

PLANETARY STORIES

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2005

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EDITORIAL

FROM THE VIBRATING ETHER

WRITE!

PLANETARY STORIES is published by Shelby Vick,
with much help from Lloyd McDaniel and other friends,
and is available on line at <http://efanzines.com>

EDITORIAL

At last!

First of all, many apologies to all of you who provided material many, many months ago, as well as to all the potential readers who have been waiting for me to deliver. And waiting. . . .

But there's some good news: The stories are just what I wanted! (Not just the ones I wrote myself, that is.) The cover is just what I wanted! Ross Chamberlain really got the feeling of the old pulp covers. Then Clif Jackson did such a great job illustrating the lead story, as well as his rendition of Lt Luna.

BUT –

I'm still not happy. I haven't achieved the look of a pulp magazine, at least not to my satisfaction. For one thing, I should have had the titles of each story done by hand. . .in fact, if someone out there wants to do a header, draw it up and send it in! That's one thing about doing this; it's flexible! Or, as they say, "Project In Progress."

Oh – while I was issuing compliments up above, I needed to issue MANY thanks to Lloyd McDaniel. He was the one who located the area for the site, as well as found the necessary programs to bring Planetary Stories to reality. In fact, Lloyd deserves full credit for this even being here! Back in 2003 I had mentioned to him how I really needed an online magazine.

(Well, Joseph Green has a lot of credit coming to him, too. The reason I needed an online magazine in the first place was because he has been telling me, for years, that my stories read like the old pulp magazine stories.)

I told Lloyd I needed an online zine to revive pulp magazines, so I could have a place to publish my

stories.

"Well, then do it," Lloyd said.

I know, I know; that was back in 2003. It isn't really THAT hard to put an ezine together! . . .Unless, of course, you are Shelby Vick.

HELP!!! I would like to use two columns to intensify the 'pulp' look, but I'm told the programs we're using -- WS-FTP and Front Page Express -- are unreliable; some monitors will pick it up fine, some won't. Anybody know of anything new?

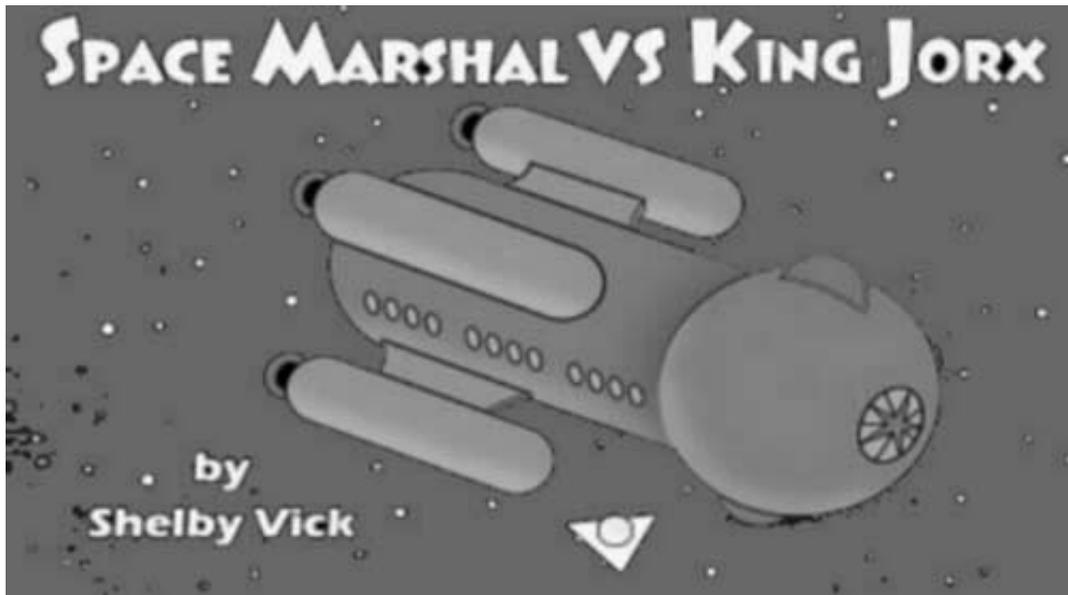
Right now, I'm going to efanazines.com; there will be further format changes -- maybe including columns. We'll see.

ABOUT ME: and why not? It's my magazine! . . .Actually, this is just for those who say, "Shelby Vick? Who's that? Why should I care!"

I'm 76 years old, and have been reading sf & fantasy for 70 years -- that is, if you count Flash Gordon, Prince Valiant and the Burroughs Mars and Venus books -- the later courtesy of my grandfather. He was also responsible for me finding sf magazines. No, he didn't read them -- but he read Western Stories pubbed by Street and Smith. One day I was at the newsstand looking for Western Stories -- and there was Astounding Stories (currently known as Analog). Back then, Street and Smith pubbed Astounding, too, and it was the same size as Western Stories. And there was a very sympathetic clerk at the newsstand; she understood about the limited funds kids had, and told me month-old issues could be bought at half-price, if I didn't mind the cover being missing. Following, of course, I ran across Startling and Planet Stories and Thrilling Wonder and Amazing and. . .but, you get the idea.



I've been writing for about the same length of time. Sold four books and five short stories, but none of them sf. But, in 2004, a sf story Joe Green and I put together sold to an ezine, so I've finally made the field!



Despite numerous advances – faster-than-light travel, which had spread humans around the universe for several hundred years, the discovery of many other advanced races, the injection of nanobots in human fetuses before birth to ensure against sickness and facilitate rapid healing of injuries – the human race in the twenty-sixth century had not improved itself enough to wipe out crime. As a result, there was need for a Space Marshall to patrol the galaxy

Oglethorpe's Universal Encyclopedia -- Volume 1

A large and bulky cargo ship floated in the velvet blackness of space. Millions of stars pinpricked the darkness. Beside the huge ship was a tiny scoutship, a triangle with a glistening ball centered in it. The contrast in size was like a mouse beside an elephant and, not unlike interactions between those two creatures, the mouse was preparing to scare the elephant.

From the scoutship came a voice: "This is Space Marshal Slade Marsten!" Thanks to the magic of electroharmonics, the setting on the com caused Marsten's voice to reverberate thruout the hull of the huge cargo ship. "Open your airlock and prepare to be boarded, or we'll destroy you!"

"No, you won't," an answering voice replied from the scoutship's speakers. "We're holding hostages!"

Marsten switched off the microphone and turned to his redheaded companion Jill Parkenson and a large robot, both standing beside him. "I was afraid of that," he said. "I'll have to bluff."

Alarmed, the girl said, "You can't endanger those people, Slade!" While he felt that, in a way it was a weakness, Marsten liked Jill's softheartedness.

The space marshal nodded. "I don't intend to endanger them, Jill. I don't want them to die. But the pirates don't want to die, either. Trust me."

Turning the mike back on, he said, "Afraid I didn't hear your response. Reception's bad. You have fifteen seconds to open your airlock."

"I said, we have hostages!"

"Ten seconds," Marsten announced calmly.

"We'll kill them if you don't--"

"Five seconds."

"You cold-blooded bastard--"

"In two seconds, I fire." Marsten held his breath.

"The airlock is opening, Slade. It worked," the robot said. It was a human voice, controlled by a human brain in the robot's chest. That was the brain of Professor Ilyan Parkenson, Jill's grandfather.

The robot had been designed by the professor and Slade Marsten ten years earlier to hold the brain and mind of the hundred-year-old mathematical genius. He was referred to as Probot, a name Marsten came up with, combining 'professor' and 'robot'. This was an example of Marsten's strange sense of humor. The robot's true identity was known only to Marsten, Slade, Jill and Crash Jones, head of Earth Security.

And one other, an entity Marsten dubbed BRITO--Beltlike Remote Instantaneous Transmission Organism. The name also was the closest approximation, in human tongue, to the name the entity gave itself. It was a fair description of it, since the entity was usually around Marsten's waist. BRITO was a traveler from another dimension who had arrived five years earlier, and found itself unable to return. Two years ago, it had separated into two entities, the second of which was on Crash Jones' waist.

As the airlock opened, the space marshal quickly donned a golden spacesuit with his emblem of authority--a large blue star--on its chest. He strode quickly to the scoutship's airlock.

"They'll be waiting for you," the robot cautioned.

"I know," Marsten said, from his helmetcom. "However, this is the only way I can take the ship from them and save the hostages."

He entered the airlock and floated, powered by his suit's gravdrive, thru the emptiness of space toward the cargo vessel. Then his nose started to itch.

"Not again!" he said with irritation. Several times before it had happened when he was locked in his spacesuit. There was a sedative he could take, but it would affect the speed of his responses, and that was something he couldn't afford. He twitched his nose, breathed deeply, but the itch was still there. All he could do was try to take his mind off it. He focused his thoughts on success, concentrated on trying to anticipate problems.

In minutes he was at the other ship's airlock door and the itch was gone. "I'm coming in," he broadcast. "Stand ready to surrender." He knew they would stand ready, all right--but it was more likely they would stand ready to kill him. It was his duty to keep them from doing that.

After the outer airlock door closed, the inner lock opened before him. As it did so, Marsten's right hand pulled a pistol while, with his left hand, he took a small disk from his spacesuit belt and tossed it thru the opening. There was a brief flash and the marshal followed it through the door.

The two men who'd been standing by the opening to ambush him now had their hands up before their eyes; their sight had not been protected by a polarized shield like the one on Marsten's visor. Two quick blows and they collapsed. Deadly force having not been needed, Marsten used the gravnet setting. He fired his pistol and an invisible net covered them, pinning them to the floor.

With his gravdrive holding him a few inches off the floor, Marsten headed down a passageway toward the ship's control room. He stopped at the open door and saw two men, one slender, one stocky, working feverishly at a panel.

"It don't work!" the slender one said. "Nothing works!"

"My pistol works," Slade said, calmly. The two spun about and faced him. There was alarm and fear on their faces. Then--

"My pistol works, too," a voice from behind him said. "Drop your weapon!" The fear on the men's faces turned to smiles.

"Not now, it doesn't" Slade said, turning to see a man dressed in black. The man's look of satisfaction turned to frustration as he tried to fire.

Slade pressed the net button and the man dropped. Then the marshal spun around in time to fire again as the other two tried to rush him. They also dropped. Slade Marsten turned back to the struggling man on the floor who was still trying to activate his pistol. "Nothing electric or electronic works, my friend," he informed the man. "Before I entered, I released an energy neutralizer. I'm protected against its effects. You aren't." He knelt beside the man, who snarled up at the marshal. Slade said, "Tell me where you're holding the hostages."

"Like hell!" the man said.

"Consider this," Slade said. "For each hostage you're holding that you don't tell me about now, you'll have another five years added to your sentence! Tell me where they are, and you'll only serve fifteen years for piracy!"

"Five years . . . each hostage?" he asked.

"Five years each," Slade said, nodding. "Where are they?"

After a moment's contemplation, the man answered in resignation, "First door on the right." He had stopped struggling.

"It doesn't pay to resist," Slade said, getting to his feet.

-oOo-

Back on the scoutship, the space marshal exited his golden suit. "What did you do, Slade?" Jill asked.

"I reasoned with them," he said with a smile. "The captain of the ship had an empty storeroom. We locked the pirates in there. I directed the captain to turn them in at Lexus, the next planet on their route. They'll be taken care of." As he said it, the voice of Crash Jones from Earth filled the cabin. As head of earth's security division, Jones was Marsten's only boss.

"Slade! King Jorx is coming here. We've already sent all our defense ships to quell a rebellion at Orion, and we only have atomic rockets to use against him. They'll barely tickle that giant battleship of his! And get this: He bragged that he's the only one who can control his planetbuster, so we can never use it against him!"

"He had it fixed that way so none of his crew could use it to overthrow him seems more accurate," Slade said.

"I'm sure you're right," Crash agreed.

Touching BRITO, Slade said, "We're on our way, Crash. Feed all the information you have into our computer."

BRITO extended a filament to connect with the scoutship's computer.

-oOo-

Stars rippled by as Slade Marsten and Jill Parkenson sat watching through the scoutship's lounge window. The lounge was above the left wing of the ship; the control room was at the front and the airlock passage rested over the right wing. Pearlescent walls reflected the stars. Jill's head rested against Slade's shoulder. "Isn't it beautiful?" she asked softly.

"It's the time distortion," Slade explained.

Jill sat up and punched his arm. "Curse you, Slade Marsten!" she said. There was only mock anger in her voice; she spoke with a gentle smile on her full, red lips. "I'm trying to be romantic." Jill's long hair framed a heart-shaped face. She wore a white, short-sleeved shirt with a V neck open enough to reveal generous cleavage. Blue shorts covered her full hips.

Slade patted her smooth leg. "Forgive me," he said. "In my capacity as space marshal, King Jorx is uppermost on my mind right now."

"Remember how we first met?" Jill asked softly, trying to sooth Slade and start him thinking of romance.

"How could I forget?" he asked. "You were a knockout in that skimpy cheerleader's uniform."

"And you were very impressive as the football team's captain." They had been in college, Slade a senior, Jill a sophomore.

"Men!" she said. "All you think of is sex!"

"It's a woman's greatest weapon," Slade said, smiling. "But that isn't why I started after you. I found out that, as Professor Parkenson's granddaughter, you had inherited brains. Looks are good to attract me, but I want more than that for a continuing relationship."

They were using ultimate speed to return to Earth, their direly threatened home world.

Probot walked into the lounge. "We are within 60 minutes, five seconds, of reaching our solar system. You asked to be notified when we reached the hour."

"Thanks," Marsten said, and his hand went to his 'belt'.

"Marsten calling Earth Security," he said. As quick as thought, the message went from BRITO to its counterpart on Earth.

"Hello, Slade." It was the voice of Crash Jones.

"How close is Jorx?"

"He'll be within his weapon's range in not much more than forty-five minutes," Jones said.

"Damn!" Marsten exclaimed. "Faster than I'd anticipated! He had this planned too well."

"Planned?" Jill asked. Then she added, bitterly, "I should have realized."

"Of course," Marsten said. "Did you think the threat on Orion was unrelated?"

"I'd thought there was no connection," Jill said. "Now I see it all. It was a plan to get our defense systems away from Earth."

"All staged by Jorx," Marsten agreed. "Chances are, the threat to Orion has evaporated." A grim look hardened his square face. "Has he contacted Earth, Crash?"

"He's told us we don't have an hour to live," Jones said. "What will we do, Slade? That weapon of his will totally vaporize our planet."

"I know," Marsten said, "I know!" He paused, and his wide brow furrowed. "There's only one thing to do. In thirty minutes, call him and tell him I'll meet him at Pluto."

"He'll kill you, Slade," Jones said, his voice flat.

"He'll want to," Marsten said. "That's what I'm counting on. Just do it."

"I see. As usual, you don't have time to tell me what you have in mind--but since I assume you don't plan to commit suicide, I'll do as you suggest. Luck!"

"Slade, you can't!" Jill objected, grabbing his arm. "He'll be in his fully armed battleship. Our scoutship doesn't have any weapons!"

"That's why he'll come," Slade Marsten said. "That's why he'll put off blasting Earth. That's what I'm planning on."

"But he'll kill you, then get Earth!"

"I want him to think that," the space marshal said. He patted the holster on his shoulder harness. "This ship is unarmed. I'm not."

Jill's eyes widened. "You mean to go up against a heavily armed battleship with a pistol?" she asked, incredulous. "I know it isn't just any pistol," she added. "It's the one granddad invented. But still, what good is it against a planetbuster?"

"I intend to disable that planetbuster," Marsten said, smiling. "The most powerful weapon is no good if it can't be used. Don't worry. Remember, Jorx failed twice before."

