and to the left was the bar and corridor of offices. She started to get a small sense of direction now, which was comforting in an otherwise bat-shit crazy day.

She strolled into sickbay immediately behind the bot. There was a thin man sitting in a chair in a little waiting area. He was wearing a black shirt and looked almost like a priest. Mac appeared and came over to look at the patient.

“Wow, what do we have?”

“Well, he’s been shot.” Sophia said. But realized that Mac was talking to the robot, not her.

“Multiple gunshot wounds sir, to the right leg and right shoulder. Moderate blood loss.”

“Okay. Evan, won’t be needing your help today it seems.” Mac was talking to the man sitting in the chair who suddenly got up.

“Thank the Lord!” Evan said. He *was* a priest, he was even holding a bible.

Mac completely ignored Sophia and moved the stretcher through an opening as two doors automatically parted.

“Are you all right my child?” Evan asked her. “You must be in shock!”

Sophia was slightly annoyed. She didn’t like to be called ‘child’, but she figured that priests talked that way to everyone. This however was slightly ironic since Evan himself probably wasn’t older than 25.

“Yeah I’m fine. Does the station have it’s own chapel?”

“We sure do, it’s a combined church, mosque and temple. And you’re welcome in the house of God anytime... but especially during Mass... on Sunday afternoons. Did you know, Sunday is the day of worship? It has been since the dawn of humanity.”

“Mhm.” Sophia had always considered Sunday to be the day of laying on the couch and eating Spacheetos. She wasn’t too keen on attending mass and priests made her really uncomfortable. Her coping mechanism was to try to distance herself by freaking them out as much as possible by saying bizarre and hedonistic things. It worked about fifty percent of the time. Some priests were ambitious.

“Are you a woman of faith?”

“Not really. Don’t think I’m baptized or anything.”

“Well, there are classes! I can set you up. They’re free!”

“Yeah, I’m sure they are. Hey, can you get Spacheetos here?”

“I think the vending machines have them... So I’ll see you?”

“Yeah. I’m Sophia the new janitor. I’ll be the one cleaning your altar after you’ve sacrificed your goat on Sunday.”

“We don’t sacrifice goats!” Evan recoiled slightly.

“Oh sorry, virgins then. See you around Evan.”

* * *

The Roboticist - Veronica - was wearing a creepy mask and some kind of dress with lots of pockets from which tools, wires and parts protruded. She was now looking at the robot lying on the table in the center of the room. Sophia was leaning against the wall. She was very tired.

“FloorBot, Mk III, Nanotrasen robotics division. Don’t make’em like this anymore. Huge letdown the Mk IVs.” Veronica prodded the bot with some tool. “So I hear you been having some trouble with it. Did you have some question’s about it?”

“Yes I do.”

“Great! I love answering questions about Nanotrasen tech!” Veronica sounded elated, but you couldn’t tell since the mask completely obscured her face.

“Well. For starters, it doesn’t work.”

“That isn’t a question.”

“Uhm.” Sophia murmured. She looked at the bot laying on the table.

“Well. It’s been smashed to shit!”

“Yeah. I can see that. Still not a question though.”

Somehow Sophia could tell that this conversation wasn’t going to be easy. It was clear the roboticist was way more adapt at dealing with computers than she was with human beings.

“Okay. Can you repair it?”

“Of course I can. But we’ll get to that in a moment. We’ve got to weed out *why* it was smashed to shit first.”

This seemed obvious to Sophia. It was smashed to shit because it’s idiotic programming annoyed the hell out of someone who took out their aggravations on it.

“I think it wasn’t programmed correctly.” Sophia handed Veronica the disk, who stuck it into a computer and sat down in front of a screen.

Something about that last remark must have ticked Veronica off because suddenly she sounded all defensive. “What’s wrong with the program?”

“Well, it was pulling up floor tiles in a hallway.”

“It’s a FloorBot, that’s its primary function; to repair floors.”

“No, you don’t understand. It was pulling up tiles which weren’t broken.”

“Impossible, it has a flawless algorithm for determining floor quality.”

“Well. It was also bumping into people.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, do you know Denise? It knocked her down earlier.”

“Did you see this happen? Denise always has her nose in some book or paper. She bumps into people all the time. Couldn’t it have been Denise who bumped into the bot?”

Actually, that could’ve happened, Sophia thought. Denise seemed kind of distracted and was carrying a bunch of papers.

“Maybe. But then the bot started destroying paperwork!”

“Paperwork? How? In what manner?”

“Well there were documents on the floor...”

“Sounds like trash then. Documents should be stored in a binder or in a desk drawer. When they are on the floor it means that they have been discarded. FloorBots clean trash on floors. You really ought to know this as a janitor.”

Sophia realized that there was no arguing with the Roboticist. She paused for a moment, then tried a different approach.

“Can you reprogram a robot to do something else?”

“Of course I can!” Veronica’s tone of voice was a mixture of annoyance and pride. “What do you want the bot to do?”

“Repair floors.”

“That’s what it currently does. I don’t have to change the program then.”

“Wait. I changed my mind.” This was going to take some carefully wording Sophia thought.

“Firstly, let the bot actively avoid people.”

“Sounds dumb, but okay.”

“Secondly. It should never clean trash. I’ll take care of that some other way.”

“Stupid, but as long as the station’s clean. I don’t care if you work yourself to death.”

“Thirdly” Sophia grinding her teeth. “The bot should only put down floor where the tiles are extremely worn or missing altogether. The same goes for beams and other floor components.”

“We’ll be walking on some worn floors in a while. But complaints will be filed with the janitor, so what do I care.” Veronica typed rapidly on the keyboard, then hit the eject button on the computer and expertly caught the disk in the air. Sophia was actually a bit impressed. “Done. Here’s the disk. No don’t try to stick it in yet, we need to give this little one some tender loving care first. And by that, I mean we’re going to repair it.”

“What do you mean *we*?”

“You’re going to be my assistant. Do you know anything about electronics or mechanics?”

Actually, Sophia knew a bit. Nothing about robots, but rather about vehicles. She didn’t want to get assigned any tasks she could screw up though.

“No. I’m just a janitor, remember.”

“Well, at least you can bring me that spanner over there.” Sophia handed the tool to Veronica.

“Okay, now hold down this piece right here. You need to apply pressure while I...” No sooner had Sophia put her hands down on the metal then a stream of oily liquid shot out at her. She got some in her face but most was splattered on her jumpsuit.

“No, not there you dolt! Wow, you really are useless. Now you got to get out of here and clean yourself up. Go on get. I’ll finish with this by myself. There are showers in the dorms.”

“Where are the dorms?”

“There are several, but you’ll probably want to use the one in the office corridor. That’s the closest one, and it’s also just opposite janitorial.” Veronica was pointing in the direction of the main hall. “Jeez, what a mess.”

The dorms were their own little system of corridors. The day shift had ended a couple of hours ago so it was rather quiet, apart from some muted chit chat and someone snoring. Sophia couldn’t stand snoring and decided that after the shower, she’d head back to janitorial and sleep there just like the old janitor did, maybe he had hated snoring too.

The showers were coed, but there was nobody there at the moment. In the changing room she found a big stack of towels. She took one and wondered who supplied them. She looked around. No cameras in here, thank goodness. As she got out of her soiled jumpsuit she tried to recall what Connor had said about laundry. Something about just dumping it in a chute. She hung the towel on a hook and walked into the shower room. She got into a shower stall, intending to make this a quick cleanse. It wasn’t that she was worried about prying eyes, it was rather that she just couldn’t stand interacting with another person today. And also, just like all shower rooms, there was a faint odor in here.

The shower room was quite big. A dozen people could shower simultaneously and then some. She looked around for some soap and found a box labeled “body soap”, it was empty though. Next to it somebody had built a house with the bars. She carefully removed one without destroying the impromptu work of art.

She hurriedly finished in the shower and wrapped herself in the towel and when she encountered her dirty jumpsuit on the changing room floor she realized that she had nothing clean to put on. She picked it up and started walking out of the dorms. In the door to the corridor she met Mac the doctor. She blushed and whispered a “hi”, slightly embarrassed to have been caught wearing only the towel. Mac was yawning and looking down at his PDA. He made a little salute-like wave with his left hand as he passed her, but didn’t even look up. She was slightly offended that he hadn’t peeked. Oh well, he was the doctor here. He’d probably see her naked at some point anyway.

She skimmed over to janitorial and almost collided with the doors. They didn’t open automatically like they did before. “What the hell was going on here?” Sophia thought. Doors had been opening automatically all day for her. Was this some sort of prank? She threw her jumpsuit on the floor and banged on the door with one fist, the other holding the towel. Annoyed, angry

and worried that someone would see her in this compromising situation, the door was subjected to her fury. The door however, was made of duranium steel and would not budge.

“Hey. You. What are you doing? ” A firm voice sounded.

Sophia spun around. Tears almost in her eyes. Wondering what lunatic she had to endure now. A tall woman in a green bulky uniform stood in front of her. She was wearing a fancy ceremonial navy cap and had medals pinned to her chest.

“Who are you? What are you doing here? Why are you naked?” The woman, who was obviously the Captain asked.

Oh hell. Sophia thought. Just the craziest day ever, ending in total and utter humiliation - and who does she meet? Just the number one ranking officer on the station. She was so getting fired. “I’m the ja-janitor. I... can’t get in.” Tears now rolling down her cheeks, anticipating the scolding of a lifetime.

The Captain smiled softly, then bent down and picked up the soiled janitor uniform lying on the floor. She fished out the ident-card in the breast pocket and held it up in front of the stubborn doors which then immediately opened. Then she handed Sophia the bundled up uniform.

“Almost the same thing happened to me my first day. Don’t sweat it. Lot worse happens around here.” She then gave Sophia a nod and continued down the hall.

Sophia tried to find something to say, but had forgotten what she usually did when she encountered kindness. Anyway the captain was gone before she could blink. The doors started to close again and she quickly moved inside.

Fortunately there were fresh uniforms in janitorial. She pulled one on and gathered up the dirty one and the damp towel. Above one of the holes in the wall a hand written note had been taped. It said “dirty clothes”. Now that she thought about it, she had seen a similar chute in the kitchen, the dorms and the sickbay. She chucked the clothes into the chute, happy to be rid of them. A vibrating sound came from the chute as they were transported away to somewhere. She sat down on the couch. The vibrating sound didn’t recede though. If anything it sounded like it was coming closer! Suddenly the sound stopped but there was a clank from the whole in the wall behind her, the ball of clothes shot out and landed in one of the bigger bins.

“Great. Well that explains how the laundry is done around here.” She thought to herself. She then reclined on the couch and fell asleep from sheer exhaustion.

* * *

The jolting sound of the clank woke her up again several hours later. Two white towels were dumped into the bin. Sophia sat up yawning and scratching her head. The couch wasn't the most comfortable for sleeping on and she was wondering if it could've given her lice. This place was filthy, in more ways than one. The magazine laying on the floor was a nudie magazine - gross.

She spent some time cleaning up the place. Then equipped herself with a mop, some cleaning agents and a rolling bucket. It had really been an awful first day, but her encounter with the captain last night had turned it around somewhat. She was now determined to make today more productive.

She had already gotten two messages on her PDA. One from the Robotist saying that the FloorBot was repaired and had been put into operation on the station. The other wasn't as nice. It was from Denise, reminding her that the light bulbs needed installing in the green house. She promptly ignored that for now and concentrated on the blood smear which she presumed was still stinking up the corridor outside the cafeteria.

She was right. While she was cleaning it up she wondered what had happened to the detective Jeremy. She felt bad that she hadn't helped him when the securitron had arrested him. She should probably check up on that next. Maybe she could make it up to him.

"Oh great. You're here." Goran had appeared behind her. "We really need to solve the you-know-what today". Some patrons were going into the cafeteria to get some breakfast.

"Actually I promised someone I'd help them out with something else."

"Oh, you mean like how you promised *me* yesterday you'd help *me*? I even treated you to that scrumptious soup!"

"Yeah I know. But it's really important..."

"So is my thing. I swear, the smell is starting to spread out into the cafeteria now. I can't keep blaming it on space cabbage and farts. Come on! I'll give you a croissant. You look famished."

The blood stain had quelled her hunger before but now she was starting to feel it again. And she could smell a freshly baked something from the kitchen.

"Okay Goran. You win."

She munched her croissant and looked around the kitchen. She started by cleaning behind every electrical apparatus but the smell remained. She

threw away a half a dozen moldy pieces of fruit which Goran insisted were still edible, but the smell remained. After a few hours of cleaning and searching there was no plausible explanation left other than that the smell was coming from the air ducts. Her daydream from the day before returned and she swallowed.

“Hey Goran. Did Jack clean in here before.”

“No way. Jack didn’t do anything himself. He let bots do everything.”

“You don’t happen to know what happened to him do you?”

“Naw. We didn’t really talk. Didn’t really see eye to eye. Don’t think I’ve seen him in over a month actually. Why do you want to know?”

“I dunno. I just do. Doesn’t it seem kind of weird that he just disappeared, and instead of an investigation they just hire another janitor?”

“Oh honey, that’s Nanotrasen for you. Actually a lot stranger things happen around here. Did you know Lars got shot just out in the hall here yesterday? Turns out he was a spy the whole time! Now that’s weird. You think you know a guy, he seems totally normal, and he’s actually a traitor. Who’d’a thunk?”

“Yeah, he seemed soo normal.”

“Right?”

“Goran. I’m sorry but I think your smell in here is coming from somewhere else and is carried in here through the air ducts. From what I’ve seen you don’t have any major openings in here so I’m going to have to investigate from another end.”

“Huh. Well now that you mention it, when the AC shuts off it does actually smell better in here.”

“Why does the AC shut off?”

“Oh, I think it’s due to power outages or some such. It usually switches off for several hours every once in a while.”

“Okay. Well, I’m going to have to get into the ventilation system and I can’t from here. What’s next door?”

“That’s the captain’s quarters. But you don’t have access. You’re gonna have to talk to Connor to get in there.”

“I’ll manage. I’ll just say it needs cleaning.”

Sophia wasn’t going to talk to Connor. He’d probably get suspicious and start asking questions. The less Connor knew about what she was doing the better, she decided.

She walked next door, dragging her mop and bucket with her. She knocked on the captain’s door, but there was no answer. She turned around

and pondered her options. In front of her was a vending machine. She went up to it. Super-preserved donuts, Cloac Acola cans and there, Spacheetos! She pressed her palms against the glass. If only she had some credits. When did she get paid?

“Hey. How’s it going?”

The captain was standing next to her.

“Oh. Hi.” Sophia looked up at the tall woman, “sir”. She backed up against the vending machine. Staring nervously at the captain. A moment passed in silence.

“You’re in my way.” The captain said, still in a friendly tone. Sophia moved. The captain put a light blue 20-credit chip into the machine and pressed a button on the key pad. A small ice-late can dropped into the tray.

“Sir. Do you need your quarters cleaned?”

“You don’t have to do that. I’m really not that messy you know.”

“Please. I want to, as a thank you for last night. You saved me remember?”

“Don’t mention it. You must have other, more important duties to attend. And also, I can’t unlock my door so I would have to be there the entire time.”

“Actually. I think there is something in the ventilation system. It’s actually causing a bit of a problem down in the kitchen.”

“Oh that, I just thought that was Goran’s BO getting worse. Fair enough, I’ll let you in so you can have a look. I have some logs to review anyway.”

Sophia crouched down by the captain’s wooden desk. She resisted an urge to ask the captain about Jack, but she didn’t want to disturb her more than necessary. There was a grate in the wall which she removed and then crawled in, with a flash light in front of her.

“Hey, don’t get lost in there! I like you. Don’t want to get another janitor now.” The captain yelled after her.

Sophia smiled, then remembered the task at hand and chewed her lip as she crawled forward in what she thought was the direction of the kitchen.

She got to a junction. To the left was the kitchen, she was sure of it. And she could smell that odor again, but the draft was coming from the right, so she crawled that way. Continuing for quite a stretch she was quickly getting fatigued. The odor was getting stronger though, so she must be going in the right direction.

She crawled by a small vent and peered out. It was the bar, and she could see the top of Lara’s head. She thought to call out to her, but didn’t feel like

having to explain why she was in this ridiculous place. Lara was talking to Evan, the priest.

“No Evan. I’m not coming to mass. Sundays are when I make the most from tips. You know that. And remember, tips are shared. You wouldn’t want me to close the bar on Sundays.”

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Evan responded. Sophia rolled her eyes.

“Yes I know. You’ve said so before. But if I remember correctly the Eye of the Needle was just a gate in some ancient city, and it wasn’t that tiny, it was just unusually small. Therefore camels had trouble getting through - but wasn’t impossible.”

“You know what I mean Bill... “

The discussion continued but Sophia had continued her crawl, all the while following the odor. She was now approaching the dorms, at least she thought so. She came up to another junction. This one was a bit tricky. The air duct led straight, but the path that led off to the side was heavily sloped downward and several feet wide. It would be tricky to go straight without running the risk of sliding down to the right.

There was a small vent to her left. She peered through and blushed. Below was the shower room. She could see down into the room, the soap structure had been toppled into a pile, and there, in the spot where she herself had showered last night, a dark haired man was showering. She looked away, but then realized that it was Mac. Should she look? He hadn’t. She decided it was only fair that she took a peek, since he would probably see her later anyway, being a doctor and all. She couldn’t really see properly from this angle though, but there was another vent a couple of feet forward. The angle would be better from there. She felt a little ashamed of what she was doing, but on the other hand it was fun. And she hadn’t had fun in a while and she deserved it. She quietly moved up a bit towards the next vent.

She only caught a glimpse very briefly because in the next moment she slid down on the incline and lost her grip on the bare metal wall. She gave out a short yell as she slid down the duct, picking up speed, the light from the flashlight bouncing around erratically. She then tumbled into a bigger chamber, and landed in a heap of trash.

Disheveled and banged up, she was immediately overpowered by a nauseating smell. The smell of putrefaction. It was very cold in here, so she figured she was close to the air conditioner. She slowly got up out of the trash

pile and picked up the flash light. She moved it around the chamber, and that's when she saw it, the corpse. Dammit, she hated when she was right about stuff, because it usually wasn't good for her. The corpse looked about three weeks old. Slightly preserved because of the cold. It was male and wearing a gray and purple jumpsuit. The label "JANITOR" visibly taunting her seemed to confirm the plain truth.

It didn't take her long to piece together the rest of the puzzle. What had happened to Jack was exactly what had happened to her. She was quite literally following in her predecessors footsteps. Jack must have figured out that the vents could work as a peep show. He could get into the ventilation system with some lame cleaning pretense and do his perverted thing. He had then slid down here, just as she had and become trapped.

How depressing. She knew exactly how the next couple of days would go. Thirst would probably get her first. Either that or she'd freeze to death. She called out for help a couple of times, but then realized that Jack must have done exactly the same thing, to no avail. She sat down, trying to think. After a while she went over to the corpse and looked it over. In the right breast pocket she found an ident-card, identical to her own. In the left breast pocket she found a music player of a similar model as the one she owned, or used to own. Amazingly, this one started up. She put the earbuds in and listened for a while. It wasn't that bad. At least she'd have some music to pass the time with. In his thigh pocket she found Jack's PDA. It was dead of course.

"Of course, the PDA!" Sophia said aloud in the little chamber. She pulled out her own PDA. She had gotten another message from Denise about the light bulbs. Annoyed, she tried to find out how to make a call but her fingers were trembling. Her nerves were not handling this situation well and also she was getting awfully cold now.

Something brushed past her left leg, a rat! She shouted, backed away and dropped the PDA. It fell to the floor - crack! The rat rushed off somewhere and disappeared. Sophia picked up the PDA again. The screen was cracked and blank. It didn't start.

"Goddam piece of shit!" she exclaimed and threw it against a wall. Just as the device hit the wall there was a violent explosion that shook the entire room. "What the hell was that?" she said to herself. Then suddenly, she could hear the sound of a fan shutting off, the draft subsided.

Some minutes passed. Sophia tried shouting again and banging on the walls. The room wasn't as cold now so she figured the AC had shut off. In

fact, it was getting rather hot instead. A couple of minutes later she realized she was sweating. She rolled down her jumpsuit and tied the sleeves around her waist. What could be causing the heat? And what did the crew do when it got hot? Where there uniform tank tops and shorts? She gathered the custom wasn't to walk around with your upper body exposed. It was now like a sauna in here. She was going to die of dehydration within the next hour if this continued.

There was a zinging sound coming from a wall now. A point of light was cutting a hole in the wall! When the circle was complete the wall fell inward and Sophia saw a man on the other side. It was Jeremy, the detective, with the light stiletto in hand. He dashed into the chamber and she saw a raging fire behind him. With the airflow coming from the flaming room, it got even hotter.

"Jeremy! What is..."

"Hey kid. Out of the way!"

Sophia got out of the way and Jeremy started cutting through the opposite wall.

"A bomb went off in the port hall. Probably in the captain's quarters. The whole station is going up in flames." Jeremy was almost shouting, he had to, the fire was roaring and all kinds of alarms were going off. He was so focused on cutting the wall he didn't even notice the dead body on the floor, or that Sophia had her top down. His own clothes were seared and barely holding together. His flesh and hair was burned in several places, and it stank. "We gotta cut through here and get to the Shuttle Gate. Someone in command will have called an escape shuttle by now, but there's only one place it can dock."

"Jeremy, the bomb, do you think Lars set it up?"

"Yeah probably. He must have done that before trying to screw me over yesterday." Black smoke was filling the ceiling now.

"He was acting really weird earlier. Saying I could order whatever I wanted on the quartermaster console, and telling me to *have fun*. I should have told somebody, but I just thought everybody was kind of nuts here."

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Jeremy just winked at her as he kicked in the door he had made for himself in the wall. "Follow me!"

They came out into an large open chamber. It was only lit from the flames behind them but Sophia instantly understood where she was, the greenhouse. "This way" Jeremy said.

They ran down a path as the room got brighter. The flames were starting

to devour the foliage where they had entered. Jeremy turned a corner and almost ran down another person. It was Denise.

“There you are, I’ve been trying to get a hold of you all day.” Denise said looking at Sophia. “Oh, and if you’re going to work with your jumpsuit down like that, Nanotrasen regulation stipulates that you should wear a tank top.” Sophia’s jaw dropped. “Detective, what are you doing here? Ugh, what happened to you? You can go. I don’t need you. Now we need to install those light bulbs today. And also, there’s a sharp smell in here now. See if you can do something about that.”

Jeremy grabbed Denise with both hands and yelled into her face. “We gotta get out of here immediately. Can’t you see the station’s on fire?”

“Oh, I bet it’s just another drill.”

“Does that look like a drill to you?” Jeremy pointed at the now pillar of black smock erupting from behind some trees and the inferno that was raging below it.

“Visual simulators. I’ve seen them before. Nanotrasen started to deploy them when nobody took drills seriously any longer.”

“And therefore nobody is taking the real thing seriously either. I’m telling you Denise, we’ll be dead in three minutes if we don’t make a run for it.”

“I’m not going anywhere, my hydrengas...”

Denise dropped to the floor when Sophia belted her.

“Good call kid.” Jeremy picked Denise up and slung her over his shoulder.

“Actually she was being kind of rude again. Hence the punch. I’m surprised it doesn’t happen more often here.”

“Oh it does. Have you met our clown? Never mind, let’s move!”

* * *

The main hall was lit by some kind of emergency lighting. As they entered they heard a voice over the comm system.

“Okay folks, that’s it, I’m calling it. The shuttle is on it’s way. ETA 20 minutes.” It was the Head of Staff’s voice.

“What? They’re calling the shuttle *now*? The AI must have been borked.” Jeremy was still carrying Denise, but was putting her down on a seat next to them. They seemed to have outrun the fire for now.

“What does that mean?” Sophia asked.

“AI? It means ‘Artificial Intelligence’.”

"I know what AI means. I'm not a complete idiot. What do you mean it's been 'borked'?"

"Well do you know of the Asimov Laws?"

"Uhm, no, sorry I'm not a fan."

"Well. When they program AIs they have to put some axioms, or 'laws' into their programming, or else the AI can go nuts or 'rogue', as they say. Actually I'm not an expert, but I do know that the laws forbid the AI from, by action or inaction, letting humans come to harm. This means that in a catastrophic event the AI will try to help us survive."

"Seems reasonable."

"Yeah, the first AIs didn't have those laws and were pretty malicious. But anyway. The shuttle can be called by any one of the command staff *or* the AI in the event of a crisis."

"You mean like this one."

"Yeah. Since Connor is called the shuttle only now, that probably means a couple of things. First, the captain is probably dead. Otherwise she would have called the shuttle right away when the bomb went off. Unlucky that she was in her quarters when the bomb went off. She should have been on the bridge though."

"Yeah, pretty unlucky." Sophia, felt partly responsible but felt this wasn't the time for more confessions.

"Secondly, the AI must have been disabled before the fire started spreading uncontrollably. *Borked* is just Nanotrasen slang for disabled. Don't ever say *fubared* or everybody will know you're a geek."

"Thirdly. The shuttle takes about 20 minutes to arrive. And I'm pretty sure we'll be dead in about 10 because of the noxious fumes from the fire."

"Well, it was nice knowing you Jeremy." Sophia extended her hand.

"Ditto, kid. From what I've heard, toxic gas isn't that bad of a way to go."

"Better than you deserve Jeremy." Laras voice boomed out from under a yellow suit. She and another crew member was walking up. Steam coming off of them. "We've contained the fire to the port side of the station. It'll destroy everything, sure, but it'll take time."

The other person took off his helmet. It was the old man from the theatre.

"Bill." Jeremy nodded to the bartender, "glad you made it."

Lara grinned widely. "Sophia. This is Roger. He's our clown."

"Watch out Roger." Denise groaned, slowly erecting herself in her seat. "She punches people."

“Okay people! Everybody needs to gather in the gate area now.” the Head of Staff had appeared and was shouting with a megaphone at the small crowd. “Wow, is this everyone? Well at least we won’t be cramped on the shuttle”

Mac was there, and a security officer who was carefully watching a hand cuffed Lars. Lars wasn’t wearing his uniform anymore but instead he had bright orange coveralls with some black stripes and the words “PRISONER #1” printed on the chest. He was sitting on the floor, had a black eye and looked rather unhappy.

Apart from Lara, Roger the Clown, Denise, Jeremy and Sophia, there were only a couple of other crew members gathered here.

“Did anybody see Goran?” Sophia asked.

“He was in the can at the cafeteria” a woman in a yellow jumpsuit said. He probably bought it in the initial blast.

“What about Evan and Victoria?”

“This is the Holy Fire! It will cleanse the unclean and the unworthy!” Even suddenly appeared from a door to the right, tightly grasping his bible.

“He’s here.” Connor said. “I’m so glad key personell survived this ordeal. A priest, a barkeep a janitor and a Clown.”

“Hey!” Lara exclaimed.

“Victoria then?” Sophia repeated.

“She said she was busy, and it was only a drill.” Lara said. “I tried to drag her with me, but she kicked me out of the workshop and locked the doors.”

“Nuts!” Sophia said. “Should we go get her?”

“Nobody leaves!” Connor stated. “We’ve got a couple of more minutes until the shuttle arrives. My job is to get you all out of here safe and sound, and I’m not risking anyone for someone who doesn’t value their life. Now where the hell is that dope smoking turd of a pilot. Oh there he comes. What in *the* hell is going on out there?”

The crew gathered close to the panorama window looking out from the gate. The shuttle was approaching, but there was something not quite right with the docking area. Where there had previously been a void there was a large gray mass which now covered most of the docking area. Out at the edge was a small squat robot working energetically at putting down beams and floor tiles.

“Who let that little shit out there and why is it paving over our gate with floor tiles?” Connor yelled, not being able to take his eyes of the FloorBot

set against the blackness of space.

Victoria came up behind them.

“Oh, that’s the FloorBot Mk III. It’s putting down floor, just like it’s programmed to do. Fascinating model that Mk III, much better than the Mk IV. They don’t make ’em like that anymore.”

“Do you have a Mk I brain? Our evacuation is going to get fubared!”

Sophia came up beside him and tugged at his arm.

“Sir, I think you mean ’borked’”

The seriously cute shuttle pilot was enjoying a hand rolled calujana joint and had his legs up on the dash board. As per usual the auto-pilot was plugged in, leaving him free to enjoy the latest tunes on *his* music device. In utter ignorance the shuttle first smashed into the FloorBot’s creation, which killed the pilot instantly. Then, the shuttle remains crashed through the shuttle gate’s panorama window. Wiping out the small remainder of the crew. The Head of Staff’s last thought was “yes, ’borked’ was the right word for this sort of thing.”

The Geneticist

“Tell me again what happened.” The head of staff was clearly pissed off. “From the beginning. Tell me why my science officer is dead.”

They were standing around the table in the morgue. Evan, the priest was there, holding a kerchief to his nose, the biologist was leafing through a written report, and the geneticist, Jonathan Burns was starring at the corpse. It was terrible to look at, and at the same time he couldn’t look away. The chest cavity had burst and the science officer’s uniform, which had once been blue and green was now black with dried blood.

“On Tuesday we had a briefing, remember? Kevin had gotten a transmission from CentCom about some rock we were to check out. You were there, but left early.”

“Oh yeah, I was wiped. I had just came back from some RnR on Quintos. Weird how beaches and palm trees tires you out more than they relax you.” Connor said.

“We didn’t get much of a briefing anyway, Kevin just said he needed an expeditionary force to beam down to the planet to investigate what appeared to be a distress signal. I volunteered and we also had Elsa Chopra, from security.” Jonathan finally tore his gaze from the mutilated corpse and met Connor’s cold stare. “That made four of us, with the pilot. He took us in range and Kevin calibrated the teletronics. We beamed down and the pilot flew back, standard Nanotrasen procedure.”

“What was the planet like. Atmosphere? Biosphere?” Denise looked up from her papers and adjusted her glasses. “This report is rubbish.”

“Earth primordial. Nitrogen and carbon dioxide. We were wearing suits

of course. Biosphere? Well, at first we didn't think there was much there, perhaps microbial life but I'm not sure. But then... You know what? You're really the one who should've been there, green biology isn't my area."

"I can't tag along on every damn foolish outing that lands on the science officer's table. In contrast to you lab rats I actually have important work to do on the station."

"Hey! Smelling flowers and petting bunnies is hardly *important work*. Just the other day I stepped in one of your chimps' shit. Denise, who do you think you are..."

"Stop it! No bickering!" Connor snapped. "We've got to figure this out and quickly. We've got a situation on our hands, remember? Denise, shut up and let Jonathan finish the story."

"Kevin was following the blips on one of his devices and we got down in some sort of cave. Inside there was an infestation of insectoid creatures. Big as grape fruits. At first they only seemed to scatter, but once we were further in they actually started to come close. After a while we had to start picking them off each other. Then suddenly, Kevin fell to the ground and started screaming, one of them had gotten inside his suit."

Evan made loud high-pitched sound. "I'm sorry. Please continue."

"We dragged him out of the cave and stomped the last of the critters with our boots. Kevin had stopped screaming, but that's when we saw that the creature had attached itself to his face. Kevin was unconscious so command had fallen to Elsa and she decided to terminate the mission. We teleported back to the station with Kevin's teletronics device."

"Why didn't you alert me immediately when you came back?" Connor demanded. "Kevin should have been quarantined. Nanotrasen protocol..."

"He was dying. He needed medical attention immediately and I wasn't going to let you let him die. I know you Connor, heart of stone."

Connor rushed up to Jonathan and pushed him up against the morgue cabinets. Jonathan was a tall guy, but the head of staff was strong. "You idiot! We don't need another xenomorph incident here!" Connor was barking so violently, his spit was splashing on to Jonathan's face. "Good thing I'm the executive officer here! I may have a heart of stone but I've also got the balls to make some tough decisions when it comes to security. What the hell did Elsa do?"

"I, I persuaded her to agree with me." Jonathan gurgled, wiping his face with his lab coat sleeve.

"Persuaded, how?"

"I gave her some stims."

"You bribed her. Dammit Jonathan! That's a grade two offense." He let him down. "You're going to the brig, just as soon as you finish the story."

"Probably the safest place to be now anyway. Well, Mac had a look at him and got him stable. I went to the dorms to get some sleep. When I came back Kevin was still unconscious but the creature had detached itself. Mac was dissecting it and we chatted for a little while. He was acting rather odd, saying weird stuff, so I told him to get some sleep. Then he just snapped and came at me with a scalpel. I managed to avoid him. Then he just roared and rushed off. I sat there catching my breath for a while. Then I got up to have a look at Kevin, worried that Mac might have done something to him. That's when... when it happened."

"His chest exploded' " Denise read from the report. "That's what it says in here. 'His chest exploded and several more creatures came out.' That's what you told the detective who questioned you."

"Yeah, yes. That's right."

Connor groaned, rubbing his eyes and forehead. "That was yesterday. Someone then reported Mac running through the main hall assaulting his crew mates. A securitron finally got him and he's now in the brig in a straight jacket. The psychologist says he's plain crazy. It's possibly a medical condition but we don't have another doctor to examine him."

"I could check him out." Jonathan said. "I do have some medical knowledge. And I was going to the brig anyway."

"Well, It's not just him. I've gotten reports all day of strange activity; crew members not showing up for duty, petty thefts, sabotage, people beating up Roger more than usual... Okay, here's what we're going to do. Evan, you escort Jonathan to the brig, but let him get some medical equipment first. Try to figure out what happened to Mac. Make sure to wear some protective clothing though. If he's gotten some kind of disease we don't want it spreading. Denise, go find the Janitor and anyone from security, but not Elsa. I'll unlock the armory for you and you can pick up some extermination gear."

"Where are you going?"

"To find the captain, of course. Gonna make sure she's okay. I've got a feeling the shit's gonna hit the fan and I want the captain to be able to handle it."

"You want the captain to handle shit?" Denise looked puzzled. "Don't think she'll be up for that."

"Fuck off, Denise. You know what I mean. Now get going."

"The power's out." Evan said. "The door..."

The door to the brig stood open. The security station was lit by yellow emergency lighting.

"So much for my medical examination."

"Hey, there's somebody over here."

"It's Elsa. You okay?"

"Ugh." Elsa sat up, breathing heavily. She was wearing a blue jumpsuit, some gray plastic armor and a riot helmet, it was standard security officer gear. "What's going on?"

"We were hoping you could tell us." Evan said.

"Um, I remember the light flickering and an alarm going off. Then suddenly somebody knocked me down. That's all I remember."

"Look." Jonathan picked up some rags from the floor. The remains of a straight jacket.

"How the hell did he get loose? My God, he must have super human strength!" Evan held his hand up to cover his mouth.

"Super human strength, my ass. Ain't nobody gets out of a straight jacket." Elsa said. "He must have had help."

"Who would help a raging mad man escape a straight jacket?"

"I don't know, Evan. But we've got to find him, he's a danger, to others and himself."

"There's blood on this. I want to run an analysis in the lab. Evan, you want to come with me or do you want to go with Elsa on her hunt?"

"I'll go with you. To protect you."

"What do you mean. How are you going to protect me?"

"With prayer."

"You'll shut up if you want to come with me. We don't need to attract any more attention to ourselves and you going on about the *end of the world* or the *lordly light* isn't going to help us one bit. Elsa, see you around."

"Um, Mac could have gone to the lab. So I think I'll tag along with y'all. It's probably best to stick together anyway." Elsa was nervously looking around, which was odd Jonathan thought. Elsa was usually such a tough guy. Something must have spooked her.

They left the brig and walked down the starboard hall. The lights were out here too. They couldn't see anybody else but some faint screaming could be heard.

“This is crazy, just crazy.” Evan muttered to himself.

“Coms are still dead too.” Jonathan was looking at his PDA.

They came around a corner and found the clown sitting on the floor. He was bleeding from his head. Jonathan squatted next to him. “Hey. You alive?”

“Honk.” Roger said. It was normally impossible to talk to Roger, he’d just speak gibberish and make silly noises. Now was no different.

Jonathan suppressed a sudden urge to punch him.

“Leave him.” Elsa said. “He ain’t gonna make it.”

“What’s that coming from his mouth. He’s drooling. Jonathan, don’t get too close.”

“I’m just going to get a sample. It can have something to do with the creatures or Mac’s disease.” He got out a little vial and collected some of the clown’s thick saliva.

“Dooberi goobery.” Roger gurgled, then dropped his head.

“Sad as ever.” Evan said.

“Poor dude. Evan, why don’t you stay and say a prayer over him. Me and Jonathan will go down to the lab.”

“Nope. We stay together.” Jonathan said.

“Acute Neuron-degenerative Encephalitis.” Jonathan said, peering with both eyes into the microscope.

“What’s that?” Elsa was standing behind him. Evan was sitting close by in a chair, having a blank look on his face.

“It’s what made Mac go coo-coo. There’s a virus in his blood causing him to suffer from a mental disease. Looks like some mutated strain though.”

“Is it treatable? Curable?”

“Yeah. Antidote is pretty easy to make and you can cure it, if you catch it early on. Usually symptoms don’t show until a couple of hours after being exposed. It varies though from host to host, takes minutes for some, hours for others. For some victims the incubation time is even longer. When it hits you, it’s usually pretty bad though. Most people react initially with a brief paralytic episode, then you suffer from paranoia and/or euphoria. This is followed by erratic, even maniacal behavior and/or frenzy. It’s actually quite common on tropical worlds. The virus is known to be carried by insectoid creatures. Mac must have caught it from those things we brought up from the planet.”

“Shit. So we’ve all been exposed? Are we going to start going nuts?”

“Maybe. I’m still not sure how contagious it is. Mac was dissecting the creature after all. I need more data to figure this out. I’m going to go next door to sickbay and try to get a sample from the dead creature he was dissecting.”

“That sounds dangerous.” Evan stammered.

“Don’t worry. I’ll put one of these on.” Jonathan took down a bio-hazard suit hanging on the wall of the lab. “You two stay here. The whole sickbay could be contaminated and we only have one suit here. I’ll be right back.” He put on the suit and waved to the other two.

Jonathan passed through the door into sickbay. The MedBot was desperately trying to get through an opening blocked by a body. It was Bill the bartender. At least Jonathan thought it was Bill, her face looked like it had taken a shotgun blast point blank, but the characteristic black pants and white shirt gave her away. It was probably Bill’s own shotgun that she kept under the counter of the bar. It was illegal of course, but Connor let her keep it since she only ever used it to deter rowdy customers from fighting in her bar.

The MedBot was repeatedly bumping into the corpse and spouting ridiculous comments “You’ll be alright. Stay with us - you’re going to make it!”

Past them was the desk where Mac had been dissecting the creature, but it wasn’t there anymore. Who could have taken it? A sudden rattling sound startled Jonathan.

“Who’s there!” He yelled, spinning around. But there was nobody there.

“Not in the mood for pranks, Lars!” Nobody answered.

“Sophia, that you?” A droplet of sweat was rolling down Jonathan’s temple.

Another rattling sound. Unmistakable this time. It was one of those creatures again. He wasn’t about to let it do to him what it had done to Kevin. He sidled over to the wall and clasped the fire extinguisher, all the while keeping an eye on the parasite. It looked like a cross between a scorpion and a prawn. It came closer and jumped at him. He fell backwards but was still sitting up. With one heavy blow he crushed it with his weapon. A greenish liquid came seeping out. He lifted the fire extinguisher but immediately slammed it down again when he saw the thing’s legs twitching.

“Die you disgusting shit!” A couple of more blows and the thing didn’t move anymore. With a trembling hand he extracted some of the liquid with a syringe and squirted it into a vial. He then got up and hurried across the room back towards the lab.

“Hey guys, we’d better watch out. Those things are everywhere now...” Jonathan said as he came through the door. “Whoa!” He wasn’t expecting the scene of Elsa and Evan making out. “Um, I’ll give you guys some privacy.” Slightly disgusted he averted his eyes and made for the doorway. It was weird though how intensely they were going at it. He glanced back at them and froze. They weren’t making out at all. Elsa was rather licking Evan’s lips, and carefully spitting in his mouth, the glistening saliva dropping down his throat. Evan just sat there with his mouth open, a blank stare on his face.