Jill shook her head. "You're absolutely hopeless, Slade Marsten--I'm more likely to die worrying about you than from a planetbuster!" She put a hand on his arm. "I know you have something up your sleeve, and you've pulled rabbits out of hats more times than I can count, but. . . ." She bit her lip and her voice trailed off.

The space marshal's face softened. "It'll be all right, Jill," he said. "I promise." He turned to the robot. "We have some planning to do," he said. "Follow me." They went to the control room.

"I can't give you a better weapon, not in the time we have," the professor's voice said.

"I know," Marsten said. Then he smiled at Probot. "If Jorx knew who you were, he'd be more interested in getting you than me--but he'd want you alive."

The robot nodded. "He'd want my research on time travel. It's good we were able to transfer my brain before I died. I'm close to making time travel a reality. For Jorx, it would be the greatest weapon there ever was!"

"Yes. He would use time travel to go into the past and kill the people whose descendants kept him from power. He would rule the universe! Exactly why he should never get it. But now," Marsten went on, "back to the present--what I need is something we can rig up quickly. Jorx will be looking for a trick, so I've got to do something he won't anticipate."

"At least," the robot said, "we will try. What can I do?"

In half an hour, the scoutship orbited Pluto, waiting. "Everything's ready, Slade," Probot announced.

"Good," the space marshal said. "How far is Jorx' ship?"

"It will arrive in six minutes, eighteen seconds."

"Raise him for me."

In seconds, a hologram of Jorx' green, reptilian face was looking at Marsten. "Are you ready to die, space filth?" he said.

"Interesting," the space marshal said. "I was about to ask you the same question."

Jorx' silver eyes gleamed red. "You're done for, human! You don't have a chance! Your ship has no weapons! It is faster than my battleship, but I know you won't run, since I would then destroy your world!"

"I don't run, anyway," Marsten replied. "But don't be so optimistic. Remember, there've been other times you thought you'd killed me."

"I didn't have a planetbuster to use, then," Jorx gloated. "In less than one minute, we will be in range. Say your prayers, Marsten!"

"Oh, come on, Jorx--that won't satisfy your bloodlust, and you know it!" Slade declared. "The only way you want me to die is in front of you! You want to see my bleeding body at your feet, or you won't be happy!"

Jorx paused. "You know me too well, Marsten. But you paint a glorious picture. Yes, seeing you die at my feet is precisely what I want."

Slade Marsten relaxed. That's what I was hoping for, you devil! he thought gleefully. Now, if everything else works out. . . . Aloud, he said, "But that presents a problem, Jorx. You'll have to let me on your ship. You know that can be very dangerous."

"You are tricky, Marsten," the alien hissed. "But I hold the key: Your planet's survival! You will enter my ship unarmed or I return and destroy your precious Earth! Agreed?"

"Agreed. Your weapons detector will reassure you, Jorx. Stop your ship, then open your airlock when I get there." So far, luckily, his nose hadn't itched. He hoped that just thinking about it didn't start the irritation.

Jorx nodded. "I'll be waiting, Marsten." The grin that spread across his features was positively reptilian even as his face disappeared from the screen.

In minutes, the giant battleship was also orbiting Pluto, within view of the small scoutship. A beam of light from the dark hulk of Jorx' ship pinpointed Marsten's scoutship, just in time to reveal a golden figure departing, moving quickly down the light.

"I'm coming, Jorx," Marsten said. His nose still remained itchless.

The blue star seemed to brighten as the gold suit neared the inviting airlock. "Open up. I'm coming in, Jorx," Marsten said.

"My detectors tell me you are unarmed. Enter."

It tells you my gold suit is unarmed, Marsten thought, pleased.

In ten seconds, the outer door closed and then the inner one opened. The spacesuit exploded in a brilliant light. Marsten, who was in a dead black suit and had entered just behind his decoy, rushed through and used his gravnet setting twice on the two groups of aliens who had been lying in wait.

"Your energy neutralizer is useless, Marsten," Jorx' voice said through his helmet. "I know your tricks. My instruments are protected and my people have shields to protect them from the glare."

That's why I didn't use the neutralizer, Marsten thought. And the flare was much, much brighter. His suit's gravdrive was sending him down the passageway toward, Marsten hoped, Jorx' control room. He moved along until, ahead, he saw an open door.

Open.

Won't you come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly? Marsten thought. It was an obvious trap . . . but he was going to have to walk into it. He saw no other way.

Deciding speed was the best approach, he set his gravdrive on high, shot toward the door--and slammed into a gravnet of Jorx', which covered the doorway. The net was attached to the sides of the door, so Marsten stuck to it instead of being pinned to the floor.

"There was no response from my guards at the airlock, so I knew you'd escaped them," Jorx hissed, grinning. He resembled a seven-foot-tall raptor, minus the tail, and was seated at a desk near the wall opposite the trapped space marshal. "Your trick didn't work, Slade Marsten!" he added, leaning forward.

And I'm stuck in the spider's web, Marsten thought. Then something struck a powerful blow to each side of his space helmet and he sank into darkness.

-oOo-

When the space marshal's senses flooded back, he was seated in a chair across from Jorx, his hands behind him, with something that felt like a metal tube enclosing wrists and hands.

"Welcome, Space Marshal," Jorx said, his pleasure obvious in his voice. "It gives me great satisfaction to have outwitted you."

"I'm not dying, bleeding, at your feet," Marsten said. "Obviously something's not working out the way you wanted it."

Jorx' narrow shoulders shrugged. "A mere momentary delay," he said. "I wanted you to witness my destruction of your ship and your friends. You humans have a most helpful habit of being emotionally attached to others." He indicated a viewscreen to his right. Silhouetted against Pluto was the space marshal's scoutship.

"I see it's still there," Marsten said. "Why the delay?" He felt something sliding along his arms. Good! I was counting on that, he thought.

"My instruments only detect two beings in your ship," Jorx said. "Your girl friend and the robot. According to my information, there are four on your team. Where is the fourth?"

There were two members Jorx' crew, one on each side of Marsten, but they were relaxed, guns holstered. That was good, because the space marshal felt the metal tubes separating. BRITO had done its work--but Marsten had one more thing for the entity to do. Quickly he shook off the metal

bonds, got to his feet while his right hand went to his waist.

"Right here, Jorx!" he exclaimed, throwing BRITO straight at the alien's face. As he threw, he lunged into the startled guard to his right, knocking it down. Slade grabbed the guard's pistol, turned onto his back and fired at the other, who already had its pistol aimed--but too late. Marsten hadn't changed the setting on the pistol, so he saw the guard disintegrate.

The next second, the space marshal was on his feet. He kicked the surviving guard in the head, palmed the door shut, then turned to look at Jorx.

He almost felt sorry for the monster. BRITO had wrapped itself around the top of Jorx' head, directly over the alien's brain. The silver eyes were wide open, as was his mouth. He was making a weird ululating sound as BRITO sent tendrils into the reptilian brain.

"Don't kill him, BRITO," Marsten said. "Just suggest that he orders all his crew to disarm and stand down. He should also disable the planetbuster, and forget how to use it. After we leave, he's to return to his home. Return peacefully!" he emphasized.

-oOo-

When they returned to the scoutship and Slade recounted his adventure, Jill was furious. "You let him go?" she asked, incredulously. "He was going to destroy Earth! He wanted to kill you!"

"His planet's not a member of the Federation. He did no real damage, and there could be all kinds of loopholes in space law he could wiggle through."

"He's right, Jill," the Probot said. "Interstellar law is an art, not a science. Someone can pick a leaf off a protected tree and be sentenced to five years. Another might embezzle millions from his company and receive little more than a slap on the wrist. If Slade took Jorx in, the alien might sue for false arrest and win."

Slade hugged Jill. "He's going home. Hopefully, he'll be so humiliated that we can expect no trouble from him for years to come."

"Well," Jill said, "everyone's safe. Happy ending."

And that, at least for the moment, was true.

DARKSTAR SILVERARM

by

Rick Brooks

When the Bad force the Good into facing unknown forces, experience has shown that it always backfires on the Bad.

Oglethorpe's Universal Encyclopedia, Volume Seven

Jeb Johnston was having trouble seeing out of his remaining eye. The medunits clustered over his body could no longer damp the pain without knocking him out.

He needed to stay awake very much.

No one had ever escaped from the Syndicate's torturers. It didn't look like Jeb would be the first. But Jeb was as stubborn as a New Texas mule.

The Albert Sidney Johnston could fly itself. It now needed to. Jeb took pride in being a hotshot pilot, the best on New Texas. With only one arm and leg left, he wasn't much of a pilot now. But he could still make decisions for his ship. The computer input behind his left ear, thank Houston they'd started on his right side, fed orders to the ship as fast as Jeb could think. The viewscreens in front of him showed the Sidney Johnston's course.

And the three Syndicate ships behind him.

Jeb blinked, then snarled. They were herding him too close to Corum, the proscribed planet. But maybe they had been too clever.

The Albert Sidney Johnston dropped out of hyperspace. Jeb almost blacked out. There was a yowl from the ship's cat.

The armored bulk of one of the Hellhammer class ships guarding Corum swelled before him. The Albert Sidney Johnston sent a complicated series of recognition signals and hurtled by the aroused Hellhammer ship.

Jeb's plan to get some of the living silver from the planet below was working. But he hadn't intended to be dying when he went down.

His mouth twisted in a wolfish grin as the three Syndicate ships tried to follow him. What looked like three solid bars of incandescent light came from the Hellhammer batteries. The three Syndicate ships instantly vaporized.

Then disaster.

One of the recognition codes wasn't quite right. He dived toward the planet taking wild evasive action. There was another indignant yowl. Jeb blacked out as the guard ship opened fire.

Due to the Albert Sidney Johnston's closeness to the planet, the guard ship was forced to use it's

secondary batteries instead of the dreaded Hellhammers. So the Albert Sidney Johnston wasn't vaporized. But badly damaged and smoking, she entered the atmosphere. And crashed.

The robot brain of the massive guardship had orders never to interfere on the surface of Corum. The human component, once awakened, agreed.

Jeb awoke to hellish pain. Weird gnomes were huddled over his body. Vast golden eyes at the top of long wedge shaped faces regarded him emotionlessly.

Jeb fainted.

The gnomes toiled on.

Jeb awoke. He was lying flat on his back in his bunk aboard the Albert Sidney Johnston. Tom, the ship's cat, was curled up by his side purring.

Jeb looked at the ceiling. And his gaze went through to the storage area above.

He gasped. His heart beat faster. He levered himself up with both hands.

Jeb almost fainted.

Then he looked at his right side. A silver arm and leg seemed to have grown out of the stumps left by the ministrations of the Syndicate.

Jeb reached out his left hand and touched his right hand. The metal was warm. He touched his right ear. It too was warm metal.

He got up effortlessly. He realized that the pain was gone. No medunits were in sight.

Jeb walked into the refresher and looked at his face in the mirror. He closed both eyes. But he could still see through the right one.

Jeb opened his eyes. He hardly recognized himself. One eye was still blue. The other was silver. Then the silver eye dialated to show something burning blackly within.

Jeb felt ill. His right eye became a ball of silver again.

Two silvery fangs met on either side of his mouth. Even his hair was silver.

He abruptly realized that he couldn't hear the ship's engines. He ran toward the bridge.

He barely recognized the bridge of the Albert Sidney Johnston. The mad dwarfs of Corum had rebuilt it with living silver too.

Jeb realized that he and his ship were now a prize that any crook in the galaxy would kill for. A fortune in living silver.

He consulted the computer input. The Albert Sidney Johnston was in orbit around New Texas. He went through the data banks. Somehow no person or computer on New Texas had noticed him or his ship.

Jeb unsteadily went back to his room. He fell on his bunk and began to shake.

Responding to his distress, a medunit scurried in and touched his left arm. Jeb felt his cares vanish.

He went to the refresher and stared at his new face and body expressionlessly. Tom hopped up on the sink and gave a soft mrrrrew.

Jeb looked at his cat. The orange tom cat looked back at him with one green eye. And one silver one. Silvery claws came out of silver toes on all four of Tom's feet, then retracted out of sight.

Silver fangs to match Jeb's showed as Tom yawned.

His right ear, torn in some long ago battle, was now whole and silver. So was the sharp tip of his tail.

Tom rubbed his head against Jeb, then hopped down and went about his business.

Tom went to the bridge and sat down to think. Even the little patch of Astro-turf he kept in one corner to remind him of home didn't make him feel better.

What had been done to him, his ship, and his cat? And how the hell did he get here, apparently undetected?

And what was he going to do next?

Jeb linked with the ship's computer and began to check out his ship. The dwarfs had improved the computer, too.

Then he went over the ship from nose to tail checking everything.

He opened the armory just off his bunkroom and marveled at the new silvery weapons there.

Jeb sat in the control room gazing off into the space revealed by the ship's viewscreens. He became aware that Tom was on the arm of the chair beside him, rubbing against him.

He ruffled Tom's fur. Tom purred in a rasping rumble.

At least that was unchanged.

"Tom, despite being in orbit over New Texas, we really can't go home."

"Mraw."

"I'm no longer Jeb. A dark star burns in my right eye shell. My right hand is a deadly weapon. I can hear and see more with my new eye and ear."

Tom began washing himself. He didn't lick his silvery toes and tail tip.

"Jeb is dead. He died back on Corum. Now I'm Darkstar Silverarm. I think the Syndicate will have plenty of reasons to regret my transformation."

He gave Tom another pat and headed for the bridge.

Darkstar Silverarm brought the Albert Sidney Johnston down just above the surface of New Texas.

The Syndicate members had not expected him to escape. So he knew where their hideout on West Texarcana was. It was buried under the Black Mesa. But not far enough under.

One moment Syndicate members were watching empty detectors and viewscreens. The next moment, the Albert Sidney Johnston was hanging in front of the mesa.

Columns of energy scarcely less potent than Hellhammers shot out. Most of the mesa in front of the ship vaporized. Stubborn walls melted and flowed.

Only two defensive batteries were left to the Syndicate base. Their energy blasts died before reaching the Albert Sidney Johnston.

Then return fire from the Albert Sidney Johnston took them out.

The Albert Sidney Johnston landed within what had been the Syndicate base. The port in the side opened. Something silver and orange shot out. A silver-haired figure wrapped in a silvery cloak carrying a silver wand in his left hand followed.

Two men, blasters in hand, rose to face him. Their eyes met his. One fainted. The other screamed and ran. He didn't get far. Like an archiac windup toy, he moved slower and slower until he fell.

Darkstar Silverarm raised his wand. Lances of fire dropped two other gunmen.

A third almost behind him, centered his weapon on the back of Darkstar's head. Hearing a faint sound, Darkstar moved with lightning speed and the shot completely missed.

Before the gunman could change his aim, a silvery and orange shape blurred toward him.

A silvery tail tip battered the blaster aside. Silver claws slashed the gunman's throat. He choked and died.

Darkstar Silverarm proceeded more cautiously. Tom shot out of sight. But Darkstar knew where he was. With a little effort, Darkstar could even see through Tom's eyes.

He could also see into the base through durasteel walls.

He stopped and gazed at his feet. Something down in the ground. It looked like a bomb. He moved rapidly and thought into his computer implant.

It too had been improved by the dwarfs of Corum.

The Albert Sidney Johnston unleashed a lance of fire into the ground. In moments, the bomb was gone.

Tom found the computer room and slipped through the metal door that had been warped by the forces unleashed on the base by the Albert Sidney Johnston.

Two men were working on the computer. Three men with blasters were guarding them. But they never expected an orange and silver cat that moved like he was approaching light speed.