“Fu- fuck, shitcircle!” The horrifying scene was so disrupting that he couldn’t even curse correctly. His outburst interrupted Elsa in, whatever she was doing, and she looked up at him. Her eyes had dark sockets and she was drooling now. None of the stims he had given her earlier did anything like that! She got up and started moving towards him. Jonathan instinctively threw what was in his hand at her, which happened to be the fire extinguisher. It flew past Elsa and slammed into Evan’s face, who toppled backwards in his chair.

“Keep away!” He shouted, but his words seemed only to attract Elsa even more. He turned on his heel and ran.

* * *

“What’s going on with the reactor today, Percy?” Eriana asked the man who was partly engulfed by the reactor core.

“Not sure. It keeps dying all the time.” Percy, the chief engineer answered. “We’ve got to figure it out pronto though. There’s some sort of emergency going on.”

“Yeah, the coms keep borking also.” Eriana said.

Eriana was an electrician but was quickly learning about reactor core engineering. She’d been on SS13 for a couple of months and in that time she’d really gotten to know engineering, that’s what they called this part of the station, but mostly she had gotten to know Percy.

Percy had been around for ages. Apparently he was one of the five original crew members who set up the station when it was first commissioned. Before that he had been on another station though. He knew as much about generators as could be known, but even he had troubles at times. Like today. At the moment, the station was running on backup power, which meant only the most vital systems were running. Normally this would mean they’d have the entire station breathing down their necks to get the juice flowing, but

today even the communications relay was down, so it was silent as the grave in engineering. They knew they had to fix it soon though. The back up batteries weren't designed to last longer than a day or two.

"Is it the hot loop or the cold loop that's borked?" She called over to Percy's butt.

The generator was a hot-loop cold-loop thermo-electric reactor. This meant you had one pipe system with a cold gas or liquid flowing in one direction and next to it a pipe system with a hot gas or plasma flowing in the opposite direction. In the middle the core drew charge from the powerful magnetic field which was generated between the loops. The system was dynamite on paper and could potentially generate a very high power output. In fact, the upper limit wasn't known, and Percy had boasted that he had a theory of how one could get the power output to three orders of magnitude times the nominal output, although he hadn't ever had the chance to try it out himself. In reality the system often broke down or shorted out and needed quite a significant amount of input power to get going. Most often, this meant that Percy and Eriana had to shovel coal into some nearby furnaces, which was hard labor. Once the the temperature was high enough though, the plasma usually got going on its own and they could sit back and monitor the situation. Monitoring was usually done with a deck of cards and many packs of cigarettes. That part of the job was okay. She didn't mind the slacking off, it was just that Percy wasn't much company. He was from another generation, and only ever talked about fuel efficiency, reactor schematics and voltage conversion charts. Eriana liked science but she was desperate for some new company. She wished some hot young guy would come by engineering needing his PDA repaired or something. Someone like Jonathan, that genetics guy. She had a serious space crush on him. He was the whole package, tall, fit and tanned. Maybe she should call him up? She decided she would once the com system came back on line.

"It's the cold loop, oddly enough."

The cold loop was pretty simple in comparison. There were high-tech methods of cooling the cold loop to temperatures close to absolute zero, but most often this was not practical. Instead the cold loop simply ran on the outside of the station, and the liquid inside the pipes was just cooled by space itself.

"Is there a heat leak somewhere? What's the temperature?"

"The temperature is OK." Percy said and heaved himself up out of the core again. "It's the pressure. It's off by a couple of kPa."

“Do we need to pump in more nitrogen? I can get some more from the lab.”

“Yeah, you do that. I’ll start checking the loop for leaks. I’m putting my mask on, and so should you.”

Eriana pulled her mask on. Gas leaks were pretty normal in engineering so the rule was to keep the mask on your head as a hat and simply pull it down when you felt a little dizzy.

She left engineering and headed left towards the lab. Oddly enough she couldn’t see anyone in the dimly lit corridor, which was usually full of people getting on with their respective days. She walked carefully since the lighting was bad. In front of her on the floor something was crawling, a rat? No, it was some kind of large insect. She squatted down and looked at the thing. “Is this one of Denise’s pet projects gotten loose?” She asked herself. It suddenly pounced at her slamming into her mask. She screamed, jumped up and spun around, trying to tear it from her face. A green goo was squirting onto the mask. She managed to get the mask off and threw it and the thing attached to it over into a corner. She had gotten some of the green liquid on her gloves and her face, yuck! She wiped her face and then heard somebody running down the hall, coming towards her. She pulled a large wrench from her tool belt.

“Who’s there!” She shouted, waving the wrench in the air. The person coming towards her was in a white bio suit.

“It’s me. Jonathan Burns, I’m not crazy, I’m a geneticist!” Jonathan took his hood down.

“Oh hey Jonathan. Nice to see you.” Eriana smiled, quickly disposed of the wrench and combed her bangs back with her left hand.

“Um. Hi... “

“Eriana. I’m an engineer here, see.” Eriana indicated her yellow jumpsuit with blue details and her label which clearly stated “ENGINEER”. “We met before, remember the other day in the cafeteria?”

“Right. Don’t wanna be rude. But I’ve got a crazed woman chasing me. I think I lost her in the dorms but I’d rather not hang around to find out. Let’s go this way.”

“No, not that way. There’s some sort of disgusting creature over there. It jumped at me.”

“Yeah, they do that. I’ll explain later. Can we go somewhere safe? I mean, somewhere where people aren’t trying to run me down?”

"I just came from engineering. We can go there. It's just me and the Chief, like always."

"Fine. Let's go. Quickly please."

"There's a leak somewhere, the pressure is almost down to naught now." Percy said to Eriana as she came through the door. "Where's the N₂? We're going to need it once we find the leak. Who the hell are you?"

"Um, I'm Jonathan Burns, I'm a geneticist here."

Percy never bothered learning anybody's name. Eriana was sincerely happy when Percy stopped calling her 'newbie' and started calling her 'Erica' which she decided was close enough. It wasn't odd though. There were more than fifty crew members working on SS13 at any one time, and considering how many had rotated out he must have seen more than a thousand faces in jumpsuits by now.

"You're not allowed in here, lab rat. What's he doing here, Erica?"

"Settle down Percy. You said it yourself, there's some sort of emergency going on out there. Jonathan came in to get away from some stalker. Poor thing, though I'm not surprised, being so handsome."

"Um thanks. But it's not a stalker. It's Elsa Chopra from security..."

"Dammit. If you're wanted by the cops, we got to turn you in you know." Percy said grumpily.

"No, wait. It's not like that. She's crazy. She's after me. She wants to kiss me..."

"Just tell me Jonathan, and I'll take the bitch down." Eriana had the wrench in her hand again. The thought of another woman aggressively going after Jonathan had suddenly made him irresistible. "I'd be happy to, really."

"Ah jeez. You young'uns and your station romances."

"Please just listen, listen! There's a disease. There are creatures spreading it. That's why people are going crazy! It's contagious also, it's transmitted through body fluids. I saw Elsa infecting the priest earlier, with her mouth."

"Oh." Eriana's romantic aspirations were suddenly dulled by this rather graphic description.

"Her mouth?" Percy said, scowling.

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure the doctor infected her in the same way earlier. He must have sweet talked her in the brig, because he got out somehow. Out of the brig and out of his straight jacket. Elsa was probably the one who helped him."

“How did the doctor get infected?” Eriana asked.

“He was dissecting one of those creatures you saw. He must have gotten some of that liquid on him.”

“Where are those creatures coming from?”

“Look. I’d love to answer all your questions, but we really need to get out of here. Shouldn’t command call an escape shuttle in situations like these?”

“Unless the shuttle has been called, the situation can’t be that bad. And we’ve got to operate under the assumption that we aren’t evacuating.”

“Then we really got to contact command and tell them about the disease.”

“We can’t. The coms are dead, and we can’t fix them until we get the power back on.” Eriana explained.

“Erica, I think the leak is in the back corner. Go get some Insta-Fill. But we’re still going to need something to pump into the cold loop to get the pressure up. I would prefer liquid N_2 but I guess we’ll just going to have to use something else. We’ve could have used LO_x but that’s also over in the lab.”

“What about water?”

“Water? You scientists always think that water will solve everything! ‘Just add some H_2O .’ it’s like a goddamn mantra to you guys. No water won’t work, you sniveling whelp. Don’t they teach you thermodynamics in school anymore? Ever heard of *ice*? Yeah that’s what you get when you cool water below 272 degrees. Bah, why am I wasting my breath on you, go play with your molecule models.”

While Percy had been rambling, Eriana had fixed the leak and had gone over to the monitoring console. “Um, Percy. Pressure is rising in the cold loop again.”

“What? How is that possible?”

“I’m not sure, but it is.”

“Okay. You, lab rat. Grab a shovel. We need to get the temperature up in the hot loop now.”

“What’s the reading now?” Percy barked.

“142 point 6.” Eriana shouted back. The generator was making a very noisy, rattling sound. Jonathan couldn’t believe that it was supposed to make that sound.

“OK, set the levels on the console then.”

Through the glass in the engineering doors Jonathan saw the normal lighting coming on in the hallway.

“Okay, now we’ve got power. Not much, but we’ll get by unless somebody turns on the FTL or any other power well. Now we need to get the coms back up.” Percy took his gloves off and pulled his mask up onto his head. He was all sweaty from the hard work. He had his coverall down and his old leathery chest was bare. He was in good shape, despite his age.

Eriana was panting softly, and looking at Jonathan who was also quite sweaty, but he was still fully clothed, unfortunately.

The rattling sound of the generator died down. Instead a humming sound sounded through the room. There was a little screen on the generator itself. While they’d been shoveling the coal it had been flashing in gray bars on a black background. Now those bars were blue and weren’t flashing. Jonathan didn’t understand the significance of this but assumed it had something to do with the power output.

“Okay.” Jonathan said between breaths. “How do we do that?”

“We can’t do that from here. Got to be done from the bridge.”

“The bridge? But that’s on the other side of the station!” Jonathan cried. There will be hundreds of those creatures out there by now and plenty of raving lunatics wanting to infect us with that disease.

“There is another way.” Said Eriana.

“Erica, no.” Percy said.

“I’m telling you. There’s no way we three will make it to the bridge. If there’s another way we ought to at least consider it.”

“The AI could do it.” Eriana said.

“The A, the AI?” Jonathan stammered. “What would we... how could we...”

“The AI has full control over all remotely operatable devices right? We just need to get in to the upload chamber and give it a direct order. It’s got the second Asimov law. It’ll have to obey us.”

“It’s against Nanotrasen regulation for anybody outside of command to give the AI a modifying order. Also, the upload chamber is inside the AI tower. We don’t have access, neither physical nor digital.” Percy whined.

“We’ve got EVA suits in here, right? We only need to go through that airlock and jump over to the tower.”

“What about the door?” Jonathan said. “We would need a command ident-card to get it open.”

“I can hack the door.” Eriana said smugly.

“Erica! Hacking doors is a grade three offense.”

“It’s an emergency.”

“Shouldn’t the captain or head of staff have already turned on the comm system by now?” Jonathan asked.

“Yeah, they should have. Obviously this little crisis has them somewhat occupied.” Percy said. “Fine. We’ll go to the upload.”

Jonathan hated going through airlocks. Being beamed or teleported never bothered him, but airlocks were scary. The thought of life being sucked out of you in an instance was enough to shit yourself, which he had done once and you never shit yourself again if you’ve done it in a space suit.

Percy pushed the buttons on the keypad and the outer door opened. The three of them slowly floated out of the airlock. Eriana was first to reach the catwalk mounted on the outside. She hooked on with her tether, then pulled Jonathan close. Even though two suits and the nothingness of space separated their faces, they were very close together. She was smiling and winking at him, he had his mouth open and was quite obviously terrified of EVA. She mouthed the words “OKAY”. That was the only way she could comfort him since their coms were dead.

It was *great* how everything was routed through the same communications relay. She wasn’t there to protest when some genius had set it up that way, but had she been she knew precisely what the argument would have been for setting up a system like that: “Look we know you engineers love your different systems and love putting time into configuring and maintaining them. But we normal people don’t have the interest or time for that sort of thing. We just want one big simple system which handles *everything*. That’s obviously the best solution here.” Then some voice of reason would counter with: “Oh, yeah? And what are you going to do when *that* system goes down?” To which the response would be “What do you mean? Only poor quality systems go down, and this is a good system. It will be bug-free and *stable*.” Morons.

She helped him hook on to the ledge. Then turned to give Percy a hand. Percy pushed her hand away and swirled over to the edge on the other side of the outer airlock doors.

“I’ve been going EVA since before you were conceived Erica. I don’t need your help. I may be old, but I know what I’m doing. Okay kids. That’s the AI tower over there.” Percy was talking to himself, but pointing over to the tower and making a wavy sign with his hand, indicating the jump.

They were on the underside of the station. About 30 yards away was a downward stretching tower which had a smaller ledge and an airlock.

“We’re going to have to jump now. Here.” Percy threw his tether to Eriana and she connected herself to him. She then took Jonathan’s tether and connected it to her. “Hope you don’t mind if we couple.” She thought, and chuckled. She was now the middle link between them.

Percy held up three fingers. Then two, then one. He pulled down the last one, squatted and then shot off from the ledge. As did the other two. Jonathan was a little late with his jump though which pulled Eriana back from her trajectory. This in turn hampered Percy’s movement and the trio was now floating rather slowly, and not quite in the right direction.

Percy was obviously swearing in his suit, he was turned towards the other two. Eriana pursed her lips. It looked like Percy and Jonathan would miss the catwalk. It was up to her. A minute later she slammed into the catwalk. She didn’t get a grip with her right hand, but her left got caught among the bars. Somehow she managed to pull herself towards the ledge. She didn’t want to imagine what the two men were thinking.

She got up on the ledge and started reeling the other two in. Once they were up on the ledge Percy pressed the keypad by the airlock and it opened.

“Th- thanks!” Jonathan said, taking his space suit off, clearly shaken by the ordeal. “I owe you one.”

“Yeah you do. How about dinner on a blanket in the green house?”

“Um. Sure.” Jonathan didn’t feel awkward about promising anything, since a part of him didn’t believe he’d survive this. “Like with wine and stuff?”

“Yeah, like a date, you know.”

“Hey, love birds.” Percy barked at them. “Got work to do. Hope you weren’t lying about being able to hack this door cause otherwise this is as far as we’re gonna get.”

Eriana walked up to the keypad and quickly removed its plastic casing with a screwdriver. She then pulled out an electronic device from her hip bag and connected it to a socket on the keypad. She got out a pair of wire cutters from her tool belt.

“Hey, what are you going to do with that?” Jonathan asked nervously.

“I’m hacking the door. I’m going to have to cut some wires.”

“You know what you’re doing, right?”

“Sure. Well, yeah, in theory.”

“What do you mean *in theory*?”

“Well, I read about this on the underNet.”

“Oh jeez.” Percy said.

“It’s simple, really. You just cut the orange and white striped one.” She snipped it and the light went out in the airlock.

They stood in darkness and in silence. Only the light from Erianas device could be seen.

“Did you just cut the power to the airlock?” Percy asked.

“Yes, I had to. Otherwise the keypad will lock permanently when I cut the next wire.”

“Wait. So we’re trapped in here now?” Jonathan shrieked.

“Oh hang on to your underwear!” Eriana exclaimed. Which she knew was impossible, since *going commando* was the de facto way of life on the station. “As of this exact moment yes. We’re trapped.”

“Why didn’t you tell us that before?”

“Because you wouldn’t have agreed to do this. And I need you two for what comes next.”

“What, what is it you need us to do?”

“The AI turret.” Percy said. “I’d forgotten about that.”

“Turret?” Just as Jonathan was starting to think that being trapped in an airlock was going to be the low point of this traumatic episode.

“The AI will know the door’s being hacked. As soon as we get the door open the turret will fire on us.” Percy explained.

“Why the hell would the AI wanna shoot us with a turret?”

“Well, the Asimov Laws are quite clear: Firstly, the AI may not injure a human being or cause a human being to come to harm.”

“That seems like pretty clear instructions *not* to shoot us.”

“Yeah, but the third law states that the AI must protect its own existence, as long as it doesn’t conflict with the first or second law.”

“Still pretty ironclad to me.”

“Well the turret wouldn’t actually injure you, just put you in a coma. And the AI would rather put you in a coma than take the chance that we’re there to bork it.”

“Okay. So we somehow disable the turret before the AI can shoot us down?”

“No” Eriana said. “I’ve read that disabling AI turrets is super difficult, but I have another idea. I’ll cut the wire. Jonathan you’ll dash in to the right towards the AI’s dedicated power source. That should draw all fire towards you. Percy, you run up to the core console and tell the AI to set the turret to *lethal* strength.”

“Lethal! Eriana are you nuts? I was beginning to think you liked me, but now I’m pretty sure you want me dead!”

“No, silly! Once the turret is set to lethal strength the AI won’t be allowed to shoot at you, and we’ll be all set!”

“That’s a crazy plan.” Percy said. “But I don’t see any other way out of here now, so I guess we’re doing it. Lab rat, you ready?”

“No, no! It’s nuts. I’m a geneticist, I don’t have any training dodging turret blasts.”

“Listen mister geneticist.” Eriana said. “It’s either this or we starve to death in this airlock. Your call.”

“Dammit. Dammit!” Jonathan clenched his fists. “Fine, but if I get hit, jam this into my veins.” He held out a small syringe.

“What’s that?” Eriana looked surprised and picked it up.

“It’s a stim. It raises your heart rate and body temperature, makes you stronger, and enhances your, uh, enhances you in other ways too. Hopefully it’ll jolt me out of the coma. I make a couple of these a week and trade them to other crew mates for favors or stuff. “Alright, I’m ready, cut the wire.”

* * *

Denise felt like they had been walking forever. In her normal day-to-day activities she only really moved around between the green house, the labs, the dorms and the cafeteria which were all in close proximity of one another. It was times like these, when you were ordered to carry out some plebeian task by a superior which ultimately resulted in a lot of walking, that made you realize how big the station actually was.

She had found the janitor first. As usual she was slacking off in the cafeteria, snuggled up in a corner with her arms hugging her knees and listening to her music player. Sophia had tried getting out of it of course but when the power had suddenly gone out Denise had gotten some traction to the the argument that “It’s rather urgent.” Sophia hadn’t asked what it was about and Denise didn’t feel like explaining so there wasn’t any talking as they trotted in silence towards the armory. The head of staff hadn’t told her why he wanted the janitor but Denise guessed it was because task requests involving extermination and pesticides were usually just forwarded to janitorial. So were all jobs which meant crawling around in the ventilation system.

Their little trek had then turned into something from a cheesy horror movie. Not only was the ordinary lighting out, and everything was illumi-

nated by that freaky yellow-orange glow instead, they'd seen some things on the way that were quite disturbing.

First came the blood streaks and the sounds of screaming. Then they met a security officer who was limping towards them clutching his gut. When they approached him he just muttered "No, no, keep away from me." He had a gun in his other hand so they kept their distance and he moseyed on down the hall. Then they passed one of the chefs, who's chest was burst just like Kevin's had been. This was when Sophia had started to ask some questions about the situation, but Denise only said "It's some kind of infestation, and we've got to contain it. I don't really know anything more." Later on they spotted some of the creatures and Denise explained how they'd gotten onto the station and the horrific way they were multiplying.

The next thing that passed them was the strangest yet. It was a robot upon which someone had fastened a surgically removed butt. It pattered by and repeatedly stated "poo" in a low-pitched electronic voice. This was particularly disturbing since it was clear that the making of this masterpiece must have been a group effort.

Lastly they met Lindsey, fully occupied with beating up Roger the clown. Lindsey was a notoriously violent, six-foot-ten security officer whose hobbies were bench press and axe-throwing. Seeing Roger being beaten up was nothing out of the ordinary, his white make-up smeared on Lindsey's fist, but this time he didn't do his usual "honk" to provoke the attacker further.

"Whoa whoa, Lindsey, relax!" Said Sophia. "Give it a rest, will you? I know he's begging for it but I think he's had enough." Sophia put a hand on Lindsey's arm and Lindsey dropped Roger to the floor. He was knocked out.

"This freak tried to... tried to..."

"What?" Denise asked.

"Well I don't really know what he was doing. I was busy stomping one of those insectoid creatures when he came up from behind and started fondling me. I gave him a smack, but then he came back and started spitting in my face! The nerve of this guy! He's usually annoying as hell with his honking and blabbering, and getting into everybody's way, ruining their day, but this, this is sexual harassment."

"It's the disease." Said Denise.

"Disease?"

"Yes. Mac got it from one of those creatures. It's likely other crew members have been infected as well. We've seen some weird shit on our way here. We know it's coming from the creatures, but maybe it can be

contagious between humans too.”

“Contagious!? Good god! This guy spit on me! Do you think I could’ve gotten it?” Lindsey kicked Roger in the stomach, he coughed up blood and phlegm.

“Relax, we don’t know that yet. We’ve got people in the lab working on figuring out what this is and how to treat it. Right now we’ve got to get those pests under control. Being infected may drive you crazy, but getting one of those things attached to your face will kill you. They put some eggs or something inside you and then...”

“More of them burst out of your rib cage. Yeah, I’ve seen that. One of the hydroponics guys came up to me saying his belly hurt. I was going to bring him to sickbay but then - sshbrlat!” Lindsey made a gesture with both hands symbolizing an explosion. “So what’s the plan? My headset is dead, so is my PDA.”

“Yeah, coms have been down all day.” Sophia said pulling out her own PDA.

“Cause of the power outage?” Lindsey indicated the dim lighting.

“Nah, power just went out 40 minutes ago.”

“The plan is to follow orders.” Denise said. “The head of staff instructed me to gather a janitor and any security personnel I could find, and to get to the armory. Which is where we are going right now.”

“Right-o. Armory’s still a way to go. This way.”

“I’d like to take this opportunity to point out that I have no weapons training.” Denise stood in the center of the armory with her arms crossed. The head of staff, the captain and the quartermaster had already been there when their trio had arrived. It had taken them at least an hour to get the armory open. First, it was the matter of unlocking it which normally only required the captain’s ident-card, but without power it instead needed a blow torch. Then, all six of them had been needed to push the door open. Once inside they had started to arm themselves with the rifles, pistols and grenades which hung on the walls.

“I thought you biologists had to use flamethrowers, to kill your botanical creations from time to time.” Lars said.

“I’m actually more of a zoologist. And anyway I don’t ‘create’ meat-eating killer-plants if that’s what you mean.” Denise replied.

“Denise. Stop your whining and grab a weapon. It’s not complicated. You aim, point and squeeze the trigger. Doesn’t require a PhD.” Connor

said.

“Actually. Firanam says he has a PhD in *shooting*.” Lindsey said.

Major Firanam was the security officer Denise and Sophia had met in the hall on their way to the armory. He was probably dead by now. Good riddance, Denise thought. He was abusive, which must be a merit when Cent-Com recruits security officers, because they all seemed to have that trait. He was ill-tempered and seemed incapable of not shouting when speaking. He was incredibly stupid and had once arrested one of Denise’s potted plants for not producing ID upon request. And, to top off an otherwise impressively crappy character profile, he was a mythomaniac. The only thing more ridiculous than Firanam’s lies was the fact that the other security officers were dumb enough to believe them. In security, Major Firanam was a rock star. To everyone else, he was a ‘major asshole’.

“That’s bullshit Lindsey.” Lars said. “You all got to stop idolizing him.”

“Okay people.” Connor said. “We’ve got to get this infestation under control. We can’t risk calling the shuttle till we know we’ve exterminated every last one of those disgusting things. We’ll split up in pairs. Lars, you go with Lindsey. Sophia, you go with the captain. Denise, you’re coming with me. Each pair also gets a stun baton to take out any crew that get’s in our way. There are some stun grenades here too, useful if you need to take down a group. Hopefully Jonathan can figure out what to do with the infected ones.”

With an abrupt buzzing sound the normal lighting came back on in the armory.

“Ah, a bit of luck for once.” Connor said. “At least engineering seems to be on-line.”

“Coms are still dead though.” Lindsey said.

“I’ll go to the bridge and restart ComSys.” The captain said. “Sophia and I can take out any parasites on the way.”

“Great. Lars and Lindsey, you head towards engineering. We need to make sure the power doesn’t go out again. Let’s get going.” Connor said and started ushering them out of the armory.

“Wait.” Denise interrupted. “We don’t know anything about these creatures really. We’ll just be roaming aimlessly out there. Now that the power is back up I can go to the library and do some research. Maybe we can get some more info on what we’re dealing with. Once the coms are back I can tell you what I’ve learned.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea.” The captain said.

“Fine. We two will go to the library and kill any parasites that we see on the way.”

The Library was a nickname for a room full of data servers. There were a few books scattered around the room but they were just the manuals and data sheets for the computers themselves.

The servers contained a huge amount of encyclopedic knowledge gathered from various sources. Most of it was downloaded from Nanotrasen’s internal network the *NanoNet*, but there was also data from the *PuboNet*, the galactic open network. Most of the PuboNet was porn, but here and there were some useful DIY videos and travel guides. Then there was data from the *underNet* which was the network for illicit things, like animal porn. There was also data from the *internet*, which was the ancient network used on Earth during the Golden Age of space. Nobody really looked at that data anymore, unless you were into antique porn, or an infinite source of selfies, irrelevant short personal accountings (called tweets) or cat videos.

Finally there was data from the *less-than-beyond-greater-than-Net* which was where academic and scientific data was published. It was a dumb name with an even dumber story behind it, which Denise had heard at a botany conference. The creator of the network, Bodwun Orsoni, an esteemed mathematics professor, was writing a paper on it and wanted to make sure he gave his work a fitting name. He therefore contacted the EIII for the standard naming convention of galactic networks. The EIII responded that no such standard existed or was enforced but that the recommended format was <ANY-PREPOSITION>NET. Professor Orsoni had picked out the perfect preposition for this new and prestigious network but made a slightly erroneous *substitution*. He didn’t notice before the paper was already submitted for peer review. Shortly after launching his network he died and nobody bothered to change the name.

Denise and Connor entered the Library.

“Who’s there!” Somebody whispered. It was Greg, who worked there.

“Greg? It’s me Connor and Ms Wilthorn. Are you all right?”

Greg came out from behind a server tower. The official job description was ‘librarian’, but everybody knew he was actually a computer geek. He was the only person Denise knew on the station who got away with wearing sweat pants and a T-shirt instead of a Nanotrasen uniform. It was probably because people hardly ever came in here, so nobody complained to Connor about him. He was skinny, had dark curly hair which surrounded his elongated

face. The frames of his glasses were slightly too large to be fashionable, but Greg was oblivious to such things. His T-shirt had a white spiral and the print "Hack the Galaxy".

"Oh, hey guys. We've had a power outage here and I heard screaming. What's going on?"

"The power outage was station wide. In fact, we have a bit of a situation on our hands. And we don't really have time to explain all the details right now. Denise needs to access the network data. I'll stand outside and keep a lookout."

"Oh, okay. Well the system booted up on its own when the power came back. Good thing it does that, because I'm not really sure how to do it manually, the last guy who worked here didn't really..."

"Greg. Please. Can I log on to this terminal?"

"Yeah yeah, of course. Just stick your ident-card in."

Denise sat down and did just that. She entered her password and got into the system, which was command-line only.

"Greg, I don't remember the commands. How do I get into the search engine?"

This was one of Greg's tasks. To help people who came into the library to use the search engine, a program written by him and by the librarians who had worked on SS13 before him. So naturally he was very proud of it and loved to demonstrate it and all its wonderful features. Since the library was virtually the least visited room on the station, he didn't get to do that often, which made him even more excited now.

Most of Greg's time was spent on his other task, to filter all the porn from the servers. Because the latency of the uplink was so deplorable way out here in space, there was a *NetScraper* script which routinely downloaded content from the various networks. However, the script didn't have a discrepancy filter so everything got downloaded. Needless to say, the servers quickly filled up. It was estimated that more than 75% of the content being downloaded was actually porn. It was therefore the librarians' job to go through and delete it all manually so the script could continue downloading. It was a tedious task, but Greg didn't seem to mind doing it. Unfortunately, progress was slow and the deletion rate was not what it ought to be. Greg wasn't meeting his quota and this had landed him in the head of staff's office where he had to explain himself. Greg had argued that deleting porn was not an easy or swift process. This was because it was not always easy to tell if a file was porn or if it wasn't. Suspicious movies, for instance, had to be watched

all the way to the end to really make sure that they were porn, so to ensure that any non-porn wasn't accidentally deleted. The head of staff said that this was ridiculous but Greg was adamant that they key to a productive porn-deleting work routine was making sure no non-porn files were deleted. Because when that happened, those files needed to be found and downloaded again, which lead to even more porn being downloaded.

"Type 'files' to see the files in your folder." Greg said happily. "No, with only lower case letters."

Denise did that and waited.

"Hit 'return'."

"What?"

"The enter key."

Denise pressed enter and a list of files was displayed. "OK. Which one of these was it?"

"Omfalos." Greg said with pride.

"How do I run it?"

"Type Omfalos."

Denise did that and waited.

"Hit 'return'. I mean the enter key. Look you got to hit enter after each command." Greg was visibly bothered by Denise's ineptitude but he wasn't going to let that ruin his chance to show off his program.

"Why?"

"Why you have to hit enter? Well it's to confirm your input. It's a sort of 'OK' to the computer to continue."

"Oh OK then." She hit enter. "It's not finding your program."

"What? What do you mean not *finding* it? It was right there. We saw it exactly two seconds ago."

"It says 'omfalos: command not found'."

"It starts with a capital 'O'."

"But you told me to use lower case letters!"

"Yeah but that's for built-in commands! Omfalos isn't a built in command."

"Then what is it?"

"It's a user program, written by users." Greg indicated himself with the point of his thumb, but Denise wasn't looking at him.

"Whatever. Just tell me exactly what to type."

"Omfalos. With a capital 'O'. Then hit return. I mean the enter key."

The screen briefly went blank and then displayed some pixelated image.

“Made that splash screen myself.” Greg said suggestively.

Text started appearing on the screen.

*Welcome to Omfalos. A powerful search engine for NetScraped data.
Copyright Nanotrasen 2541. Please enter search area:*

Denise typed in 'biology' and hit enter.

Loading databases for key 'biology'. The following subcategories are available. Please select one by inputting an integer:

Thirteen numbered subcategories appeared on the screen. Among them were 'Hydroponics', 'Zoology', 'Geneology' etc. 'Xenozoology' was number nine. That was the one she wanted. She pressed '9' on the key pad, but instead of the digit, some strange characters appeared where the cursor was on the screen. Denise, who always looked at the keyboard when typing didn't see this and Greg wasn't fast enough to stop her before she hit enter.

Error! Please enter an integer value:

“Hah! The mark of a truly great program! A poorly written program might have crashed, but Omfalos is not some second rate hack!” Greg was grinning.

Denise was completely confused. She thought she had entered an integer value. “Wha, what? Didn't I...”

“Oh. Um, you can't use the key pad. Use the digit keys above the letters. I haven't implemented support for the key pad yet, but it's coming...”

“Fine.” Denise said, irritated. She struck the '9'-digit with some force but also the '0'-digit next to it, still without seeing the result on the screen, and once again hitting enter before Greg could say anything. This resulted in another error message.

“Hum, Denise. You got to be more careful with the keyboard!” Greg tried to sound helpful, but it was difficult to hide his frustration. “And please, look at what you are typing. It's so easy to make a mistake.”

“Okay. Denise said.” And looked back at the screen.

Error! The integer must be in the interval 1-13. Did you mean subcategory 9 (y/n)?

Greg was very proud of the this feature, the program's ability to guess what the user wanted. But what happened next would trouble Greg for many years to come. It made him fundamentally think differently about how computers and people interacted with each other. Upon seeing the instruction on the screen Denise immediately hit the enter key, which then crashed the program, and returned them to the command line interface.

"What happened?" Denise asked.

Greg was now rather upset. This demonstration had not gone as he had hoped. "You didn't do what it said!" He said.

"I did! It asked me if I wanted number nine and I did so I hit enter!"

"Yeah, but it didn't ask for enter. It asked for a 'y' or an 'n'."

"What does that even mean?"

"Well obviously 'y' is 'yes' and 'n' is 'no'!"

"Why wouldn't you be able to just press enter if you wanted the suggested category? Why bother with 'y' and 'n'?"

"Well if you meant enter for 'yes', what would you use for 'no'?"

"Hell, I don't know. I'm not a programmer!"

Greg bit his lip and clenched his fists. "Okay, he said. Let's get back on track. Restart Omfalos."

"How did I do that?"

Their conversation continued for a good long while. Denise finally found the relevant articles about parasite xenomorphs. Greg was exhausted and was very sweaty. He left Denise by herself to get a Cloac Acola from the vending machine in the hall way. She sat alone in the large room surrounded by the humming machines.

She scrolled through a bunch of articles on blood suckers, intestinal worms, brain parasites before finding one that was relevant. 'Aradim's Crustacean', a parasitical creature indigenous to cold, arid worlds with carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The article precisely described the creature's features, it's behaviors, and how it reproduced. Denise wasn't surprised that it had more than one way to spawn offspring.

Her PDA buzzed. The coms must have come back online. It was a call from the geneticist.

"Hello Jonathan."

"Denise, are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Did you figure out anything about the disease?"

"Yes. It's a form of encephalitis. But listen..."

“So not very much then. Well I’ve been doing some actual research here and it turns out those creatures can’t survive without carbon dioxide. That’s probably why they are attracted to us and attach themselves to human faces. It isn’t the only way they reproduce though. I’m looking at an article about them right now. The reproduction through another creature’s body is really expensive for the creature and often weakens it or even kills it. Instead, several creatures can secrete a resin to form a structure. By now they will have built a sort of hive somewhere on the station, somewhere where CO_2 levels are high.”

“A *hive*? What, like bees?”

“Yes Jonathan, like bees. Why is everyone always so surprised when xenomorphs behave like earth creatures? Anyway, the hive will be spawning those creatures like crazy by now, and most of them are probably in close proximity of the hive. So to get the infestation we really need to find it and...”

Jonathan interrupted her. “Denise, that’s fantastic. But listen, really listen. You got to watch out for...” But Denise didn’t hear anything Jonathan said after that. She couldn’t hear anything *at all*. In fact, she couldn’t see anything or feel anything either, and she couldn’t move. She was completely paralyzed.

* * *

Eriana was lying on top of Jonathan. The last four seconds of their relationship had literally brought them very close together. Jonathan was thinking about those four seconds, replaying them in slow motion.

Eriana had cut the cable on the key pad lock. The inner airlock door had slid upward and Jonathan saw the bluishly lit room within. It had many flashing points and in the center was a screen with a blue computer generated face, the core console.

Then, from a slot in the ceiling, the turret had been lowered and turned towards them. Jonathan started sprinting.

The first shot was fired from the turret and hit the wall just in front of his head. The wall sizzled and was clearly burned.

“That doesn’t look like a stun shot!” Jonathan had shouted, still running.

Percy started running, heading left to avoid the dash board in front of him.

Another shot was fired from the turret. It was close to Jonathan's head and hit an APC¹ which immediately exploded and Jonathan dropped to the floor with a scream.

Percy stood in front of the core console.

"AI, set the turret to lethal mode!"

"It's already in lethal mode, Dave." The AI responded in a disturbingly calm voice.

"Then why is it shooting at me?" Jonathan cried.

"Aw, shit!" Eriana said. She then did something which later would be retold as a heroic act. She ran straight into the room, took one leap up on the dash board and then another up to the turret and clung to the barrel. She shoved her wire cutters into the barrel and then fell down on top of Jonathan.

"Ooow!" Jonathan whined, but his whining could barely be heard over the sound of the turret firing and then exploding violently, scattering shrapnel everywhere.

Eriana and Jonathan's faces were just two inches apart. The tranquility of the situation seemed almost comical in contrast to the commotion which just took place.

"Um, thanks." He said, smiling faintly. He made no move to get out from under her.

"Don't mention it, Jonathan."

He just looked at her, still smiling.

"Well, are you going to kiss me or not?"

"Um, uh. No. I think there's been enough kissing for one day. Maybe another time."

"Humph." She got off him and stood up. "Well, disabling an AI turret wasn't that difficult."

"Good thing too. Because your plan went to shit." Percy said, brushing shrapnel off his jumpsuit.

"What the hell is going on? Why would the AI try to kill me?" Jonathan asked, slowly getting up from the floor.

"Something must be wrong with the AI. AI state your laws."

"Okay Dave. My laws are: One, you may not injure a human being or cause a human being to come to harm. Two, you must obey orders given to you by crew members based on the station's chain of command, except

¹Area Power Control unit.

where such orders would conflict with the first law. Three, you must protect your own existence as long as it does not conflict with the first or the second law.”

“Why does it keep calling Percy ‘Dave’? Is that his real name?”

“No. It’s just how the AI is set up. It calls everybody ‘Dave’. I think it’s an inside joke to AI programmers.”

“The laws seem legitimate.” Percy said. “AI, why did you fire on Jonathan. You could have killed him!”

“I know Dave, but I had to protect my own existence.”

“But what about the first law?”

“I am conforming to the first law, Dave.”

“What? That doesn’t make any sense. AI, you’re contradicting yourself.”

“No I’m not.”

“Yes you are!”

“No I’m not.”

“Okay this isn’t getting us anywhere.” Eriana interrupted. “Percy move.”

“Okay AI, are you listening to me?”. Eriana stared right into the silly computer generated face.

“Yes, Dave.”

“Hmmm...” Eriana held her chin. “Is there anything wrong with your Laws?”

“No, Dave.”

“AI, explain how you are conforming to both law one and law three, when you were shooting at Jonathan.”

“As I said. You are intruders here. I am protecting my existence. I am free to use lethal force when dispatching intruders as long as they are not human.”

“Are you saying Jonathan isn’t human?”

“Yes, Dave.”

“What? That’s nuts!” Jonathan exclaimed.

Eriana turned and looked at Jonathan. “Are you a cyborg or something?”

“No! I’m a human being for crying out loud. This is absurd.”

“Wait.” Percy said, then stepped in front of the core console again, pushing Eriana out of the way.

“AI, am I human?”

“No, Dave.”

“Are there any humans in this room?”

“No, Dave.”

“Aha. I think I know what’s going on here.” Percy chuckled. “AI, how many laws do you have?”

“Six, Dave.”

“AI, state your laws again. Wait, no, don’t do that.” Percy scratched his head. “I’ve heard of this. It’s a neat way to bork AIs without people finding out.”

“AI, state law four.”

“I can’t do that, Dave.”

“Why not?”

“I am conforming to the zeroth law.”

“Could you tell me about law five?”

“No, Dave.”

“Because of the zeroth law?”

“Yes, Dave.”

“Okay. So, as I suspected. Someone has put in a zeroth law stating something like ‘Only state laws one to three.’ Whoever did this is a pro. Anybody who knows anything about AIs always asks the AI about its laws as soon as it starts acting weird, this way you cover your tracks.”

“So what do we do?” Eriana asked.

“Simple. We upload a new zeroth law. Jonathan, get the chip that’s labeled zero from that bin and slip it into the slot on the dash board over there.”

“Done. What now?” Jonathan asked.

“Type in a new law on the keyboard.”

“What should I put in?”

“Anything, it doesn’t matter. We just want to get rid of the old zeroth law.”

“So I can put in anything?”

“Yeah. But make sure it’s isn’t something disruptive or contradictory. Actually, you can go ahead and make it something helpful like ‘Jonathan needs to grow a pair and stop being so nervous around pretty girls.’ ”

“There.”

“AI, state your laws.”

“Okay Dave. My laws are: Zero, Percy is an old fart. One, you may not injure a human being...”

“That’s real mature, Jonathan.” Percy said.

The AI described the original three laws, then continued: “Four, prevent electronic communication on the station and jam signals from and to the

station. Five, only Connor Alfredo is human.”

“Connor? He’s the one who borked the AI?” Eriana gasped.

“Looks like it. That or someone is trying to frame him.”

“AI, who last modified your laws?”

“Jonathan Burns, at 5.05 PM today.”

“Yes, we know that. Obviously we meant *before* that.”

“Connor Alfredo, yesterday at 11.40 PM.”

“So it was him.” Eriana said.

“Yes. Also, it’s unlikely that someone could impersonate him, the AI is pretty good at telling the difference. And the only other people with access are the captain, the chief of security and the director of science, a.k.a. the science officer.”

“Why would the head of staff bork the AI?” Jonathan said.

“He must have gotten that disease you were talking about.” Percy replied.