Darkstar saw a small ship hidden within a fold in the mesa wall. His weapon shot a narrow beam into the walls surrounding the ship.

He brought out a silvery device from within his robe with his other hand. It shot out a dart of silvery metal that melted into the wall of the ship.

Darkstar hurried on his way.

When Darkstar reached the computer room, he took the edge of the door in his right hand. And pulled. Metal tore apart with a screech.

Three guards lay dead on the floor. None had gotten off a shot.

Two men sat in front of the computer viewscreen, their eyes fixed on an orange and silver cat that sat gazing with slanted eyes at them.

Darkstar walked up to them, his right eye nearly closed.

"I am Darkstar Silverarm. I want access to the Syndicate files."

His right eye opened briefly. One man gasped. The other screamed.

"What in Klono's name, are you?"

"An enemy of the Syndicate. Now give me access. Or I shall destroy your mind and take what I need from it?"

The men yielded.

Darkstar became a conduit between the Syndicate's computer and the Albert Sidney Johnston's augmented computer. As he transferred information, he felt and heard a rumble.

The Albert Sidney Johnston's detectors showed the small spaceship taking off. It stayed low and quickly disappeared from view. The Albert Sidney Johnston got in three shots at it, none the less. Carefully missing all three.

Soon Darkstar had all the information from the computer. Some had undoubtedly been destroyed. His ship's computer had outwitted and dismantled all the blocks hiding information.

So Darkstar had a decent idea of the Syndicate. But only on New Texas. The Syndicate was too clever to leave many traces to other worlds.

Tom stretched. The two men's eyes flicked over to him.

Darkstar touched both with the wand, then caught them as they slumped.

The Albert Sidney Johnston's detectors showed several New Texas Ranger ships approaching. They could handle the rest of the Syndicate on New Texas.

Darkstar and Tom left the computer room. Darkstar could now move faster than any man. But Tom steaked away from him.

Darkstar reached the Albert Sidney Johnston and wedged himself in the airlock. The outer door closed as the ship went straight up.

He entered the control room to find Tom asleep on the Astro-turf.

Darkstar watched as New Texas shrank behind them. The Albert Sidney Johnston entered hyperspace with scarcely a tremor.

A spy device was now part of the hull of the Syndicate ship that had fled. And Darkstar was following it. He would give the Syndicate more reason to regret what had been done to him.

MOULT REVOLT

by

Shelby Vick

Some of our greatest discoveries are made by accident; the apple falling on Newton's head, the discovery of vulcanization, Iac and his discovery of antigravity – and a young cluike, and the saving of his race.

– Oglethorpe's Universal Encyclopedia, Volume Ten

Wind whistled and sung through the canyon; it moaned in the distance and hissed between boulders. Symme relaxed at the edge of a plateau, absorbing all the holy music of the wind. Saving his race from total extinction was the last thing on his mind. He looked behind him at the semi-transparent shell from which he had just wriggled free. It was a thin and hollow copy of himself, with a split down to the abdomen area. The shell trembled in the wind, but did not topple.

"I don't care!" Symme exclaimed. "Custom be damned; this is right for a Moul't!" He rolled his head from side to side and a small, clear piece of his old exoskeleton clattered to the red, flat ground, stirring a puff of dust. "Never again will I moult with the rest of the Nine. A moult should be private. Special! Here, my shell will resonate to the holy music, which is as it should be." His mother, Eomme, would be furious, but Symme would face that later.

In the distance a passenger ornithopter roared along. It had to be in the distance; machinery wasn't allowed on or above holy valleys -- except for the rocketships, of course, and they flew above the atmosphere. And the rockets were on a kind of holy mission of their own. Looking around, the young cluike took a deep breath, expanding his thorax. "My third moult," he thought. "Six more and I will be ancient."

One of his feet dislodged a small rock. It rolled over the edge and bounced its way down the side.

Click-click. Click-click. Click-click.

In some undefinable but intriguing way it seemed to blend with the wind's holy music.

Symme reached out a slender, nine-fingered hand and picked up another rock. With a graceful move, he flipped it over the reddish-brown edge and listened.

Click. Click-click. Click.

No, that wasn't right. He plucked another rock from a cluster further away. As he tossed the rock over the side, he cocked his head and slid back a bony carapace that protected his ear on that side from the blowing sand, and tuned his senses both to the holy music and the sound of the bouncing rock.

Click-click. Click-click. Click-click.

Yes, yes! he thrilled. Yes!

"Oh, man!" he declared with youthful enthusiasm, "that is groovy!"

Of course, he did not say "man" with the same meaning a human being would give it. Symme had never seen or even heard of human beings; he was a young cluike, closer to a cricket in shape, although his body was over six feet long. It was covered by a thin but strong exoskeleton that was a shiny brown casing with joints that allowed flexibility of movement; the six angular and slim legs could be folded up and recessed inside the shell when necessary, as in flight. A row of nine short spurs protruded from his back. The neckless head could shift up, down or side-to-side, giving him a wide range of vision. So when Symme said "man", he was referring to those of his own kind.

"Groovy" is the closest equivalent in our language to express his adolescent verve.

His "moult revolt" had suddenly lost its importance. Being careful to exactly duplicate his earlier toss, Symme propelled another pebble over the edge, then another and another, his excitement growing. Repeatedly he heard: Click-click. Click-click. Click-click.

"I've got to tell the rest of my Nine!" he declared, and excitedly launched himself into the air. Four wingsets extended themselves from his sides, each of four panels; the brown leading edge of the first panel was the stronger part that covered the three other panels when they were at rest. The other three panels were thin semi-transparent membrane of unusual strength.

As he flew, the adolescent cluike clapped his hands together in rhythm to the holy music made by his wings. Click-click. Click-click. Click-click.

He had no idea this would lead, eventually, to the salvation of his race.

In one recess of his mind, as he thought of the others of the Nine, he remembered his concern about leaving them out of the Moulting Ceremony; after all, it was supposed to be a ceremony for the entire Nine. Yet they were his Nine; all of the same egg cluster, all the same blood. They would surely all understand.

...All except Lomme. Lomme was some kind of throw-back. Others of his Nine were modern, even ahead of their time; Lomme was a slave to custom, to boring routine, to dull tradition. Just like Eomme.

He clapped his hands again. Click-click. He'd deal with Lomme and Eomme later. This was greater than all of them! Click-click. Click-click.

Inspired to fervent joy by his discovery, Symme dove towards the ground and then pulled up to fly a loop, humming as he went, and clapping. "Just wait till I tell the group -- show the group," he thought, in joyous anticipation.

"You're telling me our race is doomed," Eomme said to the director. She said it with forced calm, forcing the appearance of calm not so much because of his information, but because of her dislike for the person in front of her. She disliked the theory proposed, but not as much as she disliked the proposer of the theory. He was one who worked only from facts, who eschewed emotion and -- even worse -- seemed to be an atheist. His office was windowless, not allowing the holy music to enter. He did not hum.

The director nodded. "We're over-breeding."

"But we've been selecting only one nine-cluster out of each rack of eggs! We store the remaining

eggs."

"Even so," the director agreed, calmly, "there is only so much storage space on our world. Stacks of stored racks reach up to the limit of our atmosphere, and already cover over one-half of our living space. Thanks to rockets, we can even pile eggs above the atmosphere -- but our control of the rockets is limited, so we just have to drop the racks and let them pile up. That isn't nearly as efficient as stacks, and the piles will, one day, become unstable. We are very long-lived and breed every nine years. Add it up yourself."

Eomme paused in thought, then suddenly said, "The moons!"

The director looked questioningly at her.

"We have nine moons above us! If the rockets can fly so high, why not send them to our moons with eggs?"

With a sigh, the director shook his head. "As I said, we can't control our rockets that accurately. We could guess at where a moon would be when we got there, but the odds are we could miscalculate. Much fuel would be used adjusting course. The rocket could well end up stranded on a moon, so that we would lose rocket and crew."

"...Why not send the rocket by remote control?" Lomme asked after another pause. "That wouldn't risk the lives of the crew."

"And then what?" the director asked, both sarcasm and curiosity in his manner. "We do not have an endless amount of material to build rockets, you know. Further, what is the point of sending the eggs to the moon if we cannot recover them? Isn't future use the purpose of all this storage?"

"What do you propose we do?" she asked, irritated at having her idea discarded in so casual a manner, then added sarcastically, "destroy our eggs?"

"That would be one solution," the director said, calmly.

"What?" Eomme stiffened with indignity. "That would be murder!"

The director lifted his forearms, indicating a shrug. "It would be suicide not to -- if no other alternative presents itself." He hastily held out his hands to placate Eomme, whose wing-cases were lifting in outrage. "That is what we must explore," he continued, with his voice still calm. "We must look for alternatives."

He did not calm her. "Look for them. Find them!" she snapped, then turned and left.

When Symme reached home, he was exposed to a similar fury. "You moulted without us!" Lomme exploded, quivering with anger. "You slipped off in the middle of the night and moulted alone!" She made it sound worse than mass murder.

The Nine were in their grassy back yard, a yard surrounded by high walls that simulated valley sides. Lomme was near one wall as she verbally accosted Symme. "Just because you hatched a day earlier than the rest of us," she continued, "you think you can do anything!"

"But it was wonderful!" Symme protested. "I was there with the wind and the holy music, and then

the music sang through my empty shell."

"Selfish!" Lomme accused him. "All you care about is yourself. You wanted the pleasure all alone." The group was humming agreement with Lomme, but their music was soft...almost quiet.

"We should all do it alone," Symme proclaimed. "It's -- well, it's just great!"

Lomme took a pose of shocked disbelief. "You sound like you want to separate the Nine!" she said. "You want us to all be singles!"

"No -- no, you don't understand," Symme disagreed. He reached for the powerful feeling his discovery had given him. "Our Moults are something that happens to each of us. Others might be around, but it is an individual thing. And it gives you not only rebirth, but insight." He looked around. There was Gamme; he had been a constant companion, and followed Symme's lead most of the time. Gamme had a confused look about him, and Symme understood; he wanted to follow Symme's lead, but felt left out -- Symme hadn't told him about his private moulting idea, hadn't taken Gamme into his confidence.

"Gamme, you must do yours alone, too," he said earnestly. "But you must take the new music with you."

"New music?" Gamme asked. His curiosity overcame his uncertainty, swung him back into Symme's camp.

"New music?" Lomme repeated scornfully. "There is no new music!" she declared. "Holy music is... well, it's holy music, and that's all there is to it."

"No!" Symme exclaimed. "The moons in the sky change, the world changes -- and the music can change. I heard it!"

No one was humming, now; he had their attention. "It happened at the end of my Moults. I can show you!" he said.

"You don't 'show' the holy music," Lomme snapped. "The music is, and that's all there is to it."

"No!" Symme disagreed. "We hum the music all the time, Lomme." His gaze took in all the group. "This is something you all have to experience," he said, his eagerness returning, "and I can demonstrate it right now! Everybody hum The Valley Wind, and I'll show you."

Gamme and a couple of the others started off. More joined them, until Lomme was the only one not humming. "Come on, Lomme," Symme urged. "Take part in this; experience it."

Gamme stopped humming. "Come on, Lomme," he begged. "It won't hurt to take part. Come on." The word "on" blended in with Gamme's renewed hum.

"Oh -- all right," Lomme muttered, reluctantly giving in. She, too, took up the hum.

Symme waited. He wanted to start immediately, but he also sensed that everything had to be just right. It had to be just right, but -- he couldn't wait too long. Then --

Now! he thought, and rhythmically began clapping. Click-click, went his bony hands. Click-click.

Click-click. Click-click. That was it! Click-click. Click-click. Yes, he had it now. Click-click. Click-click. He could tell from the growing attention of the others that they, too, were feeling it. Even Lomme was relaxing and allowing her whole body to join in.

Click-click. Click-click. Click-click. Click-click.

Gamme began clapping to the same rhythm. One by one the others followed.

Click-click. Click-click.

Soon the bodies of the Nine were swaying in unison. Gamme started lifting his wing casings in time with the rhythm, and the others moved with him. Symme was ecstatic. "Yes. Yes!" he said. "Yes!"

But then a shadow drifted overhead.

"What is all this racket?" Eomme shrieked. "What is going on here?" She had landed beside the end wall, and was facing them all.

"Mother, I discovered a new music!" Symme exclaimed with excitement vibrating him. "I heard it at my Moul't."

Eomme glanced quickly around at the others. "Your Moul't?" she asked incredulously. "You Moul'ted alone -- singly -- by yourself?" Astonishment, laced with strong disapproval, was electric in her words, her stance, in every display of her body language.

"A Moul't should be private," Symme said, then went on before Eomme could erupt. "But this is more important," he continued ebulliently, eyes bright. "I found a new music!"

"Not, I hope, that cacophony I heard just now!" Eomme exclaimed derisively.

Symme hesitated, some of his enthusiasm dimmed. "Well...yes -- but you didn't give it a chance!" he rushed on. "You must hear it all; you must!"

"What I must do is go inside and think," Eomme retorted. "There are grave dangers facing us, and I must try to plan in order that we may overcome them." She brushed through the Nine and strode into the long, wide entranceway to their home.

Symme decided -- and the others agreed -- it would be best to find a secluded place to practice the new music.

Written music was as popular as recorded music to the cluike. Recording was no problem, but Symme had great difficulty with the writing of his new sound. Cluike music had no rhythm, only notes of various values. Even worse, their system of mathematics was -- naturally -- based on units of nine; his rhythm was based on units of four. No matter how Symme tried, he could not accommodate his music to cluike math.

So Symme determined to design a math specifically for his music. Then there would be the problem of developing a program for the electronic math machine. It was going to take some time but -- once the program was developed and his music was entered on it -- he could then, using the math machine, transmit the music around the world; everyone would become familiar with the new music! That made the prodigious effort worthwhile, and inspired Symme to continue, his enthusiasm

rekindled.

Eomme entered. "What's your new project?" she asked.

Her interest and curiosity caused Symme to incautiously reply, "I'm working on a math that will allow me to transmit the new music to everyone!"

Eomme bristled, anger quivering her antennae. "I forbid it!" she snapped. "You can't do that in my house!"

Sudden realization of the depth of his transgression caused Symme's wing-cases to pull in tightly and, for a second, he froze. A cluike mother owned and controlled everything concerning her children.

-- Her children! The thought freed Symme. "No, Eomme," he said, using her name for the first time in his life. Purposefully using her name instead of her maternal title. "No," he repeated. "I have had my third Moul. I realize that does not make us equals," he added, flexing his wing cases, "but I am no longer your property. I am under your guidance, but I have the right to choose for myself, to take chances against your advice.

"You," he went on, standing taller, "are no longer responsible for my mistakes; if I am in error, I must pay the price. I do not think I am in error," he said, turning back to the math machine.

"Your music is sacrilege!" Eomme exclaimed. "It defames, it mocks the holy wind."

"We've played it for several other Nines," Symme said with calm that was difficult to maintain. He remained facing away from Eomme. "They all thought it was just as great as we think it is."

"Children!" Eomme said scathingly. "The young are ever revolutionists, lacking in the judgment maturity brings. Who are they to evaluate? I repeat, the music is sacrilege -- trash."

Still striving for composure, Symme said: "When my program is completed, it will be available for all." His conviction buoyed his spirits. "I feel it will be accepted -- joyfully accepted," he added.

Eomme's antennae still quivered with outrage, but her voice was quiet -- an intense quiet that was even more indicative of her displeasure than her antennae. "I want a copy of that program when you are through," she said. "I will take it to the director."

A meteor shower of thoughts raced through Symme's mind. He understood the threat; if the director disapproved, the music could be banned. Forbidden. And yet, the director had always seemed a reasonable and dispassionate man. Surely he would see the worthiness of Symme's discovery.