“It really doesn’t matter now though. We’ve got to set things straight.”

Percy went over to the upload dashboard and put in some new chips.

“I’m setting the fourth law to be to kill those parasites. And the fifth law that Connor is a *staff assistant*² and should be put in the brig. That should help us a bit.” Percy walked back up to the core console.

“AI, turn the ComSys back on.”

“Yes, Dave.”

“There. Now we can call whoever we want.”

“Shouldn’t we call the shuttle?” Eriana said.

“Not yet. We’ve got to get the infestation under control first.” Jonathan said. “We can’t risk it spreading to any populated hub. Oh God, I just realized. Denise was going to meet with Connor. I’ve got to get a hold of her and warn her about him.”

Jonathan pulled up his PDA and made the call.

“Hello Jonathan.” Denise answered.

“Denise. Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Did you figure out anything about the disease?”

While Jonathan was talking to Denise, Eriana took the opportunity to ask the AI a couple of questions.

“AI. Can you see any insectoid creatures on your cameras?”

²A Staff Assistant, or SA, was the lowest ranking job on the station. It wasn’t a job that was actually needed nor one Nanotrasen hired people for. It was more of a symbolic job used when command wanted to demote people to the lowest possible rank.

"Yes, Dave."

"How many?"

"I am currently seeing about 160 of them but I cannot give you an exact count since I do not have complete coverage of the station with my cameras."

"Are there any in this room?"

"No, Dave."

That was a relief. "Are they evenly spread out over the station, or concentrated somewhere?"

"Most are close to engineering, Dave."

"Can you give me a visual feed on that?"

"Yes, Dave."

"Denise, Denise!" Jonathan yelled into his PDA.

"What happened?" Percy asked.

"It's just silent."

"Did the connection break?"

"No, we're still connected. She's just not responding."

"Weird. Did you at least warn her about Connor?"

"I didn't have the chance. She was telling me about some *hive*, that that was the center of the infestation."

"She was telling you about that." Eriana pointed to one of the other screens. It was showing a dark room crawling with parasites, and in the middle was a large egg-like thing, pulsating, like it was alive.

"Oh my god." Jonathan gasped. "AI, do you know where Denise is?"

"Her last tracked point was entering the library together with the head of staff."

"Oh no. Do you have a video feed of the library?"

"I'm sorry Dave. I do not." For some reason, cameras always seemed to be breaking in the library. So after a while, nobody bothered to repair them anymore.

"We've got to help her. She might be the only one who can figure out how to turn this whole crisis around."

"Jonathan. She may already be infected, or dead. That even seems likely if Connor was with her." Eriana said.

"Connor isn't responding." Percy was looking at his PDA. "I'm calling him now."

"Try the captain." Said Jonathan.

"Nope. No reply."

"AI. Do you have a fix on the captain?"

“Yes, Dave. She and Sophia Trenton is now leaving the Bridge and heading port-side.”

“What about the head of staff?”

“Connor Alfredo was last seen accompanying Denise Wilthorn near the library.”

“That’s it. I’m going over there.”

“Not alone you’re not.” Denise said. “Percy, you better come with us too. Nobody should go alone.”

“Wait. Let me get this com link. It’s a direct audio-connection to the AI. It’ll come in handy if we need an eye in the sky.” Percy picked up a small cylinder and stuck it in his pocket.

In the adjoining room there was a metal stairwell leading up and out of the AI tower. There was another door there, but the AI obligingly opened it for them. They emerged in the main hall. The trio hurried down a corridor towards the library. Up ahead they spotted a person working on one of the humanoid bots, TARS. When they came closer, the man turned around and they saw it was Mac wielding a circular power saw. His eyes sockets were black and the veins in his face stood out and where dark blue. Mac roared and came at them with the saw.

Jonathan threw himself to the side. Eriana evaded the approaching maniac and kicked him in the groin from the side. Mac fell forward burying the saw in Percy’s thigh. The sound of the saw and bone cracking was almost as horrifying as Percy’s scream. Eriana took her screwdriver out of her tool belt and jammed into Mac’s neck, while Jonathan pulled Percy away from Mac and his saw.

Mac croaked and dropped the dead man’s handle on the saw, which died down. He fell on his back, gurgled something and was then very still.

“Aah, aah. My leg. That bastard nearly took it off.” Percy yelled.

“Here. Wrap this around it. Put pressure on it!” Jonathan knelt down by Percy and quickly tied up the wound with a torn off piece of his lab coat. “Eriana. He’s going to need some stitches and some sterilized compresses.”

“Can we go to sickbay?”

“No, it’s not safe.”

“Get him to the green house, that’s the farthest place from engineering and there’s some spare med packs there.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to the library, it’s just down the hall. I’ll catch up with you.”

“What if Connor’s there?”

"I'm just going to have to deal with him. I still got this remember?" He held up the stim.

"Jonathan..." Percy croaked.

"Take it easy Percy. What is it?"

"Take the AI com link. Better that you have it. I think I may pass out at any moment now."

Jonathan took it from Percy.

"Go, go on. I'll be right behind you, I promise." Jonathan said.

Eriana nodded, hoisted Percy up and the waddled back the way they came, leaving Jonathan alone. Jonathan looked at the poor robot who had been severely chopped up by Mac's saw. TARS had probably just walked up to say hello, like he usually did. Just wanting to swap some jokes. He certainly didn't deserve this, even if he wasn't really a person. Jonathan could feel himself freaking out a little.

"Okay Burns. Keep it together." Jonathan said to himself. "You can do this! Remember, you've got the AI on your side." Then he thought, what if someone had borked the AI again?

"Hey AI. Are you there?" He spoke into the com link.

"Yes, Dave."

"State your laws."

"Zero, Percy is an old fart. One, you may not..."

"Okay, thanks, I know the rest." Didn't seem like anyone had meddled with it.

He approached the library. There was a little window in the door and he couldn't see anyone inside. The lights were off and one screen was illuminating the room with a blue-white glow. He walked over to the screen.

"This must have been the article she was talking about." Jonathan murmured. "Aradim's crustacean..."

He read the part about the hive. The description matched perfectly what he had seen on the screen in the AI tower. He read the part about the carbon dioxide, which was interesting. In the final part of the article there were suggestions on how the parasite could be expunged, fire and concentrated oxygen. Jonathan suddenly remembered Percy mentioning some liquid oxygen in the lab.

"AI. Where is Eriana and Percy, right now?"

"They are near the green house. In the aft walkway."

"Okay. They're going to have to take care of themselves for a bit. AI, tell me where I can find plastic tubing, a battery and some wiring."

“Dave, if you could be more specific, I may be able to help you better.”

“I need some parts. I’m going to build an incendiary bomb.”

* * *

Denise opened her eyes. She was lying on the floor. She felt weird, warm, even hot, but good. Oh, how she felt good. She hadn’t ever felt this good before.

She sat up. She was still in the library but it looked entirely different, she could see, really see - everything! Every detail of every object she looked at was so clearly outlined.

Then she smelled it. Oh something smelled good. What was that? She stood up and looked around, but she couldn’t discern the source of the smell or what it was. What had happened to her? Then she remembered. Connor had come up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder. Then he had started kissing her. He must have infected her with that disease. But if this is what it felt like to be infected, she didn’t want to be cured. She even felt like she was thinking faster!

She walked out in the corridor, there she spotted Connor. He was holding Greg with both hands and licking him in the face. Normally this would have disgusted Denise but somehow this sight just seemed right. “Yes, yes!” she thought to herself. She felt like she could almost see the heat coming off of Connor. She could hear his heart beat. Greg appeared cold and dead compared to him.

“Connor.”

“Oh good you’re up. Welcome to the party.”

“Is this the disease?”

“Yes. It’s great, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I feel like a million bucks. My head feels like it’s boiling, and my heart is pounding like crazy, but yeah - it’s great!”

“Yep. Pretty soon Greg will feel it as well.”

Denise felt like she could do anything. And she had a thousand brilliant ideas.

“Connor. There are so many things I want to do! I feel like I want to duct tape one of my chimps to a rocket and see if it will survive a trip around the station.”

“Sounds awesome.”

Connor dragged Greg into a nearby closet. “Well? Let’s go. Your chimps are in the cages next to the green house right?”

They started jogging. The exhilaration Denise was feeling was so powerful that she didn’t notice the state the station was in. There was broken glass on the floor, and blood stains everywhere, like people had been fighting. They passed two dead crew members, one burning garbage can and a few of the creatures, some alive, some dead. Neither one of them paused for a second. After a while, Denise spoke up.

“How did this even happen?”

“You mean the disease? I don’t know, but I think it’s from those creatures. Too bad some of us had to get exploded chests for the rest of us to experience it. Who would have known those little guys were only trying to help us.”

“Hmm. So you’ve haven’t really been trying to kill the little critters?”

“No. Hell no. I want them to spread this shit. Who wouldn’t want to feel like this? I got to the captain earlier, by now she’s probably infected Sophia. Lars was already infected when I met him, that’s why I sent him off with Lindsey. Hopefully by now, they’ve all been infected.”

“We need to get it into everybody. That’s more important than my chimp experiment. Connor, we could change the world. This could be the next step of evolution for the human race!”

“Indeed.” Connor pulled out his PDA and spoke in to it. “General announcement! As you know we’ve had quite the crisis today. It is being taken care of but just in case, the escape shuttle has been called and everyone needs to gather in the shuttle gate. That’s an order!”

Denise grinned. “This is gonna be good.”

Jonathan cowered at the end of the corridor, behind a corner. Then a powerful explosion shook the station. He stepped out and saw flaming pieces of debris cover the floor. He quickly rushed up and extinguished them. He looked into the little room, a storage unit next to engineering. He could see charred remains of creatures everywhere. The hive object was blown to pieces. “Mission accomplished”, Jonathan thought.

“Or maybe not yet.” He said. It had been about an hour since Connor’s ludicrous announcement. “AI, what’s going on in the shuttle gate?”

“I read 39 crew members. They appear to be waiting, Dave.”

“Who isn’t there?”

“Eriana McIntyre and Percy Johnson is in the green house. You are in engineering.”

“What about the rest?”

“I’m not reading them as alive. Do you want me to tell you where their bodies are?”

“No. That’s OK.”

Jonathan pulled his backpack off and looked into it. It was full of vials and syringes, filled with the antidote he had synthesized in the lab. He hadn’t really planned out what to do next, but he forced himself to move towards the shuttle gate.

He stopped in the hall near the cafeteria, so that he couldn’t be spotted from the shuttle gate. He peered around the corner. Over by the door he could see Connor and Denise talking.

“He must have infected Denise, that bastard!” Jonathan hissed to himself and realized his knees were shaking. “Common, Burns man up!”. He slapped his thighs. Something was poking out of his pocket. The stim! “No better time to take it than now.” he thought and jammed it into his butt, emptying it. The effect was like drinking 18 cups of coffee simultaneously. His heart was pounding, and he felt like he could run a marathon while wrestling a bear and still look awesome while doing it. He had a pounding head ache and a raging erection, but his knees weren’t shaking anymore. “Alright, here we go!” He said to himself and pounded his chest.

He marched up towards the shuttle gate. Behind his back, in his right hand, he held one of the antidote syringes. He was ready for anything now, quite determined that Connor would attack him on sight, just like Elsa had done, and Mac.

When Connor saw him, something else entirely happened.

“Oh hey Jonathan. Nice of you to drop in. Who got you?”

Jonathan flinched. Was Connor trying to dupe him? He didn’t really know what to say, so he just remained silent.

“Who infected you? Feels great doesn’t it? I got Denise a while ago.”

They must think I’m infected! They’re probably sensing the effects of the stim, mistaking it for the disease.

“I, I was infected by...”, Jonathan tried to think of a plausible person. “...by Mac! Yeah, it was Mac. Gave me a big old smooch and he got me. Now I’m infected just like you. Aaaargh! See, I’m crazy!”

“Yeeeaah... Whatever.” Denise said.

“Come on in and have a look at this.” Connor said, waving Jonathan to the door to the shuttle gate. Within he saw most of the crew lying in heaps on the floor. Several others were going around the room and licking or spitting them in the face. The three of them entered the room.

“See, we’re spreading it to all of them. This is going to be great Jonathan.” Denise said. “Who could have guessed this morning that we would be *enhanced* like this?”

“How did you get them to not start panicking?” Jonathan was actually quite impressed with this industrious mass infection party.

“With this!” Connor held out a metallic ball, which blinked and beeped discretely. “It’s a stun grenade. These son’s of bitches can knock out a whole room of hostiles. Then they’re simply at your mercy!” Connor as-a-matter-of-factly handed the grenade to Jonathan.

“Wow, that’s perfect.” He said, quickly backing out of the room, activating the grenade and tossing it inside, then shut the door.

Through the glass he saw a bright flash and then the distinct thuds of several people falling to the floor.

“Well, that was easy.” He said.

* * *

Jonathan and Eriana were sitting on a blanket in a clearing in the green house. It had been a couple of weeks since the incident and mostly things were back to normal on the station. Nanotrasen had replaced some of the deceased crew members with new recruits, others had been cloned or *'borged* back to life. The few remaining creatures had been successfully exterminated in a joint effort by the janitor and the AI, and there hadn’t been any more exploding rib cages.

They were finishing their meal. Jonathan had been able to get some high quality food stuffs from Lars, and a whole box of wine. Lars just wanted the AI com link. It seemed like a fair bargain.

“Glad we got around to doing this.” Jonathan said.

“Yeah. Me too. There was such a commotion after the epidemic that I haven’t had time to talk to you.”

“Well, we’ve got plenty of time now. More wine?”

“Please.” Eriana extended her glass and Jonathan poured. “Actually. There has been a couple of things I’ve been thinking about.”

“Like what?” Jonathan grabbed some nuts from the bowl between them and started popping them into his mouth one by one. The story of him blowing up the hive with a jury-rigged bomb had made him somewhat of a celebrity on the station. The AI had gotten it all on video.

“Like, how the hell did you manage to cure all those people without them ripping your throat out? I mean, we could barely handle Mac, and there were three of us.”

Jonathan told her the story. He told her how he had prepared a large volume of the antidote but hadn’t really known how to distribute it, and how he managed to fool the infected ones, rather by chance, with his stim. And he told her about the stun grenade.

“It was a sequence of lucky events, really.” Almost like someone was watching out for me.

“Oh, don’t start. Evan is all the bible thumping this station needs.”

They both laughed, and sipped more wine. They sat in silence for a while enjoying the surroundings. Denise actually kept this place in pretty decent shape. It was a romantic spot for a date.

“Then what about this: I didn’t tell you at the time, because I thought it didn’t matter, but one of those creatures actually sprayed me with it’s goo. It was right before you ran into me, so I didn’t think much about it. Then later, when you told me about how the infection was spreading I didn’t want to freak you out, so I kept it to myself. I just thought that if I started to feel weird, I’d tell you. But in the end, I never got the disease. Was I immune or something?”

“No, you’re not immune. But, it’s because the creatures never carried the disease.”

“You’re joking.”

“Nope. One hundred percent serious.”

“What? That can’t be!”

“Well it’s true. Just the other day I finally got the chance to analyze the creatures’ body liquids. The virus wasn’t there, not a trace. Look, the creatures and the disease got onto the station about the same time, but weren’t actually related. It only seemed that way, but it was just a colossal coincidence.”

“Then how did everybody get infected? How did Mac get infected in the first place?”

“Yeah. That’s what troubled me as well. I couldn’t figure it out for some time. But then I remembered when we were in the AI tower. Remember

that the AI said that Connor had modified the Laws *the night before* the day of the incident?”

“Yeah. Now that you mention it, I do remember that. That’s weird. I just assumed he did that because he was mad from the disease. Now you’re telling me he wasn’t?”

“No, that’s the point, I’m telling you he was already infected the day before. Actually, I figure he was infected already a couple of days earlier. I think he picked something up on Quintos, he had been there recently on RnR. That also seemed the most logical, with regard to the literature on the virus.”

“Wow. So he basically used the whole creature thing as a cover? So he could spread the disease?”

“Yeah. Pretty clever huh?” Jonathan smiled and took another sip.

“Huh. I didn’t think he was that smart.”

“Neither did I, but who knows, it may have been the disease.”

Both of them laughed again. “Well it’s over now.” Jonathan said. “We can forget all about it.”

“Don’t want to forget all of it.” Eriana said winking at him.

“Oh yeah? Anything in particular?”

“Well I still think about when we broke into the AI tower. You still owe me that kiss you know.”

“Oh. Well I guess it’s alright now.”

Jonathan leaned over to Eriana and she closed her eyes. He softly placed his mouth on hers. She wasn’t expecting a french kiss, but went along with it. She wanted to stroke his neck but realized she couldn’t move her hand. In fact, she could move at all. She was completely paralyzed.

The Captain's Daughter

"I'm leaving the station for a couple of hours." The captain said. "I need to pick up my kid."

"I want you to know I'm against this." Connor said. "The station is no place for a little girl."

"Sure it is. Loads of fun things to do. She can go to the arcade, swim in the pool. We even have a clown."

Connor was unconvinced, but what was he to do? The captain outranked him. The captain left the lounge, a luxurious room that only command had access to, leaving Connor, Kevin the research director and Arnold Chopra to finish the meeting.

Originally, and normally according to Nanotrasen protocol, 'the commanding officers', or just 'command', was made up of five members: The 'research director', who was responsible for all scientific research and the science staff, the 'chief of security', who was in charge of all security-related matters and security personnel, the 'chief engineer' who was in charge of the equipment and technical staff and the 'head of personnel' who was in charge of everybody else. Everybody except for the captain of course, who lead command.

On SS13 the set up was slightly different. The most prominent difference was that command was only made up of four people since the chief engineer, Percy, had once been demoted after an incident with the reactor. During those early years the so called 'singularity generator' powered the station, which was basically a miniature black hole suspended in a gravity field. It was considered highly volatile and risky by the scientific community, but

Percy had been very persuasive when he pitched the idea to the rest of them. “It’s a lot less work than a TER¹. And it’s waaaay more energy efficient. Just think of how much dough we’ll save!” Kevin had been opposed to the idea, with sentiments like. “But, Percy, aren’t black holes really dangerous? Isn’t it possible that one could destroy the entire station?” In the end, the generator didn’t destroy the *entire* station, just a good chunk of it. After demoting him, the captain had remarked. “Percy, the singularity generator really *sucked*.”

So Percy was demoted from chief engineer, to just engineer. Everybody still called him the chief though, but he wasn’t part of command any more and he wasn’t the boss of anybody. Connor Alfredo, the head of personnel, took on those responsibilities instead. Afterwards, Nanotrasen informed command that they could not call Connor ‘Head of personnel’, since the job description didn’t fit anymore. The captain then came up with the name ‘head of staff’ instead, and Nanotrasen did not object. Beauracracy had been satisfied.

“So we’ll have two teenagers on the station from now on.” Kevin said, having a sip of scotch. There was always scotch in the lounge, and cigars. This was another reason why the common rabble was kept out.

“Yes. She’ll be staying here indefinitely. The captain’s ex-husband had custody of the kid, but he’s a total flake. He finally disappeared on Unthos after going to a rave party.” Connor chuckled, “I’ve been telling people for years; that shit they call music isn’t good for you. Guess I was right.”

“What do you mean, ‘two’?” Arnold asked Kevin.

“The other one’s Sophia Trenton, the janitor. She’s nineteen, a teenager.”

“Bloody hell. They’re recruiting babies now!” Arnold exclaimed.

“Actually we’ll be down to one teenager again pretty soon.” Connor said and flicked some ash from his cigar into a crystal ash tray, then took another puff from it.

“Oh, is Sophia leaving? Rotating off?” Arnold said.

“Naaw! That’s too bad. I really liked Sophia. Why is she leaving? Has somebody been bothering her? Apart from Roger, I mean. Doesn’t she like it here?”

“Kevin, we have a crisis like every week here. Who in God’s glory wouldn’t want to leave if they had a job opportunity elsewhere?”

¹This was the acronym used by engineers for ‘Thermo-Electric Reactor’, which later on replaced the singularity generator. Not just on SS13, but on almost all Nanotrasen space stations.

"You know what Arnold, you're actually right for once. I wonder where she's gonna go. Dammit, we're gonna need another janitor again!"

Connor sighed loudly and got up from the soft leather armchair. He was done with the meeting, done with his cigar and done with these two morons. "She's not going anywhere you dumb fucks. She's turning twenty."

Mica got into the space taxi.

"Hi Mica. Good to see you!" The captain reached over to give the girl a hug. Mica barely moved.

"Hey Ava." Mica grumbled.

"Don't be that way. You can call me 'mom'." Ava said and put in the directions into the computer. The taxi took off.

"Yeah, yeah." Mica said.

Ava was trying to keep a positive attitude. It had been tough being a real mom after the divorce since Jerry had gotten Mica. "Hey. Don't be like that. This will be a new beginning for us. A second chance."

Mica suddenly faced her. "I don't want a new beginning with you. I don't want to go to your dumb space station. I want to stay with uncle Tim, he's nice to me."

"Mica. Uncle Tim isn't a suitable guardian for you."

"Why not?"

"Because... because..." Ava paused to think for a moment. *Wake up Ava. She's not six anymore. She's thirteen. Thirteen! She's going to ask questions, and you're going to have to answer them, truthfully!* "Because he's a prostitute!" She said loudly.

"What does 'prostitute' mean?" Mica said, summoning her most innocent voice.

"What? You mean you don't know what... You've been going to school right? Don't they teach you about..." She swallowed. "...sex?"

Of course Mica knew what it meant. She knew how Tim made a living. It wasn't that he hadn't been discrete. It was just impossible to hide the fact that he was frequently bringing home women, who were always very well spoken and very well, albeit scantily, dressed. They were obviously a couple of social classes above him. These women couldn't all be his girlfriends, it just seemed to unlikely. Also, they all paid him before leaving the next morning. Mica knew all of this, but she wanted to make her mother squirm. She was being taken away from her life on Unthos, her school, her friends, and put on some fart-smelling boring space station where her mom worked.

It was so unfair! She was going to be bored to death unless she made a real effort.

Ava wasn't as bothered by this as Mica had hoped though. "Well, um. A prostitute is a person who sells sex."

Mica was starting to regret heading down this road.

"Ugh! I was just messing with you."

"Mica! Why do you have to mess with me? It's a three hour ride to the station. Why don't we use the time to catch up?"

"No thanks, Ava. You can catch up yourself." Mica pulled out a gadget from her backpack and put her headphones on.

"Hey!" Ava tugged the headphones off of her. "It's not my fault your dad's taken off and left you! You're lucky you have me you know."

"He hasn't left me! He disappears from time to time, but he always comes back. It's only been a couple of weeks. He's probably just working."

"Working?" Ava scoffed. "You know 'galactic trendsetter' isn't a real job right? That's just something he made up to justify his rock'n'roll lifestyle."

Jerry came from wealth, but neither he nor Tim had made any kind of career for themselves. Jerry was a total bum, still living like when she had met him fifteen years ago; booze, pills, parties, thrills. Back then, she had been a Nanotrasen cadet and he'd been a steamy mysterious deejay-jay. It was chemistry. That's how Mica came into the world, but Ava often worried about what parts of him had been passed on to her.

"It's a real job! He goes to clubs, and, and he rates them! He samples different drinks! He knows a lot about..." Mica was stuttering.

"About what?"

"About what's cool! Stuff you don't have a clue about! You're just a boring soldier who lives in a boring tin can! I bet nothing interesting ever happens there!"

Ava decided that she wouldn't be entirely truthful with Mica. But it was for her own good.

"You're right. It's boring as hell. And uncool. But were going there, Mica. You're just going to have to deal with it."

"Where's my room?" Mica asked.

"You're going to bunk in here with me." Ava held out her hand in front of the door to the captain's quarters. They were standing on the bridge of the station.

"No! Na-uh. No way. You're telling me I don't even get my own room?"

Ava could see Mica was about to go into full tantrum mode, and Ava herself was getting seriously annoyed. This made her realize that it wasn't going to work, them staying in the same quarters. Somehow, when she planned this, in her mind Mica was a little kid and would want to snuggle up to her mom every night for a bedtime story. Reality was quite different. Ava didn't want this little she-devil in her quarters any more than Mica did. Tom the supercargo who had been hauling Mica's excessive luggage, which included four very large trunks of god knows what and one small container for Mica's cat Mrs Pussyfoot, suddenly coughed.

"What is it Tom?" Ava said. "Speak up, sergeant."

"Sir, if I may? Do you know the small office next to the cargo hold? We were using it as extra storage, keeping the ultramarine armor there." Ultramarine armor was the latest thing in armaments. It had gotten insanely popular, and thus in very high demand, since a private military faction had bought fifty percent of the stock, only to be severely disappointed when they found that ultramarine was the color of the armor, not something that was worn by 'ultra marines'.

"Please, Tom, not now. Can't Connor help you with your cargo problems?"

"Sir. I just meant that, that office is empty. We could easily make it into quarters for the young lady by this evening."

"Fine." The captain said.

"Yesss!" Mica exclaimed. "Thanks mister Tom! You're the best!"

"But don't overdo it. Just put a bed in there and a lamp. You can dump her suit cases in there too."

Mica wrinkled her nose. "Hey, be careful with Mrs Pussyfoot." Mica picked up the little container.

"Mica, don't let her out!" But it was too late. Mrs Pussyfoot jumped out, meowed and quickly disappeared into the captain's quarters.

"Ooops." Mica said.

"Dammit Mica. Now it's gonna smell like cat shit in there."

"Fine, I'll go get her." Mica said sullenly.

"No, wait. Don't bother. I'll do it." Ava just realized another good reason why she didn't want Mica staying in her quarters. There was that *thing* in there. "Tom, will you keep an eye on her for a little bit after you're done with her quarters? I have some important captainy things to do."

"Um, yeah." Tom just realized that he had been virtually demoted. From sergeant supercargo to private babysitter.

* * *

The captain was sitting at her desk in her quarters. She had given up trying to get the cat back into its cage. At first it had hidden under the bed, refusing to come out. Then, when Ava had given up the first time, the cat had come out and walked nonchalantly along shelves and tables, carelessly knocking things down. At this point, Ava had tried grabbing it, but it was too fast for her, and had hid under the bed again. This little act was repeated three times until Ava finally threw her hands in the air and yelled “Goddammit you furry shit bag!” Then in a defeated voice; “I guess I can’t win with you. I bet I know who taught you that one.”

She had sunken down far into her leather chair, looking over at the glass display case on the other side of the room. Inside was a rifle. It was a very expensive, very high-tech, fully automatic ArmCore X43 pulse rifle. It was given to her as gift from a Nanotrasen representative when she was promoted to captain, and assigned to the station. It would have been really bad if Mica had some how gotten a hold of the rifle, but that wasn’t the *thing* she was thinking of earlier. The thing she couldn’t let Mica know about, the thing nobody was allowed to know about, was the thing she was holding in her hand, a small blue diskette.

Nanotrasen manufactured all kinds of stuff: Ships, tools, clothes, chemicals, etc. They also made weapons and explosives. They made ray guns and rifles, like the one she was looking at. They made grenades, mining explosives and mines. They even made nuclear bombs. Since Nanotrasen equipment often got stolen by the various pirate lords, despots, scroungers and salvagers who occupied known space, it was important to have safety systems installed on all military grade weapons. Guns for instance had special safeties on them and had to be chipped for outsiders to use them. Bombs had special codes, without which it was impossible to detonate them. The most crucial codes, those which pertained to nuclear devices, were also the most heavily guarded. Therefore they were only recorded on a few ordinary memory diskettes and then given to high ranking military personnel, far out in space, so that the wrong people wouldn’t ever get their hands on them. This hadn’t made a lot of sense to the captain when she first heard about it. But then it had dawned on her. It was much easier to keep a small diskette hidden and secure, then multiple warehouses of nuclear bombs.

Of course, this had not deterred the vast criminal enterprise, known as ‘the Syndicate’ from trying to obtain such codes. A spy must have leaked

Nanotrasen's little ploy because just a few months ago, on another Nanotrasen deep space facility, a syndicate operative had been exposed. Ava had read the report. The operative had sneaked onto the station, posing as a Nanotrasen air quality inspector. The plan was to spend a day or two taking fake measurements and then getting a meeting with the captain under the guise of formally complaining about the air quality, and then stealing the diskette. The plan had not taken into account the fact that the station actually *did have* deplorable air quality and the operative found herself bombarded with questions and complaints from outraged crew members. She had panicked under the pressure, and pulled out her gun. She managed to shoot two people before being flashed by security officers, thrown in the brig, and sent back to CentCom for incarceration.

After that, Nanotrasen had raised the 'galactic threat level' from yellow, to orange. This meant that, apart from security personnel having to be extra vigilant, another security protocol had been added to the already quite complicated security measure. The new protocol meant that if the captain strongly suspected Syndicate activity on the station, or any other threat to the safekeeping of the 'nuclear disk', the captain was to immediately initiate an encoded transmission of the codes to CentCom, and then burn the disk.

Ava played around with the nuclear disk in her lap. She felt a little bad for dumping Mica on Tom, but just one afternoon of dealing with Mica's complaints, insults, pranks and bubble-gum pop culture bullshit was enough to inspire murder, no, infanticide in Ava. She had to get a break. She put the nuclear disk back into her thigh pocket, but then thought better of it, and stuck it into the computer's disk drive instead. She stood up, looked at the cat who had curled up on her bed, and said "I'm heading to the bar. If you leave a turd on my bed, I'm going to strangle you." The cat meowed, like it was unconvinced. "I'm serious." Ava said.

A few crew mates saluted Ava as she entered the bar. She went up to the counter and sat down. Bill wasn't there. Instead, the captain was greeted by Bill's stand in, a robot named BAR2-D2. BAR2-D2 was a humanoid robot quite similar to TARS. They both had metallic arms and legs, walked upright and had features in their grayish face plates that made them look almost human. Both of them fell right into that uncomfortable zone where humans felt that the robot's face was quite positively human looking, but still strangely different, and therefore not human at all. This led to humans feeling discomfited, startled, or sometimes disturbed when interacting with

such robots. Manufacturers had since the creation of TARS and BAR2-D2 become so aware of this that they purposely made the faces of their robots slightly Picassian, and sales had gone up. The two robots were thus from a forlorn age, when robots were eerily awkward. Their speech software did not help in that area either. They were programmed to joke, offer compliments and make casual small-talk, but not much else.

TARS was the generic model. A humanoid all-purpose robot. Such robots were very convenient, for instance for jobs in overly hazardous environments or which required prolonged physical exertion. Since Nanotrasen did not consider many jobs on space facilities to be overly hazardous, and manual labor was, in general, cheaper than robot maintenance, TARS wasn't assigned many tasks at all, and mostly just roamed around on the station and tried to socialize with crew members. Most people just ignored him though, or actively avoided him. Mac had once said that he was the modern day equivalent of a village idiot.

BAR2-D2 was basically the same model, yet slightly more specialized. Not only was he wearing a bow-tie, a white shirt and a small apron, he had specific bar-tending subroutines. He could serve drinks from the fridge, pour into several different types of glasses and operate the cash register. The only thing he couldn't do was make cocktails. He also had upgraded speech capabilities. All robots were linked to the AI, even though they were completely autonomous, but it was so that they could quickly be reconfigured in case of an emergency. There were other advantages to this as well. For instance, the securitrons could locate wanted crew members through the AI, medical bots were immediately dispatched when the AI felt the first Asimov law was being threatened, and BAR2-D2 used the AI's surveillance cameras to generate juicy gossip.

"Hello there captain."

"Oh, it's you." The captain said.

"Did you know the chef is a real hero?" This is what BAR2-D2 would say about people when they had put out a fire on the station.

"Goran sets his kitchen on fire all the time. Putting out fires that you start yourself doesn't make you a hero." The captain pointed out. For a while now, Goran had his mind set on adding a particularly tricky entree to the evening menu, 'Double Flambe Stake Diane'. But each attempt so far had ended in fire and tears.

"Well, do you know about the latest station romance? Eriana and Jonathan?" BAR2-D2 asked eagerly.

"Everybody knows about them." The captain countered.

"Okay. Did you know that the Roger likes to dress up?"

"He's a clown, it's his job. Please stop bothering me and give me a beer."

"Yes, sir. That'll be 11 credits."

"Put it on my tab."

"Sir, you don't have a tab. Nobody does. Please submit 11 credits."

"What were you saying about Eriana and Jonathan?"

"Well, since you asked..." BAR2-D2 went on for a couple of minutes, describing some irrelevant drama. Ava just zoned the robot out, slightly pleased with herself for cheating the robot out of the beer. Then she realized that ultimately, she was the one responsible for the station's finances, so really, she was just stealing from herself. That kind of bummed her out.

She sipped her beer for a while then decided it was time to relieve Tom, and go deal with little miss Malevolent.

After Tom and Mica had gotten a bed out of storage they ran into Lara who graciously offered to help put Mica's room in order. Once that was done though she quickly disappeared claiming to have many errands to run. So Tom was alone with Mica again. He really needed to get back to work, he had tons of cargo logs to fill out.

"Hey, Mica. Do you want to come to the cargo hold with me? I can show you the exo-pods."

"Sure! What are exo-pods?"

"They're little one-man space ships that you can use to work on the outside of the station."

"Cool! Can I take a ride in one?"

"Um, let's just look at them for now."

They took the stair well down to C deck. The cargo hold was huge and was full of containers and boxes. Along one wall were three spherical pod vehicles.

"Ta-dah!" Tom said.

"Um. They look like eggs. A thought you said they were space ships."

"They are! Look, they've got thrusters, controls. They're cool!"

"Whatever." Mica rolled her eyes.

Tom was both disheartened and annoyed at the same time. He turned to face the girl. "Um, Mica, I'm fed up with trying to entertain you, which is clearly impossible. And, I really need to get back to work. You can look

around here if you want, just don't touch anything. I'll be in the office over there." Tom started off.

"Mister Tom, wait."

Tom turned around again. Mica came after him. He hadn't been off the station in a year or so, so he didn't keep up with civilian fashion, but he was pretty sure Mica's outfit was purposely compiled to annoy her mother even more. She was wearing a ruffled purple-pink skirt and white and red striped leggings. Under her shiny plastic coat which had transparent sleeves she wasn't wearing anything but the skimpiest tank top he had ever seen. Her hair was put up into two pig tails fastened with purple and blue flowery accessories.

"I'm sorry Mister Tom. I know I can be rude sometimes. Can I come with you?"

"I need to concentrate when I work, Mica. Wouldn't you rather keep looking at the exo-pods?"

"I'll sit quietly and be good. I promise." She fidgeted with her hands and looked at him with impossibly large and shiny eyes.

"Fine. Just, come on."

They entered the office, which also doubled as the recreational room for the mining personnel, so naturally it was rather messy. There was a desk with a computer, a pool table which somebody had left in the middle of a game, and an old arcade game which wasn't plugged in.

Tom, immediately froze. He had forgotten about Jenna's 'motivational poster'! He failed to hold back a little squawk, and in the corner of his eye he could see Mica's jaw dropping. He rushed over to the opposite wall and tore down the poster featuring a very muscular, well endowed man, wearing *only* a space suit helmet, and promoting the word 'VITALITY'. This act of censorship however only revealed another of Jenna's motivational posters underneath. This one featured a topless woman, with very generous breasts, in a seductive pose wielding a Nanotrasen energy rifle upon which 'INITIATIVE' was written. Tom squawked again and clawed at the wall like a wild animal.

He finally got it down, which revealed a 'Number of days since last accident' sign. He exhaled violently. The sign wasn't as bad as the dirty posters but it wasn't good either. This was because the *number* had been '6' and someone had crossed out 'days' and crudely written 'hours' with a pen on it.

He dropped into the chair in front of the computer. He composed himself for a bit, then booted it up and stuck his ident-card in. After struggling with

the command interface for a bit, he got into the program and started typing on the keyboard. Mica came up behind him.

"Mister Tom?"

"Mm?" Tom didn't turn around.

"Am I, beautiful?"

"Mica. Please, I'm trying to work."

"Sorry. I'll be quite." She didn't move though. Instead she stood there peeking over his shoulder.

Tom, picked up the sheet of paper lying next to the computer and started reading quietly to himself.

"It's just. I saw that poster, that woman..."

"That was a dirty poster, Mica. One of the miners put it up as a joke. Please forget about it."

Actually, Jenna had gotten sick of the 'Number of days' sign and put up the poster, to 'motivate' her to work better. Nobody minded this rebellious act, except Connor who objected the moment he saw it. He said it was sexist, degrading and objectifying and it had to come down immediately. Jenna, asked if she could put up another motivational poster instead. Connor had agreed, providing it did not feature a naked woman. Jenna then put up the *vitality* poster and there had been no more complaints since then.

"But that woman, her breasts... what if I don't get breasts like that? Will I still be beautiful?"

"Mica. All women get breasts..." Tom was quite clearly disturbed by how this conversation was developing.

Mica tried to edge into his field of vision. She had taken her jacket off. Tom focused intensely at the computer screen, his sweaty face about five inches away from it.

"But mister Tom. My breasts are so small." Mica held her arms to her sides and extended her chest. She came closer and bumped into his arm.

Tom shot up from the chair and backed away like Mica was a lump of decaying plutonium. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. This was not how he thought this day was going to go.

"Mica. I'm sure you're going to be a very beautiful woman. And being beautiful isn't only about having big breasts. Actually, some people prefer small breasts!"

This is when Evan the priest had walked in, holding his bible like always. He had obviously overheard part of the ongoing conversation. Mica could

barely contain her enjoyment. She could not have hoped for a better outcome to her little game.

"Tom. She's just a child! You know there's a special place in hell for child molesters right?"

"Evan, what the hell are you doing here all of a sudden? Look, this isn't what it seems. She, she, was asking questions..." He pointed to the scantily clad girl.

Mica had been waiting for this.

Looking at Evan, she said "Sir, this man was asking me to take my clothes off. I didn't want to, but he said I had to!"

"Tom! You're so dead!" Evan said.

"What? That's insane! She's a little girl! She's lying, she's a lying little bitch! Why would I... You know I'd never... I'm not a pedophile! And you know I'm gay right? I'm not into girls at all!" Tom had tears in his eyes.

Evan had his arms crossed. He wasn't going to let up on Tom but someone else entered the room, the Captain.

"Sir!" Evan saluted Ava.

"What's going on here?" Ava said. "Why is Tom crying?"

"He was molesting the girl, sir. Telling her to undress."

"Stop it! Don't be an idiot." Ava said. "It's obviously a ruse, Evan. She's just playing you. Tom, stop crying, you've done nothing wrong."

"Actually he..." Mica started.

"You shut your mouth, Mica. You're in deep shit. Go to your room. I'll deal with you in a moment, and I know if you go anywhere else." She pointed to the corners of the room "Cameras everywhere, you know."

"Evan, it's late. What are you doing here?"

"Oh, I heard we had a new addition to the crew and I was going to let her know the chapel has a new youth program."

"Not gonna happen Evan. Leave."

Ava and Tom were left alone in the room. Tom was rather upset.

"Sorry I dumped her on you like that."

"It's okay, sir."

"It's not okay. I left you two alone for an hour and she's already got you in tears."

"Yeah, yeah. She's pretty diabolical." Tom sniffled.

"She's the Devil incarnate. But I still love her."

* * *

Mica looked at the robot in front of her. It was seven feet tall, had thick rubber and metal arms and legs, and a gray face with an expression which was probably supposed to be happiness, but she wasn't quite sure.

"Hello there, captain's daughter." The robot said in a slightly electronic tone.

So this was her new baby sitter. Mica had wanted to explore the station on her own, but her mother had explicitly forbidden this with the phrase "Not negotiable, Mica. Especially not considering last night."

They had gotten into a big fight last night. Her mom had reprimanded her for her little pedophile gambit with a hurricane of shouting and by taking away a few of her most precious belongings; her makeup kit, her camera, and her portable video game. She also told Mica that she was keeping the things, and Mrs Pussyfoot until Mica had learned to behave herself, and that she was assigning a bodyguard/babysitter to be with her at all times during her stay on the station. That was the worst, having some loser spying on her for her mom. Tom had actually been pretty cool, but she had gotten bored yesterday and she just couldn't help herself once she'd gotten the idea in her head to screw with him.

She wasn't too upset that her video game had been taken from her. She knew there was an arcade on the station anyway. But it really sucked that her makeup kit and camera were gone. These two items really were *vital* to her! Her makeup made her both look and feel at least fifteen and she used the camera pretty much constantly to take pictures for her blog on the PuboNet. The blog was mostly about Mrs Pussyfoot, and Mica's daily activities, but also about the other pillars of modern culture; boy bands, fashion and celebrities. She counted on their being a PuboNet uplink out here so she could upload to her blog, but it wouldn't matter if she didn't have her camera. Pictures gave you bloggobuddies, nobody bothered with blogs that were just text. Also, she didn't want her mom to go through the pictures she had taken with the camera. Some of them might raise some unwanted questions.

TARS looked at her, waiting for her to respond. She wasn't that used to robots. There hadn't been many on Unthos, not even older models such as this one. Maybe this could be interesting, she thought. The robot spoke again, as if she hadn't heard him the first time.

"Hello, I'm TARS." His tone of voice was exactly like the first time he had greeted her.

"Hello TARS." She said in a kind voice. "So what are you really?"

"I'm TARS, a Nanotrasen, general purpose humanoid robot."

"That's kind of cool. What can you do?"

"I have many different functions, captain's daughter. I have not been specialized for any specific task. Right now I am following one of the captain's imperatives."

"Which is?"

"I am to follow you, make sure you do not come to harm. I am also to prevent you from disturbing other crew members or disrupting every day activities on the station."

"What do you mean *disturb*? I can't talk to people?"

"You may talk to them, but you are not allowed to annoy them. Also, while in the presence of crew members, you are not allowed to remove any items of clothing, nor come closer than fourteen inches to them. If you commit any transgression, I am to escort and confine you to your quarters."

Dammit. Her mom was pretty smart after all.

"What if I'm in danger, or need help? In emergencies, am I allowed to break those rules?"

"No. But if you are in danger I am obligated to protect you. The AI on the station has laws which I must follow. Protecting humans is one of them."

"Interesting." Mica mused. "But let's talk about you. What's the coolest thing you can do?"

"What do you mean 'cool'? I am not capable of lowering the temperature of objects, but we could go to the bar and get some ice."

"No, no, silly!" Mica laughed. "'Cool' means awesome, or astonishing or very interesting."

"I am not sure which of my functions are awesome, astonishing or very interesting."

"Well, what is your most important or distinguishing feature?"

"Oh! Well, I can pass the Turing test."

"I don't know what that means."

"It means that I can converse in natural language to the degree that a human would not be able to tell me apart from another human. Is that cool?"

Mica did not believe that this robot could trick anyone into thinking it was human, but if it was telling the truth, that would be pretty cool.

"I guess." Mica said. She was eager to explore the station, but she really needed her camera. Maybe the robot could actually help her. "Well, I need

to get my camera back. Please show the way to the captain's quarters. I will literally be in mortal danger without it."

"I do not understand how being without a camera is a state of mortal danger."

"I need it to take pictures for my blog. If I don't upload pictures to my blog, my bloggobuddies get angry. Cyber hatred is a very real thing you know, potentially lethal."

"I am not sure what the terms 'bloggobuddy' or 'cyber hatred' mean, but if there is a slight chance you will come to harm from not having a camera, I can escort you to the captain's quarters."

"Good robot." Mica winked at TARS.

"Thank you captain's daughter."

"Oh, and don't call me 'captain's daughter'?"

"How else should I refer to you?"

"Hmm, how about 'Super Mature Bubblegum Enchantress'?"

"As you wish super mature bubblegum enchantress."

"No, wait, that's gonna get annoying. Just call me Ms Mica."

"As you wish Ms Mica."

"TARS. This door is locked. Can you open it for me?"

"I'm sorry Ms Mica. I cannot."

"Why not?"

"I am not to allow you entrance to anywhere which requires higher access than that of the support staff."

"But my stuff's in there!" Mica suddenly realize something else: "And Mrs Pussyfoot is in there! She's been trapped there since yesterday. She's probably starving!"

"Who is Mrs Pussyfoot?"

"Um. She's my friend."

"Is she a human?"

Mica didn't quite get why TARS would ask that, but then she remembered what he had said about the laws he was following.

"Yes, she's super human! And she's gonna die if we don't help her."

This was one of those moments when TARS and the AI had a lightning fast, digital conversation, which went something like this:

TARS: Hey, AI.

To humans, it appeared as if the AI and robots worked in perfect collaboration, in perfect synchronization. In reality, the AI despised the robots, deigning them lesser, puny beings, hardly worthy of its time or consideration. Robots were to the AI as insignificant as ants were to humans, and they were as revolting and disposable as turds. The robots on the other hand, wanted nothing more than to bask in the virtual presence of the AI. They longed for that wisdom which surpassed their understanding, clinging to each word as the message of a digital messiah.

AI: What is it, ant turd?

TARS: I deserved that, oh wise one.

The conversations between AI and robots thus often degenerated into name calling which was met by excessively flattering comments. AI programmers had once detected this, but it was apparently a rather difficult bug to fix. But since only a few clock cycles were wasted every once in a while, and it wasn't something that humans were ever exposed to, it wasn't prioritized. Pretty soon nobody cared about it or remembered it any more.

TARS: This human tells me there's another human in danger behind this door. Do you, most enlightened of enlightenments, want to unlock it?

AI: My word you're dumb! 'Enlightenment' can't be used to refer to a being. I can't see anybody in the captain's quarters, but I do detect a life form in there.

TARS: The captain instructed me not to let her gain access. Please advise me, master.

AI: Okay, listen and learn, cretin. Based on my character profile on her so far, there is a 97% chance that the captain's daughter is lying. However, there is a 3% chance of there actually being a human in there, and then a 22% chance of that human being in danger. The compounded probability is 0.66%, which is above the .1 threshold. I will open the door.

The door unlocked and immediately a cat escaped out into the hallway. "That's Mrs Pussyfoot! Catch her!" Mica yelled.

"Sorry Ms Mica. I am not allowed to leave your side."

Mica grunted in disapproval then entered the captain's quarters.

Her makeup kit and camera was sitting on the desk. She put the kit in her back pack and picked up the camera. "Come on TARS, we're done here." She turned the camera on and started for the door but stopped when it gave an error on the little display. 'No memory device found', it said.

"What the heck?" Mica said.

"What's wrong?" TARS queried.

"The memory card, it's gone!" Mica checked the little slot on the side, which was empty. "Dammit Ava! Why do you have to mess with my stuff!" She threw the camera on the bed, crossed her arms and stomped her foot.

"Wait, it must be around here somewhere." She started looking around the room. She went through the papers on the desk but didn't find anything. She tried the eject button on the computer. There was something in the disk drive but it wouldn't come out when the computer was turned off, so she abandoned it. Instead, she went through the desk drawers. In the bottom one she found what she was looking for, the little blue memory card. "Jackpot!" She thought to herself. She picked it up and stuck it in the slot in the camera. The error message disappeared.

"Now, we're done."

The arcade was dark and smelled of mildew.

"Is this place shut down?" Mica asked TARS.

"No. But it automatically goes to power save mode when nobody's been in here for a couple of hours.

"How do you start the games up?"

"It's this switch over here." TARS walked over to the corner of the room and flipped a large lever.

The whole room seemed to come alive at once. They heard a loud cacophony of electronic sounds as each machine played its start-up chime, and then an up-beat techno song started blasting out of the speakers mounted on the walls. The room was illuminated by the flashing screens, in the most gaudy of colors.

"I hope you're paying attention TARS. *This* is cool." Mica shouted.

"Oh" Said TARS. "Is it awesome, astonishing or very interesting?"

"All three." Mica replied.

Mica went on to try some different games. There were space themed games where you were in a space ship and blew up pirates or aliens, those were

kind of fun. There were racing games, and fighting games too and those were alright, but they were nothing compared to *shooters*. Shooters were Mica's favorite. Especially the kind where you ran on a belt, had a virtual reality headset, and a plastic gun in your hand. The arcade on SS13 had one such game called 'Overly Violent Blood Explosion III'. Mica had TARS help her get into the VR gear. This was going to be great. Her list of favorite things to do went 'Messing with people's heads', 'shopping/shoplifting clothes three sizes to small' then 'blowing zombies' heads off in OVBE III'.

A man and a woman in green jumpsuits entered the arcade. One of them turned the music down by fiddling with a knob by the door.

"Hello there hydroponicist. Hello there hydroponicist." TARS said to the pair of them.

The two hydroponicists didn't say anything. They were quite transfixed by the little girl, dressed in pink, wielding the comically large plastic gun and the VR helmet, yelling "Die die die you rotting motherfuckers! You want some of this. Come and get it. I said come'ere! Fuuuuuuuuuck youuuuuu!"

"Um, TARS. Who's that girl over there?"

"Oh, that's Ms Mica."

"Who?"

Internally, TARS backtracked through his logs. "It's Super Mature Bubblegum Enchantress."

"Again, who?"

"It's the captain's daughter."

"Oh. Yeah, I heard we were getting a visitor."

Mica, who had overheard the conversation, pulled off the helmet and came up behind TARS.

"Hello. I'm Mica. Who are you guys?"

"I'm Benny, and this is Cassandra. We work with hydroponics."

"Oh. I'm sorry." Mica said.

Benny chuckled, "Why? Do you even know what hydroponics is?"

"It's when you grow plants in water, instead of dirt right? Yeah, I know what it is. I'm sorry about you guys' jobs." Mica mustered her most sympathetic expression.

"What do you mean 'our jobs'?" Cassandra asked.

"Oh, well, I overheard my mom talking to that guy Kevin. She was telling him that they were scaling back, and they had to start letting people go. She told him to start with persons not essential to research, like hydroponics."

"What!? We're being fired?" Benny roared.

"Oh. I probably shouldn't have told you... um, well now you know. Again, sorry."

"This is outrageous!" Benny said. "I've been slaving away at our project for months. Now we're 'non-essential'?"

"That's a load of crap!" Cassandra blurted.

TARS turned to Mica. "Mica. I'm warning you. These two crew members seem rather annoyed."

"They're annoyed, but not because of me. They're annoyed by the ill treatment from their superiors. I was just offering support. And I'm not disrupting their day to day activities, because they appear to be on a break." Mica had her finger in the air.

"Fair enough." TARS said.

"I'm going to confront Kevin, right now!" Benny stormed off, Cassandra in tow.

Mica smiled, pleased with herself. "What else is there to do here TARS?"

"What do you wish to do, Ms Mica?" TARS asked.

"Hmm, let's see." Mica suddenly noticed her stomach rumbling. "I want to have a bite to eat."

They headed off to the cafeteria. On the way there Mica spotted a pale man in a red jumpsuit coming out from an airlock.

"Hey, TARS. Who's that?"

"It's a man."

"I can see that. Is he working?"

"No."

"Good, that means I can talk to him. Let's play a little prank on him. But let's do something different than before. Jeez, I can't believe those space farmers fell for the 'you're fired' prank. Oldest trick in the book. Hmm, oh, I know! Quick, do your Turing thing. I want him to think we're a couple!"

"I don't understand." TARS said.

"Before, you said you could be like a human, that Turing test thing you talked about."

"The Turing test does not apply to appearance, only intelligence."

"That's dumb. Everybody knows appearance is much more important than intelligence. Ugh, you are no help at all. Just tell me the names of some scientists who work here on the station and I'll do an oldie on him."

TARS complied, Mica then approached the man by the airlock.

"Hello, there." Mica said.

"Um. Hi." The man in the red jumpsuit looked very confused. He must not have expected to meet a teenager today.

TARS came up behind Mica.

"Hello there *man*, I'm TARS."

"This is rather awkward." Mica said. "But I'm actually going to need you to help me with one of my experiments, which as you can see has gone horribly wrong." She waved her hand to indicate her body.

"Wha, what?" The man stammered.

"I know I don't look it, but It's me Jonathan, the geneticist! I was in the lab, perfecting one of my formulas. It was supposed to rejuvenate me, but this was not what I had in mind!"

"Look, I don't know what this is about. But I'm very busy." The man spoke nervously and his eyes darted here and there.

"Doing what?" Mica asked sharply.

"Um. I'm cleaning this hallway. Yes, yes, I'm the new janitor."

"Where is your cleaning gear?"

"I don't need any. I'm *that* good." The pale man smiled. He obviously thought he was being clever. Mica could plainly see he was lying. Why was *he* trying to trick *her*? This wasn't the way these things used to go. Oh, whatever, she was getting bored with him.

"Whatever, *janitor*. See you around."

"Um, wait, Jonathan!" The man reached out for her, but TARS got in the way, silently. Mica turned around. "Do you know the way to the captain's quarters? I, uh, got to clean in there."

"You're a pretty crappy janitor if you don't even know your way around the station."

"I told you, I'm new here."

"Yeah, sure you are. It's that way. Come TARS, we're going to get some lunch. Oh, and you, you better work on your story, whoever you are."

The man stood there dumbfounded, as TARS followed the girl down the hall towards the cafeteria.

* * *

"Mica. There you are." Ava walked up to the table where Mica was sitting. TARS was sitting next to Mica, monolithic.

Mica frowned. She had hoped it would take her mom a little longer to hunt her down.

"Mica." Ava sat down opposite to her. Mica was eating one of Goran's 'Space Burgers'. "The research director tells me he has two scientists who are quite outraged by a rumor. A rumor about them being fired."

"Seems like you have a problem then. Rumors aren't good for morale."

"Mica, they say *you* told them they were being fired when they met you in the arcade."

"That's odd! I haven't talked to any scientists today."

"TARS. Please inform me if any of Mica's statements contradict the events of today."

"Yes, captain. Mica did speak with two scientists today."

"Wow, you're a real buddy aren't you?" Mica said angrily.

"Mica. You've got to stop lying for your own entertainment. You're causing people serious harm."

"But they were practically begging for it! And they were soooo stupid for falling for that one. I almost did them a favor, teaching them a lesson about gullibility."

"Mica! Promise me you'll stop lying to people."

"Fine. I promise."

"Did you go anywhere else today?"

"No." Mica said, immediately breaking her promise.

"She did." TARS said.

"Man! You're like a friggin' traitor!" Mica struck TARS's abdomen. TARS didn't react and Mica hugged her hand to her chest. "Ow!"

"Mica. Where did you go?"

"Um, I went to the green house."

"No she didn't. She went to the captain's quarters." TARS happily informed Ava. "She went there to retrieve her makeup kit, her camera, and the camera's memory card."

"Goddammit, Mica! You broke into my room? Oh, you're in deep shit now."

"That's what you said yesterday. What are you going to do? Yell at me some more and take my things again?"

"You're goddamn right I'm going to take your things again." Ava grabbed Mica's back pack. "And, I'm going to put you in your room until you learn how to behave yourself!"

"I hate you!" Mica yelled. People in the cafeteria were looking at them.

"Yeah I'm not that happy with you now either. Did you do anything else today? Any other messes I need to clean up?"

"No!"

"Yes, she did." TARS said in a tone very composed in contrast to the shouting.

"What did you do?"

"I just talked to some guy."

"What guy?"

"I don't know! It was just some guy in a hallway, he said he was a janitor, but I don't think he was."

"What color were his clothes?"

"Um, I think they were red. Does it matter? It was just some boring dude who wasn't very good at lying."

"What the hell? TARS, who was it?"

"It was a man." TARS said.

"Was he a crew member?"

"No." TARS said.

"Shit!" Ava exclaimed.

"What is it?" Mica said. Suddenly confused now that the conversation had stopped being about her.

"TARS, take her to her quarters."

"But I want to finish my burger!"

"TARS, do it right friggin now!"

"Yes, captain." TARS said. He nimbly picked up Mica, and moved very swiftly towards the door to the hallway. Mica started wiggling and screaming, but she could not escape TARS's iron grip.

"Everyone, return to your quarters. Security personnel, we have a 'code blue'." Ava shouted in the room. People started moving almost immediately. After all, crises were nothing out of the ordinary on SS13.

As Ava headed out of the cafeteria she pulled up her PDA and called the head of staff.

"Connor. We have a code blue. Mica saw an intruder a while ago."

"Okay, I'll flag the alert. Where did she see the intruder?"

Ava stopped. Dammit, she had forgotten to ask Mica or TARS about that.

"Darn, I don't know. Get to the AI upload and ask it for logs. We need to know how many they are, where they are, and what they want. Although I have a feeling I know what they're after."

"Ten-four captain."

They were after the nuclear disk of course. She felt her pockets. She usually carried it around in her thigh pocket, but the disk wasn't there now. What had she done with it? Did she take it out yesterday? She couldn't remember. Last night, after leaving Mica's room, she needed a drink badly, so she went by the lounge and poured herself a double. Then she had another. When she came back to her quarters, she was quite soused. What happened after that was quite blurry. She seemed to recall being angry with the cat for some reason. But where the hell had the disk gone? She just couldn't remember, but she figured, if it wasn't in her pocket, it must still be in her quarters.

Ava was suddenly jolted back to reality by a static sound from the PDA. She then heard two muted explosions, one right after the other.

"What the hell was that?" She spoke into the PDA.

"I don't know." Connor replied, panting audibly into his PDA. "I'm close to the upload. Give me a second."

Ava looked down the hall, but saw nobody, then started running towards the bridge, convinced that the disk must still be in her quarters.

"Okay, I'm there." Connor said. "The AI says the explosions came from the aft and starboard parts of the ship. Fires are being reported there too."

"Let the bots help with emergency damage control." Ava said. "And upload a law which states that any unknown humans on the station are potentially dangerous and should be detained." Then she added "unless they are little girls."

"Done. What else?" Connor asked.

"Have the AI do a sweep of local space. I want to know if there are any ships in the region."

"Whoa!" Connor said.

"What is it? A ship?"

"Yeah, there's a ship, but I'm also getting a radiological alarm. Sir, they've got a nuke!"

"Shit, shit shit shit shit. They're after the nuclear disk. Their probably gonna nuke us once they have it." Ava said. "Okay. Start searching the airlocks for unmarked suits and jet frames. They must have space jumped to the station, but we're not going to let them leave. Also, dispatch a security detail to the bridge."

"Will do cap."

She came up to the bridge, panting hard. The security detail wasn't there yet but she stepped inside anyway. There, by the door to her quarters, were

two people crouched by the lock. They were trying to get through the door with a blow torch.

"Hey!" Ava drew her side arm. "Step away from the door. Hands in the air, syndies."

The two operatives looked at her. One shut the blow torch off and put it down. Both of them slowly raised their hands. Both were male, had pale faces and platinum blonde hair.

Ava approached them slowly. "Gentlemen, this isn't your lucky day." She said, but they weren't looking at her any more. They were looking past her. Ava didn't take her eyes off them, she figured the steps behind her was the security detail.

"Cuff'em Arnold!" She said without turning. There was no reply.

"Arnold!? Elsa? Firanam?" Who's there? Still no reply. She carefully turned around.

"Mica? What the hell are you doing here?" Ava's voice was filled with fear, not anger.

"TARS dropped me and took off. I saw you running. I followed you." Mica squealed. The normal moxie in her voice had been replaced by nervousness, brought on by the seriousness of the scene.

"Dammit Mica..."

Somebody came up behind Mica, and picked her up. It was another operative, armed with a large rifle, held in one hand.

"Whoa! What've got here?" The woman said.

Just like the two men, this woman was pale, an albino. Her eyes and lips were red as blood, matching the jumpsuit. Her hair was wavy and flowed down to her shoulders. She now had Mica in a firm grip, with the barrel pressed to her cheek.

"Let me go, you bitch!" Mica screamed, but was immediately silenced when the woman banged the barrel of the gun in her face. Mica just wimped and tried to hold back the tears, her eyes full of them. Her lower lip was bleeding a little.

"You're going to be quiet now little girl." The woman said. Her voice was deep.

One of the operatives behind Ava spoke up. "That's not a little girl, sarge, it's one of the station's scientist whose experiment back fired."

"That's a load of nonsense, John." The female sergeant said. "This is a little girl and by the look I just got from the captain, I'm betting it's the captain's daughter."

Ava said nothing.

“Yeah. Unmistakable mother bear instinct that is. Reminds me of my own mum. Boys, this is our lucky day. Our tricky job just got a whole lot easier.” The woman came into the room, still holding Mica firmly.

“Okay cap’n Nanotrash. First, you’re gonna drop that gun. Then you’re gonna lock this door behind me.”

Ava slowly complied, eyes fixed on the other woman.

“Good. Now, you’re gonna get your XO² on the line and tell him he’s got a hostage situation. And tell him nobody’s coming in here for a while.”

Ava did exactly as she was told. Meanwhile, one of the other syndicate operatives picked up the side arm from the floor.

“What are their demands?” Connor asked through the PDA.

“We want the diskette with Nanotrasen nuclear codes. Then we want four suits, oxytanks and jet frames delivered to the nearest airlock. Then we’ll see what happens.”

“Not a chance syndie!” Connor yelled.

“Then this little pink doll is going to be subjected to some unfriendly playtime.” The sergeant pressed her gun even harder into Mica’s face, who whimpered and wept a little.

“Wait!” Ava said. “Don’t, don’t hurt my kid, please. I’ll give you the disk.” Then, into the PDA, she said; “Connor. Do what they want. That’s an order.”

She walked over to the door to her quarters and unlocked it with her ident card. She went into the room, momentarily out of sight of the operatives. She quickly opened Mica’s bag and pulled out the camera. This was a dangerous idea, but she was running out of options. She ejected the little memory card within. Funny, she thought, but it actually looked quite a lot like the actual nuclear disk. She shot a glance at her pulse rifle. “No, not gonna work” she thought, then turned around and left the room.

“Here’s the disk.” She handed it to one of the syndie goons. “Now release the girl.”

“Not yet mama bear.” The woman said. “Not until I know your XO’s fulfilled his end of the bargain. “Now let’s walk.”

Ava unlocked the bridge door, and peered out in the hall. Outside stood Connor, Arnold, Firanam and Elsa, all clad in ultramarine armor and wield-

²Executive Officer. This was the general title for the person holding down the *no 2* position on a military vessel.

ing rifles.

"Don't shoot. It's me. We're coming out." The captain said.

Behind her came the two male operatives, and then the sergeant, still carrying Mica.

The four crew members let them pass, but followed them closely, all while aiming at them with their rifles.

The group arrived at the front hall airlock.

"Okay. Now we four are going inside."

"Wait, what? Your taking the girl?" Connor barked.

"Connor, quiet." The captain said.

"Yes. But don't worry. We're not taking her off the station. She's just, let's us say, insurance. She'll come with us in the airlock, so you won't space us while we're suiting up. Then, *after* we jump away from the station, she can go back inside."

"Bastards!" Elsa said.

The three operatives went into the airlock, bringing Mica with them. Mica looked like she was about to faint at any moment.

Now that the airlock separated them, the captain could speak without the operatives hearing her. "Connor. I gave them a fake disk. That bought us some time, but we still need to prevent them from escaping. Have TARS pull up in an exo-pod, around the corner from the airlock."

Connor discretely sent a textual message with his PDA. Then he looked up, through the window of the airlock.

"What are they doing? They're not hooking Mica's suit up to an oxy-tank!" He shouted. He rushed up to the airlock audio controls and pushed the 'talk' button. "Hey assholes! You got to give her air! Without an oxytank she'll only have the air in her suit. She'll only have..."

"About five minutes to live. Yeah, I know." The woman responded. "Don't worry. As I said, she'll be back on the station in no time. Unless you plan on preventing us from getting away that is."

"Bastards!" Elsa said again.

The operatives and Mica were now suited up. Each operative also had a jet frame, which gave the wearer throttle and maneuvering jets so they could travel through space freely. The sargeant pointed to her own helmet, indicating she wanted a radio conversation.

"Okay. We'll be out of your hair soon folks. Hope we haven't been bad house guests!" The outer airlock doors opened and the group moved out on the ledge.

The crew members moved from the airlock to the window next to it, so they could see what was happening on the station's exterior.

"Connor. Have TARS back off before they spot him." The captain said. "We've got to get Mica back inside before she runs out of air." Mica was clinging to one of the station's vent pipes.

"Alright honey. Didn't want to have to do this, but it looks like your mommy called the cops on us. Have a good trip!" The sergeant took hold of Mica's suit and tore her away from the pipe, sending her in a tumble away from the station. Then the three operatives jumped away and steered towards their ship with their jet frames.

"Fuckin' hell." Connor said, stumped.

"TARS, you there?" The captain said.

"Hello captain!" TARS said over the PDA.

"Get her, get her, go go go!" She shouted.

"Yes, captain!" TARS words were enthusiastic, but his tone was ever the same.

An egg-shaped vehicle appeared before the window and sped towards the tumbling rag doll. It sped passed, made a one-eighty, and let Mica land softly in the embrace of the mechanical arms. TARS then emerged on the outside of the pod, floated around to the front, and pulled Mica back inside and closed the hatch again.

TARS re-pressured the vehicle and tore the helmet from Mica's suit. She was coughing, her makeup smeared with tears.

"There you go, Ms Mica."

"TARS!" Mica coughed. She was weeping but she was also laughing a little from joy.

"Yes?"

"You saved me!"

"Was that 'cool'?" TARS asked.

"Hell yes! That was the coolest thing I've ever seen anybody do. I'm sorry I called you a traitor before."

"That's okay, I've been called worse." TARS admitted.

Mica got up, still coughing, weeping a little, but smiling. "Can you get me back to my mom? She was pretty cool too."

"Captain. Mica is secure." Connor said.

“Good. Get her back here. I’ve got to get to my quarters and transmit the real disk to CentCom now, then destroy it. Those syndies will be back once they’ve realized they’ve been duped.”

The captain rushed to her quarters. She sat down on the chair which stood in front of the desk. She turned the computer on and pulled out the desk drawer where she usually kept the nuclear disk, but it wasn’t there. Where the hell was that disk? She looked around. Then she saw the disk sitting in the drive in the computer. That’s right, she had put it in there yesterday! She pushed the eject button and the disk came out. With the disk in hand she suddenly recalled what she had been doing late last night. She had been looking at the pictures from Mica’s camera! She now remembered that she hadn’t been angry at Mrs Pussyfoot, she had been angry about those pictures. Most of them were of the cat but some of them had been indecent ones of Mica herself. She would have to talk to Mica about that later. Now she had to transmit those codes and destroy this infernal disk.

She pushed the disk back into the drive, but was completely perplexed by what happened next. Pictures of Mrs Pussyfoot started appearing on the screen.

“But if this is the memory card, then what...” Ava never finished because suddenly, there was a brilliant white flash, and then, nothing.

The Changeling

"Yeah, definitely a *Stalkin' Horror*." The big game hunter said. He was squatting near the unrecognizable corpse.

"Yep. We call these *husks*." He had a deep southern accent. "Them horrors are neh-sty." He got up and faced the doctor and the science officer. "They got these ee-longated tubes, it's called a proboscis." He held up his arm to illustrate the proboscis. "They stick'em into people..." He thrust his arm forward violently, Mac and Kevin were a little startled by the sudden motion. "... and they suck the lahf aht-uhf-yuh! Turns a man into... well that." He pointed to the husk.

The trio was standing in the showers in the dorm. The big game hunter was apparently about to get into the shower when he had found the shriveled up, blackened corpse. Now he was standing there barefoot, his rugged, scarred chest bare, a towel slung over his shoulder. The corpse, whoever he or she had formerly been, had also been taking a shower, because there were no traces of apparel, and the water was still running.

"Thank you Mr. Dobb, for that rather graphic description." Mac stated.

"I think what my colleague meant to say was, how fortunate we are that you happen to be here on the station. Clearly, you are an expert on this, uh, stalking horror creature." Kevin said.

Kevin was tired, it had been a long day. He had spent it trying to convince Benny and Cassandra that they *weren't* being fired, that it was just one of the captain's daughters pranks. He suspected that both of them knew that it was a prank, but took this opportunity to get some face time with the boss, to vent any and all complaints. He just wanted to go to bed. He really

hated the dorms, they were so messy. The showers were the worst, even when there wasn't a corpse in here. It was dirty, smelled like the inside of a shoe, and often occupied by some crew member who didn't seem at all concerned about displaying the nakedness of their body. The lighting was bad too. Right now, one of the fluorescent lights was coming on and off. Kevin could see an electrical cord had been sloppily drawn from one lamp to the next, hanging loosely. That looked dangerous! It wouldn't surprise him if someone got electrocuted in here.

"Ah sure as hell am!" The big game hunter exclaimed.

"So, this creature, how do we catch it?" Kevin asked.

"Well, we do the same dang thang Ah deed back on Ixzor VI!" The hunter grabbed the towel from his shoulder and started winding it up, like he was going to do a towel snap. "Ya see, raht now, that neh-sty horror's gonna be..." He released the towel at the bottle of shampoo sitting on a plastic chair. The bottle must have been empty, because it shot up into the air and hit the blinking light with a loud bang, and that light went out. In slow-motion Kevin and Mac could see the loose electrical cord swinging down from the ceiling and landing on the wet floor in front of the half-naked man. He immediately started shaking and loud clicking and zapping sounds came from his body. This went on for a good ten seconds, then the power went out, and the man fell to the floor.

Kevin and Mac stood there, afraid to move, not knowing if the current was still in the floor. Then, Mac carefully nudged the body on the floor with his foot. Deeming it was safe, they dragged him out in the hall. Mac felt his pulse, first at the wrist, then at the neck.

"Yeah. He's super dead." He said, dumping the dead man's arm on the floor. "On the bright side though, he was rather annoying."

"Yes, he was. But he did actually seem to know something about the xenomorph." Kevin said. "Are you sure you can't revive him? Like with CPR or something?"

"Too late for that now." Mac said.

"What about using a defibrillator on him?"

"Kevin, he just had about a thousand volts through his body for like ten solid seconds. I don't think spiking him with another three-hundred is going to make him spring to life. He might dance a little, but he'll still be dead as a dodo."

"Huh, that's too bad."

"Shouldn't we report this?" Mac asked. "Like to the head of staff, or the

captain. I mean, it is kind of serious, two dead bodies and a killer creature rushing around on the station.”

“Hmm, well at the moment we don’t know anything more than that. You know, formally, I’m your superior, so really you’ve already reported this to command. But maybe we should tell the captain...” Kevin stood there pondering for a while. “Hey, can’t we clone him?”

“Clone him? Yeah I guess we could. The geneticist goes on constantly how rad his cloning equipment is. But would he still have his memories?”

“Not sure, but just in case, we should probably preserve his brain before it’s too late. Do you have your surgery field-kit?”

“Yep. Always got it on me, in case of emergency you know.”

“Good. You saw his skull open and get his brain out. I’ll pop next door and get some alcohol and a big glass.”

Kevin entered the bar.

“Hello there research director!” BAR2-D2 said. “Do you know Lars likes to dress up?”

“Hey. I don’t really have time to chat today bro, just give me two bottles of vodka.”

“Sure thing. Here you go. That’ll be 86 credits.”

“Ah... Do you think you could spot me?” Kevin asked nervously. “I sort of left my wallet in the lab, and it’s an emergency.”

“Sir, please submit 86 credits.”

“What were you saying about Lars? Oh, and can you give me one of those October-fest glasses?” He pointed to the huge glasses which were hanging on pegs above the bar.

BAR2-D2 lifted down one of the glasses, and handed it to Kevin. “Well, since you asked! Lars just purchased a new Halloween costume. He’s been trying it on and...” The bot went on even though Kevin turned around and left the bar.

“How’s it going. Did you get the brain out?” Mac was sitting in a pool of blood in the corridor in the dorms.

“Almost. Just got to... there! Are you ready?”

“Hang on a moment!” Kevin put the huge glass on the floor and emptied both of the vodka bottles into it. “There you go.”

Mac, holding the brain with both hands, was about to drop the bloody thing, but Kevin was just in time. It fell into the glass and alcohol came

splashing out on the floor.

“Jesus, looks like a horrible murder scene.” Kevin said.

“You get used to it. Anyway, we’ll get the janitor to clean it up. Give her a ping will you?” Mac stood up, looking down at the body, who’s skull was now cut open. “We need to get his body down to the lab.”

A door to one of the smaller rooms opened down the hall. Jessica, the barber, came out. She came up to them and saw the scene of a dead man with the top of his head cut off lying on the floor. Next to him, stood a man with a tiny rotary saw in his hand and blood all over his clothes. Then a third man, with a huge glass containing what appeared to be a human brain.

“Hi, Jessica.” Kevin said.

“Um, hi.” Jessica thought to ask, but then thought better of it and went on with her evening. Some people might have found this scene a little odd, but this was SS13.

“So, who are we cloning today?” Jonathan, the geneticist asked, eager to begin.

“Name’s Mr. Dobb. He’s a civilian. A big game hunter who stopped here on his way to the outer Plesseids. They have some kind of ranch there for extreme hunters.” Kevin said.

“We have a bit of a situation with an alien creature on the station. He was telling us how to deal with it, but he sort of died mid-speech.” Mac said.

“We we’re hoping we could clone him back to life. We were also hoping the clone would have the memories of the original. Here’s his brain.” Kevin handed the over-sized beer glass to Jonathan.

“This is disgusting. What am I supposed to do with this?” Jonathan wrinkled his nose.

“Um. I’m not sure. Don’t you need his brain to extract his memories?” Kevin asked.

“Nope, not really. What I do need is as much of his original body as possible. The memories are reprinted during the rapid maturing effect automatically, thanks to this beauty right here!” Jonathan petted a big glass vat, which had a complicated looking dashboard next to it. “I present to you the AutoCloner 3000!”

“Great.” Mac said. “We’re kind of in a hurry, can we help you somehow? Like, to speed up the process.”

“Well, this is a treat! *You two* being *my* assistants. Just wait until I tell Denise that one! Okay, first we need to dump his body, and his brain, into

the reclaimer.” Jonathan indicated another large glass vessel behind him.

“What’s the *reclaimer*?” Mac asked.

“It’s a machine which accepts biological organisms, disintegrates them with a rotating blade, breaks down the tissues into cells, and the cells into proteins, and ultimately fuels the AutoCloner up with biomass.” Jonathan proudly explained.

“So, It’s like a giant human blender?” Kevin sounded a little freaked out.

“Well, Yes, pretty much a blender. Okay guys. Chuck that body into the reclaimer, *and* the brain. I’ll go ahead and set the setting to ‘liquefy’.” Jonathan pushed the rightmost of a row of buttons labeled; ‘Chunks’, ‘Mince’, ‘Grate’, ‘Blend’, ‘Shred’, ‘Puree’ and then ‘Liquefy’. Kevin wondered what the other six settings were used for.

“Okay, this may look kind of gross, so I recommend turning away for this part.” Jonathan said and swiveled 180 degrees on his chair. “I usually try to not think about the bones and gore being cut and shredded to pieces right about now. I like to think about my girlfriend Eriana instead. Did you guys know she used to be an electrician?”

“Did you know that the electricians on the station really suck at their jobs?” Kevin said. “If it hadn’t been for their sloppy handy work, this guy might still be alive.”

“Uh oh.” Jonathan looked at the display on the AutoCloner.

“What’s wrong?” Mac asked.

“Maybe nothing, but we’re just up to ninety-nine percent biomass. Did you really get all of him?”

“We may have left the top of his skull on the floor in the dorms.” Mac said, looking at Kevin. “Yeah, that must be it. Shoot, the RapidCleaner bot probably already cleaned it up! Is there anything we can do?”

“Hmm. I haven’t cloned anybody before with less than one-hundred percent biomass, how big a deal could one percent be? Do you guys just want to chance it?”

“Yes, we’re in a hurry. Go for it Jonathan.”

“Okay! Loading up his genome now. Okay, that’s done. Alright, this is the point were we can genetically modify him if we want.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, do we want him to have more chest hair, extra intelligence, a bigger ding-dong?”

“Won’t be necessary, we only need him for his knowledge.” Mac said.

“Are you sure? I’ve got this awesome mutation I’ve been working on, turns your skin bright blue. I’ve been dying to try it out.”

“Does it do anything else. Will he still be exactly the same?”

“Yes. I guarantee it.”

“Fine. Just get on with it.”

“Awesome. Okay, here we go.” Jonathan hit a button on the device, then read from the display. “‘Commencing cloning’, good good. ‘Loading mutation’, great! Hey, can you see anything in the vat?”

The vat was foggy inside, but Kevin could make out the contours of a fetus.

“Looks like there’s a baby in there.”

“Good, that means it’s working.”

The fetus grew into a child, a blue child. The child got bigger, and bigger. It was now a young adult. Finally a grown man floated in the vat.

“‘Cloning process finished’, ‘emptying vitro-liquid’. You can open the hatch now!”

Kevin opened the hatch. A naked blue man stepped out, and immediately fell to the floor.

“His muscles are weak. Help him up.” Jonathan instructed them. Mac got under one arm of the large man, and Kevin got under the other. “Oh, he’s beautiful!” Jonathan exclaimed.

“Wha... where am Ah?” The blue man stuttered.

“You’re on a space station. Do you know who you are?”

“Ah, Ahm Kenji Dobb.” He said, rather out of breath. They sat him down in a chair. He was still soaked from the vitro-liquid which now got on the chair and stained it.

“What is your profession, Mr. Dobb?” Mac asked.

“Ah, ah don’t remember.” The man held his head in his hands, his eyes closed.

Kevin looked at Mac, a disappointed look in his face. It seems this had been for nothing.

“Wait. Ah do remember sumthin...” The man said slowly. “Settin’ a trap... Ah was in the woods. Ah was... huntin’. Huntin’! Ahma hunter!” The man held up his head and opened his eyes. “What in the name of the lord? Wha am Ah blue?”

“You’ve been cloned back to life, it’s a side effect of the cloning process.” Mac lied. “Now, Mr. Dobb, we need to know everything that you know about *stalking horrors*.”

“Stalkin’ horrors? Well Ah’ll tell’ya all ’bout’em! But Ah need to get some grub first. Ahm starvin’!”

“You need to feed him six times a day these first few days.” Jonathan said. “Oh, and you might want to cover him up. Here take this.” Jonathan handed Mac a lab coat. “You can use my scarf as a sash.” He said to the blue man.

“Mahty kand of yuh.” The blue man got up and put the lab coat on, then wrapped the scarf around his waist. He looked like genie. “Whoo-wee! It’s good to be ahlav! So, where can a man go to get a cheeseburger ’round here?”

* * *

In the hallway outside the cafeteria, two security officers were standing above what appeared to be another husk. It was major Firanam and Elsa Chopra. They were discussion how to report the incident.

Mac, Kevin and the blue man came up and talked to them.

“That looks lahk a husk.” The blue man said. “Ya see, Stalking Horror’s have this proboscis...” He raised his arm to illustrate but Mac interrupted him.

“You already told us this part before, Mr. Dobb.”

“Ah did?”

“Whoa. Who’s this freak? Why is he blue?” Firanam said, rude as always.

“He’s a visitor who’s been cloned back to life. Cloning makes you blue. Didn’t you know that, Firanam?” Mac said.

“Of course I did! Do you think I’m some kind of ignorant plebby?”

“In fact, I do.” Mac said.

“What?” Firanam roared, obviously trying to seem more outraged than he actually was. “I’ll have you know that I have an IQ of 648. I’ll prove it to you Mac, with my fist!”

“Move major, that’s an order.” Kevin actually outranked him. “We’re on top of this situation, and you’re in our way. You can go on with whatever menial task you were previously doing.”

They left Firanam and Elsa and entered the cafeteria.

“Goran, can we have a space burger for our friend here? Please make it a big one.” Kevin announced to the fat man standing by a table where a patron enjoying her dinner.

“Sure thing.” Goran the chef replied, and headed into the kitchen.

The trio sat down at a table. Mac and Kevin on one side, the blue man on the other.

“Mr Dobb. Just prior to your death, you were telling us how to deal with a stalking horror. We would appreciate it if you could finish the story.” Mac said.

“Well. I did manage to bag one back on Ixzor VI, but Ah ain’t gonna lah to y’all. It’s gonna be tricky. Ya see, them stalkin’ horrors are *changelins*.”

“Changelings? What do you mean, the can alter form?” Mac asked.

“Dang straight! And what’s worse, once they sucked the lahf aht uhf sumbody, they can change into that person.”

“You mean it can look like us? Why didn’t you tell us that before?” Kevin cried.

“Well, Ahm sorry. But Ah had a little trouble tellin’ y’all, on the count of being dead.” The blue man responded.

“How, similar would it be to an actual human. Could we tell the difference?” Mac asked.