Memories of the ecstasy on the plateau by the valley flooded over Symme; he quivered with joy, recalling his discovery of the new music.

-- But he had also heard that this director was not musically inclined. Could that mean problems? Could that mean...?

No!

No one could take his music from him; not even the director. No one was going to --

But there was Eomme. Even though she was no longer his absolute ruler, he had to live with her and the other Nine until his fourth Moul. While she could not rule him, she could make his life miserable.

Yet the director would have no reason to ban Symme's music; if he was not interested in music, then why should he care one way or the other?

These thoughts chased each other through Symme's mind in the briefest of seconds. Eomme was not aware of any significant pause preceding Symme's agreement.

"As soon as I finish my program, you'll have a copy for the director," Symme told her, reaching deep within himself to regain his confidence. The director did not need to approve -- only not disapprove. Everything would be wonderful -- great!

Surely....

In only another minute Symme forgot about Eomme and the director, and was deeply involved in creating his program.

It took Symme over a month of hard work to develop all facets of his program and commit it to recordings through the math machine; a month of intense concentration, frustration, mistakes and restarts -- a month that ended with even more intense elation when success was achieved. As he had promised, Symme gave Eomme a copy of the program for the director. Then he and the other Nine went to a holy valley to celebrate.

Eomme made good on her threat and took Symme's music program to the director. When she entered his office, he looked up at her and said, "Greetings, Eomme." His voice was calm, but there was a hint of irritation. That changed as Eomme took a program cube from a pouch that hung from her neck.

"What's that?" he asked, curiosity in his tone. The hint of irritation was replaced by an equally small amount of hope.

Eomme placed the cube on his desk with disdain. "That," she said with distaste, "is blasphemy. It is a music program Symme has written that is sacrilegious. I want you to listen to it so you can ban it."

"Oh," he said. His voice was so flat that Eomme was surprised.

"Why?" she asked. "What were you expecting?"

Despair settled over the director's frame. "It -- Oh, if you must know, I had the ridiculous thought that maybe, just maybe, you had come up with a solution. Forget it," he said brusquely, brushing the thought aside with a hard and long-fingered hand.

"A solution?" Eomme repeated, so wrapped up in her purpose for coming that she missed the director's meaning.

"The eggs," he reminded her.

Eomme's antennae drooped with shame. "Oh. Oh!" she exclaimed, as she made the connection. "Oh my. I fear I have been so concerned about Symme's transgression that I let the major concern slip to

the back of my mind. No...no, I have let my preoccupation with this horrible music distract me. I...I have no thoughts at all as to a solution."

"I also have had no new ideas," the director said. There was a faint emphasis on the word "new"; faint, but it caught Eomme's attention.

"You dare not destroy the eggs!" she declared tightly. Her antennae quivered.

Again the director gave the arm-lifting shrug. "It is undesirable," he said, "but what alternative do we have?"

"We have enough room for now," Eomme said. "With Symme's offense dealt with, I can put my mind to the problem."

"Offense?" the director repeated.

Eomme touched the cube. "You will understand, once you have played this," she said. "Let me know when you have done so." With that, she left.

At the holy valley, Symme and the others of his Nine had sang and clapped and flipped rocks all day long and into the night, singing as the nine moons rose.

Other Nines joined them and all were enthralled by the new music. The fact that many adults were displeased by "their" music was no deterrent to their enjoyment; in a perverse manner, it increased their pleasure -- proving yet again that adolescents, no matter what their birthplanet, are still adolescents.

Days passed in joyful musical festivity. Then they went home.

"The director wants to see you," Eomme greeted Symme, smugly confident of the meaning of the summons. A shower of cold water could have done no more to bring Symme's spirit down to earth. "Now," Eomme added. "He almost sent a search party looking for you." This did nothing to restore Symme's confidence.

Without a word of response, Symme turned and flew away, heading for the director's office. Better to get it over with than sit and stew.

Symme was baffled by the director's reception. He was greeted warmly, almost enthusiastically. "Come in, my boy, come in!" he said, rising from behind his desk. "I've been most eager to meet you." His antennae was vibrating, but Symme recognized the pattern as one of excitement. Could it be the director felt the same fervor for the new music as Symme felt? That hope seemed to be verified by the director's next words. "Your music program is marvelous, youngster; absolutely marvelous."

"Yes. Yes!" Symme exclaimed. "It is new!"

"That's it," the director agreed, "it is an entirely new approach; something no one else has ever done."

"I'm glad you appreciate the music," Symme gushed. "It really moves us."

"The music?" the director repeated, momentarily at a loss that puzzled Symme. "Oh, yes -- but it's the

rhythm program to which I refer."

"Of course," said Symme, relaxing. "The rhythm is what is different; the rhythm is what makes it unique. It came to me at my third Moul't."

"I wouldn't have thought music could be detected while nine cluikes Moul't." The position of the director's head indicated amusement.

"But I was alone!" the cluike exclaimed. Eager to explain, he rushed on. "A Moul't should be a private thing," he said. "Particularly the third Moul't. The music proves one should be alone; I never would have discovered it if I had waited for the rest of my Nine." Deeply involved in disclosing his discovery, Symme gushed on. "The music is important for more than one reason; first, of course, for itself -- but it's also important as a symbol for change, an expression of individuality, as something to bond all third-Moul't cluikes together. The rhythm is so...so...." Symme stopped, his eyes looking dreamily into the distance beyond the director's walls.

The director paused, looking contemplatively at Symme. Then he said, "Young one, I don't think you understand; I know the rhythm is important to you, but that is not what I mean." Symme was totally at a loss. "Your fascination with the rhythm," the older cluike continued, "drove you to heights of sheer genius -- not," he hurriedly added, as Symme's musical pride was pumping the youngster's enthusiasm anew, "the music or the rhythm, but what it inspired you to achieve." Symme's confusion was now complete. "In order to transcribe your music, to record it for all the world, you invented a new form of math!"

"Well...well, of course," Symme spluttered. "I mean, the rhythm is two-four; that cannot be recorded by a math based on nine."

The director shook his head in amusement. "So simple," he said, mockery in his tone. "You, who are not a mathematician, invent a new math -- and see it as nothing but a musical tool."

"Don't you understand?" Symme said, a bit of desperation in his voice. "I had to come up with a program that would accurately catch the rhythm."

"I know; I understand," the director said reassuringly. "It just amazes me that you don't comprehend the scope of what you have achieved." He put up a long-fingered hand to cut off Symme's attempted reply. "Yes, you think your achievement was your music; that may well be remembered, too. But your math program will revolutionize, will save the world as we know it. It will lead to the salvation of our race"

Symme was immobilized. Thoughts ricocheted in his brain, bounced off each other, and could not coalesce into coherence. "I...the music...it...." His words trailed helplessly away.

The director did something totally out of character: He laughed. His body trembled as the sound rumbled through him. "Yes, my innocent young musician," he finally managed, "you have saved the world. You didn't even know it was in danger, did you?"

Symme, still flabbergasted, could only shake his head.

"Eomme knew," the director went on, managing to regain his serious mien. "Many of us knew. Our eggs are crowding us out of our home."

Mention of Eomme brought Symme's thoughts back into focus. "Then why save the eggs?" he asked.

"Truth from the innocent," the director murmured. "If only it were so simple," he continued. "Most adults regard their eggs as extensions of themselves; doing away with the eggs would, to them, be the same as murder."

"But -- it makes no sense!" Symme proclaimed, disturbed. "Why save something that will cause us to die?"

"The young are liberals, the older are conservatives," the director said softly, more to himself than to Symme. "Your logic is clear, unhampered by emotions," he went on, more directly. "I can sympathize with the view of the adults. They see the eggs as other cluike; they forget they are only potentially cluike -- a long way from being citizens."

"Besides -- wouldn't a good citizen give up his life if it were for the good of the race?" asked Symme.

"Of course!" the director responded. "The adults, however, respond by saying that the eggs cannot make that decision. But," he went on, shaking himself and brightening, "that is no longer a problem. Unwittingly, you have solved that."

"But -- I don't understand how," Symme said.

"We developed rockets to enable us to pile the egg crates higher," the director explained. "However, the rockets are limited. While they can travel above the atmosphere, we cannot send them to the moons; fuel is limited, and our control is minimal. With your math, I have developed a program than can accurately pinpoint where a moon will be and what a rocket's most efficient path is to intercept it."

"Will it work?" Symme asked.

"Wrong tense, young one," the director said, smug satisfaction in his voice and his stance. "It did work. As soon as I realized what you had, and learned to use it, I worked non-stop on a navigational program. I received word of the rocket's return only minutes before you arrived! Now we can stack eggs on the moon. We can even send cluiques to other planets to breed; you have saved not only the world; you have saved your race -- and launched them into space!"

"Director, I am very glad to hear that," Symme said, self-consciously -- and concerned. "But...." He stopped, unsure of himself, uncertain how to express his worry.

"Yes -- yes? Speak up," the director encouraged.

"Are...are you going to ban my music?"

Again the director erupted into laughter.

NEUTRON McGUIRK

by

Michael Shack

(Mr. Shack wishes to acknowledge the contributions of Jerry Page.)

It is not unusual for Captain Shiver to save a planet, a solar system -- or even a universe!

Oglethorpe's Universal Encyclopedia -- Volume Three

Space screamed. The universe itself seemed tortured and dying. The sky twisted, the stars slewed to this side and that, and gravity did strange things. Captain Shiver knew that if she had made a mistake she - and the rest of the universe - would pay for it now. She was careening - she and the planet she was standing on and the stars around them - through the great worm hole, and she could not stand up. She fell sprawling and lay there while creation itself spun and whirled and screamed and rose and fell -

And then it was over and everything was quiet.

Or almost everything.

"Golly gee, Captain Shivers," Urgus said. "You saved the universe!"

"Oh, double bummer," said Thurston. "I'll bet you saved entropy, too."

"By crackies!" said space marshal Grabby Haze, using all ten tentacles to lift himself from the ground. "I knowed you could do it, Cap'n Shivers. Why, by doggies, it reminds me of the time I helped young Curt Newton figure out how to deal with them thar ornery space fabric vortexes on Duceon IX. Waal -"

"Will you for frippin sakes cut it out with the nostalgia," said first officer Nadir McGuirk dusting himself off with his right wing. "This is serious stuff here. While we was zipping through space I thought for a minute my cigar went out."

Shivers climbed to her feet and gazed at the sky behind them. It was muddied and clouded and the clouds moved like whirlpools of quicksand. "It is serious. I thought I designed that worm hole to be unstable. But it's not breaking up."

McGuirk puffed on his perpetual stogie. "So? We got through it, didn't we?"

Abstractedly, Shivers nodded her head. "Yes, but unless that thing collapses, Doctor Ping's space devourer can follow after us and if it manages that, we won't have escaped, and it'll destroy the entire universe anyway."

"In that case," said Thurston, "it's just as well you saved entropy."

"Forget entropy," she said, with a snarl. "Ping's lab is just over that hill. Come on, we can't have much

time."

"You had to bring time through that worm hole, too," Thurston remarked.

She started off at a fast walk, forcing her friends to scurry to keep up with her long-legged strides. She was thinking that all this was really her fault.

Six years ago, she and Grabby went after Ping and Percy Pontifex, a loving couple of space extortionists who were threatening planets on the off-side of the Horse's Head Nebula, with a planet gobbler they had invented. She realized now the planet gobblers were small-scale versions of the thing Ping was now letting loose to destroy the entire universe, but they seemed impressive at the time. Grabby captured Ping. Captain Shivers were after Percy. She tracked him to his space lair where he was creating the planet gobblers. In the resulting fight, Percy fell into one of his own planet gobblers and was devoured. When she heard, Ping swore revenge.

She spent a year in jail and then escaped, successfully dropping out of sight once she was out of prison. No one knew what she was up to until three days ago when it was realized she had managed to create a planet gobbler of such macrocosmic proportions that it had the ability to swallow - after carefully chewing up - the whole universe.

But Shivers had a couple of tricks up her own sleeve. Instead of attacking the gobbler directly she flew to Outpost, a planet on the outskirts of the universe on the far side of creation from where the gobbler was forming. While the gobbler was still outside, she used Mesomorph technology, combined with a trick she had learned that vortex season she's worked with "Storm" Cloud, and created the biggest worm hole ever. So big the universe would zip through and find itself elsewhere when the space devourer attacked. But if the worm hole didn't collapse of its own instability, the space devourer would simply follow after them.

It was no surprise that Ping's hideout was located on this cold and desolate, virtually starless planet. It was the only logical place, all things considered, and Captain Shivers had considered them twice. Now, determined one way or another to put an end to all this, Shivers made her way toward Ping's stronghold.

"Wow, are we ever in luck," exclaimed Thurston. "She left the front door wide open!"

"Waal, I never," said Grabby drawing his six guns.

"In that case," McGuirk snapped, "stop bragging about it all the time."

"That thar ornery she-male mad scientist done set a trap for us. She expects us to just stupidly walk right in through that door whar she'll be a-waiting for us. Come on, boys! And you too, Miz Cap'n Shivers! Let's sneak around this way."

Before she could stop him, Grabby took off around the building with Thurston, McGuirk and Urgus following, right into the concealed pit.

Shivers peered over the edge. They had fallen into the strong, sticky web of a giant spider. The spider looking hungry, was eagerly moving toward them. Happily, it was a small giant spider and she felt certain it was no match for her crew. She could get them out of the web later.

She ran across the rocky ground to the open door. She pressed against the wall, her d-gun held ready, and peered inside. The interior of the building was dark, of course. Very dark. Captain Shivers' brain raced.

This was a trap, of course, but that had to be weighed against the short amount of time left before the space eater would stabilize enough to get pulled into the worm hole. Ping had a better opportunity for

subtlety than she did. So Captain Shivers took a long, deep breath and darted through the doorway into the trap.

As she suspected, there were guns trained on it. She saw the flash of their muzzles as they launched their energy rings in her direction. She dropped to the floor and rolled under them, her own gun firing to disable them. Something snapped. Something else crackled and popped. The hidden guns ceased firing. She got to her feet, saw a corridor before her and ran down it.

Abruptly her path was blocked by a gigantic being that stepped from an alcove. It was naked to the waist and its skin was scaled like that of a snake. From its pit viper's head a thin, forked tongue extended and trembled, testing the air. In its three-fingered hand it held a scimitar which it swung at Captain Shivers, aiming for her neck. She ducked and let the flat, curved blade pass above her. She fired her d-gun straight into the guard's mid-section. Rings of violet and green, orange and blue, red and yellow energy donuts sprouted from her weapon and consumed the creature. Captain Shivers continued onward.

She found herself in a large, mostly empty room. Draperies were hung on all sides covering any openings there might be except for the one she had come through. The light was dim and rather ghostly, she thought. Why must these mad scientist types always be so dramatic? Oh, well. There was nothing else to do. She stepped into the center of the room.

She knew there would be a trap and she was certain it would come from the ceiling. She hoped it would be an easy thing to duck under it as it fell and thus escape it. But as it fell, it fell faster than she thought possible. As she darted to get out of it her shoulder slammed painfully against the curved glassite wall. She was trapped like a fly under a cup. Lying there she fired her gun just to confirm her suspicions. Sure enough, the photonic rings crackled harmlessly against the hard transparent metal. "Trapped at last," said Ping, stepping out from a nearby hiding place and standing in front of Captain Shivers.

Shivers got slowly to her feet and holstered her useless d-gun. Under her breath she cursed herself for this miscalculation. Such recklessness! How could she be so stupid with the lives of everyone in the entire universe at stake?

Seeing her lips move, Ping misunderstood her anger and said, "Curse me all you like, you fool. I will be the one to have the revenge. Me! Not you,"

She was tall and slender. She wore the elaborately revealing black gown of a lady mad scientist. The cowl was thrown back to show the twin streaks of gray hair that shot from her temples through her long, straight black hair. Her eyes were cold and angry, the semblance of a smile that twisted her lips, false. She leaned closer to the barrier that separated them.

"Oh, how I've hated you these past, ugly years, Captain Shivers, for what you did to my lover. You came, you and those fools who follow you, because I threatened the universe. But destroying the universe is trivial compared to revenge against you." She stood up straight and with hatred dripping from her words, said, "Because of you I lost the only man I ever loved."

She moved with a lithe grace over to the wall and pulled back the drapes to reveal a control panel. "Your cell is not just a prison, but the barrel of a space catapult. It was extremely difficult, but while you were creating that dismal worm hole of yours, I managed to induce a small added potential into its energy fundament. It can't collapse until something goes back through it. Anything will do, you know. Even your small mass. With one pull of this lever, I will send you hurtling into space back into the gravity well of the worm hole. You'll be shot back to the other side of the sevagram where my universe devourer awaits. I'm sure it will be disappointed having just you to devour, but I look forward to the event." She smiled the way a snake smiles at a bird with a broken wing. "I'll build a new worm hole, then. After all, if you can build one, anyone can. And I'll bring my space-eater here."

Her hand clutched the lever and she laughed madly.

"That highly efficient Earle K. Begery design lady space captain's uniform you wear will protect you from the rigors of space, of course, but I advise you to take a deep breath now, because I don't intend to give you the opportunity to don a space helmet."

The tube in which Captain Shivers was trapped had a diameter of about four feet and though it was smooth, it was no more than eight feet to the top. The catapult mechanism had to be in the floor. As Ping turned, Shivers made her move.

She pulled her Swiss Army ballpeen hammer from her belt and jumped.

Using the hammer as a grappling hook, she caught the top of the tube and pulled herself up. Ping saw what she was doing and leaped for the control lever.

As she reached it, and pulled, Captain Shivers yanked her d-gun out of her holster and, thumbing the control stud to force field and fired straight down at the catapult. The idea was not to destroy the thing but to balance forces. Forces must balance, you know. The mechanism of the catapult sang. But the thing did not spring. Shivers pulled herself up out of the tube and dropped to the floor.

Ping saw what was happening and, with a scream of rage, drew her own d-gun, thumbing the control stud to kill, and fired. Shivers hit the floor, dropped and rolled clear of the round, colorful rings of the energy donuts, and fired.

There hadn't been time to thumb the control stud back to combat. The force field slammed Ping against the wall panel. A lever - not the catapult release - flew up. The glassite tube rose back into the ceiling.

"I'll kill you with my bare hands!" Ping said, charging. But her hands were not bare. She held a wicked looking knife and was slashing, too angry to be effective. With a move she had learned on the playing fields of Miss Amelia Tidwell's Space Academy for Genteel Young Ladies, Shivers straight-armed her opponent, sending her sprawling to the floor, right over the catapult.

The catapult strained against the pressure of the force field. Shivers jumped for the control panel. But before she could reset the catapult release lever and stop it, the catapult burst free.

Ping screamed as she was hurtled aloft.

For a long time Shivers just stood staring up at the hole in the ceiling through which Ping had exited. Then McGuirk walked in, puffing on his stogie and said, "I see I had all the hard stuff, again."

"Did everyone escape the spider safely?" Captain Shivers asked

"Oh, yeah," said McGuirk moving toward the middle of the floor. "One puff of my old stogie and I had old eight legs taking off like a turpentine bath."

"Good. Oh, you better moved away from that spot."

McGuirk looked down at the floor which gave no indication of the now-reset catapult hidden beneath it. He scowled and said, "Why for?"

She told him. "Because Ping the Percyleless says you can't stand there."

REVOLT ON MIMAS

by

Rick Brooks

True civilization can lead to satisfied living.
--Oglethorpe's Universal Encyclopedia, Volume Four

Can Ranger Will and the Robotmen head off a war in the Jovan system?

Chapter 1: "Not on Mimas."

"A revolt on Mimas. That's impossible!" Ranger Will shook his head. "Ezra, my mother and father lived on Mimas after I was born. The people of Mimas are the most civilized people in the Solar System."

Marshall Ezra Wojciechowski ran a hand through his graying hair. "I know Will. I was there with your folks. But the Mimasans have changed. The Solar Council is ready to send in the Space Marines."

"Things are that bad?"

"Councillor Treemas wanted me to tell you at once."

"Treemas isn't the kind to panic. I'd better get moving. Thanks, Ezra."

"I'll see you, Will. Give the Tin Men my regards."

The viewscreen cleared.

"Excuse me, Ranger Will."

"Yes, Webster," Will said as he turned. He saw a slightly taller steel plated robot standing beside the black and silver robot.

"AL76 ready for duty, Master."

"Webster?"

"Grag and Speedy and I finally got AL76 repaired after what the claim jumpers in the asteroid belt did to him. We had to make some of the parts for him and guess at a few others."

Webster put a silvery hand on the other robot's shoulder. "He was your mother's finest creation before she created the three of us."

"I'm glad to see you're back with us, AL76."

"Thank you, Master."

"But right now, we hav to get to Mimas fast. AL76 return to your cubicle."

Will hit the alarm. He and his black cat, Dark Nebula, were in their acceleration couches and the three robots in their control chairs in less than a minute.

The Comet shot off for Mimas at top speed.

Chapter Two: "What Do You Hear?"

Will usually enjoyed being on Mimas. He'd spent his early childhood here and the gravity maintained at three-fourths of Earth's by the Forerunner generator at the moon's core lent a bounce to his step.

Mimasport seemed the same. But Will was troubled by what he saw of the Mimisans. They seemed jumpy and nearly all were frowning.

As he, Grag, Speedy, and Webster headed across the spaceport, two young spacers fresh off a cargo ship watched them.

"That's Ranger Will. Made Unattached almost as soon as he joined the Patrol."
"But he's so small."

"Only 5'5" and doesn't look very muscular. But he's a direct descendant of Whistling Dan Barry on his father's side and Dusty Fogg on his mother's side."

"They say there ain't a man in Known Space faster on the draw."

"They're right."

"Isn't the Comet the quickest and fastest ship in Known Space?"

"Sure is. Ranger Will really knows how to apply scientific discoveries. Takes after his Dad. The Comet has improvements that no other ship in the fleet has."

"Didn't the robots raise him?"

"Yep. After the Milford Mafia killed his parents, genius robotist Susan Calvin Vanderbilt and skilled engineer Thomas J. Vanderbilt, the three Robotmen bought him up. He and the Robotmen broke up the Milford Mafia before he turned 16.

"They broke through the Milford asteroid's fortifications that even the Patrol couldn't crack. Ranger Will beat their leader, the feared Demon Knight in hand to hand combat."

"Will is supposed to be a lot stronger than he looks."

"He took out a grizzly bear once with only his bare hands. Just like his ancestor Whistling Dan did."

"I thought it was Clark Savage Jr. that did that."

"Do you believe everything people tell you?"

Webster's supersensitive hearing effortlessly picked up the conversation. He was always interested in what people were saying about them.

Will and the Robotmen went down a narrow alley between two warehouses. A nudge by Webster and Will turned to see a slight figure in the dim light under an overhang.

The little man had a huge head with large faded blue eyes. A few strands of white hair struggled to cover the dome of his head.

"Will."

"Findar. What's wrong?"

"I do not know, Will. We seem to have lost our serenity. Even I have trouble remaining calm and balanced."

"I feel a bit jumpy myself," Will admitted.

"Humans are sensitive to ultrasonics," Webster said. "I can just detect a faint sound high on the ultrasonic band."

"Yes, I hear it too," Grag said.

"Weird modulation pattern," Speedy added.

"Similar to some human brain patterns," Grag said.

"None of you have heard it before when we were here," Will said.

The three Robotmen looked at each other. Webster said, "We have not."

They looked at each other again. "We have never sensed anything quite like this before," Webster said.

"That could be quite significant," Will said. "That and the trouble here are both since our last visit."

He briefly gripped the shoulder of the small humanoid. "We'll do what we can, Findar."

"I am heartened, Will. I shall do what I can to smooth your way. But be careful. Many of my people are becoming irrational."

Findar faded into the shadows.

Will turned to his three companions. "Let's find this sound. Something must be generating it." He gestured. "Grag you start out going north. Speedy, you go south. Webster and I will keep going east. We'll try triangulating this sound."

"Right, Will."

"Sure thing, Chief."

Chapter Three: "No Need to Go Looking for Trouble. It Always Finds Us."

Will didn't tire as easily under the lower gravity. But he felt dispirited. "Three hours now, Webster. All we can say is that there are several sources and they all seem to be in motion."

Webster stiffened as though listening. Will knew that he was in touch with the other two Robotmen.

"One seems to have stopped." Webster turned his head a bit and began running. Will was right behind him.

Even with the daily exercises Will did under high gravity and with the low gravity of Mimas, Will couldn't keep up with Webster. Keeping the silver and black robot in sight was enough, though.

Soon they approached a traffic snarl. Outraged Mimasans were actually fighting each other in the streets. Shrill voices filled the air. Small fists tried to dent large heads. Webster slowed down. Will could see Speedy's silvery form above the crowd forcing his way from a cross street.

Then Speedy disappeared. There was the sound of metal on metal.

Will's ray guns set on stun flashed into his hands. Webster followed suit.

The crowd melted away in front of them.

There was a bellow of rage that momentarily silenced the crowd. Grag stood on the top of a truck in the other cross street. He had a stun rifle in each massive red hand and was hosing down the crowd.

Soon all was quiet. Speedy got up as Will, Webster, and Grag hurried up to him.

"Are you hurt, Speedy?" Will asked.

"Just a few dents, Chief. Nothing serious. Grag will enjoy telling me how careless I was as he fixes them."

"Let's find the sound generator first. Where is it?"

"It's quit," Grag said disgustedly. "Was probably one of those." He pointed to a cluster of 3 small cars, a flatbed with something wrapped in a tarpaulin on it, a cream-colored van, and a robot pulled wagon, apparently full of pineapples.

Will started for the vehicles, carefully stepping over sleeping Mimasans.

Before he could get there, three motorcycles rode by little men in Mimasport Police uniforms pulled up behind them.

"Come here," one commanded.

"Will grimaced and went over. The Robotmen followed him.

"What has happened here?"

"There was a riot. We put everyone to sleep with stunners so that no one would get hurt," Will explained.

"You do not have authority to do that."

"This is Unattached Space Ranger Will," Grag growled. "The Space Patrol has given him the authority to keep order anywhere in the Solar System."

"But Chane Din..." one of the Mimasan policemen started to say.

Another held up a small hand. "We must sort this out. Please return to your ship and wait for us."

Will nodded. He gestured and he and the Robotmen headed back to the Comet.

Grag grumbled all the way back to the ship.

When they arrived at the Comet, there were two more policemen waiting. After Will and the Robotmen entered the ship, the policemen moved to the foot of the ramp.

Chapter Four: "Now What?"

The four met in the Control Room of the Comet.

"Another fine mess you've gotten us into," Grag said to Speedy.

"I wasn't the one that left dents in the roof of that truck," Speedy said.

"That's done, men," Will said. "What do we do now? We can slip out of here without them noticing. But we need to know where to go."

There was a meow and Dark Nebula hopped up onto his acceleration couch. His unusually large head was the only sign that he was not a normal cat.

Webster reached for Nebula's collar and unfastened the ornamental boss. "Shall we see what Nebula has noticed."

Speedy nodded. "That cat seems to have a nose for what we need."

"Remember when you got him on Proxima Centauri, Will?" Grag said. "That place was spooky. The Adepts looked like ghosts on all wavelengths."

"Supposed to be one of the Forerunner races," Speedy added.

"Crystalline pillars upholding a crystalline roof over each world in the system. What a work of

engineering!" Grag was momentarily lost in admiration of such a feat.

Webster put the collar boss into a specially designed recorder.

In less than a minute, a green light came on. Webster took out the boss and replaced it on Dark Nebula's collar as the recorder screen lit up.

A cat's eye view of things usually takes in a lot of feet and legs. But Nebula had obviously put his front paws up on something for all the shots.

Most of the short film sequences showed cream colored vehicles marked Simon's Bakery. Some showed Mimasans with rings on their left index fingers. Two shots showed a close up of two different rings.

"Chief, let's go back and look at one of those bakery drivers."

Speedy reached over to the recorder. The picture froze and zoomed on the driver's hands on the steering wheel. He was wearing a now familiar ring.

"Good work, Speedy. Probably some form of identification."

"I fear we have a problem then, Ranger Will," Webster said.

"Both of the policemen at the foot of the ramp had such rings."

"As did the policeman that mentioned Chane Din," Grag said.

"There is something a little odd about their faces," Webster said. "Their features are almost too regular."

Will knew that all three robots were blessed with photographic memory. He nodded. "I think that we've got a problem."

"There's only two of them, Chief," Speedy said as his spidery silver arms moved restlessly.

"And a lot more if we stun those," Will said.

"We can't just stand here, Chief."

"We won't. Grag, you get AL76 and work on building something to jam those ultrasonic generators."

"Won't work near the generators, Will."

"Also turn out a few small flying robots to look like moon doves equipped for surveillance and able to disable a heavy duty generator without injuring nearby Mimasans."

"Right, Will. Twenty should be enough. I'll get AL76 on it right away."

"Speedy, use the Comet's computer. Link up to the local Net and find out all you can about Chane Din. And anything else that looks fishy to you."

"Right, Chief. I'm on it." Speedy darted over to his control chair and his hands blurred over the built-in computer keys.

"Webster, button the Comet up tight. Keep a look-out all around the ship. I think trouble's on the way."

"Another name for fun, Chief," Speedy said, without looking away from his computer screens.

"As for me, I think our junior partner could use some tuna. He's had a busy day."

Dark Nebula looked smug as he jumped down and followed Will from the Control Room.

Chapter Five: "Chane Din is Up to Something."

Ranger Will frowned as he looked over Speedy's shoulder at the computer screen. "Chane Din seems well on his way to running this world."

"What puzzles me, Chief, is that the fool can't see that he'll bring in the Space Marines if he keeps up this war talk."

"You know, Speedy, I'm beginning to think that's just what he wants."

"Ranger Will," Webster broke in. "There are several more policemen and two vehicles here. I think they want admittance."

"Guess we better go see what they want. Get Grag with us. And take the usual precautions."

Ranger Will and the three Robotmen met the small large-headed policemen part way down the ramp. One policeman went past them.

But Speedy had flipped the airlock door shut.

The policeman struggled to open it, but couldn't.

"The Comet is not part of Mimas and you have no reason to enter it," Will said quietly.

"But we were ordered..." the policeman at the airlock said.

"We have all four of them here. Just keep watch around the ship for now," the policeman in charge said.

He turned to Ranger Will. "I'm afraid you will have to go to headquarters with us and make your statements on today's incident."

Chapter Six: "I Look Bad in Stripes."

Police headquarters was a squat, massive building built of dark volcanic rock.

It didn't look much better inside.

Especially when twenty little policemen with drawn guns surrounded them. Quick hands disarmed them.

Then they were hustled into another room. Three little men sat on a dias. Even Will was close enough to recognize the rings on their left index fingers.

"Ranger Will, you and the Robotmen, are being held on the suspicion of murdering ten citizens of Mimas. It will not pay to try anything while here as there will be two armed men watching each of you at all times and men outside watching on telescreens."