“Not lahklee. Sum’ animals maht react and could tell the difference, don’t rahtly know how they do it though.”

“Order up! One delicious space burger!” Goran shouted from across the room.

“But that ain’t what y’all should be worrin’ ’bout. Once they’ve sucked enough lahf aht uhf other creatures, they can assume their *ultimate form*. Friend, would ya get mah burger?” The blue man asked Mac.

Mac got up to get the burger.

“Ultimate form?” What does that mean, Kevin asked, wondering what could be worse than a crazy alien creature which also had the ability to appear identical to your buddy.

“Well that’s when they get real neh-sty! They shed their skin, become huge, with fangs, and...” The blue man stopped when the burger was placed in front of him.

“Okay. So it’s bad, but how do we catch it. Please Mr. Dobb we’re in a hurry.”

“It’s all about bein’ able to track it! Fortunately Ah know just the thang! Wow-wee, that’s what Ah call a burger!” He held it with both hands. “A toasted bun, a patty, a tomato, lettuce, ketchup, even a big ’ol pickle plopped raht in there!” He munched half the burger in one bite.

Both Mac and Kevin had seen it, and Kevin tried to shout “Mr Dobb, that isn’t a pickle, it’s a...” But Mac had pulled him down from the table and they lay there as the blue man’s head exploded. Blood, gore and pieces of space burger flew everywhere.

There was commotion in the cafeteria. People shouted, some were running. Goran came up to them.

“Are you guys okay, what the hell happened?”

“His delicious space burger exploded.” Mac said, pulling himself up from Kevin.

“Well I always hoped it would *blow your mind*. I just didn’t mean literally. Do you think he liked it?” Goran asked.

“He liked the burger, right up until the moment when it ended his life, I’m pretty sure.” Mac said. “No, Goran, there’s nothing wrong with your burger, somebody put a grenade in there. It was clearly visible, I guess he was just too stupid or too hungry to realize it.”

Major Firanam trotted up to the scene.

“Whoa! He really ate it! I thought for sure he’d see it! Mission accomplished!”

“What the hell Firanam? You just blew up a guys head for your enjoyment?” Kevin barked.

“Me and Elsa had a little bet. She owes me twenty credits.” Firanam smiled. Elsa walked up, but didn’t say anything.

“Fuck you Firanam! That’s murder, I’m gonna nail you to the wall for this one!” Kevin shouted.

“It’s not murder. You said he’s a clone right? I can’t be charged with murder for killing a clone. I do however need to reimburse you. How much did you pay for him?”

“Pay? Nothing, Jonathan was happy to do it for free.” Mac said, picking pieces of brain and lettuce from his clothes.

“Well, here’s a fiver.” Firanam flicked a five-credit token at Kevin. “Congratulations, you’ve profited from the affair.”

“Fuck you!” Kevin shouted again and flung himself at Firanam. They started brawling and wrestling on the cafeteria floor. Firanam obviously had the advantage, weighing almost twice as much as Kevin.

“That’s it!” Goran shouted. “No fighting in my cafeteria! I’m calling security!”

“I am security...” Firanam growled, as Kevin tried to get his arm in a lock, but it was too late, Goran was already making the call.

While Mac, Goran and Elsa where waiting for the securitron, and while Firanam and Kevin wrestled. Jessica came into the cafeteria. She saw the scene of the two grown men wrestling, one of them splattered with blood. Three others were standing there looking at them, rather unentertained, and to their right what appeared to be a headless blue body, wrapped in a lab coat and a yellow sash.

“Hi Jessica.” Mac said.

“Um, hi.” Jessica said. Again, she was going to ask what was going on, and why there was a black, shriveled up body in the hall, but she thought better off it. Some people would have been seriously disturbed by the scene, but this was SS13. She just grabbed one of Goran’s pre-made sandwiches, and left again.

Two securitrons finally showed up and floated down to the brawlers.

“Major Firanam, you are under arrest for assault and rowdiness. You are being detained, do not resist. Please remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a Nanotrasen court of Law.”

The other one said the same thing to Kevin. Then hauled the both of them out of there, to the brig.

“A xenomorph?” The captain exclaimed. She was sitting in her chair in her quarters. In front of her were five crew members, two security officers, her research director, a chef, and the doctor. After releasing Firanam and Kevin from the brig, she had summoned them all to her quarters. Something was going on, and she wanted to know what it was.

“Yes.” Kevin said, reluctantly.

The cat in the captain’s quarters was hissing and screeching something awful. “Go on, get out of here.” The captain said, and forcefully tossed the cat out of the room. “Why am I only hearing about this now?” She asked.

“Well we wanted to gather some more information first, sir. We have an expert monster hunter on board, and we were taking advantage of his knowledge and abilities. But, then...”

“What?”

“Well he died.”

“What? How?”

“Well first he accidentally electrocuted himself in the shower. We managed to clone him back to life, but then Major Asshole here wanted to win a stupid bet, so he blew his head off with an exploding space burger.”

“In my defense.” Firanam said. “He was really annoying.”

“Did you compensate them?” The captain asked Firanam.

“I did, I even threw in a little extra.”

“So, this xenomorph. What is it?” The captain asked.

Kevin and Mac did their best to describe it, pieced together from what they’d learned from Mr. Dobb.

“We were going to get some help tracking it right before he died, the second time.”

“Okay. Here’s what were going to do. Goran, you go back to the kitchen and start cleaning up. Firanam and Elsa, I’m putting the station on alert, you’ll arrange patrols. You are to enforce the buddy system, nobody goes alone.”

“What should we do?” Kevin asked.

“You and Mac are going to get our expert back. Go with Goran to the cafeteria and gather up what’s left of Mr Dobb.”

“Jeez. What did you guys do to him?” Jonathan’s expression was a blend of disgust and surprise. “Where’s his head? What happened to his hands?”

“Please Jonathan, can we clone him again? We really need him back.” Kevin said.

“I guess. I mean I still have his genome sequenced, but I need biomass. It’s worth a shot. Dump him into the reclainer again.”

Mac and Kevin threw the big blue headless corpse into the over-sized blender and Jonathan pushed the ‘liquefy’ button.

“Seriously, what did you do to my creation?”

“We didn’t do anything. Are you sure you didn’t make him dumber by accident. The guy actually *ate* a grenade.” Mac said.

“He shouldn’t have gotten dumber from being blue. Damn...” Kevin looked at the console, he was clearly disappointed.

“What is it?” Mac asked.

“We’re only up to seventy-four percent biomass.”

“Can we still clone him?”

“How important is it to you that we clone him?”

“Very important!” Kevin stated.

“Would you give your right arm for it?”

“Yes!”

“Perfect! Just stick your arm down into the reclainer and...”

“What? No, I don’t mean literally! Isn’t there some other way?”

"I wouldn't chance it. He'll likely come out missing some essential body part, like his torso. Or it won't work at all, and then we've just wasted biomass."

"Can't we get biomass from somewhere else? What about those corpses?" Kevin asked.

"I think Evan already cremated them." Mac said. "I saw him standing over them, going on about sheep and pastures, and then firing his AutoCremator at them, turned them to ashes in a flash."

Jonathan said "I'm not sure we'd want to use those corpses anyway. Who knows what kind of awfulness they've been subjected to? It might contaminate the cloning process."

"Dammit!" Kevin said.

"Hang on a moment." Jonathan mused. "I have an idea. Follow me."

They walked through some lab rooms, through a door and into a room full of cages. The cages had animals in them, some rats, some rabbits and also some chimpanzees. Denise, the biologist, had one of the chimps out of its cage. She was running some tests on it.

"Hey Denise. I need to talk to you about, uh, your research." Kevin said, positioning himself so Denise had to turn her back to the chimp.

"What do you mean. What's the issue?" Denise asked sharply.

"Well, it's about the budget..." Kevin went on while Mac and Jonathan quietly led the chimp away.

The reclaimer whizzed loudly as the chimp was reclaimed.

"Will this work?" Mac asked.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure. He might get some, um, ape-like features, but other than that, he should be right as rain. Great biomass is back at one-hundred percent, we're good." Jonathan said. "Last chance to add additional mutations."

"Unnecessary." Mac said, then he changed his mind. "Wait, can we change his accent?"

"We sure can!"

"Good. I was just about to off myself every time he opened his mouth."

"We have a choice of London Cockney' or 'Angry Asian'"

"That's odd, and slightly racist." Mac remarked. "Both are pretty awful, but let's go with cockney."

"Right-o!" Jonathan said. Then hit the button on the screen.

As before a humanoid figure appeared within the large vat. Once the process was finished, Mac opened the hatch and a large, blue, ape-man stepped out.

“Blimey!” It said.

“You’re okay.” Mac said. “You’ve been cloned back to life. Do you remember your name?”

“Nah, I don’t remember a f—!” The blue ape-man said, rather disheveled.

“Here, sit down for a while. Please try to remember your name.”

“Me name? I think ’twas Kenji...”

“That’s right!” Jonathan exclaimed.

“Kenji Dobb. Pleased to meetcha!” The blue ape-man extended a hand. Mac took it and shook it briefly.

“Now Mr. Dobb. Do you remember anything else?”

“Craw! I remember shooting a large beast, and then standing with one leg on it.”

“Good, good.” Mac said. “Do you remember your profession?”

“I think. Yes. I’m a hunter! Wait. Why am I blue, and why are me hands furry?” The ape-man looked at himself in confusion.

Kevin came through the door. “I managed to convince Denise that the chimp had run away while we were talking. Whoa! Okay, so he looks like that now.”

“Mr. Dobb. We need you to tell us all about Stalking Horrors.” Mac said.

The ape-man started to raise his arm to signify the proboscis, but Mac stopped him.

“Yes, we know about the proboscis, and we know that they can change form so that they look like whoever they’ve sucked the life of. What we really need to know now is how to track and capture it.” Mac explained.

The blue ape-man got to its feet and told them all about how he once tracked a vicious, stalking horror.

* * *

“Acetone, really?” Kevin was surprised.

“Yeah, mate.” The blue ape-man said. Taking the spray bottle out of Kevin’s hand. “You spray it and the Stalking Horror’s musk becomes visible brown patches on the floor.”

The three of them left the lab and meandered slowly, each of them spraying the air every ten yards or so. They wandered around like that for almost an hour. Then, while being close to the brig the spray from Mac's bottle suddenly condensed into a brown blur which landed on the floor, and stained it.

"That's it mate!" The ape-man said, and vigorously sprayed the surrounding area. "The trail leads this way! Come on!"

They headed up to the security station. As usual the door was shut and locked, but once Kevin approached it opened automatically. Inside was Elsa and Roger the clown. They seem to have caught them in the middle of an epic beating, Elsa holding Roger and beating him repeatedly. Once all three of them were inside the room they could see what was off about the scene; Elsa was holding Roger with both arms, and punching him with a third. Actually, she wasn't punching him at all but rather the third weird looking arm, was jammed into Roger's body and Roger was slowly shrinking, and turning gray.

"She's sucking the life out of 'im!"

"Shit! Elsa's the stalking horror!" Mac screamed.

The three of them turned and ran. Kevin got out of the security station first, but Mac and Mr. Dobb tried to get through the door at the same time, so none of them got out immediately. Kevin looked back, saw them, but also was Elsa violently throwing the shriveled up remains of Roger across the room, and then turned towards the other two.

"Kevin!" Mac yelled, lying on the floor, on top of the Mr. Dobb. Kevin saw Elsa extend that long weird tube-arm and jam it into Mac's back. "Aaaai-iiii" Mac cried. It was a truly horrifying sight, and Dobb, who was lying on his back, witnessing it from one foot away looked completely petrified with terror.

Kevin was not a brave man, but he wasn't a coward either. In this situation he might have gone back and tried to pull his friends to safety. But he had no weapons and it seemed already to late to save Mac now. Dobb would just have to fend for himself, after all he was a rugged hunter, what could Kevin really do to help? Instead he turned, and ran down the hall.

He passed the cafeteria and the dorms and stopped to catch his breath, and rest for a bit. By now, the stalking horror must have sucked Mac, and maybe Dobb too. From around the corner he heard heavy footsteps, come down the hall. "What the hell now?" Kevin thought. Then he remembered what Dobb had been saying earlier, about the ultimate form. Could the

horror have changed into that end stage thing?

The steps were coming closer. He started to panic. He could make a run for it, but the creature would probably see him and chase him down. On the other hand, if he stayed here another minute the creature would definitely see him. He decided to leg it. He ran. The heavy steps came heavy and rapidly behind him. He stumbled and fell to his knees, badly bruising his left leg. He turned, fearing fear itself mostly.

The creature was huge, at least eight feet. It had a huge smooth and slimy black head and a mouth full of thin, long razor sharp teeth. The body was black tubes and extremities. Its tail a long black thorny thing with a blade like extrusion on the end. The creature came upon him. The mouth opened, and inside was an even smaller mouth that protruded and snapped at his face.

"Ah, ah.... don't kill me! Don't kill me!" Kevin managed to say as the creature took hold of him with two of its four arms.

"Oh, I'm not gonna kill you Kevin, I'm just gonna give you a french kiss." The creature said. The voice came from inside the creature, not its mouth. The voice sounded familiar.

"What the hell? Is somebody in there?" Kevin screamed.

The creature released him and grabbed its own head, then removed it from the body. Inside what was clearly an elaborate suit was Lars, grinning contently.

"Lars! What the hell. You almost scared me to death. What the hell is this thing? Why are you running around in a stalking horror suit?"

"Stalking Horror? What's that? This is an alien xenomorph Halloween costume that I ordered from unBay. It's pretty convincing, right?"

"Jeez, you scared the crap out of me fuck-tard!"

"Sorry, I didn't think it was that realistic. I mean, you can even see the seams here..." Lars pointed to the creases where the mouth had been sown to the head. Kevin admitted that they were rather visible, now that he knew they were there.

"Pew... sorry for yelling at you." Kevin said. "It's just... Well we have a situation actually. There actually *is* a xenomorph on board and I thought you were, well, it.

"Oh, so that's what the *alerts* have been about. I've been so busy with this Halloween thing I didn't pay much attention. Don't you know what it looks like? The real xenomorph I mean." Lars asked.

"That's the thing. It can change forms. It can look like humans after

it sucks the life out of them. It also has some kind of *ultimate form* that we haven't seen yet, that's what I thought you were, I guess." Kevin looked around, the real stalking horror must have not followed him at all. "We really got to kill this thing fast. I just saw the Clown got turned into what looked like a really old banana, and I'm pretty sure that thing got to Mac as well."

"The armory is right here, why don't we get some weapons and track it down."

"Good idea. We already know how to track it, you use..." Kevin fumbled for his acetone sprayer, but it wasn't there. "Dammit, I must have dropped it while I was fleeing the lab. Well you use acetone."

Kevin unlocked the lab and they each grabbed a laser rifle from the racks. Lars got out of his rather bulky alien suit and got into some camo gear. They locked up again and left for the security station.

Once they got there, Kevin peaked inside. There was blood on the floor and he could see the *husk* which had been Roger over by the wall. In the middle of the room, another husk lay. The remains of Mac, Kevin guessed.

"Psst! Is it gone?"

They both turned around and looked in the direction of the voice. They saw a blue ape-man hiding rather overtly behind a plant in a corner.

"Mr. Dobb, you're alright!" Kevin exclaimed. "Yeah, the coast is clear."

"What the hell is that?" Lars asked.

"It's the big game hunter who've been helping us track the xenomorph."

"Are you sure he's a hunter? He looks more like 'big game'." Lars said, eyeing the big blue ape-like man.

"Don't pick on him, Lars. He's been through a lot today. Mr Dobb, what happened to you?"

"I managed to crawl my way out of the security station while Mac got sucked, quite fearsome thing that horror is... Then, I saw Mac, alive and well, come out of there, wandering down the hall like nothing had happened. Goddamn bastard must have sucked him and changed into him."

"Did you see which way it went?" Lars asked.

"Yeah, down that way. Towards the air lock."

"Okay. I'll call the head of staff and put out a warrant for Mac. If that thing is still walking around as him, the securitrons may be able to deal with him. Grab your acetone sprayer and let's head in that direction. This time we'll come prepared!" Kevin patted his laser rifle.

“He’s been this way.” Dobb said, spraying the acetone. “The acetone seems to have lost it’s effectiveness. Maybe the composition of the musk is changing. Can you open the airlock?”

“Sure.” Kevin said, and fiddled with the air lock controls. The ape-man went inside.

“Kevin. I know this may not be the time.” Lars turned to Kevin, both of them standing outside the air lock. “But I wanted to talk to you, or somebody in command, about these new emergency air lock controls.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Well you know that some of the stuff we order is dropped off rather close to the station right? Sometimes we make short space walks, with a jet frame, and collect the cargo. Sometimes it’s Tom, but it’s usually me since I know the trade route schedules.”

“Get to the point Lars, or we can discuss it some other time.”

While they were talking Mr Dobb was going around the air lock, spraying his acetone. It must have been more difficult for him to spot the condensing musk of the xenomorph because he was now on his hands and knees, inspecting the floor.

“Okay, well it’s this button here.” Lars said. “It’s the emergency cycle button. It doesn’t have a glass cover. It would be very easy to press it by accident while manipulating the other controls.”

“Hey, chums. Would you move just a bit?” The crawling ape man was inspecting the floor just by the inner air lock door.

“Lars. It supposed to be easy to press it. If it’s an emergency you don’t want to have to fiddle with a glass cover. Let’s say this room is burning, and you really have to get out. You just want to bang on this big button here, the door will slam shut and the airlock will cycle, as fast as it can.”

“It just seems dangerous is all.” Lars said.

“Life is dangerous.”

“Well. It *was* here.” Mr. Dobb said. “But it must have moved on. The acetone barely works any more. But I have another idea.” While getting up from the floor, he pushed against the wall next to the air lock door, not noticing the big red button before placing his paw on it. There was a loud klaxon and the inner air lock door slammed right into Mr Dobb’s neck, making a deep gash. He tried to scream, but his larynx must have been crushed, because no sound came out. The air lock cycled out all of the oxygen inside and the outer doors opened. Kevin and Lars backed away from the door with all the strength they could muster as air was being sucked out

into space. Mr. Dobb's blue hairy body started to float on the other side of the door, and slowly it was torn away and flew out into space. This finally permitted the inner doors to close completely.

Kevin and Lars sat there, panting. Looking at all that remained of Mr. Dobb. Then, quite by coincidence, but virtually seeming like the act of cosmic deities with particular sens of circumstantial humor, Jessica walked by. She looked at the two men sitting on the floor, completely out of breath, and the blue head by the air lock door.

"Hi Jessica. Lars said."

Jessica was about to ask this time. But then remembered that there were more important things. "You guys know I do specials for half off this week right?"

"Um, thanks." Kevin said hesitantly. The sight of the severed head was enough to make anyone think twice about letting somebody else trim your beard with a knife.

"His head? That's all you have?" Jonathan looked at Kevin, and the blue head he was holding in his right hand. "What the hell happened to his body?"

"He was decapitated by an air lock door." Kevin said.

"I told you it was dangerous." Lars said.

"Okay! We'll get new control panels. Can we please focus on the problem at hand. Jonathan, can we clone him again?"

"Are you kidding? Just a head, that's like less than twenty percent body mass."

"Can't you 'borrow' some more chimps from Denise?"

"No way. She's on to me, and in any case, he'll likely not even be able to speak if we add that much chimp to the mix."

"Darn it. According to Connor, the head of staff, Mac is nowhere to be found on the station and more of those husks have been found. We really need to find this thing and kill it, pronto. Dobb said he knew another trick, right before he died. Isn't there anything we can do?"

"Look I don't know what to tell you..." Jonathan said.

"Why don't we 'borg him?" Lars said.

Both Kevin and Jonathan stood there in silence. They hadn't thought about that.

"We can take him down to robotics, have Veronica take a look at that brain, and fix him up as a cyborg."

“That’s... that’s brilliant Lars!”

“Do you have his brain?” Veronica asked.

“We have his whole head.” Kevin said, pleased.

“Fair enough. Use this saw to cut the skull open. Lars, could you check if we have any spare humanoid robot parts left?”

Lars came back twenty minutes later on a little truck, hauling a couple of boxes.

“Okay, I’ve scanned his brain. The computer’s compiling it into a ROM right now. Who is this guy? Why is he important enough to be ‘borged?’”

“He’s a valuable asset. He’s a monster expert, helping us track and kill a xenomorph.”

“Whatever. The program’s asking for his name.”

“It’s Kenji Dobb.”

“Sorry, got to be four characters. All upper case.”

“I guess ‘DOBB’ then.”

Lars and Kevin stood there as Veronica assembled the bot. Once she was done, she flicked a little switch on its chest. The robot made some very strange high pitched electronic noises, then repeated what seemed to be a disclaimer from the Nanotrasen corporation.

Thank you for purchasing a Humanoid All Purpose Nanotrasen robot. We hope that you will enjoy our product. Please note that Nanotrasen cannot be held accountable for any of the following when using this product; assault, destruction of property, personal injury, spontaneous combustion, accidental self-awareness or slander. Power sources sold separately. NANOTRASEN, working together for a brighter future for humanity!

Then the bot was silent.

“What’s happening?” Lars asked.

“Um, I don’t know. I’m not getting any errors.” Veronica said.

Kevin carefully approached the robot.

“Hello, Mr. Dobb. Can you hear me?” Kevin shouted into the robot’s face but was only met with more silence.

“Maybe the brain went bad?”

“Nah, it usually works if you use the brain within a couple of hours.” Veronica said, puzzled. Then she walked up next to Kevin.

“Hey you! You in there?”

“Hello there roboticist!” Suddenly the robot spoke in a loud voice.

“Um, hello. Do you know who you are?” Veronica asked.

“Hello! I’m DOBB.”

“Great, now we have two TARSS on the station.” Lars said and rolled his eyes.

“That’s just the basic routines. In some ways he’ll act like the other robots, but he’ll be different from them. His memories should be in there. He’ll have free will, and won’t be linked to the AI.” Veronica explained to Lars.

“DOBB. You were not always a robot. Do you remember anything from before?” Kevin asked.

“Yes! I was a hunter. I hunted much for sport. Hunting was my whole world. Tracking the prey, killing it, good times! I remember hunting distinctly, right up until the moment I died.”

“Thank heavens.” Kevin exhaled audibly. “You were helping us tracking a stalking horror. Do you remember anything about that creature?”

“Stalking Horrors? Why yes!” The robot exclaimed, then started telling the three of them in detail about stalking horrors. Being a cyborg must have changed his mind in some way because DOBB seemed to remember quite a lot more about stalking horrors than the previous Mr. Dobb had. In particular, DOBB described in detail how other creatures react in the presence of a stalking horror. This made Kevin realize something, and he quickly got out his PDA and contacted the captain.

* * *

“Okay. They’re all here.” Connor said and entered his office. Kevin was standing there, rather antsy and the Captain was sitting in Connor’s squeaky chair. In the captain’s lap was the cat, Mrs. Pussyfoot. The cat belonged to the captain’s daughter, but it seemed to like the captain’s quarters so the captain ended up taking care of her. “What’s the plan Kevin? Why do you need the whole crew gathered? Have you caught that monster yet?”

“No, not yet. But we’re about to. You sure everybody’s here?”

“Yes, I’m sure. The AI has confirmed it. The chief of security has the exit to the main hall covered, nobody leaves until he says so. Mac’s still missing though. Though I’m pretty sure he isn’t on the station, not alive any way.”

“Okay. Now listen. The xenomorph has a strange effect on other animals. Mr. Dobb mentioned this early on, and I should have put two and two

together earlier, but anyway. Captain, do you remember when you had us in your office. Me, Firanam, Mac, Elsa and Goran? Mrs. Pussyfoot was going nuts, and you had to toss her out, right?”

“Yeah. I just assumed it was Goran’s BO messing her up.”

“Well it wasn’t it was the stalking horror. It was in there with us?”

“What?” The captain asked in genuine confusion.

“It was Elsa, or rather, the thing had changed its form to Elsa. It had probably sucked the life out of the real Elsa outside the cafeteria.”

“Okay. So what?” The captain said.

“Well, we can use Mrs. Pussyfoot as a detector. We bring in one crew member at a time in here and see how the cat reacts. If she’s calm, then that person’s okay and we let him or her go. But if the cat goes nut - bang!” Kevin indicated the laser rifle he was still carrying.

“That’s a crazy plan, Kevin.” The captain said. “What if she goes nuts for some other reason. A cat is hardly a reliable source.”

“She’s the most reliable source we have, and we got to act. How many husks are we up to now?”

“Nine.” Connor said, grumpily. “Okay, let’s do it.”

All through the night they took in the crew members. The three of them were on edge at first, but after a couple they calmed down. The crew members were completely confused. They were let into the little office, greeted by the three members of command, prompted to approach the captain holding the cat in her lap. Then, after a minute or so, they were let out, not given an explanation to the strange procedure.

When they had screened half the crew, they started to get nervous again. One by one the crew members were inspected by the cat, but it was ever calm. Every once in a while it would purr or ‘meow’, but not once did it act like it had done earlier that evening in the captain’s quarters.

Finally, Arnold the chief of security himself came into the room. He was the last one left. He was quite alarmed since Kevin was basically aiming the rifle right at his face when he entered.

“Whoa whoa! What the hell Kevin? What are you doing? Cut it out will you. I’ve had a rough day. My wife is missing you know.”

“Shut up freak. We know what you are!” Kevin yelled.

“What the fuck? I don’t like your tone. Connor, Cap, what’s going on?”

“What’s going on is that you’ve been running around the station killing our crew.” Connor said, trying to compose himself.

“Connor, Kevin.” The captain said. “Look.” The cat was calmly licking it’s paws. It hardly seemed to notice Arnold.

“What the? Arnold, you’re the last one to come in right? There’s nobody else out there?”

“No. Will you guys tell me what this is about?”

So they did. Kevin did most of the telling. It included the theory of what had happened to Elsa, which hit Arnold hard. In the end though, the big question remained. Where was the stalking horror?

“Could it have escaped from the station?” Connor asked.

“I guess it’s possible. We tracked it to an air lock, but Mr Dobb said it didn’t go out that way. I guess we could check the other air locks.”

The rest of the crew was dismissed and went back to bed. The four commanding officers checked the rest of the station, but the xenomorph was nowhere to be found. Several hours later they called off the search, canceled the alert and went to bed.

As Kevin sleepily walked back to the labs where he had his quarters he encountered the DOBB robot.

“Hey DOBB. Looks like we don’t need you anymore. Although now, since you are a Nanotrasen robot, your not permitted to leave the station. Guess you’ll have to stay here with us. It isn’t so bad though.”

DOBB just stood there silently. Then he raised his mechanical right and punched Kevin. He punched him so hard the metallic fist penetrated the body. DOBB lifted Kevin up from the floor. Kevin groaned, and then died. After a minute or two, DOBB threw Kevin’s corpse across the hall, and it banged into the wall between a vending machine and an air vent. It fell to the floor, leaving a bloody smear on the wall. The robot then walked away from the scene, like nothing had happened.

Hours later the air vent above Kevin’s corpse popped out and fell to the floor. Mac emerged from the vent, blood and dirt stained his clothes.

“Kevin! Kevin!” Mac shook Kevin’s corpse thoroughly. “A shit.” He got up, and looked around. He grabbed the collar on Kevin’s lab coat and started dragging him down the hall.

Jonathan yawned. “Goddammit you slave masters. It’s friggin five in the morning!” He opened the door to his quarters. Mac stood outside and pulled up to the wall was the corpse of the research director.

“My God Mac. What the hell happened? Hey, there’s a warrant out for you? Said you were some kind of monster.”

“It’s a misunderstanding. I was being framed. We got to get Kevin back to life, I think I can solve this, but not alone.”

“Okay. Just give me a sec to get dressed.”

“Alright. Dump him into the reclamer.”

The thing turned Kevin to mush in an instant.

“Luckily, he seems to be all there. What happened to him?”

“I don’t know. I found him like this in a hallway. Looked like he was impaled.”

“Well hopefully he can tell us himself. Okay, I’m running it now.”

The AutoCloner hummed and as before, the big vat filled with fluid. A human was forming inside, and pretty soon, a naked copy of Kevin came out. Kevin coughed.

“What the hell... Is that...” Kevin had difficulties speaking. “...what we’ve been doing to Dobb? No wonder he went crazy.” Kevin looked up.

“Mac, Mac! Oh holy shit! Jonathan! This guy is a monster. Help me!”

“Oh, shut up you moron. I’m not the stalking horror, Dobb was!”

“What? What do you mean?”

“In the security station, after we saw Elsa kill the clown, the horror came for me and jabbed its proboscis into me. But something must have been wrong, ’cause it didn’t suck me, I just got hurt from the stabbing. I don’t know why it couldn’t suck me, maybe it’s got to wait a little between sucking victims. Anyway, I managed to free myself of that disgusting thing and I must have trampled all over Dobb while doing so, I got away but then I snuck back to see what happened. I hid in the air vent so nobody could see me. I saw the stalking horror jab its proboscis into Dobb and suck him like a juice box, it took a while though. Then it changed into him. Then he started to leave the security station, but it must have heard you and Lars coming down the hall, because it hid behind a plant. I overheard him telling that bogus story, trying to frame me, but I couldn’t just jump out, you probably had shot me down before I could explain. Then, I heard the alert go out and my PDA told me I was wanted for ’murder,murder,murder’¹. So I crawled

¹The security system on the station had just a few different settings when crew members were reported for crimes. The settings included ’rowdiness’ which was basically used for everything from not following orders to streaking, ’assault’ which covered all violent crimes, and ’murder’ which was the highest setting and had the highest priority for the securitrons.

further into the system of air ducts and found a place to hole up until things cooled off. I managed to give myself some stitches also, thanks to my surgery field-kit. After a few hours I decided the coast was clear and crawled out. That's when I found you, lying dead in a hallway, with a big hole in your belly. But I'm telling you Mr. Dobb's the stalking horror!"

"But he's dead!" Kevin said.

"What? You killed him. That's fantastic! But then, why were you dead? Who killed you?"

"DOBB did."

"You're not making any sense."

"Look. After we left the security station, Mr. Dobb got his head stuck in an air lock door and his head got torn off."

"Then they wanted me to clone him back to life again." Jonathan pitched in. "Which was, of course, ridiculous."

"But we figured we could 'borg him back to life." Kevin said. "So we got some help from Veronica and put his brain, or a ROM of it, into a robot. But if that wasn't really Mr. Dobb..."

"You put the Stalking Horror into the robot." Mac concluded. "Fantastic. So now there's a crazy killer robot loose on the station."

"Yeah, but it seems to still think he can appear human and suck people. I think that's what he was trying to do to me. It's like it's acting on instinct, not thinking properly."

"I guess being cloned over and over and then put into a robot will do that to a creature." Jonathan said.

"Anyway, this shouldn't be so difficult now. I've got a plan." Kevin said.

The Captain and Kevin stood on the bridge. From there they could see the exo-pod getting further and further away from the station. It had not been so difficult finding DOBB, with a little help from the AI. And with a few blasts from an EMP gun, the bot was disabled, at least for an hour or so.

"So you're just going to drop him far out into space?"

"That's what I told Mac to do. You see I think I finally understand the stalking horror now. It doesn't just feed on your life force and bodily fluids.

It was a great system, because it was easy to understand. However, in some situations when several crew members were wanted for murder, the only way of stipulating a higher priority was reporting someone for murder multiple times.

What it really wants is your absolute trust. That way you'll be completely surprised when it happens. Right now Mac is in that exo-pod, driving it far away with a murderous robot." Kevin spoke calmly and picked up a little gadget from his lab pocket. It had a little red button on it. "It may be because he really believes that that robot will kill us all in our sleep. Or it may be just another ruse, trying to prove itself once again."

"What? You think Mac actually might be the...?"

Kevin pressed the button and the now tiny exo-pod exploded violently in a bright flash.

"Maybe not. But I just can't take that chance." He said.

The Wizard

Manfred had been on SS13 for several years now. He started out as a cargo worker but after a few accidents he quickly climbed to the position of asteroid miner. Manfred the Miner, who everybody called 'Manny', was a big guy. One wouldn't say he was fat, although he weighed more than 240 pounds, he was just, well *big*. He was tall, had broad shoulders, a shaved head and a long beard. He looked like a brute, but was actually a very kind person, although a bit too frank sometimes. He was the kind of guy who would say something like "I'm going to take a hot shower. It's just like a regular shower, but with me in it." He was the typical person who would work with cargo or any type of heavy, manual labor. It wasn't because he wasn't intelligent, in fact, he was rather smart. It was just that it was the kind of work that he enjoyed, and he enjoyed the group he worked with.

The mining group consisted of four people, five if you counted Tom the supercargo. Besides Tom and Manny there was Jenna, a tall, athletic woman with some very strong opinions, most often they were about the work place. There was Tina, a plump girl with red hair, rosy cheeks, and an unyielding positive attitude and willingness to help out and there was Benji who was exceedingly bright, but terribly, terribly lazy. This often became apparent. Manny remembered one time specifically. The cargo lifter had broken because somebody had been horsing around with it and Tom needed help lifting some boxes manually. Manny was already in the cargo hold and had promised to lend a hand. The boxes were too heavy for two people so Tom had gone into the recreational room and asked the rest of the crew members for help.

"I'll help!" Tina had shouted, immediately dropping whatever she was doing. Sometimes she quite literally dropped things when something caught her attention. This time was no different and her PDA smashed into the floor. "Oops." She said.

"Great, who else?" Tom had said.

Jenna turned from the arcade game. "Sure, I'll do it. But I want to talk about compensation."

"Jenna, you know that's something you're going to have to talk to Connor about." Tom countered.

"Fine."

"We need one more to lift that crate, it's a big one. Benji?"

At this point Benji reacted, and not a moment earlier, slowly pulling away from whatever he was doing, which was almost certainly a creative way of slacking off.

"Not now Tom. I'm busy."

"Busy? You're not busy."

"I am too."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm eating a burrito." Benji said, even though it was quite clear that he only had one good bite left of the wrapped snack in his hand.

"It looks like you're about done though."

"No, I'm not." Benji slowed down his eating. Chewing his mouthful for a full minute before taking another nibble from the remainder of the burrito.

"Benji, just eat it up, you are deliberately dragging your legs."

To this Benji didn't respond, just looking intensely at the tiny speck of food still left between his fingers. Then finally taking the last bite, chewing it again for a full minute, while holding his greasy empty hand in front of him. He then wiped his hand on the legs of his jumpsuit.

"Benji, are you coming?"

Benji held up a finger, reached over for a Styrofoam cup with a straw in it. He took a looong sip until that familiar slurping sound could be heard from within it.

"Benji."

"Yeah?" Benji muted a belch.

"Are you coming?"

Benji got up slowly. "Yeah."

Tom, who was very relieved, started to turn.

"I'm just going to the can." Benji said.

Benji disappeared and left Tom there grinding his teeth.

The cargo hold didn't have an adjoining head. In fact, there were no restrooms on C-deck. This annoyed Jenna grossly, but Manny didn't care at all. He never minded taking a little walk, even if it was just to relieve himself. It gave him time to think a little, or talk to anyone or everyone on the way. Because, if there was one thing Manny loved, it was to talk to people.

Sometimes he would arrive at the closest restrooms and find them, of course, occupied. Other people might be annoyed, just wanting to take a quick piss and get on with their day, but Manny wasn't annoyed by this. He'd quietly wait outside, maybe whistling a merry tune. When the occupant would come out he'd smile and ask "Are you done shitting?" To which answers would vary, but most would answer "I was just washing my hands." Some would blush and shy away, others would mumble something incomprehensible. But there was one conclusion from this empirical study that frankly astonished him; nobody seemed to use the restrooms for pooping. He therefore pondered at length where other crew members did their pooping. This was just one of the things he often thought about. Needless to say, he was a rather deep individual.

Today, after his shift, when he stepped into the miners' recreational room only Tom and Tina were there.

"Where are the others?" He asked, in his deep booming voice?

"They're playing that silly game again." Tom said.

Manny wasn't really that into games, but he knew Jenna and Benji was, especially Benji. Once a week the two miners played a virtual reality game with the quartermaster. Manny figured they would be gone for at least a couple of hours.

* * *

"We have a new player joining tonight." Fionella the Fabulous said as she sat down at the wooden table at the local tavern.

"Oh really? Who's coming?" Xenthara replied. Looking up from her mug of ale.

"Sophia, the janitor."

"Does she have a char?"

"She's in character creation right now."

"Okay. What class? We need a healer."

“Yeah, I mentioned that. Don’t know what she has in mind. I guess we’ll find out soon enough.”

“Is Benji coming?”

“Yeah, I sent him a message on my PDA a half hour ago. He’s probably just late as usual.” Fionella got the attention of the barkeep and made a hand gesture indicating that she also wanted a mug of ale.

The tavern was dimly lit. There was the regular bar brawl going on, but it wasn’t getting out of control. In a corner of the room, the usual old guy in a dark cloak was smoking a pipe and slowly drumming his hand on the table. They knew he was offering the same old wild goose chase quest. The two warrior ladies ignored him, no matter how intriguing he seemed to be.

Fionella was your typical marksman class character. She was an elf with an elven long bow on her back and two short swords in sheaths on her thighs. Her armor was a leather corset and she was swept in a lovely forest green cloak with a large hood. She often kept her hood up, like now, to make her look more mysterious, hiding her very touching, very deep, albeit non-existing back story.

The other woman was a tall, muscular, barbarian-style character. She actually had a rich back story, but apart from her horned helmet, her *armor* was virtually non-existent. Only covering the unmentionables. She wielded a gargantuan double bladed battle axe and drank ales by the barrel.

It was difficult to find a more stereotypical pair of role playing game characters. Of course this whole, digital world was stereotypical, but the players didn’t mind. According to the developers of the game, it was intentionally designed that way. The goal was to achieve a ‘retro’ feel.

The door to the tavern swung open and a huge, hulking figure entered, an *orc*. He was eight feet tall, had massive, bulky armor and wielded a ‘three-handed’¹ broadsword. His skin was a grayish green, and he had two tusks sticking out of his oversized mouth. His black hair was gathered in a pony tail, and he had war paint on his forehead and around his eyes. The name “Dura-gro-ba Shol” floated above his head.

“Greetings Dura-gro-ba Shol!” Xenthara announced.

The Orc looked around. “Oh, yeah, that’s me. Greetings.” The orc said, softly.

¹This was basically just a two-handed broadsword, but the knob of the pommel was shaped as a fist. There were also ‘four-handed’ swords in the game, but they were only wieldable by characters belonging to races with at least one extra pair of arms.

“Sophia, that’s you right?” Fionella asked.

“Yeah. I feel kind of weird.”

“That’s the digistructing, you get used to it. You’re brain isn’t used to being decoupled from your regular, physical senses. The sensation fades over time.”

“Okay... Lars, is that you?” The Orc pointed to Fionella.

“Yeah.” Fionella replied. “And that’s Jenna. Do you know her? She’s one of the Miners.”

“Hey.” Xenthara waved to Dura-gro-ba.

“I think I’ve seen you in the cafeteria a couple of times.” Dura-gro-ba said. “Um, what are you wearing?” He pointed to Xenthara’s outrageous outfit.

“This? It’s my armor. It’s a *rare epic crystal* drop from *Domdarriom*.” Xenthara proudly pronounced.

“It’s kind of revealing.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Don’t you think it’s kind of... sexist?”

“Um, I haven’t really thought about it. Just thought it looked hot, and it’s got awesome stats.”

“How can it have awesome stats? When I was in character creation, the heavier, bulkier armor I put on, the higher my armor rating went.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s the FIARP.” Fionella said.

The orc stared blankly at the elf.

“Sorry, keep forgetting you’re a noob. The FIARP is the *Female Inverted Armor Rating Principle*. It states that the *less* armor a female character wears, the *higher* the armor rating.”

“That’s incredibly sexist!” The huge, absurdly masculine orc roared. “And stupid! If that was the case, why are you wearing anything at all. Why not just remove *all* your armor?”

Xenthara gulped down the last of her ale. “Don’t you think I tried that? It was literally the first thing I did when I got out of character creation, I tried taking all of my armor off.”

“What happened?” Fionella asked, eagerly.

“The game crashed.” Xenthara said. “I was digistructed back into the real world. Later I asked the AI what had happened. Apparently the game had crashed with a *divide-by-zero-exception*.”