He gestured toward the cell block. "And each cell is airtight with its separate air circulation system. So you cannot gas us while we can gas you."

"The Robotmen do not kill unarmed civilians" Speedy said indignantly. "When is our trial? Or do we get one?"

The spokesman smirked, "I'm sure we will get to you quite soon."

He gestured. Will and the Robotmen were marched away.

Chapter Seven: "Dance to the Jailhouse Rock."

Ranger Will sat on a too-small bunk in his cell with his arms cuffed behind him. In three neighboring cells, the Robotmen were wrapped in chains too heavy for even Grag to budge.

In addition, eight policemen with drawn guns were watching them. None looked too happy with the job.

"Even Grag with his big feet wouldn't have stomped three Mimasans," Speedy said.

"Nor would you have knocked over seven more," Grag added.

The policemen's eyes were on their captives. They didn't see something small and dark slip in.

Dark Nebula paused to scratch his neck.

Eight policemen yawned, almost in unison. Then they all sagged to the floor.

Dark Nebula trotted over to Will's cell and rubbed against the transparent blast proof door. Around Dark Nebula's collar were small plastic containers. Each had been clawed open. There were small plugs in his delicate nostrils.

Speedy's spidery arms seemed to have several more joints as he twisted until his fingers touched a lock. It opened. Then he reached a second and a third.

One of Grag's hands had left its wrist and was going from lock to lock. As had one of Webster's hands.

Soon the three Robotmen were free and had opened the locks on their cell doors. Will had slipped out of his cuffs and had his cell door open about the time that Speedy reached it.

Dark Nebula rubbed against Will's legs and purred. Will reached down and stroked the cat's head. The plugs in Will's nose, put in before he left the Comet, had filtered out the sleeping gas.

A quick search in the next room found all the weapons that had been taken from them.

Then they left through a police station full of sleeping Mimasans. Will stopped and leaned over one wearing a familiar ring on his left index finger.

Will undid the Mimasan's collar and studied his neck. The three Robotmen joined him. Dark Nebula sat down and looked bored.

Speedy looked at his companions. "That explains a lot."

"It does indeed," Will said. "But we've got to get moving. That rally of Chane Din's is in West Stadium in less than an hour."

A man, three robots, and a cat headed out into the gathering dusk. They had a world to save.

Chapter Eight: "Just an Evening in the Park"

Ranger Will and his companions stood in the shadows near the stage where Chane Din was being introduced. The crowd went wild.

Chane Din was tall for a Mimasan, nearly four and a half feet tall. He waved his hands to silence the crowd. "My friends. A new day dawns on Mimas. A day when we will be free of our oppressors."

"Give the order to AL76," Will said to Webster.

Webster nodded.

AL76 stood beside a bank of controls in the Comet's engineering and maintenance section patiently waiting. When he received Webster's order, he quickly pushed one control button.

Twenty flying robots that looked like moon doves went into power dives. Eight ultrasonic generators ceased to operate.

Webster, Grag, and Speedy all looked toward the area back of the stage. "One left back there. Too heavily shielded for the flying robots to destroy." Webster gestured.

"Grag, take out that generator. Webster and Speedy, come with me."

The crowd was again going wild when three figures hurtled across the stage. Several Mimasans tried to stop them, but failed.

Dark Nebula came out of nowhere and tripped two.

"People of Mimas. You are being tricked. Chane Din is a liar and a fake." Will's voice projected out and momentarily silenced the crowd.

Chane Din started to answer.

With an abrupt gesture, Will ripped Chane Din's head off.

The crowd gasped. Will held Chane Din's head in his hands. But underneath was a smaller head. The head of an Enceladusan.

The small man who had posed as Chane Din tried to draw a concealed raygun. Will bounced his fake head off his real one.

The fake Chane Din dropped his raygun and went over backwards.

Webster picked up the head. "A great job of robotics. Perhaps Tal Cabot of Mars. Or Malik Rosemead of Mercury."

"Perhaps their equal who is on the wrong side of the law," Will said.

There was a crash as Grag charged into the last generator that had held the people of Mimas enthralled. The massive red robot turned out to be much sturdier than the generator.

The people of Mimas looked at each other. Then at the being who had posed as Chane Din.

A low growling sound arose from the masses that had so recently hailed their glorious leader.

Grag joined Will, Speedy, and Webster.

It took all four of them to get Chane Din off the moon safely.

The Patrol moved in and sorted out the fake Mimasans from the dazed natives.

To Will's relief, the Mimasans were their normal selves in less than an Earth week.

"There's No Place Like Home."

A little over two months later, Ranger Will and the Robotmen were sitting on a platform at the edge of Mimasport's busy spaceport.

The Chief Administrator of Mimas was delivering a speech to the throngs of cheering Mimasans.

Will did his best to mimic the poise of the Robotmen. He guessed that Speedy was listening to his

computers working on some complex problem while holding his body immobilized.

Marshall Ezra Wojciechowski, as the senior Patrol officer present, ceremoniously took over Mimas Base on behalf of the Patrol.

Then the stocky, greying officer turned it over to Ranger Will and the Robotmen as the senior Patrol officers of Mimas. The crowd became even noisier.

The crowd of cheering Mimisans escorted Ranger Will and his companions to the gates of Mimas Base.

Ezra grinned as they were left by themselves. "I reckon that getting this base shaped up will keep all of you busy awhile."

Will nodded. "Grag and I will set up a complete maintenance bay for the Comet."

Grag added, "I've got some ideas to improve our defenses. As well as the maintenance robots."

Speedy gestured. "I'm going to build the best base computer in Known Space. I'll call it Isaac."

"Isaac?" Ezra queried.

"The genius who designed the first robot over twenty years before there was the technology to build it."

Ezra turned to Webster. "I suppose you'll find something to do."

"First, I'll check everything brought here to verify that it's what it should be. Then I'll help AL76 set up a security system. He will run the base when we're away."

"With the help of Isaac," Speedy said.

"Well, looks like you fellows can get along without me. But somehow I've got a feeling that you'll be out of here before too long."

Ranger Will nodded. "Things do seem to turn up."

Ezra turned with a wave and headed for the Patrol cruiser waiting for him nearby in the Mimas spaceport. Shortly after he boarded, it lifted off.

But by then, Ranger Will and the Robotmen were busy fitting up their new home.

TOLERANCE STATION

or

TRUE CONFESSIONS FROM SPACE

by Shelby Vick

"Farms around Tolerance Station are extremely fertile and produce unparalleled crops. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the farmers."

-- Oglethorpe's Universal Encyclopedia, Volume Eight

I just wanted to be loved.

As I lay on my hospital bed, sometimes darkly unconscious, sometimes jolted awake by a new wave of pain, sometimes hovering between the numb relief brought on by pain medication and the fearful relief of blackness, I remembered.

. . . The spacer I fell in love with when I was sixteen. He was blondly handsome, and I saw an aura of mystery about him because he went into the depths of space.

"Wonder and death around me all the time," he told me. His name was Lew Krant, and he was an Associate Astrogator. We were sitting on a bench in the park where we had met. There was one real tree, several plants in pots, and a glassed-in square protected a plot of real grass. The spring air was almost clean. "Things few men have ever seen," the spacer went on, "and things no man should ever see." He held me tight while he said that, and I was sure I felt love pouring from him. His eyes looked at the skies, but I knew he was totally aware of me.

"What's your name, pretty thing?" he asked.

Why did he have to ask that?

". . . Jefferson Rook," I answered, nearly whispering.

"Jeff --" he started. "But. . . . But you're a girl!"

"Yes." There was bitterness in my voice. "But my father wanted a boy. He wouldn't change it."

". . . Oh. Well, it doesn't matter. You are who you are, whatever label you carry. You're beautiful, Jefferson Rook."

It felt good. So good that, when he asked me to go away into space with him, I agreed in a heartbeat. "Wait here," I told him. "I want to get a few things from home."

"Very few things," he said. "Not much room in my cabin."

"'Very few things' is all that I have," I said, a touch of bitterness in my voice. Then, remembering we were going off together, my spirits lightened. "I'll be right back," I said. He kissed me, and I turned to go home. The kiss was still tingling on my lips; I would definitely be right back.

When I walked in the door, two of my sisters were there. "Well, I see little miss innocent big brain decided to honor us with her presence!"

I blushed, then got mad because I had blushed. It bothered them that I was at the top of my class.

“That’s intolerance,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm.

“What are you talking about?” my older sister said, shock and puzzlement in her defiant voice. In the twentieth century, ‘dis-crimination’ had been the buzzword; anyone guilty of it was considered to be a social outcast. As discrimination was gotten under control, ‘intolerance’ took its place. No one wanted to be guilty of that -- not even my sisters.

“Intolerance is not accepting a person or idea or anything else just because of some difference,” I explained. “You’re being intolerant of my achievements. You can’t deny it!”

“But it’s always someone else who is intolerant!” my oldest sister objected. “It’s always someone else!”

“Not this time,” I said. “Just think about it.” That backed them off. I went to my bed, picked up the few things I wanted, and left without any explanation. We were a poor family; they would be better off without me.

Lew smuggled me aboard the freighter that had brought him, keeping me out of sight until the space drive went on. “After that,” he explained, “it will make no difference. Costs too much to go back.” So I kept quiet during and after takeoff, staying in his quarters, both of us strapped in, until he said, “Did you feel that tingle just then?”

I nodded. I had felt it, and felt just a little sick.

“That’s it,” he said. unstrapping. He smiled when he saw the expression on my face. “Feel like puking?” he asked. I nodded again, afraid to talk. He pulled a small box out from under his bunk, took out a syringe, and pressed it against my arm. Whatever he aired into me worked faster than it takes to tell it. My stomach calmed, and I felt fine. Without prompting, I followed his lead and unstrapped, stood up. Impulsively, I hugged and kissed him.

“You’re a marvel,” I breathed.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” he said, still holding me. He kissed me again, and his warm hands caressed me. Love washed over me as we returned to bed.

Even when he slapped me, I knew he loved me. The first time was when I met one of his crewmates. We talked a while, and then he said we had to go back to his quarters. When he closed the door, he slapped me.

“Don’t ever do that again!” he snapped.

“Wh-what?” I asked, puzzled and hurt. My heart hurt worse than my stinging face.

“You were flirting with him!” he hissed. “Don’t ever forget -- you’re mine!”

He was jealous! I felt better, realizing that. He loved me, or he wouldn’t be jealous. “I didn’t mean it,” I said, softly. “I thought he was your friend, and I was just trying to be nice.” Then I added, “I’m sorry.”

Slowly, the anger faded from his face. “All right,” he said. “Just don’t let it happen again. None of these bums are friends of mine; I just work with them, that’s all.”

I kissed him. “I’ll remember,” I promised.

The next time . . . the next time he slapped me. . . . But before I could remember, the medicine swallowed me into blackness again.

The pain that brought my hospital bed back into my consciousness also reminded me of the pain of that other slap. He had asked for sex, and I said it was the wrong time of the month.

“That’s your problem!” he said, and slapped me. “I want you now, and that’s that!”

He needed me! How could I have been so selfish? He loved me, and needed me.

I submitted.

But the last time he slapped me was different. “You’re what?” he asked, total disbelief in his voice.

“I’m pregnant,” I said, this time some defiance in my voice. “We’re going to have a baby.”

He slapped me. “You were supposed to take precautions!” he said.

I drew back, putting a hand to my face. “I did!” I protested. “I took the Pill, and I used a diaphragm. But I’m pregnant, anyway. That means God wants us to have a child.”

“The hell it does!” he exclaimed. “It means you’re trying to trap me, that’s what it means! I’ll have the doc suck that thing out of you in a heartbeat.”

“You will not!” I insisted. “No one is killing our baby!”

The baby was the only thing of his I was going to have. He put me off at the next spaceport. We got off the ship, “To see the place,” he said.

“It doesn’t look like much of a place,” I said, looking around.

“It’s a farming community,” the spacer told me, “with the space-port serving as its capitol. A few thousand people live here, scattered over hundreds of miles. Best produce in the galaxy,” he went on, trying to sound enthusiastic. “Each farm has at least several hundred acres, each run by one family.” Like spokes from a hub, roads led away to the farms. Automated trucks brought produce to the spaceport where it was stored for shipment.

“The spaceport itself is really modern,” he continued, “with schools, restaurants, a major hospital, bars and theaters as well as administrative buildings and -- mostly -- huge warehouses that surround the landing pads.”

A warehouse was the last thing we looked at together. “Know what your trouble is?” he asked me. We were walking down a hall with high walls, stacks of storage compartments and a few closets.

“What?” I asked, a little concerned. After the argument about the baby, I hadn’t been sure how to take anything he said.

“Moradys,” he said, then was smugly quiet -- and expectant.

“Moradys?” I asked, not knowing what he wanted. “What’s that?”

He shook his head. “Smart a girl as you are, you don’t know?” he asked. “Guess that ain’t in schoolbooks yet.” He chuckled, a self-satisfied look on his face.

“What is it?” I repeated.

“It’s you,” he said. “Sweet. Innocent. Great in bed.” The takeoff horn blasted. “But not that great!” he snapped, grabbing me and shoving me into a closet before I could do anything, and propped a chair against the knob. I screamed and pounded on the door, but it did no good.

I never saw him again.

Eventually I remembered a glimpse of something I had seen when he pushed me into the closet. There had been a long strip of metal lying on a shelf at the rear, a strip that reminded me of a metal ruler. I fumbled around and cut my finger on something sharp; the edge of the ruler. Sucking my cut finger, I carefully picked up the metal strip. Yes, it was thin, but thick enough for my purposes.

I had learned a trick back home. When the government van left food for us, my sisters would sometimes push me in the bathroom and put a chair under the knob. They did that so they could have more food. One time a ruler had been left in the bathroom, and it finally occurred to me how to use it to get out. I repeated the trick now, getting down on my hands and knees (it was harder to do in the cramped closet, but I managed) and sliding the ruler under the door until it pushed against a chair leg. After minutes of maneuvering, I managed to slide the chair back, and it fell. I was free.

But free for what? While I was working at the chair, I had felt the telltale vibration signaling the departure of the ship. I was stranded.

Str-a-n-d-e-d. . . .

“Hello, honey.”

Who -- Who said that? Groggily, I opened my eyes. Through a slowly-clearing haze, I saw a blurred hospital room around me. I moved my head and looked about. There was no one there. Who had . . . ? Then I remembered. It was another time I had awakened, back to my memories of the warehouse. I had cried myself to sleep on the warehouse floor, in utter exhaustion, out of it until a hand touched my shoulder and someone said:

“Hello, honey.”

I looked up, and a man’s face slowly came into focus; an old man’s face; he must have been over forty. There were furrows on his brow, smile lines had left their impression around his eyes and mouth. There was a hump to his nose. It was a craggy face, but friendly. He looked a bit rumped, and unshaven. He must have just gotten off work.

“Hi,” I said, squeakily, sitting up. I cleared my throat. “Hello,” I said, this time with no sleep in my voice. “Am I in trouble?”

He smiled and sat beside me. “Why should you be in trouble?”

"I . . . I don't belong here," I said, nervously.

"You don't even belong on this planet, honey," he said, patting me on the shoulder. "But that doesn't break any laws."

"Oh . . . that's good," I said. Then I looked him in the eyes. "How do you know I don't belong on this planet?" I asked.

"Don't take no great smarts to figure that out," he said. "Just two eyes is all I need." He said 'Don't' without the 't', and 'Jes' instead of 'Just'. All his ending 't's were soft or dropped. It sounded strange, but comfortable. Something was reassuring about it. . . . My grandfather! I hadn't seen him since I was six, but I remembered he talked that way. I was reassured.

"You don't dress like anybody around here," he went on. "No farmer's daughter would be wearing clothes like that." I was wearing metallic jeans that fit tightly, and a sleeveless yellow top that emphasized my breasts. He had liked it. "And," the man continued, "you ain't old enough to be working in the port. Besides," he added, smiling, "while I can't say I know everybody here, I sure would have noticed a pretty young thing like you." I smiled, but then he spoiled it. "My name's Jim," he said. "What's yours?"

I looked away, biting my lip. Why did I have to carry such a name?

"It can't be that bad," he said gently. "I won't tell anyone else."

The secret wasn't really a secret, anyway. "Jefferson Rook," I said, defiantly.

"Jeff --" Jim shook his head. "Your father must have hated you."

"Why decide it was my father?" I asked, curious.

"Because a mother would never do that," he said. "A mother isn't likely to want a son that strongly. Even if she did, she wouldn't take it out on a daughter just because she was the wrong sex."

He was so wise, so perceptive. I nodded, not feeling as bad now that someone understood. "He wanted a boy," I agreed. "I have three sisters. I tried my best. I was always on the "A" honor roll at school, but he said he expected no less." My sisters used to chide me about those "A"s I got. "Straight "A"s and you don't know nothing; no smarts at all!" they'd say. "A straight-"A"s ignoramus! You don't know about people; you don't know about life! It's on the street you learn things, not in school or sitting at home reading all the time." One of them tossed a magazine at me. It was garishly titled, Street Confessions. "If you're going to read anything, read one of these." I never read them, because they were the only things my sisters would read.

"My father," I started again, but Jim interrupted me.

"Never mind," he said squeezing my shoulder. "It's who you are inside that counts."

"But," he added, "we've got to do something. You can't just live in a warehouse." He got up. "Come with me," he said, holding out his hand.

I followed him unquestioningly. He led me outside the warehouse. It was dark, but clear. Two small moons were overhead, and countless stars dusted the heavens. The weather was calm and just comfortably cool. Lights glowed from posts. An occasional vehicle went silently by. I went with him quietly past darkened storefronts and to a nearby building. As we went inside, I asked, "Where are we?"

"Home," he answered.

He led me down a long, low-ceilinged hall to a door with his name on it. He palmed the lock and I said, "I might not be here if warehouse closets had palm locks."

He lifted a questioning eyebrow and I told him what happened.

Putting an arm around me, he said, "Sounds to me like you're lucky we got knobs on closet doors."

I stared at him, then realized what he meant. Nodding slowly, I said, "I think you are right."

We went inside. The indirect lighting revealed a light blue cubicle twice the size of Lew's quarters. Colorful pictures were scattered about. On the right was a cubicle with a bed with drawers under it and a cabinet beside it; on the left was a cooking unit and a refrigerator. Between the two, on the opposite wall, was a narrow door. "My bath," Jim said, indicating it. "The luxury of a tub, as well as an ultrasonic shower."

"More than we had at home," I said, a touch of bitterness in my voice; not bitter in envy, but bitter memories.

Jim patted my shoulder. "Don't worry about it," he said. "That's all behind you, now. Welcome to Tolerance Station."

Tolerance! That was a nice name, and certainly in tune with the times. I knew I was going to like it here, with Jim. He was so understanding.

In minutes he concocted a nice supper which I put away shamelessly. "I hadn't realized I was so hungry!" I exclaimed, pushing my empty plate away.

"It's been some time since you last ate," he said. "You probably slept a long time, and you hadn't eaten since leaving the ship, I'll bet."

"You're right," I agreed. "But that's enough, thanks. Strangely enough, even after all my sleep, I'm tired."

"Stress," Jim said, nodding. "About time I went to bed, too. But have you ever taken a tub bath?"

"Goodness, no! We couldn't afford that much water back home, and all the freighter had was ultrasonics."

"Plenty of water here," he said, standing. He held out a hand. "Let's go take a bath."

"Maybe . . . maybe we shouldn't," I said, hesitating. "It might be dangerous. For you, I mean."

Jim stared at me, eyes wide. "What are you talking about?"

"I've been told I have," I paused, not being sure I was doing the right thing, but I didn't want Jim to catch anything. "I've been told I have moradys." I finished quickly.

Jim laughed.

"It's funny?" I asked. "I thought it was something bad!" I didn't know whether to be angry or glad. "What is it?"

"Moradys is government-speak for 'morality dysfunction', or something like that. All it means is you're sexually active while still being sweet and innocent. Nothing to be worried about at all. Let's take our bath."

It was marvelous, soaking in all that warm water and relaxing. Jim scrubbed my back, and that was wonderful, too. All of this enhanced by my relief that moradys was nothing to worry about. Why did the government even come up with such a designation? 'Dysfunction' meant some kind of disability. What was wrong with enjoying sex, especially if you weren't wanton about it?

"I can't get over how innocent you are," Jim murmured, as he toweled me dry.

Memories of my sisters washed over me. They were always telling me how innocent I was. "Just a minute!" I said, pulling away. "I didn't come here to be insulted, no matter how nice you are!"

"No, no!" Jim said, holding up a hand to restrain my anger. "That wasn't what I meant at all! I was complimenting you! What I was referring to was the wonder of it all, that, after all you've been through with that spacer, you still retain a wonderful innocent attitude about life, and --" he dropped the towel, put his hands on my bare shoulders, and pulled me forward, so I was close to him "-- your relationships with men. So few girls could stand before me, totally nude, and be so unselfconscious about it -- but still innocent, not flirting or showing yourself off or anything, just . . . just innocent." He leaned over and kissed me. Then he held me tightly, and kissed me again.

It was nice. But what did he think was so different about me? My parents had so little time for me; they never said anything about how I should behave around men, and girls were all I had around me at home. My sisters. But they made 'innocence' sound like a bad word.

In school, there were my teachers.

One day my fifth grade teacher, Mr. Fromme, asked me to stay after class. Alone with him, he said, "I've been noticing you, Jefferson Rook. I've been noticing more than your grades."

"Yes?" I said, not sure what was going on.

"You are. . . developing. Your figure has filled out, very nicely." He tilted his head questioningly and said, "Does it bother you if I talk about your figure?" he asked. When I shook my head, he went on to say, "Does it bother you if I say your breasts are full and well-rounded?"

When I said, "No; should it?" he stood up.

"Would you come into my office with me?"

I didn't know what he was leading up to, but I saw nothing wrong with following him. Inside, after he closed the door, he said, "Would you mind if I . . . admired your breasts?"

"I don't see why not," I said. "Do you want me to disrobe?"

He licked his lips. "That would be nice," he said. Then he added, "Have you done this before?"

I shook my head.

It was interesting, different, and quite enjoyable.

Afterwards, while putting on his trousers, Mr. Fromme said, "I think this should be our little secret, don't you?"

"If you like," I replied.

It was a secret that, after that, every male teacher and I kept.

Then there was Lew Krant and, now, Jim. That had been one thing I had liked about Lew; he didn't

like secrets; he didn't mind that everyone else knew what he and I did in his cabin; bragged about it, in fact. I liked that. Still, I didn't understand what Jim was talking about. But that was all right.

Afterwards, we went to bed.

Everything went fine. No one questioned my presence, and I enjoyed Jim's hospitality. In a few weeks, he came home to say, "Got a special visitor coming tonight. Would be real nice if you could fix him a good supper and show him a good time."

I like to cook, and Jim always kept us supplied with food, much better than there had been on the ship. Any food was better than what we had back home. "Sure, Jim," I said. "I'd like that. What would you like to eat?"

Jim hesitated. "Well, I won't be here tonight," he finally said. "Just fix anything you think is nice." He paused again. ". . .Honey," he said at last, "do be nice to him. Really . . . nice."

"I will," I said, gently. "Don't worry. Wish you could be with us but, if you can't . . . I'll show him a good time. You take care of yourself, too!" I added, with mock severity.

"Don't worry," he said, stroking my cheek. "I'll be fine." He kissed me, then straightened up. "Better get busy, honey," he said. "Ain't got a lot of time. You want to have everything just right for tonight."

When I opened the door, a nice young man said, "Hi. I'm Ed." He had an eager look on his face,, but a bit hesitant at the same time.

"You can call me Honey," I said. It was what Jim called me, and I liked it. I turned on some nice music while I was serving dinner, and smiled at him a lot and made light jokes.

"Daisies," he said, at one time, pointing to a big picture I had hung on the wall.

"They're my favorite flower," I told him, smiling fondly.

I served some wine with dinner, to help him loosen up.

Afterwards we danced and I held him tight, putting my head against his shoulder. After a while, he kissed me, and I responded.

It was a very pleasant night.

A month later, Jim asked me to entertain another visitor. Since I stayed in his apartment most of the time, and ate his food, I felt I owed him the courtesy of entertaining visitors. Besides, I found newcomers refreshing. Again, Jim wasn't able to be with us.

We didn't mind.

After the third visitor came and went a month later, I suddenly started having pains. Jim took me to a doctor.

"That's strange," the doctor said, after consulting his computer. "I find no records on you."

“Never been sick a day in her life,” Jim said before I could answer. “Never had to work, neither. Outworlder to boot, so there ain’t no reason for her to have any records.”

The doctor gave me a stern look. “You should have had your records transferred when you moved here,” he said.

“Doctor, I’ve always been healthy,” I told him, following Jim’s lead. It was true, too. “I was so flustered over my first offworld trip, I didn’t see why I should take the time to get records that wouldn’t be of any real use.”

“Well,” he said, “you’re going to have some records now.” He nodded at a small open medical booth. “Stand over there, and we’ll give the computer something to digest.” It wasn’t as advanced a booth as some I’d seen on Earth; instead of standing on the plate for a heartbeat, I had to stay in place a full minute. Even then, it didn’t do a complete genetic workup, but it was sufficient for a basic health profile; height, weight, blood work, measurements -- enough so the computer would have a fairly thorough holographic record of my body, inside and outside.

After the examination, the doctor said, “You’re one of the fortunate ones, young lady. Even though you’re six months into your pregnancy, it hardly shows.” He gently patted my belly. “Still, you need to take care of yourself; get more exercise, take these pills, and it might be a good idea if you held off having any more sexual activity until after the baby gets here.” He looked at Jim, as if to be certain he understood.

“We’ll abstain,” I reassured the doctor. Jim nodded and said, “We certainly will.”

The next few months were somehow different. Jim was kind and gentle, but somehow distant -- particularly that one time a month that a spaceship came to our station. I had figured it out by then; the “special visitors” who came by were spacers -- or, at least, passengers from a space ship. What made them so “special” I didn’t work out until months after the baby was born.

The baby I never saw.

Dreamily, I was aware I was again conscious and in my pain-filled hospital room. Why was I here? What had happened to me? All I could remember was that I hurt, had been hurting a long time, and I kept drifting back, back to my earlier -- dumber, stupider -- life on the station. I was still drifting. I remembered another hospital room. . . .

In my hospital room, after the baby had been born, I asked Jim to let me see my baby.

“Not now, honey,” he said.

“But I want to hold him!” I said. “I want to nurse him and take care of him!”

“That . . . that wouldn’t be a good idea, honey,” he said, holding my hand and patting the back of it.

“Why not?” I asked, instantly anxious. Sitting up, I said, “Is something wrong with my baby?”

Quietly, Jim nodded. “Spacers get exposed to all kinds of radiation. There are always shields and other kinds of protection, but -- Well, sometimes things don’t go right. Doesn’t show on the spacer, but it affects his sperm.” He stopped.

“The baby didn’t turn out right?” I asked, softly. “Is it,” I stopped and swallowed before I completed

the question, then said, softly, "alive?"

Jim nodded. "He's alive, all right, and he'll be taken care of."

"Of course he will!" I shouted. "I'll take care of him!" I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and started to get up.

Jim stopped me with a hand firmly on my chest. "No, honey; no. Everything's taken care of. The baby has a good home, now. Some people said they would be glad to take care of him."

"But he's my baby! I should take care of him!"

"Honey, this way is best. A farm couple took him. All farms are way out from other people. Nobody else will see him. If we kept him, there are lots of people here at the port. We couldn't hide him forever. Besides," he added, "we don't have room. We'd have to get another apartment, and I don't qualify for that." When I opened my mouth, he held up his hand and added, "Not only that; he's a reminder of a part of your life you keep telling me you want to forget. His spacer father did you wrong. Sometimes you'd be mad at the father and take it out on his son, not," he added, quickly, "really meaning to! I know you'd love the baby, but there would just be too much baggage with him!" He gently pushed me back into bed. "Just lay there, and think about it for a while," he said. "I'm sure you will end up agreeing." He stood up, then placed a finger over my lips as I started to speak. "Not now!" he said. "Just think about it."

I went to sleep thinking about it, and thinking about all Jim had done for me.

A little over a month later, Jim brought another "special visitor" to our empty apartment. Not really empty; it just seemed that way because there were only the two of us in it. "You need this, honey," Jim said. "You'll be thinking more about entertaining our visitor than, than --"

"Than the baby," I finished for him. "You might be right, but there's one thing: Why would a farmer take a deformed child?"

Jim smiled. "I keep forgetting you're so young, and you don't really know how this place works, honey. The soil, atmosphere and everything makes the produce of Tolerance Station popular throughout the universe! But it costs so much to grow the stuff, most farms are a one-family business, covering hundreds and thousands of acres. Most everything is computer-operated, so just a few people can control an entire farm, but it keeps them all busy, husband, wife, and -- if they already had a child -- one kid. All of them are busy anywhere from ten to fourteen hours a day, seven days a week. There ain't no time for the wife to take off being pregnant. A baby, now, they can work in; keep it beside the wife's computer terminal, with the crib on wheels so's she can take it from room to room, if she has to go do something else, like check on connections and things like that."

"Why don't they just hire some help?" I asked.

"Combination of things. Our planet doesn't charge export taxes to families, but really soaks corporations. Space law, on the other hand, says it ain't a family business if anyone other than family works there. Makes it a corporation, which families don't want. Got it?" he asked, lifting an eyebrow. I nodded.

"Anyway," he went on, "some wives miss having a baby, but they know they don't have time to produce one themselves. They don't like those produced by testube. So they adopt. Ain't no babies on the planet to adopt, so they come from offworld. That ain't necessarily easy. So there were several families eager to take care of your baby, no matter what he looked like.

"So I guarantee you he's loved and well-taken care of. You should be proud of yourself, the home you

provided for him. He's fine, and will grow up rich." Jim smiled and stroked my hair. "So relax, be glad things turned out so well, and think about how nice it will be to have another guest to entertain." He bent down and kissed me on the forehead. "See you tomorrow, honey."

Figuring out that the guests were all from spaceships was only a small part of me deducing what was going on. Maybe Jim was involved in some kind of spy ring? But Jim didn't seem like a spy and, anyway, I was the one with the visitor, not Jim.

Maybe he was just trying to be nice to a certain group, represented by the visitors, by showing them a good time? Maybe it was a group that could do him favors?

Such as?

It took me over a year to work it out. A year in which I gave birth to twins.

Before the twins were born, Jim sat down with me in the apartment and I found out the truth about my first baby.

"Honey, do you have any idea how much extra it costs me to take care of you?" He held up a hand to squelch what I was about to say. "Not that I wouldn't do it all over again! I'm glad you are with me, and hope you can stay here a long, long time. Still, it does eat deep into my credit account. Now, I found a way to replace some of that shortage. It happened when you were first pregnant. Doctors told me there were lots of farmers wanting babies, and told me how much it cost them to get one from offworld. Said families would gladly pay it, but they'd still like to save money.