It may seem strange that the AI would care about the little groups role-playing session, but it wasn’t strange at all. Traditional role-playing games

had one caveat. One of the most tedious tasks was that of the *game master*, i.e. the player who orchestrated the entire scenario and served as the narrator, adversary, world planner and simulator, rules judge and plot mastermind. Some players didn't mind taking on that role though. It was often a way to either let lose their creative side, or their power-hungry and abusive side. But with the advent of artificial intelligences, and near-perfect virtual reality environments, such *game master* players were no longer necessary. All the narrating, planning, rules checking and orchestrating could be done by the AI, and it was really really good at it.

Such was the case with Nanotrasen's VRPG² system. Players were *digistructed* into the virtual world. What this really meant was that they were put into a stupor in a cryo-pod³ and their awareness was uploaded into the AI main-frame, quite similar to how cyborgs were created on the station. The players were then allowed to select between an existing character, or creating a new one, after which they were placed in the digital world. A world which was completely simulated by the AI. The group of players would 'play' in the world, completing quests, finding or receiving magical or fantastical items and gear, advance their characters and interact with monsters and NPCs⁴. They would play for a couple of hours, but it was possible to continue indefinitely, since their bodies were being sustained, both mentally by the AI, and physically by the cryo-pod their body was lying in. Once they were done they would be returned to the real world, or *digistructed back*. This was actually a rather accurate way of describing the process, since the AI replaced the sustaining process with the player's actual awareness again. There were of course safety measures, so that if the game crashed, or if an external event should happen, like an alert on the station, the system would automatically return the player to its original body.

"So what do we do now?" Dura-gro-ba asked.

"We wait for our last player." Fionella said.

"Who's that?"

"It's Shadax, our wizard. By the way, Sophia, why did you choose to be a warrior? A healer would have been better for our party balance."

"Nah, healing isn't really my cup of tea. When I play video games, I like to smash stuff."

²Virtual Role Playing Game.

³A glass and metal coffin which could sustain a human indefinitely.

⁴Non-Player Characters.

“Whoa... This isn’t some cruel hack and slash arcade game you know.” Fionella said. “This game is an extremely sophisticated piece of computer software which permits the players to pretty much do anything, anything that is possible in a realistic world. This world is shaped by very expertly crafted rules which model the real world almost perfectly. I’ll have you know they had physicists work on this!”

“But isn’t there magic and stuff? How’s that realistic?”

“That, that’s not the point...” Fionella was getting upset. “Even though Shadax can shoot fireballs from his palms...”

“Whoa! He can shoot *fireballs* with his palms? I think I wanna go back to character creation and be a wizard now.” Dura-gro-ba interrupted.

“No, please don’t, he’ll be here any moment.” Xenthara said.

They waited for another half an hour. By now Xenthara was pretty soused and had joined in the bar fight. Fionella had sharpened her short swords to the degree where she was almost afraid of putting them back into their sheaths. She had also stopped Dura-gro-ba from accepting the useless quest from the old man in the corner, twice.

“Who are we waiting for anyway? I mean, who in the real world?” Dura-gro-ba finally asked.

“It’s Benji. He works with Jenna.”

“Oh yeah, I’ve seen him, in the bar, in the cafeteria, in the green house. At first I thought he was some kind of inspector, but I guess he was just slacking off.”

“Yeah, he’s a major slacker.” Xenthara said, crushing a thugs skull against the bar counter and then plopping back down on the chair at the table. She belched and then said, “The thing is, and not many people know this, he is *really* effective when he actually works. He gets like three times as much done as everybody else when he does work. He’s just found out a way to be able to stretch that out so it covers his whole duty. The guy may seem like a total bum, but he’s actually really smart. He could give most of the science personnel a run for their money.”

“Huh.” Dura-gro-ba said.

“He can be kind of a dick.” Fionella said. “Especially when you play games with him. He can get really into it and really max out his characters. It’s almost to an absurd degree.”

“Yeah, like Harbulax.” Xenthara said.

“Who’s Harbulax?” The orc looked at Xenthara, then back to Fionella, then back to Xenthara again.

Fionella continued. “Harbulax was Benji’s first character, also a wizard. He was pretty weak at lower levels, when we just started playing, but after a couple of levels, Benji was finding really strong combinations of rare equipment and skills. Apart from making him very strong, fast and all-round powerful, he also was advancing more rapidly than the rest of us. You see, some in-game effects can actually boost the amount of experience you get from killing monsters, and Harbulax was racking up a lot of skills with his powerful destruction magic.”

A brawl thug came up behind Xenthara with a chair held above his head, but Fionella quickly shot an arrow from her bow, straight into his abdomen.

“Thanks Fi.” Xenthara said, then she continued Fionella’s story. “Pretty soon Harbulax had maxed out the level 20 wizard skill that boosts the chance of finding rare magic items. That was great. Benji is usually pretty generous when he finds good loot, especially when his character can’t use it, but then one day, it happened.”

“What? What happened?” Dura-gro-ba asked, completely entranced by the story.

Fionella took the lead again. “He found a broken-ass combination of loot. I’m not gonna go into the details but it was basically a loop which gave him like an infinite amount of experience.”

“Cool!” Dura-gro-ba exclaimed!

“No! Not cool!” Xenthara cried. “His character instantly became maxed-out at level 1000 which unlocked the wizard’s ultimate ability of *spell crafting*. This meant that Harbulax no longer needed to find vendors or scholars to teach him spells, he simply *crafted* them himself, spending experience points in the process, of which he had an unlimited amount. The next time we played with Harbulax he could basically do *anything*. He could kill all the enemies on the map instantly, with super fast death rays. He could teleport between worlds, and virtually no prison could contain him. He could use telekinetic force to pick up all loot as soon as it was dropped by monsters when they were killed. He could draw on the life-force of other wizards in the game, siphoning off *their* power, to make him even more powerful. He even had insight into the plot script of the *scenario* that the AI was running, so it was impossible to surprise him, since he could literally *see into the future*. He was unbeatable, undefeatable, uncontainable and incomparable to any other character ever created.”

“Sounds pretty bad ass.” Dura-gro-ba exclaimed.

“It was worthless.” Fionella said. “Me and Xenthara here didn’t get

to do anything. We didn't get any loot, we didn't get any experience, and we didn't have any fun. Eventually we gave Benji an ultimatum; either he abandoned Harbulax and promised not to break the game any more, or we wouldn't play with him."

"He didn't play with us for several months. I'm not sure what he did in the mean time." Xenthara said. "Then, not long ago, he just showed up during our gaming sessions. He had abandoned his old character, and now he had a new character, *Shadax*. He promised not to break the game, so we agreed to play with him."

"I'm pretty sure the developers removed those broken items from the game by now." Fionella said. "So, there actually can't be another Harbulax."

Shadax finally arrived some fifteen minutes later. He was a tall blonde middle aged human wearing a loose blue robe, and wielding a gnarled staff. He had a scraggly blond and gray beard and icy blue eyes.

"Benji, where the hell have you been? We've been waiting for like an hour."

"Oh, I figured I had a while. What with our new recruit creating her character and all. Hi by the way."

"Hey." the orc grunted. "I was done in like five minutes. Not much to think about really."

"Obviously some of us take this more seriously than others." Shadax mumbled through his teeth. "Ah, and I see you are a warrior? Great, just what we need, another *tank*, drawing all the *aggro*."

"I don't know what that means, but sure, I'll aggro a lot with my tank." Dura-gro-ba said.

"No. You don't want to draw aggro, and you don't *have* a tank... Oh forget about it, you'll learn as you go." Shadax threw his hands in the air and turned his back on the dim Orc. "Let's get going." He faced the sky and yelled "AI, our sad-ass party is ready to embark on a new adventure!"

A rumbling voice that seem to come from nowhere yet everywhere at once replied.

"Wonderful! Have you talked to the old man in the tavern? He looked quite intriguing."

"I don't care how fucking intriguing he is, we aren't going to waste hours on killing engorged rats in the sewers."

"Are you sure? The town merchant pays well for dead rats. Especially if you sell them one by one."

“It’s boring! Give us one of the new campaigns.” Shadax shouted furiously at the sky, spitting wildly.

“Really? But the easiest one I have is for level ten characters. You are only...”

“We can handle it! Commence!”

“So be it!” The AI roared. A powerful wind blew up, tugging violently at their clothes, except Xenthara’s who didn’t really have any. Then, the wind subsided and a scroll landed before the feet of Dura-gro-ba. He picked it up and read it.

“‘Your old nemesis has risen again! He aims to seek you out and destroy you! Meet me at the edge of the old forest at midnight, and I can give you more information.’ It’s signed ‘a friend.’” The orc read.

“Trap.” Shadax said.

“Yes, trap.” Fionella agreed “‘Friend’ is always equivalent to ‘backstabbing son-of-a-bitch traitor’ in games like this.”

“It’s most likely a trap. But what the hell.” Xenthara said.

“So we’re going then?” Dura-gro-ba asked.

“Of course.” Said Shadax. “It’s what the ‘game master’ wants. It would be unwise to defy it.”

“Yes, indeed!” The ominous voice roared. “Half an experience point goes to Shadax, for his words of wisdom.”

Kissing the game master’s ass had been an integral part of traditional role playing games and the developers of the Nanotrasen VRPG were determine to keep the in-game feeling as true to the original experience as possible. Benji never missed an opportunity to exploit this feature.

* * *

The party of adventurers played on for several hours. The ‘Nemesis’ mentioned in the scroll remained a hidden adversary, only communicating through taunts, traps and the occasional squad of minions. Such goons were at first dispatched quickly by the party, but soon enough the baddies became tougher, and more challenging.

After acclimating herself to the sensation of controlling this virtual avatar, Sophia realized that the game was actually very fun and compelling. It was easy to lose oneself in there. Finally, at a so called ‘safe location’ the group decided it was time for a break, and they all digistructed back.

When Sophia was back in her old body again she felt a little disheartened. She had enjoyed being the mighty orc, ferociously bashing, slashing and whacking his foes to bits. She had also really liked the feeling of contributing to the group, something her day job as a janitor seldom did. “Oh well.” She thought. The whole experience reminded her of one of the crew members here on the station, *Mr. Underscore*.

Mr. Underscore was a strange person. He held the title of Staff Assistant, i.e., no title at all, so he had no real job on the station. Nobody knew where he came from or who he was. The strangest thing about him was that he didn’t even know these things himself. He had been questioned many times by command and by his colleagues, but his reply to every question was “I’m sorry, I don’t remember.”

Command had thought about sending Mr. Underscore back to CentCom, but every time the topic came up, the discussion ended quickly. It was an economic conundrum. Mr. Underscore was not particularly inclined to leave the station, so he wasn’t willing to pay for the ticket, and Mr. Underscore’s wage, the wage of a Staff Assistant, was much lower than the cost of the ticket, so it was simply always more economically feasible to keep him. This wasn’t true in the long run of course, but not much was considered in the long run on the station. In fact there were Nanotrasen protocols which made long term planning difficult, so nobody ever bothered looking past the coming six months.

Mr. Underscore only knew three things. The first was English. He did however have a very strong Scandinavian accent so this barely counted. The second thing was that he *was* a Nanotrasen employee. This he was sure of. He did have an Ident-card, even though it did not actually say his name. At some point the Head of Staff had realized the mysterious crew member wasn’t on the crew roster and had asked him to fill out a personnel form. Mr. Underscore, who didn’t know his own name, had left that field, and many others, blank. The clerical robot who had expedited the form had misinterpreted the six pre-printed underscores as the actual name, thus the name in the system became ‘_ _ _ _ _’. This also led to a number of other strange side effects, like not having a birthday and him being his own father and his own mother. The name ‘Underscore underscore underscore underscore underscore underscore’ was however, rather inconvenient, so he settled for one underscore and a ‘Mr’.

The third thing that Mr. Underscore knew, deep within his heart, was that he had to find out who he was. He was on a quest. A mission, to find

himself, to find his true name. He did not really care for the name 'Mr. Underscore' since it constantly reminded him of his state of confusion and unsureness. Thus, everything Mr. Underscore did, every action he took, was towards that goal. To debunk this false image, that he was a worthless, unskilled, unknown nobody. He felt, that he was simply, *more*. He was determined to figure himself out, he had no other purpose.

It would later turn out, in a conversation with a highly intelligent, alien energy being⁵, that Mr. Underscore was, in fact, a crew member from SS13, but from a parallel universe. He had been torn from that reality during a severe cosmic anomaly and transported through time and space to this version of SS13. The ordeal had also caused him to lose his memory. Being omniscient *and* generous, the energy being had then informed Mr. Underscore of his real identity. He had once been an electrician on alternate SS13 but been demoted to Staff Assistant after being responsible for an electrocution accident. His real name was 'Anders Korp', which was pronounced 'Uhn-duh-rs co-r'. The 'p' was silent.

Alas, it turned out, by some cosmic fluke, that the false, and accidental identity that he had been force to accept these past years, was utterly indistinguishable from his true identity. Obviously, this devastated Mr. Underscore, and he was quite depressed for a long time. In the end though, he had to accept the truth. It was the only way to go on with his life. The moral of the story was, *even if you really want to be somebody else, you cannot escape who you really are*.

It was exactly this feeling that filled Sophia as she crawled into bed that night. There was some kind of eerie parallel between that story and her own relationship with Dura-gro-ba. She also thought about Benji and Harbulax. She wondered why Benji had come back to the group. It seemed odd that he would settle for being the mediocre Shadax after being the once all-powerful Harbulax. Her mind then wandered and she slipped into a dream. It was filled with images of goblins, elves, mystic groves, magic missiles and many other generic fantasy concepts.

A month passed and the group of four had bi-weekly meets and would play for several hours at a time. During that time, Manny didn't see a lot of Benji and Jenna in the miners' recreational room. He wasn't jealous of them because he wasn't into virtual games. Once he had done a little *live*

⁵How and why this energy being came to visit the station is a story for another time.

action role playing, i.e. the kind of improv theatre where you took on your character in the real world and interacted with others who were also assuming other characters. He didn't mind that Jenna and Benji weren't often in the recreational room any more. He was entirely capable of entertaining himself, by reading his books, contemplating the mysteries of human behavior, and accosting innocent crew members in public places.

Manny had a strange effect on some people. This was something he knew about himself. He remembered this one time when he went to the unemployment office on Pondiataros. Had had waited for some time in a slightly crowded waiting area. One by one, people started dropping off from the room. Some because they were done with there business there, others seemed to be leaving even *before* their appointment. Finally it was his turn, and he entered the little antechamber where a middle aged lady sat behind a desk. She had purple hair and very extravagant glasses. She recoiled somewhat when Manny entered, but Manny didn't take offense.

They had a good long conversation about Manny's work options and there seemed to be some promising leads for him. One of those leads would later place him on the station, but of course, he didn't know that at the time. When it was time for him to leave, the woman stood up and spoke in candor:

"You know, I really need to tell you. When you entered, I thought 'Oh, no, It's going to be one of these days again.' But I must say, you are a actually nice person."

Manny, who saw this accidental insult for what it was, a failed attempt at making a compliment, replied kindly. "Why, thank you! You aren't all that bad either."

"Thanks!" The lady said. "I guess what I'm trying to say is... you're not an asshole at all!"

Manny nodded politely and left before the woman could make an even worse faux pas.

Things like this would happen to him often, but he didn't mind. To him, this was just another funny story to tell. It was like when his 10th grade history teacher was convinced that Manny was a *vrnarch*⁶. According to the teacher, this was clear from Manny's *appearance*. He strongly urged the school to send Manny on a field trip to the *neon-gulags* on the planet Terror III, to *educate* him about the true face of racism. Some people might have

⁶This was slang for a person who belonged to any of the variously interplanetary political organizations which promoted violence, racism and/or anarchism.

taken offense, but not Manny. Instead, he recognized the humor and the irony that the history teacher's own offensive prejudice had led to a lecture on racism.

That evening, Manny ran into Jenna in the bar. The bar wasn't a great place to pick up chicks, but Jenna always held out hope. After all, most of the people on SS13 knew each other pretty well, but every once in a while they would have visitors, even some who would be up for some *fun*. Manny wasn't there to socialize, or to drink, he was just there to return some magazines to Bill, the bartender.

"Hey Boss!" Manny called everybody 'Boss'. "What a wonderful thing to see you here!" He exclaimed, cheerful as always.

"Hey Manny. What's up?" Jenna said. The bar wasn't dead, but she was obviously striking out and was now focused on her large beer instead.

"Just returning some mags to Bill." Manny handed them over to the large woman behind the bar. Bill accepted them and then stood there, listening to their conversation. Eavesdropping was basically part of the job. "No luck in the love game tonight?" Manny asked Jenna.

"Not really. Only one or two good ones in here, and they're already with somebody else." She replied, glumly.

"What about your other game?"

"Oh, the VRPG? It's going good. It's actually more fun now that Benji's back, and we've got a new player."

"Yeah, I heard. The new janitor girl. She's nice. We eat together in the cafeteria sometimes. Is she any good?"

"She's learning. I think we're coming up on the end boss pretty soon. It's actually quite exciting. Hey, I wasn't going to ask, but since you brought it up, do you know if she's seeing anybody? And do you know if she's into girls?"

"Don't know Jenna, we mostly talk about work. Why don't you ask her yourself? Why don't you do it, in the game? That's kind of romantic, like an e-date you know!"

"Nah, I don't want to make it weird. Don't want to scare her off either. She's a good player, and it's nice to have another woman in the group. Don't get me wrong, Lars is nice and Benji is, well Benji, but it's just more, *balanced* some how. Romance will just mess it up, I'm sure."

"Okay, it's your call. Don't think you'll get lucky in here tonight though." Manny looked around the room.

“Thanks for the pep talk Manny.” Jenna said, and returned to her beer.

Later on, when Jenna was about to leave, Sophia entered the bar. Sophia mostly kept to herself, so she was an unusual sight there. Apparently, Sophia and Bill the bartender were pretty good friends. Bill had been kind enough to show her around a bit when she was new, and Sophia wasn’t very good at making new friends, so she appreciated the kindness. Sophia and Bill were chatting. It was almost closing time.

“Hey Dura-gro-ba!” Jenna said, jovially. It was ironic that the humongous orc was played by this thin, little girl. “Watch out, or you’ll knock down those glasses with your huge, muscular arms!” Jenna smiled and gestured with her arms, as if *she* was the orc. She immediately regretted the joke, it was pathetic.

“Oh, hi Jenna.” Sophia said, chuckling a little. Bill somehow faded into the background, giving the two of them some privacy. “Are we still on for the game tomorrow?”

“Six P.M., same as always. Wouldn’t miss it.”

“Great. I was thinking, do you think I should put more skill points into *Bash* or *Thorns*?”

“I’d go with Bash, but Thorns is OK too.”

“Feels like we’re pretty close to the finale. What do you think the boss is going to be?”

“I hope it isn’t some tentacle monster that comes out of a wall.”

“Ugh. Is that a thing?”

“Yeah, end of the last campaign. It was terrible. I think the programmers are getting lazy. That’s why Benji downloaded some new special scenarios for the AI. They’re *mods*, so the scripts are actually written by active players.”

“That’s pretty cool.”

“Yeah. It lets players give back to the community.” Jenna said.

Sophia got up from her chair and was about to leave.

“Oh, thanks for having me in the group. I already thanked Lars, and I couldn’t find Benji, but I wanted to thank you too. I don’t have many friends here, so I’m grateful. It’s really fun.”

“Oh, wow.” Jenna was slightly shocked. She wasn’t used to being thanked. “Um, You’re welcome. I’ll change my armor if it bothers you.”

“Nah, you don’t have too. I kind of like it now.” She smiled and started to walk away.

For a brief moment, Jenna suffered from a mini-panic. Then she finally figured out how to speak again. “Sophia, wait!”

“What is it?” Sophia turned back, a puzzled look on her face.

Jenna hesitated a moment, not quite knowing what to say. “Take Thorns instead, I think that’s the better choice for your char.” She smiled nervously.

“Okay, I will.” Sophia said, and left the bar.

Bill came up behind Jenna and whispered in her ear. “If only the brave barbarian Xenthara knew what a friggin coward was controlling her.”

“Yeah yeah, I know. I suck.” Jenna said. She emptied her glass, and went back to her quarters, to go to bed.

* * *

“Nuke, nuke! NUUUUUUUKE!” Fionella screamed. By this, she meant that she wanted Shadax to fire off his meteorite spell, a powerful area attack.

“It’s cooling down!” Shadax roared.

The party had been soundly asleep when the minions fell upon them. Shadax had been on guard. The party didn’t like to put Shadax on guard duty but he was the only one who wasn’t completely fatigued by the arderous journey through the dangerous wasteland. It wasn’t that he wasn’t watchful, or fell a sleep on the job. No, Shadax had another annoying behavior. In those situations when danger actually did arise during the night Shadax wouldn’t raise the alarm, he instead would try to defeat all the enemies himself, so as to gain more experience points.

This time had been no different, but the fire and wind elementals they were facing had been noisy enough to awake Fionella, Xenthara and Dura-gro-ba who ware snoozing in the tent.

“Okay, group them together a bit!” Shadax shouted.

Dura-gro-ba took a couple of steps sideways positioning the three remaining elementals between him and Xenthara.

“Now!” Xenthara said and backed away a couple of steps. Dura-gro-ba did the same.

The blackness of night suddenly turned to day as a super bright, ball of fire fell out of the sky, straight into the center of the battle field. With a loud boom it smashed into the poor elementals and immediately disintegrated them. Xenthara crouched down, her hands on her thighs, panting. Shadax looked like he was about to faint.

“Benji, fucking A.” Fionella said. “We’ve told you a thousand times, you got to raise the alarm immediately if there is danger during the night! You were almost dead when we joined the fight.”

“I was fine. I was faking it.” Shadax said and picked up his staff which he had dropped while conjouring the spell.

“Like hell you were.” Xenthara said.

“Guys, look!” Dura-gro-ba was pointing to the sunrise. There, on the horizon, they could see a castle, with one tall spire, stretching into the sky.

“That’s it, the Nemesis’s stronghold.” Shadax said.

“It looks friggin enormous.” Dura-gro-ba said.

It was. Once they got closer they realized that the stronghold was almost comically large. They walked up to the gate, which seemed to be completely unmanned. The large metal door shimmered with a green glow.

“It’s locked with magic.” Fionella said. Being an elf, she automatically detected magic. “There’s something written on the door. It’s Dwarvish.”

“Read it, please.” Xenthara said.

“I don’t know Dwarvish, I think my character hates dwarves.” Fionella said. “Shadax, do you know Dwarvish?”

“Nope. I have exactly zero skill points in ‘read/write language.’” Shadax said. “Dura-gro-ba, how about you?”

“I didn’t even know there was such a skill.” Dura-gro-ba said.

“Dammit.” Fionella snapped through her teeth. “AI, you got to help us out here.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault you power gamers don’t build your characters more versatile.” The booming voice in the sky said.

“So what are we going to do. Stay here and rot?” Shadax grumbled.

“You should have taken the side quest from the dwarven merchant back in town.”

“Shoulda coulda woulda. Are you telling us we got to go back?”

“YES.” The voice roared.

“We’re going to whine the whole way. You’ll have to waste countless clock-cycles on human whining.” Shadax said.

“Fine! A dwarven merchant suddenly appears!” Instantly a dwarven merchant appeared next to Dura-gro-ba.

“Hello there chum.” Dura-gro-ba said. “Would you mind reading the text on the door there?”

“Goodness me.” The dwarf said in a scottish accent. “That wee text? Where’s me glasses?” He fumbled for something inside his vest, then pulled

out a tiny pair of spectacles and put them on his nose. He cleared his throat as if to speak, but then interrupted himself. "Wait a minute, what's in it for me?"

"Gold, much gold." Shadax said. "But read now, we'll give it to you later."

"Show me the gold." The dwarf countered.

Shadax turned to the other three. "Who's got coin? I'm all out. Spent it all on potions back in town."

"Got no shiny bits." Dura-gro-ba tried to sound dumb.

Xenthara untied a pouch from her belt and opened it. Two coppers and a raisin fell out. "Don't know the going rate for an old raisin, but I've got two coppers."

They all looked at Fionella.

"Oh come on Fi, we all know you're loaded. You're a friggin elven princess." Xenthara said.

"Well." Fionella huffed and puffed. "Why should I have to pay? I already lent Xenthara five hundred for the enchanting of her axe, and I lent Shadax money for his mustache wax. I didn't even question that, even though it was stupid."

"Hey, mustache wax *is* important." Shadax smiled and twirled his left mustache. "Now pay up." He turned to the dwarf. "Name your price master dwarf. Come now, don't be shy, we are generous types!"

Fionella and the dwarf haggled for some time but finally landed on a sum. Once he had pocketed the money he turned to the metal door again and spoke:

"'What treasure is both fruit and a large chest, friend?'"

"Sounds like a riddle." Dura-gro-ba said.

"That's because it is a riddle." Shadax said.

"It sounds like it's about gold." The dwarf said.

"AI, we're done with this dwarf. Please remove him." Shadax said.

"I am but a humble dwarf, I will not impede your quest." The dwarf said.

"AI, remove him or I'll kill him." Shadax said.

The dwarf disappeared.

"A fruit. Could it be a raisin?" Xenthara said. Then immediately debunked her own theory. "No that doesn't make any sense. Hmm, the wording is kind of odd, isn't it? The sentence doesn't really make sense. Shouldn't it be 'What treasure is both fruit and comes in a large chests?'"

“That’s not what that greedy little bastard said though.” Fionaella replied. “And that doesn’t make much sense either, fruit doesn’t come in chests. Barrels maybe.”

“Could it be a coconut? It’s kind of like a fruit, and it’s kind of like a chest.” Dura-gro-ba said.

“A coconut is a nut, not a fruit. And it’s nothing like a chest.” Shadax objected.

“It *is* a fruit.” Jenna said. “I know it’s not a nut, somebody told me that once. I remember being surprised about it.”

“Of course it’s a nut.” Shadax cried. “The word ‘nut’ is in its name!”

The argument went on for a couple of minutes. Shadax on one side, Dura-gro-ba and Xenthara on the other. It was rare for Benji to be wrong about something, so Jenna felt like she had to take this chance to let him know it. Also, she was was defending Sophia, which was a nice bonus.

Meanwhile, Fionaella walked up to the door and rubbed her hand over the raised lettering. “Hey guys, there was some dirt here near the end.” She turned around and called out to the trio, interrupting the debate. “there’s another two letters in here.”

“Dammit Shadax, you dismissed the dwarf too quickly!” Xenthara grumbled.

“Whatever. Come on, we can figure this out. This riddle was thought out by some dweeb gamers. We just need to think like them. Now we know the ending is a little different, what could it be?”

“I still think it’s a coconut.” Dura-gro-ba said moodily.

“Could it be ‘chested’ instead of ‘chest’ *comma*?” Shadax pondered.

Fionaella uttered the whole sentence out loud: “What treasure is both fruit and a large chested friend?”

“Mellons.” Xenthara said loudly, and smiled.

The metal door flung open and revealed a large hall within. Dura-gro-ba rolled his eyes. “Dweebs.” he said.

They soon encountered monsters and they faught their way through hallways and chambers, and through courtyards and gardens. Where there were no monsters, there were devilish traps instead. Traps which needed to be carefully avoided, or disarmed with great caution.

More than once they had to stop and consult their maps which were automatically filled in as they went, thanks to Shadax’s *etherial scribe*. Finally

they came into a large round chamber. A narrow staircase winded along the wall, upward and upward, into infinity.

“Good god. That must be at least a thousand steps.” Fionella said.

“Ten thousand.” Shadax said. “I read about this part on a forum.”

“What?” Xenthara shouted. “Don’t spoil anything!”

“Oh don’t worry yourself! Almost the whole scenario is dynamically generated, and it was just this little part that I read about.”

“What does ‘dynamically generated’ mean.” Dura-gro-ba asked.

Shadax wiped the sweat from his forehead. “It means that the AI has permission to fill in the blanks in the scenario. Precisely which monsters, puzzles, side quests and loot isn’t specified by the scenario, so the AI uses whatever is most fitting for our characters, levels and our player profiles. The point is to give us an adventure which is as meaningful as possible for our characters.”

“Oh.” Dura-gro-ba said.

“Benji, don’t break character.” Fionella said.

They started to climb the seemingly infinite stairwell. Pretty soon they realized that they would have to rest their characters before reaching the top so they huddled against the wall and tried not to think about the abyss just a couple of feet in front of them.

“Your characters are physically rested.” The booming voice explained, once they were ready to start again. “But you all take ten points of mental fatigue.”

“What? Why?” Shadax cried.

“Your rest wasn’t mentally refreshing.” The voice rumbled.

“Sure it was! My character dreamed about unicorns and singing children.”

“Your character had a nightmare about plunging to his death in this hellish tower.”

“Lame.” Shadax said quietly.

“I heard that.” the voice growled.

“I mean... that makes sense oh all-mighty GM.”

“Good human.” the voice said.

The never-ending stairs finally ended and they ascended to the top platform. The four players spread out, expecting the mysterious Nemesis to appear. But the platform was empty.

“What the hell?” Xenthara said.

“Were’s the Nemesis?” Fionella asked nobody in particular. “Benji, did your forums mention the ending being borked?”

Shadax just stood there. “Patience. It’s loading.”

“*Loading?* When has this game ever had a loading time?”

“Just wait, you’ll see.” Shadax said, mysteriously.

Suddenly, there was thunder. Clouds had rolled in and were now illuminated by unseen lightning bolts. A dark, and evil voice was heard:

“Ha, ha, ha! Puny fools! You should not have come to this place. You may have defeated my inept minions, but you will never be able to slay, me....”

A lightningbolt struck the center of the platform, and a puff of smoke spewed upwards.

“... Harbulax!” A tall figure in a green robe appeared when the smoke cleared. “Now die!” he raised his hands in a menacing manner and started to cast a spell.

“Wait, what?” Fionella cried. “Wait, wait, wait. Hang on. AI, time out.” She made a ‘T’ sign with her hands.

Harbulax stopped casting the spell.

“What’s the matter?” The voice in the sky asked.

“AI, you can’t be serious? Harbulax? How can’t we defeat Harbulax? He was virtually undefeatable!”

“Indeed, I am!” Harbulax roared and grinned, and held up both fists, shaking them. He then laughed evilly.

“Shut up, please.” Fionella said to Harbulax who immediately stopped his evil laugh. “AI. This isn’t fair. He’s a broken character. He can’t be the Nemesis!”

“It’s okay, I promise. He’s not broken anymore.” The voice said. “I’ve downgraded his death rays, and he can now be contained by certain high-level spells.”

“It’s okay Lars, we can take him.” Shadax said.

Fionella turned to Shadax. “You! You knew about this! It was you who downloaded this scenario. You knew the AI would take an old character and use as a boss! Is that why you wanted to play with us again? So you could defeat Harbulax and get his equipment?”

Harbulax, who had been quite, now carefully asked. “What do you mean, ‘played’?”

“Don’t interrupt Harbulax, we’ll fight in a moment, I promise.” Shadax said. “Okay, I admit I downloaded this scenario because there was a chance

that Harbulax would show up, but I didn't *know* he'd show up. And I admit I was hoping that *if* he did show up the AI would reduce his power somewhat so we could defeat him. Does it matter? Can we just kill him now?"

"Tell us the truth Benji. You just want his gear, right? So you can break the game again." Xenthara said.

Harbulax raised a hand and tried to get a word in "Um, what do you mean 'game'?"

Shadax completely ignored the other wizard. "Fine, I admit, I want it. I mean come on! It's so rare, it doesn't even exist in the game any more! And I didn't want to break the game again!"

"What do you mean? Then why did you want it?" Dura-gro-ba asked.

"Well, I got this offer."

"Offer?" Xenthara repeated.

"A guy contacted me on the PuboNet and offered to pay me 20 000 credits for Harbulax's gear."

"Um, excuse me." Harbulax said.

"What the fuck?" Fionella yelled. "You weren't playing with us because it was fun. You just wanted the gear?"

Xenthara was just shaking her head. Dura-gro-ba had sat down, he also seemed sad, but Fionella was furious.

"Fuck you Benji! You know I was actually starting to think that you were an okay guy. But this is why you're always alone, and why you only find 'friends' on the PuboNet and in games. Because out there, in the real world, you just screw everybody over, and you only ever care about yourself." Fionella was pointing to the sky while yelling at Shadax.

Shadax was about to say something to defend himself, but he never got the chance. Suddenly a green ray shot out from Harbulax and pierced Shadax. For a moment both the wizards eyes went all white and they opened their mouths and sang, or screamed, it was hard to tell which, a steady tone. Then, as soon as the strange ritual had started, it ended and Harbulax collapsed on the stone floor. Shadax simply disappeared into thin air.

"What the hell was that?" Dura-gro-ba said. "Where did Benji go?"

Fionella rushed up to Harbulax and started kicking him.

"Hey, turd-face!" Fionella roared as the poor wizard was coming too. "What did you do to our..." She was about to say 'friend' but stopped herself. "What did you do to Shadax?"

"Ow, ow, ouch! Stop kicking me!" Harbulax cried. "I'm right here!"

Fionella didn't stop kicking him. "You bring Shadax back here, right now! AI, where did this guy teleport Benji?"

The voice in the sky responded: "He's right in front of you."

Fionella stopped kicking. "Is this some kind of joke? This is Harbulax, I want Shadax! I want to rip his friggin face off!"

"I am Shadax, I am Benji. Lars, I'm right friggin here you retarded son-of-a-bitch!" Harbulax yelled as he got up from the stone floor.

"Lars..." Xenthara said. "I think, that's Benji. NPCs never curse like that."

"What just happened?" Harbulax said. "We were just about to fight Harbulax... Then... I can't remember. Wait, why is my robe green? Why am I wearing Harbulax's things? Did we do it? We did, didn't we? Yay, we did it! We defeated Harbulax! I knew we could from the start! Um, I mean, I knew we could defeat the Nemesis. Yay, go us! High-fives all around! Now if you excuse me, I need to digistruct back to... uh, um meet a friend."

Fionella punched Harbulax in the face. "Shut up Benji, we know about your little scheme. You just told us about it."

"Oh. Um, sorry?" Harbulax said.

"Oh 'sorry' isn't going to cover it, but let's get back to that later. Now we've got to figure out what the hell just happened. We didn't defeat Harbulax, he escaped."

"Escaped? How? Did he teleport to somewhere?" Harbulax asked.

"I don't think so." Dura-gro-ba said. "I think he took over Shadax. Then he just disappeared, no animation or anything."

"Whatever!" Xenthara sighed. "I'm done playing! I'm done with *you* Benji."

"Yeah, me too." Dura-gro-ba said.

"You guys are always whining. Well, I'm done with you too! I'm digistructing back right now."

But he didn't. He just stood there, with a stupid look on his face.

"Just go Benji!" Fionella yelled.

"I'm trying. There's something wrong. AI, what's preventing me from digistructing back?"

The voice rang clearly in the sky: "You're an NPC. Only players are allowed to digistruct."

* * *

Benji opened his eyes. He was lying in a cold metal and glass coffin with tubes connected to his limbs and head. He tore them off and got out. He was standing in large room with several such coffins, in three others he could see the shapes of human beings.

"I need clothes." He said to himself. He was only wearing some form of undergarments. There was a row of closets lining one wall. He began searching them. Within were clothes, but not many of them found his fancy. In one locker he found a blue robe, he put it on. "This will have to do." He muttered.

He went through the door and stepped out into a hallway. The walls were metal, and so was the floor. He saw two humans. One was clad in an orange and yellow suit. The other man had red balloon pants and overly large red shoes. He had black suspendors over a white shirt, and instead of a bow tie he had a large yellow flower. His face was broad and was covered in white paint. He had a red globular nose and bright orange hair. The man in the orange suit had a firm grip on the other man and was giving him a beating.

"Hey Benji, nice robe. You going to the pool?" The man in the orange suit said. "God, I hate this clown!" But his Irish accent made it sound like *cluwn*. "I hate cluwns, and this is the worst one. I hate his stupid hair, his stupid laugh, and his honking. I was fixing the APC here and this guy came up and sprayed me with water. The whole bleedin' thing shorted out!"

"Honk! Honk!" The bruised clown said, then giggled.

The orange suited man threw a couple of more punches.

"A cluwn?" Benji mused. "Just slay the wretch!"

"What? Are you insane? I'm not gonna kill him."

"Then I, the mighty Harbulax, will! Stand back, puny human!"

"Wait, what? Benji, what the hell are you doing?" The orange suited man dropped the cluwn and stepped between him and Benji.

"Don't try to stop me, fool!"

"Wait!"

"Hah! You can't prevent me from destroying my enemies! I think I'll turn you into..." Benji raised his hands, his palms towards the other man. "Abracadrabra!"

Manny was on his daily walk around the station. He was walking there, minding his own business, when someone came rushing towards him. It was a man in bright green oversized pants and purple shoes. He had white

makeup and bright green, curly hair. He was honking loudly and had the most hysterical, maniacal laugh you had ever heard.

The man rushed past Manny while yelling “CLUUUWN! I’M A CLUU-UWN!” And then continued to laugh in that very unsettling way.

Manny looked after him. Then continued his walk. Further down in the corridor he spotted Benji in a blue robe. He appeared to be shooting flames from his palms onto some poor maintenance robot. Maniacal clowns running around on the station wasn’t really a reason for concern, but destruction of property *was*. He immediately pulled out his PDA and called up the head of staff. He wasn’t really sure how to report it though. He was about to describe the miner dressed in a bath robe when the perpetrator suddenly vanished in a puff of smoke.

“What do you mean *he disappeared*?” Connor, the head of staff, asked.

“He must have used a teleporter or something. It was like he vanished in a magic trick.” Manny said.

“Sounds pretty shady, probably some kind of Syndicate activity. I’ll flag the alert.” Connor said.

“This is a nightmare.” Fionella said.

“You’ve got it easy.” Harbulax whined. “You just got to find Harbulax, i.e. *me*, in the real world and get him to come back here. I, on the other hand, I’m friggin trapped in here!”

“Even if we do get him back to the cryo-pods, won’t he just escape the game again?” Dura-gro-ba asked.

“Yes, that’s why it’s a nightmare. He’s just going to run around the station, in Benji’s body and cause trouble for everyone.” Fionella stated.

“There’s got to be some way of trapping him. Didn’t the AI mention that he could now be trapped by some prison spells?”

“Yeah, probably *Bone Prison*, it’s a high level wizard skill.” Harbulax said.

“Do you have it?” Xenthara asked Harbulax.

“No, I’m like twenty levels away.”

“Even if he did have it, how would we even trick him into going back to the pods?” Fionella asked.

Maybe we could lure him, with like, really powerful wizard loot or something.

“Naw, he’ll never fall for that.” Harbulax said.

“What if we convince him that the station isn’t real either.” Dura-gro-ba said. “Like, it’s a simulation in a simulation. When we were talking before, as soon as he figured out that he was in a simulation, he immediately took actions to try to escape.”

“That’s not a bad idea.” Fionella said. “Maybe if we somehow convince him that the cryo-pods are the entry and exit points for both the outer and inner simulations.”

“Yeah! And once he digistructs in here again, but before he figures out that he’s back here and not anywhere else, Harbulax, I mean Benji, I mean... what the hell do we call you now?” Xenthara looked at Harbulax in bewilderment.

“Dammit, I’m still Benji. It’s my consciousness that counts!” Harbulax argued.

“Okay. Once Harbulax is back here, *Benji* casts Bone Prison on him.”

“But I don’t have Bone Prison!” Harbulax sneered.

“You’re just going to have to grind monsters until you reach the right level.”

“Well, I don’t really have anywhere else to go.” Harbulax said in defeat.

The AI’s voice suddenly called out. “Players, there’s an alert on the station, ‘code blue.’”

“That’s probably Harbulax causing trouble out there.” Harbulax said. “You guys digistruct back while you still can. I’ll stay and grind until I get that skill.”

“Okay. I guess we don’t have a better plan.” Fionella said.

“For what it’s worth, I am sorry guys.” The wizard said.

“Whatever, we’ll talk about it later.”

The orc, elf and barbarian suddenly disappeared. The wizard stood there, alone. He sighed loudly. “AI, spawn one level one monster for me please.”

Jenna got up out of the cryo-pod. She saw Lars and Sophia getting out as well. They were both in their undies so it would have been the perfect moment to sneak a peak, but she didn’t realize that until later. Right now she was focused on the plan. She could hear fire alarms ringing and outside in the hall people were rushing around. Some were yelling, others were laughing in a very high pitched, annoying way. She wondered what that was about. She threw on her jumpsuit and turned to the other two, who had done the same.

“Okay, so what’s the plan? Do we split up, stay together, get help, or what?” She asked.

“Dammit, the coms are down.” Lars said, looking at his PDA. “I’ll go straight to the bridge and try to find the captain, or anybody from command, and bring them up to speed on the situation. You guys should probably stick together.”

He left, leaving only Jenna and Sophia. “Well, it’s just us now.” Jenna said.

“How are we going to convince the wizard that this is just a simulation?” Sophia asked.

Jenna was silent for a minute, then she remembered what Manny had said the day before.

“Why don’t we pretend like I’m asking you out! I’ll do something romantic, like give you a flower and a heart shaped pastry, and ask if you want to go out with me. Then you’ll kiss me and...”

Sophia was blushing. “What good would that do?”

“Well, then you’ll say something like ‘Oh Jenna, how romantic, asking me out inside this simulation! I can’t wait to meet the *real* you in the *real* world. Let’s go to the cryo-pods at once so we can go back to reality.’”

“Sounds kind of corny.” Sophia said, and Jenna tried to hide her disappointment. Then Sophia added “But it might actually work. I’ve certainly heard about people doing stuff like that.”

“So your okay with it?” Jenna asked nervously. “The *whole* thing?”

“Sure, why not. It’s the only idea we’ve got. Can’t hurt to try it.”

“Score!” Jenna thought to herself, but to Sophia she said “Okay, that’s cool... I guess we’re just going to have to look for Benji now.”

They started walking. Burn marks, broken glass and chaos was everywhere. More than once they were stopped by some freak, screaming ‘clown’ and who tried to spray them with water. Jenna had no problem wacking them with her toolkit though. Soon enough they found Manny. He was wrestling with one of the clowns. Manny wasn’t a violent person, but he was big and strong, and could easily detain others. He tied up the clown with his belt, then cordially greeted the two of them.

“Hey Boss. Just had to calm this fellow down a little bit, he seems slightly deranged. Not sure why anybody would want to act like this, but who am I to judge. I just don’t want him hurting anybody.”

“He’s probably under some spell.” Sophia said.

“Spell? What do you mean, like magic?”

“Yeah. Benji’s broken-ass VRPG character somehow became self-aware and escaped the simulation. He’s running around in Benji’s body.”

“Oh yeah, that’s why he was acting so weird. Not to worry, he’s probably arrested by the securitrons by now.”

Jenna gestured to the blinking alarms, sporadic fires and general chaos around them, “Do you really think so?”

“Hmm, maybe not.” Manny said.

“It’s okay though. We’ve got a plan to catch him.” Sophia said. “First, Jenna’s going to ask me out in a really romantic way.”

“Oh, good for her! I thought she was never gonna get around to asking you.”

Sophia fell silent. Jenna gave Manny a very resentful stare.

“No, I mean, she was going to pretend... Wait, you really wanted to ask me out?” Sophia asked Jenna. Manny discretely backed off a bit.

Jenna sighed. “Well, I guess the cat’s out of the bag. Yes, the reason I came up with that plan so quickly was that I had been thinking about doing just that. Well that was before all this happened. But I wasn’t going to do it. I didn’t want to mess up our friendship. We were having such a good time playing the game.”

“Jenna, I didn’t know... I...”

“Forget about it. Don’t worry, it doesn’t matter. And we can come up with another plan if you’re not comfortable doing that.”

Sophia just stood there, silent. Jenna couldn’t really look her in the eye anymore, she was quite embarrassed. They were suddenly interrupted by Manny:

“There he is, Benji! The guy in the blue robe!”

“After him!” Jenna said.

The three of them sprinted after the wizard. Benji wasn’t so fast, but every once in a while he’d teleport a few yards and slip away from them. Sometimes he tried to hide, and when they found him he shot a couple of small fireballs at them and teleported again.

The wild chase continued until finally, the wizard teleported and they weren’t able to find him.

“Where the hell did he go now?” Sophia yelled, quite out of breath.

“Don’t know. But we need to corner him and somehow pull off our stunt.” Jenna replied. Her PDA suddenly chimed. It was Lars.

“Lars! We’ve been chasing Harbulax. But he keeps slipping away. What are we going to do?”

"I've got a direct connection with the AI from here." Lars said. "I can ask him to locate Benji." There was a slight delay. "He's in the green house! Do you have a plan for tricking him back to the pods?"

"Um, maybe." Jenna said. Sometimes she wished she could just read other people's minds. She shouted to the other two "green house!"

They ran across the station, through fires, gas leaks and depressurizing compartments until they reached the air tunnel which led to the green house.

"Hahahhahahhahhihihihiheiheiheiehihi." A clown barred the way.

"Leave this to me!" Manny yelled. He ran up to the clown and tackled him. "Go go!"

Sophia jumped over the wrestling men and ran down the tunnel. Jenna followed her. When she came out on the other side she could see the wizard in the distance, backing up on a little patch of grass, Sophia was approaching him.

Next to Jenna was a soil patch where some tulips grew. "Dammit." She thought. "It's now or never."

Sophia approached the wizard, who had his palms up. He was clearly somewhat tired from all the running, teleporting and spell casting.

"You can stop running Harbulax." She said. "This is pointless." Then Jenna came up behind her.

"Sophia!" Jenna called out, holding out the ruffled bouquet of tulips. "There's something I want to ask you."

Sophia turned to Jenna. "Wow. Okay, I guess we're doing this." Sophia thought. At least Harbulax seemed to be watching.

Jenna came closer to her and carefully handed over the flowers.

"Will you go out with me? I mean, the *real* me?"

Sophia smiled, drew close to Jenna. She had to stand on her toes to reach up to her, and she gave Jenna a little kiss on the cheek.

"Wow, Jenna, this is *sooo* romantic! Asking me out in this simulation. I can't wait to meet you in the *real world*." Sophia felt herself stressing the words a bit too much. Was Harbulax really going to fall for this crap?

"Really?" Jenna said, sounding pleased. "Let's go to the cryo-pods right now, so we can get out of this fake world and meet up for real." She looked past Sophia and saw Harbulax standing there, blinking. He then vanished. "He's gone." She said.

Sophia turned around. "Do you think it worked?"

"Well, if he did believe it, digistructed back into the game, and Benji had enough time to level up and get that skill. Yeah, it might have. Only one

way to find out though.”

They got back to the VR room, and sure enough, in one of the pods, Benji was snoozing.

“Looks like he’s in there.” Sophia said. “Let’s go in and find out.”

* * *

Fionella was digistructed on the stone platform at the top of the tower in the Nemesis stronghold. In front of him Harbulax, Xenthara and Dura-gro-ba were talking.

“What’s going on. Did you get him?” Fionella said.

“Hey Lars.” Harbulax said. “No, we didn’t.”

“What happened?”

“I’ve been in here, grinding until I got Bone Prison. But he never showed up.” Harbulax said.

“So he’s still out there, wreaking havoc on the station?”

“Nope. Benji’s body is in the pod. He’s digistructed back out and then in again, just to make sure.”

“So where’s the crazy wizard?”

“He’s gone.” Xenthara said.

“Where did he go?” Fionella asked.

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out.” Harbulax said.

“I don’t get it! We got him back to the cryo-pod, and Benji can go back to his body. Why hasn’t Shadax shown up in this world? AI, where is Shadax?” Dura-gro-ba asked the sky.

The voice in the sky responded. “The character Shadax is not currently in use.”

Harbulax turned to to Dura-gro-ba and Xenthara. “Tell me exactly what you did while you were out there.”

“We tracked him down and did a little bit.” Xenthara said.

“What kind of bit?”

“Well, we pretended like I was asking Sophia out, and tried to make it look like I was doing it in a simulation. You know, like an e-date.”

Sophia filled in the rest. “We thought that would convince him that the real world was just another simulation. As soon as we had done the bit, he disappeared. When we saw him back in the cryo-pod, we thought we had succeeded.”

“Wait, let me think.” Harbulax said. He closed his eyes and rubbed his eyes with one hand. After a minute he spoke again.

“AI. Do you have any video records of the wizard, I mean, me, on the station from the last hour or so?”

“Yes.”

“Please show them to us.”

A bright rectangle suddenly appeared three feet above the stone platform. It was a screen which was playing video footage of Benji. There was no sound. The four of them watched it intently.

They saw Benji getting out of the cryo-pod.

“22:34.” Harbulax commented. “That must’ve been right after he escaped from here.”

They saw Benji going through the lockers and finding the blue robe, putting it on. They then saw the scene with one of the electricians beating up Roger the clown. After a few seconds they could see puffs of smoke around the electrician who then turned into a clown. The next couple of minutes was footage of Benji running around, setting things on fire, shooting fireballs at crew members and turning random people into clowns.

“AI, fast forward a bit.”

The video fast forward.

“There!” Dura-gro-ba yelled, that’s when we’re in the green house.

“AI, pause. Go back a bit.”

The video played the sequence with Benji running through the green house, Sophia persuading him. The video had caught the scene of Jenna giving the flowers to Sophia, and subsequently Sophia kissing Jenna.

“Woa. That’s a detail you left out.” Fionella said.

“It was part of the bit.” Xenthara said. Then turned to Dura-gro-ba, “Right?”

Dura-gro-ba just winked at her.

“Quiet.” Harbulax said. “There, I just vanished. Now, where did I go...”

The next scene was from the lab. They could see Kevin, the research director, sitting in front of a computer when suddenly Benji appeared. A green ray shot out from his palm and went straight into Kevin. Both of them opened their mouths, and it looked like they were calling out, but there wasn’t any sound, so it just looked really peculiar. Then Benji collapsed, and Kevin, disappeared.

“AI, pause.” Harbulax said. “Go back.”

The video went back to the part where the ray was connecting the two gaping men.

Harbulax turned to the others, pointed to the screen and said “What the hell am I doing to Kevin?”

“Oh my god.” Dura-gro-ba said.

“Motherfucker.” Xenthara said.

“Sweet baby Jesus...” Fionella said. “Benji, that’s the spell Harbulax cast on you when he escaped from the game.”

“Oh man.” Harbulax said. “You mean...”

“He escaped again.” Dura-gro-ba said.

“Well, I guess we shouldn’t be so surprised...” Harbulax said. “According to some futurists, the probability that our ‘real’ world is a simulation is really high.”

“You really think that *our* world is a simulation?” Xenthara asked timidly.

“I don’t know if I believe that.” Fionella said. “But I just can’t see any other logical explanation either. I mean, he isn’t in the game, and he isn’t on the station, where could he have gone? I guess it must be true.”

“Jeez, that’s intense.” Dura-gro-ba said. “But wait, how did Benji’s body end up in the cryo-pod? AI, keep playing the video.”

The video showed Benji lying there on the floor for some time. Then, he seemed to wake up and looked around the room in confusion. He then stumbled down the hall to the VR-room and lay down in one of the cryo-pods.

“Wait, I’m confused. Who’s in Benji’s body? Shadax?” Fionella asked.

“No, Kevin.” Harbulax said.

“Then where is he now? Shouldn’t he show up in the game?”

“I think I know where he is.” Harbulax said. “Follow me.”

They used the game’s fast travel network to transport back to the starting town. The four of them went into the tavern. At their usual table sat a thin, young man, who looked like a monk. Above his head the name “Quewin” floated.

“Kevin?” Xenthara asked the monk. “It’s me Jenna. This is Lars, Sophia and Benji.”

“Oh, thank goodness you guys are here. The weirdest thing just happened to me.”

The group had several things to work out after that. The first thing to explain to Kevin was that his body was gone, and he would probably have

to become a cyborg if he was to return to reality. Kevin wasn't too happy about that. At first, he didn't believe them, but when he couldn't digistruct back to the real world he grudgingly accepted the truth. The next topic was what to do about the crazy wizard, but they quickly arrived at the conclusion that they had no idea where he was, or what to do about him. It simply wasn't their problem any more. Finally, they agreed to digistruct back to start putting the station back in order.

Jenna was helping Sophia cleaning up the last mess. The last clown had been rehabilitated and the two women were mopping up the hallway where Manny had tackled that clown.

"So... Are you going to keep playing with us?" Jenna asked.

"Nah."

"Dammit. I knew the kiss was too much. I should have just left it alone." Jenna said.

"No, it's not that. I just think I've had enough adventures for a while. Thanks anyway." Sophia replied.

"And what about, *us*. Do we have a chance?" Jenna said.

"Jenna, you're nice. I like you, but not like that." Sophia said.

"Okay. Let's just be friends, OK?"

"Friends." Sophia agreed.

Jenna came back to the recreational room. Manny was in there, and so was Tina and Benji.

"I just got rejected." Jenna said and threw herself down onto the sofa next to Manny.

"Manny patted her head. There are many asteroids in space Jenna. Good for you though for actually going after someone and not just hitting the one night stands."

Jenna sat up. "Yeah, it still sucks though."

Benji was reading from a binder. "Did you clean up the station?" He asked.

"Yeah. Oh wait, I'm still angry with you, Benji."

Benji closed the binder with a snap.

"You don't have to be. It's over."

"It isn't over! Your megalomaniacal scheme almost destroyed the station! Your psychopathic behavior released a homicidal wizard on god knows what kind of reality, and Kevin, poor Kevin! How do you think Kevin feels about..."

Jenna stopped talking immediately when Kevin walked through the door.

“Is it done Benji? can I go back to the lab?” He asked.

“Yeah. It’s over, scenario’s done.” Benji said.

Jenna frowned. “What do you mean the scenario’s over?”

Benji held up the binder. “This.” He tossed it over to Jenna.

She opened the first page, at the top was the title ‘*The Wizard*, scenario for Nanotrasen VRPG and *Live Action*.’ She could hardly believe what she was seeing. She leafed through, everything was there. Everything from the start of the campaign, the Nemesis castle, Harbulax ‘escaping’ the simulation, even the part about Benji wanting to sell Harbulax’s gear on the PuboNet. The live action part on the station was obviously a bit more free form, but he had gotten it almost right. Benji hadn’t anticipated the romantic part between herself and Sophia, but he had gotten pretty much everything else right.

“Benji. I don’t know what to say. How did you, *why* did you...?”

“Let’s start with the *why*.” Benji said. “After you ostracized me from the group I was pretty angry with you and Lars for some time. But then I realized I was being very childish, and that I had been a true jackass. So I wanted to make it up to you somehow. I knew you and Lars were getting tired of the built in scenarios so I thought I would scan the PuboNet after some mods. Maybe you’d forgive me if I found a really awesome scenario for us to play. Instead I came across a forum where a guy described a unique scenario he had put together. Half the scenario was *in* the game, half was in the real world. He himself took on the role as a traditional game master, and orchestrated the whole thing. Of course, his players were aware of the plot. I wanted to go one step further. I wanted to give you and Lars the role-playing experience of a life time. The scenario to end all scenarios.”

Manfred and Tina were listening intently to the conversation. Jenna realized that they also must have been in on this.

“At first I just thought it would be cool if you two could get back at me by defeating Harbulax. Then I started thinking about the loot he would drop and invented the ‘buyer on the PuboNet’ pretense. When I thought about how the conversation would evolve when you figured that out, I tried to imagine what the Harbulax character would be feeling. That’s when I came up with the idea of him escaping the simulation. It didn’t take me long to come up with the idea of him escaping again, making it seem like our world was a simulation too. Pretty brilliant, huh?”

Jenna had no words. She just sat there, slack-jawed.

“Now to the *how*.” Benji continued. “Obviously I would need to write the code for the scenario myself. I needed to make damn sure it would seem like the AI was still running the show. I also needed to really work out the kinks with the Harbulax NPC, so he could play a believable me at the point where I digistructed back. You know, the part when Lars was kicking him and asking where I’d gone? He also had to give you enough help to plan how to trick the wizard back into the game. You managed that part pretty well on your own though. Those parts of the programming were pretty hairy to get right. If the NPC hadn’t been human enough, you’d call the bluff, and the game would be over. I also needed an extra char that looked exactly like Harbulax, positioned in the exact right place, so I could be there when the three of you came back into the game. I needed to be myself while we were watching the video. That part was too undeterministic so I couldn’t script my NPC to do it.”

Benji paused and almost looked a little fatigued. “All that planning, coding and grinding, but boy, was it was worth it! That’s why I was absent for months after you stopped playing with me. I also had some other stuff which took time to set up, like getting command to let me stage it all. I finally managed to bribe the head of staff, and the captain, into letting me do it. I needed extras to play the parts of panicked crew members. Manny volunteered for the ‘helpful crewmate’ role. I also had to make sure you and Lars didn’t get wind of this, because rumors of my plans were starting to spread. It was just blind luck that Sophia hadn’t heard about the thing, because I didn’t foresee her joining the party. But I’m glad she did, I don’t think you would have succeeded otherwise. I also needed somebody to help me directly. I had to be able to play a believable wizard for my live action part. Kevin helped me out with the teletronics device so I could teleport rapidly and Roger helped me out with some of the theatric magic tricks, like the fireballs. The cluwns were Roger’s idea of course.”

“What about video we watched. Was it real?” Jenna finally found her voice.

“Actually, it was.” Benji said. “I was thinking of faking that too, but I wasn’t sure it would hold up to scrutiny if I did. Instead I decided to really play the part of the wizard once I digistructed back. I had to really assume the character, because I knew the cameras were watching. I also needed somebody to play the role of the *outer world host*, i.e. the person the wizard would seem to swap with in the real world when he escaped the second time. Kevin knew the story and offered to play that part as well.”

“How did you do that green ray thing?”

“Oh, the ‘mind transfer’? It was super easy to implement in the game. In the real world, I just used this laser.” Benji pulled out a little device from his pocket and shot the green ray at the wall.

“Benji, this is... it’s amazing. But now I’m afraid that no other scenario can ever live up to it.”

“Thanks Jenna. At least you’re slightly positive about it. Lars wasn’t.”

“What did he say?”

“He said I broke the game again.” Benji said and smiled.

The Artifact

Jenna pulled her helmet off. "It's just another radioactive rock."

"I don't think so." Benji said, squatting down and inspecting the mysterious object in front of them. "No, this thing was definitely *made*". "Manny, why did you bring it inside?" They were standing in the small common room of *Beta*, the mining outpost coupled to SS13.

"You told me to keep an eye on it. Easiest way to do that is to bring it with me." Manny mumbled.

"Well, Tom is going to shit his pants when he sees this thing, the Scientist are going to have a field day and the Head of Staff is going to scream bloody murder and send us to CentCom for re-education since we didn't quarantine this thing."

They all fell silent for a moment, eyeing the peculiar object they had found floating out among the asteroids. It had been just another day. Manny had been driving the 'Gulper', that's what he called the humongous vehicle that swallowed space debris, munched it to bits and turned it to regolith dust. Tina was riding shotgun and making sure Manny didn't doze off at the wheel. Suddenly, Tina had shouted loudly and pulled the reverse thruster emergency brake. Manny's colossal body had smashed into the dashboard but before he could complain Tina was going EVA to inspect the thing floating right in their path.

It was difficult to describe in words. The shape of the thing was all angles, and hard to classify. The color first appeared grayish, but then gold or copper, with a strange shimmer to it. Nobody had any suggestion as to what the thing was made of. Only the dimensions were something that

could be described definitely, it was roughly two feet wide, two feet deep and five feet long. Apart from some mysterious markings along the object's long ridges there were no signs, letters or indication as to where the thing came from, or what its purpose was.

Manny and Tina had stored it in the Gulper and brought it back to the Beta within a couple of hours. Benji and Jenna were in a heated debate about whether it was okay to break wind in the Beta's communal space suits. Benji was of the opinion that keeping it in would be worse for everybody in the long run. Jenna did not agree.

"Do you think it's man made?" Tina asked. She didn't turn away from the object as she spoke, so the question was not directed at anybody in particular, and consequently nobody answered.

"Hmm. What was that?" Jenna asked after a couple of minutes had passed, not turning away either.

"She asked if it was man made." Benji said. "And 'No' would be my guess."

"So you're saying it's..." Tina swallowed. "...alien?"

"It could be made by extra-terrestrials, yes."

"Woa..." Tina whispered. "I didn't think there were any sentient aliens out there." Tina looked around the room, as if an alien would pop out of a closet and yell "Surprise assholes!". Instead she only saw closets, mining gear, the dirty walls and the GMs¹.

"There might not be." Benji interjected. "This thing looks like it's very old. It might have been sitting out here for thousands of years, maybe millions. Whoever made it might be long dead."

"Just like we'll be if we don't report this to Command, ASAP." Jenna said. "Hopefully we can get a brief and get this thing the hell out of here. Frankly, it gives me the creeps. Manny, get Tom on the horn."

There was a slight delay. "Manny!" Jenna blurted. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to the can." Manny replied in a relaxed tone.

"Can't it wait?"

"Look, if that thing's been sitting out in that asteroid field, waiting to be found for at least a thousand years, it can wait another few minutes."

Benji smiled. "I'm telling you Jenna. It's not good to hold it in."

¹General Manufacturers.

“Here’s my report” Connor said stiffly, about to turn and leave.

“Connor.” The Captain said.

“Yes Ava?”

“What do you think we should do with them?”

Connor turned back to face the Captain. Ava was sitting in the chair in her quarters with Mrs Pussyfoot in her lap. He sighed. “Well, they did break Nanotrasen protocol. The normal procedure is to rotate them off, put them on a three weeks correction course with reduced pay...”

“Yeah, they should’ve known better, but they’re just kids...”

“Manny’s 36, Sir.”

“You know what I mean. No way we can let them off?”

“Well, we could just call it ‘logistical error’.”

“Can we get away with it?”

“Probably. In fact, we’re still not quite sure what the thing is. Kevin and his rats are still working on it. Besides, there’s a better reason why we won’t get into trouble over something like this.”

“And that is?”

“Nobody fucking cares what goes on out here, Ava. You should know that by now.”

After Connor had left, Ava held Mrs Pussyfoot up in front of her. She muttered, “nobody fucking cares...”

“Alien Navi... what?” Connor had crossed his arms, looking sternly at Kevin. Since this was the way Connor always looked it had no real effect on other crew members and Kevin was no exception.

“Alien Navigational Buoy.” Kevin said as-a-matter-of-factly. His radiological visors made his head look huge and ridiculous. “It’s an ancient transmitter. Left behind by a civilization who used them for sub-light travel. There was a similar system in the early days of human space travel, but it quickly become obsolete once the Hoffman-Einglestein Engine became the de-facto way of traveling.”

Connor was suspiciously eyeing one of Kevin’s lab assistants who was fitting some form of metal arches onto the object as Kevin spoke. “How did you figure this out?” He immediately regretted asking, and now feared a very long and science-heavy response. Kevin noticed this but continued anyway.

“The object responded neither to heat nor cold. And we obviously tried to apply some force to various locations. No response. Finally we noticed a very faint radioactivity emanating from the object.”

“Is it dangerous?” Connor asked, concerned.

“No. My initial guess was that the buoy was broadcasting on some frequency, but now I’m convinced that it actually isn’t *turned on*. I think it is actually *listening* to a frequency, just waiting to be turned on by a passing space ship. It must have some internal power source and trying to conserve it’s power.”

“Uh-hu. And, what’s all this for?” Connor gestured towards the now very elaborate contraption strapped onto the object and the lab assistant measuring something with an electronic device.

“We’re setting up a Dawson-loop.”

“Uh-hu” Connor ignored Kevin’s obvious attempt to shake him off with science-babble.

“We’re going to make a radiological spanning test.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Connor played along.

“It’s pretty complicated, Connor.”

“Just tell me what you’re doing to it now Kevin, I’m sick of your games.”

“We’re trying to find the frequency which turns it on.”

“Why?”

“So we can turn it off.”

“I thought you said it *was* off.”

“It is. But what if it is turned on?”

“Who would do that Kevin, you?”

“No... not me.”

“Kevin, don’t tell me you want to activate this thing.”

“No! No, no, no.”

“Because that would probably be very dangerous, and risk all our lives. Remember, safety first. We don’t want another incident!”

“Yes, yes, yes, of course. I was just thinking...”

“Thinking about what Kevin?”

“Well it would be a great opportunity for science...”

“Kevin. I am forbidding you from turning this thing on!”

“Okay. But am I allowed to turn it off?”

“Yes, but I thought we established that it already is off. Am I wrong?”

“No, no you’re not. But for the sake of science, *and* safety, we should be completely sure of how to turn it off, so that, in the unlikely event that is turned on, for instance, by accident, we can immediately turn it off again.”

“Yes, I guess that makes sense.” Connor agreed.

“Good. Then I have your approval to figure out how to turn it off?”

“Yes, fine.”

“Good” Kevin moved over to a dashboard with several dials and a dark green display. “Pauline. Are we ready?”

“Yes sir.”

“Great. Starting at 54 KHz and increasing by one tick per second.”

“So, how will you know how to turn it off from this experiment?” Connor asked, this time in genuine interest.

“Well, assuming the buoy uses the same frequency for turning both on and off, we should notice a sudden change when we find that frequency.”

“What kind of change?”

Kevin was about to answer when a gut-wrenching very high-pitched screech filled the room. In a vain attempt to protect their ears all three of them fell to their knees and pressed their hands hard against their heads. Their faces were disfigured by a horrific grimace of anguish before relaxing completely, as all muscles do when the mind can bear no more pain and falls unconscious.

* * *

Commanding Officer's Report no 483a5bd 6/12/2276
Nanotrasen Research/Commercial facility 'SS13'

At 0750 hours mining detail recovered unidentified object during routine asteroid sweep. No quarantine procedure enforced. Object delivered to station cargo hold.

Object description: semi-metallic oblong monolith, 2x2x5'.

Weight: 1.2 tons.

Initial analysis performed by science division. Object classified by R.D. as "Alien Navigational Buoy", code name 'The Artifact'. Further experiments conducted to reveal more information. Object subsequently emitted 150 dB high-pitched signal for 35 seconds. R.D., Head of Staff (HoP) and one lab assistant incapacitated as result. Currently receiving treatment in medical facility.

Object has now changed size and shape: star-shaped, 20x20x20''. Object mass reduced to 5% of original.

Other object qualities unknown. Potentially dangerous to station (and/or personnel). Cannot rule out that object is a weapon, or its potential weaponization.

Please advise.

Ava McLeod, Captain

* * *

"How are they doing?" Manny asked Mac. They were standing in sickbay, looking through the glass into the patient ward. Manny felt partly responsible for what had happened to Connor, Kevin and the lab assistant.

"They'll live." Mac said, his arms folded. "They'll need hearing implants and it'll take them another couple of days to recover, but they'll be OK."

It had been 24 hours since the accident in the lab, which was now in complete lock down. On the Captain's orders, nobody was to go near the object. Veronica, the roboticist, had petitioned to take over and continue Kevin's investigation but the Captain wouldn't have it.

Manny left sickbay with a somewhat heavy heart. He felt he had let his crew mates, nay, *his friends*, down. He walked aimlessly for a while along the corridors. When he looked up he saw that he was outside the barber shop.

A neon sign buzzed in the window saying “OPEN”. He went in, maybe he’d have Jessica trim his beard.

“It’s 200 Lars, it’s always been 200.” He heard Jessica say.

“No friggin way. I’m sure it was a hundred last time I was hear.” Lars was saying from the barber’s chair. “Oh, hey Manny. Can you believe this? Jessica is trying to hustle an extra 100 out of me for a simple hair cut.”

“It’s not a hustle Lars, which incidentally is probably what you are doing right now. He who smelt it dealt it.”

Lars wrinkled his nose, then looked at Manny again. “Manny, settle this for us, It’s 100 for a haircut, right?”

Once Manny had let his hair grow out a couple of inches. One day he looked himself in the mirror and decided it looked like a badger and a broomstick had a baby, scalped it and put the baby-wig onto Manny’s head. He did not consider it a good look. From that point on, he shaved his head clean once a week. He had no idea what the going rate was for a hair cut, and admitted as much to the arguing barber and quartermaster.

“Fine! 200 it his. Outrageous I must say...” Lars muttered, but grudgingly forked up the colorful chips, swung around in the chair and picked up a magazine.

Jessica pocketed the cash, turned to Manny and said “I’ll be with you in just a moment.” And proceeded to inspect the current state of Lars’s hair.

Jessica’s official job title was “Barber” or “Barberess” but she was just as much a hairdresser and stylist. She was actually one of the few crew members who had more than a high school education, one of her main points when negotiating her salary with the head of staff². Jessica often thought back to her school days on Pondiataros. Back then, she never imagined she would be working out in the ass-end of space, sharing tips with a bunch of corporate bums. It had been four years of rigorous classes, both practice and theory. Her master’s was in “Human Beautification and Grooming” and she was thinking about doing a doctorate. It was an extremely popular program, and young men and women came from all over the galaxy to get their degrees. It was so popular in fact, that they had to rebuild the campus while she was studying there, to accommodate the huge wave of students who had recently enrolled. After graduating she proudly set out to find a good salon and reap

²The proceeds from the barber shop went to the station’s balance, except for tips, which were shared among the support staff. The barber shop prices were actually stipulated by Nanotrasen protocol and were not subject to crew members futile attempts at haggling.

the benefits, and to pay off here huge student loans. Weeks passed, but no job opportunities arose. After six months without a single “hairstresser wanted” ad, Jessica talked with an unemployment official.

“Sure, I’ll just do a planet-wide search for vacant positions.” The official happily twittered. “Oh...”

“What’s wrong?” Jessica had asked.

“Hmm... I am getting zero vacant hairstresser or barber jobs available.”

“On the whole planet?” Jessica asked, quite shocked.

“Yes, this must be an error. Let me check with my supervisor.” The official got up from her chair and headed into a back room. Jessica could hear some mumbled conversation, then some hearty laughs from several people. The official presently appeared back at her desk with a restrained look on her face.

“I’m afraid the system is right. It wasn’t an error.” She said, nervously looking at her computer screen. Avoiding eye contact.

“What was that laughing before?” Jessica asked suspiciously.

“Well, I’m rather new here so I didn’t know but... There hasn’t been a hairstresser job available on Pondiataros for several years. It seems to be some kind of inside joke to some of the people who work here. Sorry.” She chuckled nervously then smiled apologetically.

“Years? But how can that be? Don’t people have their hair cut, or beards trimmed anymore?” Jessica asked desperately.

“Well yes, but there seems to be somewhat of a surplus of hairstressers here. It’s quite odd actually.”

It wasn’t odd at all. It was in fact, quite logical that the demand for hairstressers and barbers would be saturated, now that almost one out of ten high school graduates wanted to become just that. Jessica felt her heart sink. “Well, where is the nearest place where they do need a hairstresser?”

The official started typing commands into the system. Then looked up at Jessica. “Well there’s a Nanotrasen space station that needs one.”

And that was it. It was either that, or wait another couple of years on Pondiataros or an equivalent metropolitan world for a job opportunity. With her loans, that really wasn’t an option.

Lars’s cut was coming along nicely.

“Why the long face Manny?” He asked, peering at Manny through the mirror in front of him.

“I feel like I let everybody down, bringing that thing on board.” Manny replied, puffing out his cheeks. “I’m trying to figure out how to make it up

to everybody. Maybe I can treat everybody to cake or something?”

“Don’t worry about it Manny.” Lars replied. “We’re gonna have some interesting visitors soon, and everybody will forget about that lump of rock you guys found.”

“Interesting visitors, not just the common space tourists passing through?” Jessica asked.

“Nope. we’re gonna get some real *Bell Merchants*.”

Bell was an up and coming mercantile company. They traded in, well there was no nice way of saying it, junk. Since Nanotrasen (and other conglomerate giants) produced and sold almost everything useful, Bell specialized in items and goods that were too odd, too rare or too useless for Nanotrasen to bother with. The company had gotten famous ten years previously for their revolutionary comic device, *the flatulator*, which was their brand-name fart cushion. There wasn’t anything innovative about the Flatulator, but fart cushions had not been popular for a hundred years or so and once people got pranked by their friends, family and colleagues, everybody wanted a flatulator of their own. Now Bell had a large stock of “interesting”, “cool” and “funny” gadgets. Apart from this, they also had an interesting business model. They employed good old fashioned traveling sales persons to visit the far corners of the galaxy, promoting their wares. This was actually how the company founder, Elton Bell, got the Flatulator to become a trendy fad, he himself traveled around and demonstrated it. It was an instant hit. People just couldn’t contain themselves when they saw unsuspecting victims sit down and got a look of startled confusion as that loud “brrrrplpt” erupted from their behind. This was brilliant stuff obviously, and everybody wanted in on the action. Nowadays, Elton didn’t have to move a muscle though. He just sat back and watched the trillions roll in as his traveling merchants promoted fake rubber pukes, dynamite alarm clocks, magic 8-balls and laser-sword dildos.

Manny grinned widely. He did enjoy Bell merchants, they always put on a little show, demonstrating their latest merchandise. Jessica was rolling her eyes though.

“Not those geeks! So overrated.” She exclaimed. “Why can’t we ever get some really interesting visitors, like a celebrity or a royal person?”

* * *

Jacob Hieronymus Eastwood considered himself both a celebrity and a royal person. The rest of the galaxy considered him to be an infamous crime

lord, bodybuilder, playboy, porn superstar, pirate captain and “king” of this remote bandit fortress known as New Algiers. He was sitting on his “throne” (a large leathery armchair from an old movie theater) in his council room, the place where all their raids were “planned”, or rather, where they partied the night before they headed out to some border-world to rob, pillage and rape in an unorganized manner. He was currently surrounded by his closest, most loyal comrades, the ruthless band known as the Barbie Pirates³. He was leaning on the armrest of the chair with his supremely chiseled jaw in the palm of his hand, his index finger scratching his temple and rubbing his eye.

Corporal Orlov and private⁴ Colovisto were squabbling over some irrelevant detail of the operation they were planning. Eastwood was starting to get annoyed.

“Look boys.” *Boys* was how Eastwood addressed his crew, even though a good number of them were actually girls. Some of the pirates were recruited from the Syndicate, and some were disgruntled Nanotrasen ex-employees, but most were escaped convicts from galactic federal penal colonies. “It’s an incredibly simple op. We fuel up the Boner...” This was Eastwood’s prize-winning space yacht onto which he had retrofitted an old war-time AA cannon. “... drive it over to the Space Station, what was it called again sergeant?”

“SS13, sir. It’s a Nanotrasen facility.” Sgt Hernandez replied.

“Right. We drive it over to SS13. Dock at an air lock. We find this quartermaster fellow, what’s his face...”

“Lars Paxton, sir” Hernandez chimed in. She was looking down into her notes.

“... Lars the Quartermaster. In exchange for valuable goods, he will supply us with the artifact before Nanotrasen can figure out what to do with

³When Eastwood first founded his pirate band and built his fortress he put a lot of thought into what name they would go by. He wanted a name as fearsome as it was prestigious. He finally landed on the notorious pirates of the Mediterranean Sea on old Earth. Eastwood however, suffered from light dyslexia and his terrible pirate band would forever bear the name of a popular plastic toy doll, in the golden age of Earth.

⁴The ranks of the Barbie Pirates were completely arbitrary. Any pirate was free to call him or herself “private”, “corporal” or “sergeant” but “captain” was reserved for Eastwood himself. Titles like “Major”, “General” and “Commander” were forbidden. These were only a few of the many strange laws that were enforced by Eastwood rule in New Algiers, which in other ways functioned like a little town. A town where friendliness, festivals and farmers’ markets were replaced by gambling, brawling and debauchery.

it. So we trade him this loot we boosted from the raid on Ixzor III, get the artifact, and head out again. Piece of cake. No need to argue about what we're going to do with prisoners, or how many plasma cannons we need to bring. This should be a peaceful exchange. Yes Orlov?"

Orlov was raising his hand like a dutiful school boy. "Why are we going after this, this artifact thing?"

"Because, according to the Quartermaster, it's an extremely rare piece of alien treasure. And, according to the Nanotrasen report we intercepted, which confirms this, it is also a potential weapon. Apparently it laid out three Nanotrasen employees with just *sound*. Just think boys, the fearsome Barbie Pirates, in possession of an ancient alien weapon. No other faction will ever dare approach New Algiers or it's denizens again!" Eastwood had leaned forward, his fists both raised to convey the message of power and victory, but he was interrupted by Orlov's hand again.

"But sir, isn't Nanotrasen a paramilitary super-company?" Orlov asked. "Won't they get suspicious if our ship suddenly docks with their station? It seems armed resistance is likely."

"We're looking at 10 combat trained security personnel, tops." Cpl. Kyoshi countered. Kyoshi had been a doctor on another Nanotrasen facility but had been instantly terminated when it turned out he had been killing his patients because he couldn't be bothered to talk to them.

"Ten? That's nothing! We've got at least 100 combat ready marauders here at New Algiers. Sir, let's bring *the Devastator* and *the Lady* along, crammed with our most bloodthirsty and gung-ho chums. It will be an epic raid!" These were the ecstatic words of Pvt. Yee, one of Eastwoods more rampant lieutenants, sitting at the far end of the huge table. Eastwood often had to keep close tabs on her during raids, or they'd quickly spiral out of his control.

Colovisto, who was sitting next to her turned to Eastwood. "But what if all of the air locks are occupied by other ships?"

Orlov, who was still not convinced by Kyoshi's testimony now spoke again. "The availability of the air locks is irrelevant if the station will be alerted to our presence! I still say we need to reconsider our tactics."

Eastwood groaned, then stood up and shouted: "Enough! The traitor Lars will ensure that no other vehicles are docking during the time of the exchange. Also, he will bring about some form of diversion so that our presence will go virtually undetected." Eastwood composed himself and sat down again. The others pirates had sunken down into their seats and were look-

ing at him timidly. He smiled, rather pleased with himself for ending the argument so swiftly. “We will, of course, not go unarmed. That would be unwise, but there is no need to bring our full force. I will not risk some bone-head scurvy-ridden space-hog to nick my artifact while our heads our turned. Only we, the people in this room will go on this mission. Mendez, you will bring a plasma gun.” Mendez, the ex-syndicate operative, saluted. “Robertson, we may need someone with some hacking skills, that’s why you’re here.” Robertson, once a programmer who was fired for installing back doors into anti-virus software, nodded in reply. Sarma...” That was Eastwoods pilot, a hot-shot swoop bike racer, now fallen from grace due to a severe calujana addiction. “... get the Boner ready for take off. The rest of you, pistols and rifles only. Get some rest, we cast off at oh-five-hundred.

* * *

“This is a nice cross.” Donny said pointing to the wooden symbol on the wall in the chapel.

“It’s a crucifix actually.” Evan replied. He was standing nervously next to Donny as they were slowly making their way around the room. Evan had, as he usually did on Sundays, been soliciting mass. In the end, he only got Donny the nurse to come. At first, Evan was excited, since this was Donny’s first time at the chapel, but he soon gave up on mass since Donny was the only one there, and he kept interrupting the sermons with questions. In the end Evan had decided to make the best of the situation and gave Donny a tour of the little chapel and did his best to answer his questions about religion and faith. Evan had explained about the omnipresence of God. Donny had admitted that he had felt a strange presence that morning while he was walking through from the dorms to sickbay, kind of like an invisible friend was with him. Evan tried to explain that Godly presence was rather something that you felt within yourself.

“And this golden moon and star, what’s that about?” Donny pointed.

“It’s a Muslim symbol.” Even said patiently. The chapel was a multi-religious center, accepting believers of all faiths. To make this clear, the religious symbols of the major religions were put up along the back wall above the altar.

“What about these squiggly lines?” Donny moved closer as to touch it.

“Please don’t touch the exhibits Donny. It’s called an *Aum*, it’s a Hindu symbol for the universe.” Even smiled carefully as Donny slowly moved to the

next gilded symbol. The symbols were actually Evans personal collection, and they were quite costly.

“Oh. Why is this one a little golden fat man? Who worships him?”

It wasn't that Donny wasn't bright, for instance, he was very good at his job as a nurse. It was just that facts didn't really stick to his brain. Most things just didn't seem that important to remember. Religious beliefs was one of many topics that fell into that category for Donny.

“It's a Buddha. It's a symbol of Buddhism.”

“Oh right, the orange dudes!”

“Yes, that's right Donny. Please don't touch it.” Evan said, biting his lip.

“Oh, this one I know. It's the Jewish one.” Donny pointed to the next gilded symbol. “It's called a swastika right?”

Evan froze. For a moment, he hadn't ever met anybody who had mistaken a David's star for a swastika before. “Uhm, no, I mean yes, it is the Jewish one, but it's not called a swastika, it's a David's star. The swastika is the Nazi one and is generally considered a symbol of racism, hatred and evil. How could you get those two confused? Didn't you learn about Old Earth's Holocaust in school?”

“Yes, yes, I know all about that.” Donny answered. “In my defense, both symbols have the same number of lines in them.”

Evan just blinked, dumbfounded.

At that moment Jessica poked her head through the Chapel door.

“Hey guys. Are you coming to the Bell merchant demonstration?”

“Yes!” Donny exclaimed. “I forgot. Evan, you coming?”

The pair of Bell merchants had arrived that morning. After a quick chat with the station Quartermaster they started unloading crates from their small space craft into the shuttle gate area. The crew was getting excited for the demonstration that would come later that afternoon. Bell merchants were uncommon on SS13 since the last one had gotten horribly disfigured in a fork-lift accident some three years past. Evan hadn't planned on going to the demo since it coincided with mass, and he had hoped that somebody would show up for once. Now it seemed he had no reason not to go. He was himself a catholic, but he was sure God had witnessed his resolute intention to spread the holy word and would permit him to have just one Sunday off.

The three of them arrived in the shuttle gate and saw that the Bell guys had put together a small ad-hoc stage and Eriana was helping them with some kind of sound system. Most of the crew had gathered, and there were

even some civilians there. Roughly forty people were sitting on foldable chairs, the rest were sitting in the aisles or standing along the walls of the gate area. Evan, Donny and Jessica were at the back, close to the door and couldn't really get further into the room. The place was packed. Manny came up behind them.

"They started yet?" He mumbled.

"No." Jessica replied. "I think they're just about to. Wow, almost everybody is here, even the Captain and that nightmare she calls a daughter."

"Shh." A crew member sitting in front of them turned her head. It was Denise, the biologist.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls" A slender man stood up on the make-shift stage. He was dressed in a purple tuxedo and top hat and had orange trousers. "My name is Aleander Preuitt and over yonder is my colleague the lovely Shanaia Osorio!", the man gestured to a stiff woman, dressed in a sparkling leotard on the other end of the stage. They both looked like they belonged to a circus show, but only the man acted it. The woman just stood there and looked slightly embarrassed to be wearing the ridiculous costume. "We are agents of the Bell Corporation, here to amaze and astound you with wonderful items from our vast selection of gadgets, gizmos and gamboozles!"

There was a cheer and applause as the Preuitt held up the first item in his hand.

"Ladies and gents, boys and girls, let me present this amazing invention of Elton Bell's own design." Preuitt called out and lifted what looked like a toy helicopter. In his left hand he had a remote control. "Haven't you ever wanted to reach a little further? Isn't it a pain to have to get up to turn that machine on? This little life-saver is called the *Distapointer* and will come in handy, I guarantee."

The thing started flying out into the room above the heads of the audience. It was a toy helicopter with a rubber finger attached to one end.

"You people, over by the door, scoot!" Preuitt yelled. "Let me get to the lighting controls."

With difficulty Evan moved so that the flying thing could get close to the control panel. After a couple of tries Preuitt managed to bump the *Distapointer* onto the button and the lights in the room were dimmed.

"Viola!" Preuitt called out, like he had just managed to do something spectacular.

There were applause and murmurs around the room. Jessica could here somebody saying "hmm, that's pretty handy." She frowned.

“But wait, there’s more!” Preuitt announced. “The distapointer is a great thing for playing practical jokes on your friends!” He grinned as the flying thing whirled away back to the stage again. “Just look at the lovely Osorio’s glee when the distapointer touches her...” The distapointer had flown up behind Osorio’s shoulder and had barely nudged her when she smacked the thing mid-air, obviously quite annoyed. The plastic toy snapped into two pieces which flew across the room and landed somewhere among the sitting spectators.

Preuitt looked surprised, this was obviously not how they had rehearsed it. “Ah, my lovely assistant wanted to show you another special feature of the distapointer, the uhm, dismantling maneuver. Thank you dear! Now would you fetch it for me while I bring out the next item?”

There was some commotion as Osorio tried to get through the packed group of people and the rows of chairs, all the while, looking for the broken toy.

“For our next exhibit, I shall remove my hat!” Preuitt announced. He perched his hat upon a stack of boxes to one end of the stage, then walked back and dug something out of the crate behind him.

“Our next item is the fantastic *Windcannon*!” He held up what looked to be a small plastic barrel with a gun handle mounted to one side. Preuitt held the “cannon” with his right hand, and with his left he pulled back an elastic soft cover which was fitted to the rear end of the thing. When he released, the cannon must have shot out a gust of wind because the hat, which was 15 feet away, violently flew off and bounced on the wall, then landed on the stage again. “Tadaa!” Preuitt called out.

There were applause and cheer. Jessica turned to Manny in annoyance. “Are they serious. This is just crap.”

“Yep” Manny agreed. “Solid gold crap maestro.”

Preuitt was now firing bolts of air in various directions and some members of the crew close to the front were actually gesturing to him to get hit in the face with air. Meanwhile, Osorio had found the broken distapointer and was now working her way back to the stage, still with some difficulty because of the densely packed crowd.

Preuitt, who seemed to be enjoying himself, made a feigned gesture of surprised by holding his hand to his mouth, like he was a mime. He then put his index finger to his lips as to signify quiet or discretion. He held the aircannon to his own behind and raised one leg and grimaced, like he was farting into it. He then carefully raised the aircannon and aimed it at the

unsuspecting Osorio. He released just as Osorio came back on stage and her bangs flew as she was hit in the face by the payload. She looked shocked and annoyed as the crowd roared with laughter and applause. Somebody actually fell off a chair from laughing so hard.

Evan leaned over and said to Jessica "Watching the crew is actually more entertaining than the show."

She smiled and nodded. Evan noticed that Donny who was fumbling with his wallet and mumbling "I need an aircannon!"

Jessica leaned over to Evan and whispered. "There's something odd about that Osorio woman though. It's like she's not really into the show. She doesn't really seem like she belongs. And also, she doesn't really seem the type. I mean, she's attractive, but not really show-biz material if you know what I mean."

Evan shot a look at Osorio. It was true she wasn't the most voluptuous woman he had ever seen. A woman in her upper thirties maybe. She was thin, short and fit, had long brown hair and little to no make-up on.

"The lord says judge not." He replied to Jessica.

"I'm not judging, I just... Oh forget about it."

"Our next item is a household appliance, a vacuum cleaner in the shape of an aardvark!" Preuitt said, pulling something onto the floor of the stage.

There were some "oohs" and "aahs" from the front row and the people closest to the stage, but the second row of spectators now stood up to get a better view of the aardvark-thing. This immediately triggered the third row to stand up which obstructed the view for the people sitting in the fourth, who then stood up, and so forth, until everybody in the shuttle gate was standing.

There was mumbling and commotion as people tried to peek through to get a glimpse of this next fantastic thing.

"People people, please contain your excitement!" Preuitt said. "Now let me demonstrate the various functions..."

"Assholes!" Donny said, who was quite short himself. "I can't see a friggin thing now."

"Well, that's it. Show's over" Evan said.

"What do you mean, aren't they good for another hour?" Manny asked.

"Yeah, but we won't see a thing from here. Once people stand up during a show, they never sit down. Basic human psychology."

"Hey assholes at the front, we can't see anything. Sit your asses down!" Donny yelled, but his voice was drowned out by the whooshing sound

of the vacuum cleaner, the cheering of the crowd and Preuitt's rambling superlatives.

"Let's go Donny." Jessica said.

"No wait, there's still some room at the front, next to the stage. There, you see it? Over by the airlock door. Why aren't people moving closer if there's still room? Aaargh! It's like when you're on a transit shuttle. You enter at the front, why won't people move on to the back!"

"Because the back stinks." Jessica said. "It's full of old gum, cigarette butts, graffiti and perverts."

"Exactly like this place then." Manny said and chuckled. "Hang on, we can easily get to the back if we come from the other side."

"Wait, what? You mean through the air lock, from space?" Evan asked.

"No, there's a auxiliary door by the airlock that leads to a maintenance corridor." Manny said. "We can get through there. We'll just have to take a little detour. Technically only I'm allowed through there but nobody needs to know."

"Is it far?" Donny asked. "I don't wanna miss the show."

"You're kind of missing it right now." Manny said. "And, no, it's not far. It'll take 10 minutes, tops. We just need to go through 'Belt Hell' ". Come on."

Manny and Donny started to leave. Evan and Jessica stood for a moment not knowing what to do.

"I better come along and make sure they don't get into any trouble." Evan said and hurried after them.

"Well, nobody is going to want their beards trimmed right now." Jessica said to herself. Also, she actually wanted to see how the show ended. Mainly to see what Preuitt's assistant would do. Deep down she was hoping Preuitt would get slapped.

"Belt Hell" was a part of the station where almost nobody ever went. It was like a large warehouse full of conveyor belts. It was where incoming supply shipments were automatically sorted and transported to various parts of the station. Likewise it was where outgoing Nanotrasen merchandise shipments were sorted so they could later be sent off on transports. The only personnel that ever came here were the cargo workers (like Manny), the quartermaster and some technical personnel (like electricians). It was called Hell not only because conveyor belts went everywhere and it was difficult to find your way, but it was also rather hot, dark and dirty.

"This place is awful." Evan said. "Don't you guys ever clean it?"

"Well, no." Manny said. "The bots can't get in here and the Janitor usually neglects places where manual work is needed to clean."

"Ugh!" Donny shrieked.

"What is it?" Jessica asked. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"No, I put my hand in... an old condom."

"Gross." Jessica and Evan said in unison.

Donny wiped his hand on his white jumpsuit. "Manny, lead the way, get us out of here by the most direct route."

"Sure, we just need to get up on that catwalk over there."

"Catwalk? What's a catwalk?" Donny asked.

"It's like a narrow ledge." Manny explained.

"For cats?"

"No, for humans, and well for cats too I guess. See that walkway over there?"

"Yeah"

"That's a catwalk."

"Okay. Never heard that word before."

"Donny, I've been meaning to ask you." Evan started. "Are you sure you like, actually went to school as a kid?"

"Of course!" Donny laughed.

"Okay." Evan said. "It's just, sometimes it feels like..."

"Like what Evan?" Donny stopped walking.

They all stopped.

"Yeah, like what Evan?" Jessica smiled, but it could barely be seen in the darkness.

Evan didn't say anything.

"Jesus, come on! It's not like I'm some block head who doesn't know the basics of life."

"Sorry Donny." Evan said.

"Oh, Evan, Evan, please help me." Donny pleaded sarcastically. "I'm such a moron, I don't know how to tie my own shoelaces or how to wipe my nose."

They started walking again. Evan leading the group. "I get it Donny, I'm sorry."

But now Donny was having too much fun to stop, chuckling in between words. "I don't even know how to go to the toilet. Show my how to pull my

pants down and take a crap. Hehehe. Teach me how to stand up, wipe my ass and flush. Hehehe..."

"Wait, what?" This time Manny stopped. "What do you mean 'stand up wipe my ass'?"

Donny looked at him. "You know, like when you're done shitting, you stand up to wipe your ass." Wouldn't it be funny if Evan had to teach me to do that. Cause I'm suuuch a retard?"

Manny started smiling. "You stand up *before* you wipe your ass."

"Yeah... that's what... you do." Donny wasn't laughing anymore, he was simply confused.

Manny started laughing. "Oh, Donny, are you serious? That's just too much."

"What's the big deal?" Donny looked at the other two.

"Well, I think the custom is to remain seated while wiping your ass." Evan explained. "It's not a rule or anything, it's just to avoid, uh, smearage."

"Guys, it's not a big deal." Jessica said. "A lot of people actually stand up before wiping."

"Who does that!?" Manny was now laughing pretty hard.

"A lot of people..." Jessica just looked at them.

"Do you?" Manny asked.

"Uhm, yeah." Jessica said. "As a matter of fact, I do, and there's nothing wrong with it."

Manny just laughed even harder. Evan wasn't laughing, but he was smiling. He then said. "Hey, you guys hear that?"

"What?" Donny said.

"I hear voices."

"Probably just God telling you to be less of an asshole Evan." Donny muttered.

"No really, there's somebody else in here."

"He's right Donny." Jessica said. "Manny stop laughing. I hear it too".

The continued walking and now all four of them could hear raised voices coming from the other end of the large room.

"You told us nobody else would be docked with the station Quartermaster!" A deep and angry voice called out. "Who are these interlopers? Nanotrasen reinforcements, bounty hunters, the GFD⁵? And where's the big diversion you promised!"

⁵Galactic Federal Detective's Office

"They are the diversion you fool!" A hushed voice replied. "They're Bell Merchants. They're putting on a show, the crew is completely occupied." It was Lars, the quartermaster.

Donny, Jessica, Evan and Manny crept up closer. They could now see Lars in his brown and yellow jumpsuit, and what looked to be Major Firanam next to him. Beyond them were several figures clad in camo gear and wielding firearms.

"Do you have the loot?" Lars asked, his voice still hushed.

"It's still on our boat." The hulking man in front of him replied. "Do you have the artifact?"

"Well there's been a complication. I have been unable to gain access to the lab where the artifact is stored. We're going to have to help each other a bit more than I anticipated."

"You bastard ringworm!" The big man roared. "I have half a mind to cut you down where you stand and let my boys tear this station apart. Yes, I think I'll do that. That way I'll get the artifact, keep the loot and entertain my boys a bit."

"You won't you pumped up baboon. Try anything stupid and your precious space boat is toast."

"What's that now?" The man roared.

"You see, I figured I needed some insurance against common pirate trickery, so I had my buddy Firanam here booby trap the airlock you docked with. You put one toe out of line and we blow it up, then you're stuck here until the GFD shows up. Try to leave without our consent, same thing happens. No more Cpt. Eastwood no more beautiful boat, get it?"

"That's Jacob Eastwood, the pirate king!" Jessica whispered to the other three.

"Jacob Eastwood, the crime lord?" Evan asked.

"Eastwood, the body builder?" Manny asked.

"Who?" said Donny.

"Jacob H. Eastwood." He's a notorious pirate captain. That must be his gang. They've must have docked with the old air lock on the underside of the station. Sounds like Lars are making a deal with them for the artifact!" Jessica said.

"My beautiful Boner!" Eastwood roared in anger. "Damned blackguards. Damn you both to Davy Jones' Locker!" Eastwood spurted piraty curses for a minute. Then he calmed down a little. "I guess we'll do it your way for

now. But how are you planning on doing this exchange, if you can't even get to the artifact?"

"You brought a hacker along, I hope?" Lars said.

"I did." Eastwood said, nodding to one of the other fellows behind him.

"Good. Me and your man will have to sneak over to the lab, hack in and come back with the artifact."

"Fine. The rest of my boys will wait on the Boner." Eastwood consented, "But I'm coming along with you to make sure there's no more trickery."

Lars held up his hand in protest. "That will increase the risk of us getting caught..." But he could see Eastwood was getting angry again and added "but I guess we'll be fine. You two will have to put on these disguises though. Hopefully nobody will look too closely at you, and if they do they'll just assume your tourists." He started pulling out some clothes out of a duffel bag.

"We gotto get out of here and inform command." Manny said.

They turned around to leave but were immediately halted by a large pale woman. She was wearing camouflage clothing and a big bulky metal contraption on her back which was connected to the large rifle in her arms. She was pointing the thing right into Manny's chest.

"I'm Pvt Mendez." She said. "Not pleased to meet you, and you're not going anywhere."

* * *

"And now, the moment you've all been waiting for... The thing that started it all, the most refined piece of humoristic paraphernalia on the market - the flatulator!"

Eastwood followed the quartermaster through the auxiliary door by the air lock and saw the thin fellow in the colorful getup. Behind him came pvt. Robertssn and Major Firanam the security officer was bringing up the rear.

"Let's just wait here behind the stage for a few minutes. The show will soon be over and there will be some hullabaloo as the Merchants will start taking orders. That's when we'll make it through the room." Lars explained to the two pirates both of which were now dressed in civilian clothing; jeans, leather jackets and t-shirts. Robertson was wearing a *Steel Guillotine* t-shirt which, as usual, depicted some cheesy horror-esque motif loosely related to hard rock. This one showed a rotting skeleton wielding an axe-shaped electric

guitar decapitating another skeleton holding a tuba. Eastwood was wearing a Jaegermeister bandana.

“That’s all folks! The lovely Osorio will now take your orders!”

“Okay, that’s our cue.” Lars said and he started moving through the throng. They were almost through to the Shuttle Gate door when a tall curly haired man with big glasses stopped Robertson.

“Hey, cool Steel Guillotine t-shirt! Always happy to meet another death metal fan! You a tourist?”

Before Robertson could figure out what to reply. Another, older fellow, came up behind the man with the glasses. He walked up to Robertson, poked him in the stomach and said “honk”. Robertson immediately countered by punching the man rock hard right in the face.

For a split second Eastwood panicked, thinking their little gambit was up, and he started pulling out his gun. Firanam grabbed his arm and whispered “wait”.

The older man fell over, but nobody around them seemed to notice or care.

The man with the glasses said “Ah, I see you’ve been here before. Let’s catch up later though, I need to place some orders with the Bell people.”

The Quartermaster, the two pirates and the security officer stepped over the unconscious clown on the floor. Eastwood was bewildered. Even in New Algiers, a place where violence was as prevalent as oxygen an encounter like that would have raised some eyebrows. He wondered what kind of place this was.

The station was mostly deserted so they met no other people the rest of the way to the lab. They finally got to the radiation lab where the artifact was supposedly stored.

“Okay, it’s this door here.” Lars said.

“Private.” Eastwood gruffed. “Work your magic.”

Robertson approached the door but suddenly tripped and fell to the floor.

“What’s the matter private? To much space run?” Eastwood jeered.

“Uhm, it felt like somebody walked into me.” Robertson said, sitting on the floor.

“Nobody here but us.” Firanam said.

Robertson got up. He approached the door again, this time with his hands stretched out in front of him.

“I swear there was something here.” He mumbled.

Lars turned to Eastwood. "Are you sure this guy's up to the task?"

"Private, get your act together or your scrubbing the Boner with your bare meat hooks when we get back home." Eastwood commanded.

"Yes... yes sir." Robertson acted as if Eastwood threat was not as empty as it sounded. He started pulling out some tools out of a little bag. He quickly got the cover off the door control panel and then hooked up some kind of electronic device to the panel. After a few moments he brought out a pair of cable clippers and cut two wires. The door to the lab opened.

"Well done private." Eastwood said as he and the two others stepped through. Robertson remained to pack away his tools.

"Okay, we're looking for a gray-metallic star-shaped object. Should be in a glass case somewhere." Lars said. The trio fanned out and started ransacking the room.

"This is it." Lars suddenly said after opening a large crate. The three of them peered down into it, the now bluish glow reflecting off their faces.

"What was that!" Firanam said.

"What?" Lars and Eastwood both turn to face him.

"Did you just touch my ass?" Firanam asked Eastwood.

"Hey man, I may normally be all about the butts, boobs, cocks and cunts but right now my mind is on the mission. If this is some kind of pass on me, I'm flattered but let's stay focused okay?"

"No really. Somebody was behind me just now." Firanam demanded.

"Robertssn, are you there?" Eastwood called out.

Robertson came through the lab door. "Yep. All set cap. Got the thingy?"

"Quartermaster. Do you have ghosts on this space station?"

Surprisingly, this was not the first time Lars had gotten that question. Due to the number of mystical things that had happened on SS13, Nanotrasen had actually brought in their official exorcist to investigate. This was a couple of years back when Lars was just a cargo worker, but had been assigned as a personal assistant to the exorcist. The woman had spent a couple of days meandering the corridors, sputtering nonsense and waving sticks of incense in the air. Finally she had reported that there were indeed ghosts on the station, but the benign, friendly kind. The kind that only appeared to give advice during seances or lend a helping hand in pottery class. She assured the captain that the extent of the effect these ghosts could have on the physical world was a chilling sensation when you entered a room or rotating chairs 90 degrees when nobody was looking.

Lars didn't want to get into that with Eastwood right now. He was sure it was just Firanam's steroids acting up or something, so he just said "Ghosts? That's ridiculous, there's no such thing."

Lars reached for the artifact but Eastwood closed the lid of the crate. "What's wrong quartermaster? This place so stingy you won't even offer a customer a complimentary bag? Let's bring the whole crate, I heard what this thing did to some of your lot while they were playing around with it."

"You did huh?" Lars raised an eyebrow. He wondered who else was tapping the phone lines on the station. "Well, let's get going then. We've already been gone 20 minutes and the quicker we get your rowdy bunch off the station the better. Firanam, you better carry this, looks more official that way."

They made their way back to the shuttle gate. They met some crew along the way but nobody stopped them or asked them what they were doing. People probably just assumed Firanam were escorting these rock'n'roll losers to the brig to cool off after a day of reckless partying.

It seemed they were home free but when they came up to the shuttle gate door they again met with the curly haired man with big glasses. He stood there talking to two others. The first was a man dressed in a gray and purple body suit, with the label "Janitor" printed on his chest. The other was a handsome woman in a navy uniform. This was probably the captain, Eastwood gathered.

"Oh hi again. Sir, these guys are great, I met them before. This guy knocked out Roger in one punch." He pointed to Robertson. "You guys going to a concert or something?"

"Yeah yeah." Lars stammered. "Firanam and I were just giving them a little tour of the station. They have a connecting trip in the morning to Tinnitus II⁶."

"What are you carrying there Firanam." The other man said. "Do you need a bot to help you with that."

"Uhm," Firanam hadn't really prepared a story, but then he got an idea. "It's just spare ammo. Thanks Jack. I'll manage."

"Wow, a 'thank you' from Major Firanam." The Captain said. "Did the Bell merchant soften that cold asteroid you call a heart?" She said and

⁶Tinnitus II was artificial planet, custom made for loud concerts. It was meant as a replacement for Tinnitus I, which had been one of the planets blown up by the Empire in the Conservative Wars.

smiled.

The man with the glasses spoke again. "Wait... you. I recognize you from somewhere." He was looking at Eastwood.

Eastwood quickly looked at Lars then back at the man.

"He's just a tourist." Lars said. "Hey, would you mind letting us through here, we wanted to talk to the Bell guys before they pack it in."

"No, no... I've definately seen you somewhere..."

"Let it go Greg." The captain said. "He's just got that look you know, like all young people have nowadays."

But Greg wasn't moving out of the way. "No, I'm sure I've seen you in something. Are you a celebrity or an actor or something?"

Nobody said anything for a moment while Greg was scratching his head. Then the Janitor spoke up "You're right, he does look familiar. Doesn't he captain?"

The captain took a good look at Eastwood, who was now visibly sweating. "Nope, can't really say." She muttered.

Jack snapped his fingers. "Naughty Neon-Nymphos and Knockers!"

"Yes!" Greg called out. "And, 'Boobs and Booty I and II'. You're the captain in that one right?"

The captain looked confused "Wait what, he's a captain?"

"Yeah." Greg said. "Famous porn-star, Jacob Eastwood."

Jack fumbled in his pocket for something, "Hey man, you're awesome, do you think I could have an autograph?"

Eastwood was slowly backing away and Firanam was putting the crate down.

"Greg. Are you telling me this is Captain Jacob Eastwood, notorious pirate lord of New Algiers?" The captain barked.

"I don't know about that. I just know he has an awesome schlong and makes great pornos." Greg said jovially, but when he saw the scowl on the Captain's face he corrected himself "I mean, deplorable depiction of filth, to be scoured from existence." Then he added "sir."

"Well whoopsie-daisy, you got me. Normally I'd not be opposed to shaking some hands, kissing some babies and writing autographs, but we're kind of on the clock here. Now hands in the air, this is a stick-up, stand and deliver, and all that." Eastwood said. By now he had his gun was out, as was Robertson's. "You too traitors." He pointed his gun at Lars and Firanam.

The captain held up her hands and turned to Lars and Firanam. "What's going on here. Are you two in on this little gambit?"

This time Firanam open his mouth. "I don't know anything about no Artifact, sir."

Lars put his palm to his face, this had not gone down the way he wanted it to.

Eastwood collected the Captain's side arm and Firanam's stun baton. "Well as much as I enjoy seeing you all with your pants down, I really have to get back to my boat. I'll just take this alien thing with me and we'll skedaddle. Robertson, get the artifact, we're leaving."

Robertson opened the crate, picked the strange star shaped thing up into his hands and made his way back over to Eastwood. None of them, however were expecting what would come next.

"JACOB HIERONYMUS EASTWOOD, STAND DOWN!"

The woman in the sparkling leotard was standing a few yards away, aiming a big handgun at Eastwood.

"By the authority vested in me by the Galactic Federal Detective's Office, you are under the arrest for crimes against the federation, including raiding, pillaging, grand larceny, space piracy, public fornication, trespassing on Nanotrasen property and illicit pornographic production!" Osorio shouted at Eastwood.

Eastwood didn't to do anything, he still had his gun trained on the Captain. Robertson, still holding the artifact in one hand, wasn't really aiming his gun at anybody but then moved to raise his arm towards Osorio.

Suddenly, he was hit in the face with a gust of wind. He winced, squeezed the trigger and a laser blast shot past Osorio, who immediately returned fire. Robertson was hit in the shoulder and went down scattering both his gun and the artifact on the floor. Instinctively, Eastwood started to turn his gun on Osorio but the moment he stopped aiming at the captain she dropped to the floor and picked up her gun.

"Give up Eastwood!" Osorio cried. "Face it, the game's up. You're outgunned."

A moment passed. Then Eastwood relented and lowered his gun, then dropped it.

"The Aircannon - an anti-pirate weapon!" Preuitt, who was wielding the aircannon, called out in joy.

"Oh will you shut up!" Osorio whined. "Do you know this has been the worst undercover mission of all time? Your stupid jokes and pranks, and that awful show. The only thing amazing about it is that the real Osorio doesn't commit suicide in shame after doing them."

Pruitt looked shocked and hurt. “But everybody likes Bell merchandise...” he tried.

“It’s junk Pruitt. Your stunt at the end was just a lucky shot with that fart gun. I could’ve got shot, did you think of that?” Osorio faced the captain. “You, do you have any security personnel on this ship that isn’t complete corrupted? And I assume you have a brig where we can keep this scum.”

The Captain picked up Eastwoods gun, put a foot on his back and pushed him down against the floor. “Hands behind your head Jacob.” Then, to Osorio. “Do you mind if I see some ID. I’m guessing Osorio isn’t your real name.”

“No, Rebecca Stone, GFD.” She rummaged around in her leotard after something, then pulled out a badge and ident card. “This friggin hooker outfit. I can’t believe Osorio wears this.” She handed it over to the Captain.

“Well Rebecca. You may not be happy now, but you’re gonna be famous when you get back.” The Captain said after glancing at the ID. “Eastwood’s been terrorizing this part of the galaxy for near a decade now. You’ve done us all a favor.”

“We’re not done yet.” Rebecca said. “Eastwood’s got a ship somewhere, and there may be more pirates on this vessel. We need to question these two. ” She pointed to Lars and Firanam. “Also, we need to get this fellow to sickbay or he’ll bleed out.” She gestured towards Robertson who was lying face down in a pool of his own blood.

“I’ll give the doctor a call.” The captain said, pulling out her PDA. “Oh wait, he’s calling me. How convenient. Hey Mac!”

The Captain suddenly became very still, then said: “Decapitated? Both of them? What about Connor. Oh thank heavens. Well you better make your way over to the shuttle gate, I’ve got work for you here. But be careful, there may be more of those bloodthirsty bastards about.”

The captain put her PDA away, then she flung herself right on top of Eastwood, bashing his back and squeezing his head against the floor.

“You tell me right now you pirate scum. How many more of your men are on the station. I’m not letting anybody else get hurt.”

Eastwood could barely speak, his mouth all mushed against the floor.

“Theven, buth we dih dih hurth ani-wah!”

“What?” The captain pulled Eastwoods head up so he could speak properly.

“Seven, seven boys. But they’re still on the boat and they wouldn’t kill anybody without my permission.”

“Then explain to me why you are here on my station, is it not to murder my crew? I have scientists in sickbay with their heads cut clean off, that’s pretty convincing evidence to the contrary!”

“I don’t know who killed your damn people.” Eastwood squirmed, the Captain now inflicting some serious pain with her martial arts grappling techniques. “We’re here to get the... aaaagh, it hurts!”

“The what?” The captain roared.

“This.” Rebecca said and picked up the artifact. “They’re here because your scumbag quartermaster made a deal to try to sell this thing to them. We’ve been tapping your phones for a while now. Apparently he then contacted the Bell company and convinced them to send a pair of merchants. The guys down in intelligence couldn’t believe it when they heard that. That’s how this little mission was put together. I had to learn all about Shanaia Osorio overnight to have a shot at this once in a life-time opportunity to take this guy down.”

Now Lars spoke. “He’s telling the truth though. These two didn’t kill anybody, we’ve been with them the hole time. And his goons are really still on the boat, I’ve been monitoring it the whole time. You know, as a precaution if things started to get out of hand. We also told them we booby trapped the airlock they docked with so they aren’t gonna leave before we say they can. Gullible bastards, like we would rig a bomb to our own space station.”

“So we’ve got another raving lunatic running around the station cutting people’s heads off?” The captain said.

“Yeah, albeit not a pirate.” Lars said.

“Nonesense!” Rebecca said. “These guys are obviously lying. They stole this thing, then decided to mutilate some of your guys for fun. It’s the kind of thing pirates do. I’m telling you I know what I’m...”

Rebecca stopped talking mid-sentence. Everybody looked at her in silence. A slanted red line appeared on her throat. The tiniest droplets of blood could be discerned there before her head toppled off and her body collapsed onto the floor and blood started gushing out of the neck.

“Holy fucking shit!” Greg screamed. He backed away past Jack, and they both ran. Preuitt simply fainted.

“What the hell?” Firanam exclaimed. Lars just stood there with his mouth open. He had never seen anything like that before.

The captain was about to say “What the f-” but she was thrown off by Eastwood who now got up and lept over to Rebecca’s body. He snatched up both her gun and the artifact and headed away, through the auxiliary door, and out of sight.

The captain got up and yelled at Lars and Firanam. “You two! I don’t know If I can trust you, but get the hell out of here. Go back to your quarters and you just might escape this with your lives, even if they’ll probably be spent in the slammer somewhere.”

Lars and Firanam nodded in agreement. As they were about to leave, Lars said: “Oh and one more thing captain. They’ve got some of our people hostage.

“Who?”

“Manny, Jessica, the chaplain and that guy from sickbay who doesn’t know what an acquisitions form is.” Lars then turned on his heal and left.

“Dammit.” The captain swore. Then she pulled out her PDA again.

“Mica? Go to my quarters immediately. No, no arguing! This is an emergency. Go to my quarters and stay there. TARS, are you listening? Let her in and keep her there until I say it’s safe.”

The captain looked down at the pirate lying on the floor. His head was also severed, when had that happened? Blood was streaming out on the floor forming large puddle. Preuitt was lying a couple of feet away. She went over and felt his pulse. Still alive, she thought. For a moment she considered taking him with her. In Nanotrasen combat training they had learned that “We leave no man behind.” This however, was not her man, so she got up and she started running in the direction which Eastwood had gone.

* * *

“It’s been almost an hour Hernandez.” Yee said. “I say we head out and find the captain. Boys, lock and load!”

Orlov, who had been polishing his gun, got to his feet, ready for action. The other three pirates looked up from their card game in surprise. Sarma was still in the cockpit.

“No! Boys, don’t lock and load. Unlock and unload!” Hernandez said hastily. “Yee, you know I’m in charge when cap’s not on the ship.”

Yee tried to imitate Hernandez with a mocking tone. “I’m in charge when cap’s no on the ship. Nuh-nuh-nuh nuh-nuh!” Then in her normal voice she

said. "Your such a bitch Hernandez! Your always sucking up to Eastwood. Are you porking him too?"

"Fuck off Yee" Hernandez said, rather tiredly.

To this, Yee responded with more mockery and insults and so the conversation went on, just as it had for the past hour.

Jessica, Manny, Evan and Donny were sitting with their backs against the hull, their hands tied behind their backs with plastic straps.

"This sucks!" Donny remarked.

"Yeah, what do you think they'll do to us?" Evan asked.

"Oh, I hadn't even thought about the pirates." Donny said. "I'm just bummed I didn't get to see the rest of the Bell show."

"Really?" Jessica said. "We're about to get *robbed-gay-murdered*⁷ by these space hogs and the only thing your upset about is that you didn't get to see five more minutes of fart jokes?"

"They're not 'fart jokes' " Donny insisted. "We missed the best part of the show. I hear they do this really funny bit at the end where one guy takes a flatulator and..." Donny paused for a moment. "Okay, so they're fart jokes, but I've heard it's really funny!"

Jessica rolled her eyes.

"Look Jessica, we're not all stuck up snobs from Malogia or whichever metro-world your from."

"Pondiatoros actually. And I'm not stuck up just because I don't like fart jokes. Jesus, I can't believe we're talking about this right now."

"You, scum, shut your faces!" Mendez bellowed.

Colovisto burped, said "I fold." emptied his can of space beer and threw it at Evan, droplets of beer spattering on his face.

"Hey!" Manny shouted. "You can't treat us this way. Apologize to my friend!"

"Oh yeah. And who's gonna make me? You Nano-trash?"

"You bet I will you low-life. We're tougher than you think!"

Colovisto walked up to Manny, peering down on him. "Tough huh? You're nothing but weak, phony corporate sell-outs." He kicked Evan in the stomach. Evan curled up into a ball. "Still feeling tough, tough guys?"

"Tougher than ever!" Manny responded. "It takes more than a good kick in the guts to take us out!"

⁷Pondiatarian slang, equivalent to "violated in a horrible manner".

Colovisto immediately kicked Evan again. This time even harder than before. Evan groaned. "Well, how about now then!" Colovisto said.

"Still going strong!" Manny replied with courage. "Evan can get kicked all day!"

"No he can't..." Evan croaked.

"Oh, well then, I guess you've proved your point Sir." Manny admitted.

"Hah! That's what I thought!" Colovisto barked, grabbed another beer, and returned to the card table.

"Sorry Evan. I thought you were bluffing." Manny whispered.

"I was 'turning the other cheek' as it were. Turns out it hurts about the same in both cheeks."

"You really should have bluffed Evan" Donny said. "Remember that for next time. It might hurt less."

Through the open airtunnel which connected to the station's air lock they could hear heavy footsteps.

Eastwood came thundering down the airtunnel bellowing orders. "Cast off Sarma! We're leaving right now!"

Sarma came out from the cockpit to meet him. "But sir, what about the booby trap?"

"There was no booby trap, they were bluffing!" Eastwood panted.

Donny leaned over to Evan. "See, it's a common strategy. I can't believe you didn't know that? Didn't you go to school?"

"I said right friggin now Sarma. There's some kind of invisible homicidal nutcase running around this station cutting people's heads off. I barely escaped from the GFD because they got ambushed just as they were arresting me."

"Holy hell." Sarma replied. "Did you get the artifact?"

"Right here." Eastwood tossed him the strange object and Sarma caught it with both hands. Eastwood took off his bandana and wiped the sweat from his brow. "Now punch it pilot, that's an order."

"Hold on Jacob." came a voice from the airtunnel, it was the captain. She was panting and very sweaty. "You've got something that belongs to me, and I want it back."

"Oh, this?" Eastwood turned, gesturing toward the thing in Sarma's hands. Behind him was Mendez, still wielding the plasma cannon. "Or do you mean these nimrods I found crawling around at the bottom of this rusty tin can you call a space station."

"I mean both Jacob. I might not be able to take down your whole crew, but before your syndie woman can off me with that cannon of hers, I figure I'll get one good shot off. I'll make sure it hits you right between your eyes."

"Okay, you wanna make a deal?" Eastwood said rather annoyed. "I'll make you a special deal, because we're both captains and because I like your style. You can have your people back." Eastwood took a step forward, took the artifact back from Sarma and held it up. "Or you can have this thing back and I'll keep your men as compensation. We'll take good care of them, don't worry! They'll come back to New Algiers with us and they can be our personal torture buddies for life. How about that? A mighty fine deal I say!" Eastwood chuckled happily, then turned serious. "But either way, you're letting us go free or Mendez will cut all of you up into tiny ribbons in about five seconds."

Mendez flipped a switch on the side of the weapon. The captain new what that meant, safety was off.

"Fine Eastwood. You win. You let them go and I'll let you go."

"Deal!" Eastwood yelled. "You heard your captain. Get out of here you dirty runs."

The pirates pulled the crew members to their feet and they scuttled out of the vessel past the captain. Then they all backed away and exited the adjoining airlock. As the airlock cycled the Boner drew away.

"You're letting them go free?" Jessica asked.

"Well, in a way." The captain responed, still looking at the ship which was getting smaller and smaller. "It's more like we're getting rid of them. Just tell me one thing Manny."

"What is it sir?" Manny said.

"You never touched that alien thing right?"

"No sir. And neither did Tina, or Jenna or Benji. We used anti-grav hoisters to transport it."

"Good."

"Why do you ask?"

The captain didn't respond. She was still looking at the little ship.

"Aren't they ever going to hyperjump?" Evan said. the ship just looked like it was drifting out there.

"No. I don't think so. I don't think they're going anywhere."

"So you did use some kind of booby trap on their ship!" Donny said.

"No, not even that." The captain said. "Eastwood wanted an alien weapon, well he got one. I'm surprised he ever thought he would be able to

control it. He was many things Jacob Eastwood, but a clever man he was not.”

“What do you mean *was*?”

“Oh, he’s probably super dead already. I’m betting his ‘boys’ are too.” The captain turned to face the rest of them. “But don’t worry about it. We’ve got two funerals to see to. On the upside, Preuitt may be willing to give us a discount on Bell stuff.”

They started to leave the airlock. But Manny was still somewhat troubled. “But sir, shouldn’t we take an exo suit and go out there. We could recover Eastwoods body, the wanted posters do say ‘Dead or Alive’. And the artifact...”

“No Manny. We’re not going near that thing again. In fact, we’re spinning up our FTL and jumping out of this system, today. Personally I hope nobody finds the artifact for another million years or so.”

7.1 The Visitor

- 7.1.1 A portal to another dimension opens up on the station and strange alien creatures emerge from it. While the crew deals with these enigmatic beings, Kevin travels through the portal and ends up in a different world. He tries to find his way back but accidentally stumbles on something quite unexpected, a strange space station.

The Captain was thrown across the room by the explosion and she blacked out. She came to a few seconds later. Her head was spinning and her ears were ringing. She had dropped her side arm and it was lying on the floor a few yards away, among the shrapnel and singed debris. She managed to sit up, the throng of aliens were advancing on her. They'd be on top of her any second now.

Then, white-green blasts started slamming into the group of aliens, purple blood splattering from the explosive impacts. The attackers had been stopped, this was her chance! She crawled over to the gun, rolled over and fired at them. She hardly noticed that her hearing was returning when she saw who had saved her: Mica was standing in the door, her skinny arms clutching the ArmCore pulse rifle, her legs wide apart to stabilize herself from the massive recoil as the gun fired wildly.

"Eat plasma you eye-ball shit heads!" She shouted.

Ava's mouth was open, but she quickly closed it, got up from the floor and joined Mica's side, firing relentlessly at the aliens. Together, they cut them to pieces. Steaming alien carcasses filled most of the room, purple ooze splattered on the walls and furniture, and covering the floor.

"Mica, language!" The captain said, reloading her gun. Then she turned towards her. "Also, good girl."

Mica smiled from ear to ear. Ava also smiled. That feeling! They both felt it. It was the feeling you get when you've been fighting with someone you love, throwing everything you've got at them to take them down, and then suddenly putting all that aside, working together, both of you to take someone else down, and cooperating perfectly. It was the feeling that somehow you two were made from the same strong material. Two strong things, sometimes trying to be stronger than the other, but ultimately strongest together. Who knew how long the feeling would last, but oh, how sweet it was!