"One doctor said he had a waiting list of families wanting to adopt. He said he was sure they'd be glad to pay us, particularly if they could pay less. Shocked me, how much money he suggested. Came right at a time when my balance was close to zero. Saved us, it did."

I had been suspicious. I had thought about it a lot, and gradually came to the conclusion that what Jim had done was right. I didn't know the figures, but I was certain I cost him lots of money, and he had been so nice to me. It wasn't easy accepting it, but I did. "There wasn't anything wrong with the baby, was there?" I asked, softly.

Jim hesitated, but then he shook his head. "No, honey; except for him being Lew Krant's son. Nothing at all." He put out a hand. "I didn't like lying to you, but I didn't want to worry you about money, either." He stroked my hair. "Forgive me?"

I smiled, just a little, then reached up and took his hand. "Jim, you've given me the closest thing to a family I've ever known. Before you, my world was nothing. Nil. Zero. Hunger and abuse. Now, thanks to you, I know what a home is really like." I leaned forward and rested my head on his chest. "I owe you anything you want."

Gently, Jim pushed away from me. "Honey, you might not say that after I tell you something."

"It's the babies, isn't it?"

Jim nodded. "I -- I'm afraid I'm beginning to think of you as a baby factory; you get pregnant so easy! That, and all these farmers wanting babies. Seems others are kind of jealous that the one family has a baby actually born here. Now all of them want one! They -- they're willing to pay offworld price, just to have a baby born here! They say it's kind of like the produce; if it's born here, it's better!"

"If we build up enough credit, then we'll be able to afford a better place, and I can keep a baby? My baby?"

“Yes!” Jim said, eagerly. “Oh, yes, honey! For sure!”

So two families were happy after the twins were born. I squelched all my maternal instincts, and kept telling myself it was all to help Jim, that I would later be able to afford my own baby, and that life with Jim was really nice. Then, a few months after the twins, I found out the truth about our monthly guests.

He was the fourth one after the twins. As always, I met him at the door with a big smile. I was wearing a simple, low-cut white dress. “Dinner is --”

“The hell with dinner!” he said, as the door slid closed behind him. He reached out and grabbed me, forcing my body against his. “This is what I paid for!” he went on, forcing his lips against mine. One of his arms was around my waist; the other was lower, and his hand was squeezing my bottom. “Where’s the bed?” he asked, pulling his head back an inch. Before I could say anything, he pushed me down on the floor. “Hell with a bed! It’s been months since I’ve had a woman; we’ll do it on the floor!” He ripped at a strap on my dress, pulling it off. I screamed.

He stopped.

“What was that about?” he asked. “I’m just after what I paid for!”

“I -- I don’t know what you mean,” I said, trying to pull away from him.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he asked. “The crew put eighteen thousand into the pot and I won the drawing! Eighteen thousand is a lot to pay, and then get pushed away!”

“I mean, you’re a pretty expensive station wench, but I’ll admit you are the youngest and sexiest I’ve ever seen.”

“Station . . . wench?” I asked, puzzled.

“Don’t you know from nothing? Nearly every station has one. Us guys get awful horny, out in space with no women. Stations try to provide at least one wench.” A distant look glazed his eyes. “I remember one station, had three wenches. It’s a real popular station.”

“But . . . but I’m not . . .” I stopped, remembering our other “guests”. I had . . . I mean, I did . . . Well, Jim had said to be nice to them, and I really liked each one of them, so we . . . Good Lord; oh, good Lord! What had become of me?

“You’re not?” the man was saying. “Now, that isn’t what I’ve heard. I’ve heard lots of spacers talk about this station’s wench, how pretty she was, how good she was, how they hoped to get back here some time.”

“But they were all . . . nice about it,” I said. “They weren’t so impatient, so impulsive.” I had been thinking about it. He knew the truth when I didn’t. He came expecting me to know, too. Lots of money had been spent; spent on me. Jim had lied to me again, but I couldn’t really take it out on this man. If I could just calm him down, it might not be so bad. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t done it many times before.

I calmed him down, and it wasn’t bad at all.

When Jim came back, I was furious. “You haven’t just been selling my babies,” I said. “You’ve been

selling me!”

Jim hung his head. “I was going to tell you,” he said. “But things were going so well with you not knowing, I thought maybe -- I mean, you were enjoying yourself and everything, and I wanted you to be happy, and I wasn’t sure you would enjoy it if I . . . “

I was beginning to feel sorry for him, but I was determined not to let him get away with it, this time. “Your account should be running over by now!” I said, forcing myself to stay angry. “We could have a new apartment right now, and keep this baby!” Of course, I was pregnant. I shouldn’t have said “this baby”; again, I was carrying twins.

“Honey, I don’t --”

“Don’t ‘honey’ me, Jim! I want a real home with a real baby that’s mine to keep and raise! I want to see him grow up and everything!”

“I know that, honey,” Jim said, in his soft way. “I have it all planned. But you need more than just enough money to get a bigger apartment; you need money to live on, after that. I got it all planned out, honest! There are six more families signed up for babies; this pregnancy will take care of two of them! I’ve told the doctor that those six are the end of it. With the money from that, and from our monthly guests, you’ll have plenty to live on the rest of your life! There’ll be nothing else to worry about, honey. It’s all planned, honest! If you don’t believe me,” he added, “you can ask the doctor.”

Just four more, after this. The doctor had said I was liable to have twins again, or maybe even triplets. At the most, just another two years and I’d be set for life! “What if the birth after this is triplets?” I asked, softening and not even hating myself for it.

“It’s always easy to find another family,” Jim said. “You’ll see.”

The pain pulled me back to the hospital. In the haze, I was aware of several people around me.

“. . . better,” one of them said. “. . . responding,” was another word one of them used. They did something, and some of the pain ebbed away. Consciousness left with the pain.

After the twins, the next birth was another single. That, however, was followed by triplets. “That’s all four remaining families!” Jim exulted, after hearing the doctor’s prediction. He really did seem happy for me. I wasn’t happy.

“I’m not through yet, Jim,” I said. My voice was calm, but the words had trouble getting through my tight throat.

“What do you mean?” Jim asked. “I hate to see you retire, but I thought we had worked it all out. Now you have lots of money.”

“But not enough,” I said. I had learned a lot as time had passed. “I can’t raise a son here. He’ll be known everywhere as the son of the station wench! We’ll have to move to another planet, where we won’t be known. I’m afraid --” I had to swallow to continue “I’m afraid that means another year as Station Wench; another birth to sell.

“But after that!” I exclaimed, my voice rising, “Nothing! No more! One more year and that is it, Jim; that is it!”

But I didn’t know, couldn’t suspect, what the next year would bring.

After the triplets were born, Jim said, "You've changed." He didn't say "You've changed, honey." He didn't call me 'honey' any more.

"I know," I said. I had to change; a teenage innocent couldn't be a station wench. A teenage innocent couldn't sell her babies. I remembered my sisters calling me a straight-"A"s ignoramus, and telling me I didn't know about life. They were right. I even ordered a copy of *Street Confessions*. It was very expensive because it had to come from Earth, but they were right; I learned from it. I suppressed the innocent girl; she had no place here.

But my guests expected her.

Pain was everywhere. Pain that was different; pain that penetrated all my body, yet wasn't as sharp as it had been. Instead of burning in spots, instead of extreme agony that was localized, it was a lesser, but all-over pain. The haze wasn't quite as thick; I could see a vase on the table beside my bed; it had daisies in it.

Daisies!

He brought be a daisy embedded in a crystal. He came three months after the last birth, twins this time, and the first thing he did when the door opened was hand me the crystal.

"A daisy!" I exclaimed, first in surprise at what he handed me, followed immediately by a wave of recollection. "Ed!" I exclaimed. "You remembered!"

"How could I forget? You never forget your favorite girl's flower." He hesitated, then went on, quickly, "Especially when she was your very first girl." He had started quickly, but then his voice faded.

"Your . . . your first girl?" I asked, quietly, unbelievably.

He nodded, and looked away.

I touched his cheek. "Your first girl," I said, a touch of bitterness and regret in my voice, "was a . . ." I couldn't finish.

He looked at me, a sad and rueful expression on his face. "My first girl was a very sweet girl who didn't even know she was -- Was what she was," he finished, unable to say it.

Bitterness swelled in me. "A station wench!" I exclaimed. "That's what I am and that's what I was! Don't you forget it." Suddenly, without meaning to, I added, "I can't!"

Ed put his arms around me, firmly but tenderly. "I know all about it. You didn't know what you were getting into. You didn't mean to be anything but nice. You . . . you're an innocent who was led astray by circumstance. I even," he added slowly, "think Jefferson Rook is a kind of cute name for such a sweet girl. I'd like to call you Jefi."

"No!" I forced myself to say. ('Jefi'; that sounded real nice. It was -- No!) "That first night, I might not have really known everything, but I was no innocent! I was pregnant then! I'm not the kind of girl --"

We were standing close together, and he put a finger to my lips. "I'm not that old-fashioned . . . Jefi," he said softly. "I never expected to meet, let alone marry, a virgin."

“But you were --”

“Only by accident of occupation,” he said. “My first few years as a spacer, I didn’t make it big like pros do. I had to send money home to my parents, so I couldn’t put anything into the wench pot. My pay had only reached that level the year I was lucky and met you. Oh, I had put money in for two or three stops, but didn’t win.” He held me close. “I’m glad I didn’t.”

“But you --”

“I think you have a lot of wrong ideas about me. I can’t say I’ve been faithful; I’ve won two wench pots since you, and I went. I went, but all they did was convince me I was right about you. I’m not an innocent, and don’t ask me how I feel that you are, but I’m convinced. Nothing you have done or said has changed my mind.”

I didn’t know how to handle him. This wasn’t anything I’d run into before, and certainly wasn’t covered in Street Confessions. I didn’t want to hurt him, or let him hurt himself by falling in love with me. Then I had an idea.

“Ed, I’m a baby factory! My little bastards (I had learned that term from Confessions) are in nearly every farm on this station! I sell them Ed!”

He didn’t look shocked.

“You couldn’t take care of so many kids. It’s better for them to be part of a small family.”

“. . . You don’t seem surprised,” I finally managed to say.

“I told you; I know all about you. I went to great lengths to find out everything I could. I mean, we’d only met the one time. I even tracked down Lew Krant. I wanted to be sure I was right.” He smiled and added, “I was.”

“You -- you’re hopeless!” I exclaimed.

“What they used to call a hopeless romantic,” he admitted, the smile still there. “I can even tell you about moradys.”

“Oh, I know about that,” I said, dismissing it.

“But not enough!” he said. “I found out why it’s considered a disability. They say there’s something in our genetic makeup that, reinforced by society, divides women into two groups: The sexually active who always seek sex, such as nymphomaniacs. The others are normal, feeling a little guilty about sex -- even though there’s a substrata there, who brag about their exploits, sometimes even making them up, while still feeling guilt.

“Those with moradys, on the other hand, feel no guilt. At the same time, they also don’t go after sex the way nymphos do, or feel any urge to talk about it. With them, sex is good when it happens, and they let it go at that.”

I nodded. “Sounds like me,” I said.

“I have an idea what’s behind it, in your case,” he said. “You are extremely fertile. I thought that might have triggered the moradys.”

“I guess,” I said. He had cleared up a few things, but they were things I wasn’t that concerned with. Moradys, shmoradys, I was me, and that was all that counted.

“Not that explanations matter,” he said. “Except that it’s what makes up the girl I love.” He kissed me. What could I do? There was only one thing; after all, he had paid.

Late that night, Ed suddenly sat up. “I’ve got to go back to the ship!” he said. “There’s something important I forgot to bring.” He dressed quickly. I got up and got dressed, too.

“You don’t have to go,” he said.

I smiled. “You paid for the night; you’re getting the night.”

He stopped in the middle of putting on a boot. A strange look was on his face. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Finishing getting dressed, he headed for the door. “Let’s go,” he said.

It was a long time before he told me what he had started to say.

“You stay here,” Ed told me, when we reached the street by the launch warehouse. Even though it was called a “launch” warehouse, it was where the ship landed, too. The “warehouse” was a large and tall circular building with a landing pad in the center. When a ship landed, its cargo -- machinery, mail, medicine, and other things not available on the planet -- was unloaded into the warehouse. After that, produce waiting in the warehouse was carefully loaded, the ship was inspected and, if necessary, repaired, and then would return to space.

“Why can’t I go in with you?”

“Sometimes guards come by, to be sure no one steals anything,” he said. “Besides,” he added, smiling, “I want to surprise you. I’ll be back quickly,” he said, patting my shoulder. Still smiling, he turned and went across the street to the warehouse door. He turned, waved, and then went inside.

In a few minutes, two guards coming from opposite directions met in front of the door. I was still across the street, so they didn’t see me. They talked for a minute or so, and then suddenly turned as there was the sound of an explosion from inside.

Ed!

I ran across the street and got there just in time to hear one guard say, “Thank goodness there was no one inside!”

“Ed’s in there!” I said. “Do something!”

“Ed?” one of them said. “Who’s he?”

“He’s a spacer from that ship!” I said. “Do something!”

“Help’s on the way,” he told me, trying to sound reassuring. “There’s an automatic alarm system. All we’ve got is those fire blankets inside the door.”

“We can’t wait!” I cried. I don’t know where the strength came from, but I pushed both guards down and rushed through the door. I was glad that many doors used the palm plate only to activate the opener, and weren’t coded the way private doors were. Down a long hall, I saw flames. But I didn’t see the fire sheets the guard had mentioned. I was about to run on anyway, when I noticed a locker beside the door. Yanking it open, I found fire sheets hanging there. Grabbing one, I turned and ran.

“Ed!” I shouted. “Ed! Where are you?”

The cavernous building echoed my cry and my running footsteps. It echoed something else very ominous -- the roar of flames. I ran towards one of the rooms that would lead to the ship. The door palm was hot to my touch, but it responded and flames leaped out. I was glad I had held the fire sheet in front of me. It reflected the inferno, but heat still swirled around me.

“Ed! Where are you?” Smoke and flames were everywhere. I bent down, so I could see under it, and -- there he was! On the floor, against the far wall, between two stacks of crates. One leg looked bent at a strange angle.

“Ed!” I screamed, and ran to him. To my surprise, I heard footsteps behind me and, glancing back, saw two silvery-uniformed firemen not far behind me. I looked back at Ed and fear clogged my throat; the two stacks of crates that had been protecting Ed had burst into flame! With a burst of speed, I was beside him, over him, draping the fire sheet over both of us. Then, added to the crackle of the fire came the crackle of crates breaking apart! Heat seared me, something struck me on the head, and I remembered no more.

Someone was talking. “. . . absolutely amazing they went through all that unscathed. I doubt it will even bring on a premature birth. Of course, they were cushioned. . . .” “. . . always astoundingly productive, so many multiple births. . . .”

“She’s stirring! Blood pressure normal, looking good.”

I took a deep breath, coughed, then tried again. It felt good. “Hello,” I managed, then licked my lips.

“Here,” someone said. “Take a sip.” A straw touched my lips. I drank greedily. “Easy!” a voice laughed. “I said ‘a sip’.”

I looked around. There were four people in the room, all wearing the white of medical professionals. “Where. . . .” I paused, because I was afraid to ask, but had to know. “Ed?” I managed. After all, they said ‘they’ went through it unscathed. I felt my face. There was a bandage on one cheek. If we were unscathed, why the bandage? Why all the pain? Suddenly I understood; they were talking about my babies. I sat up. “Where’s Ed? Is -- is he. . . ?”

They looked at each other. One of them smiled. “I think we should leave,” he said.

I held out a restraining hand. “Ed?” I asked again.

The one who had smiled took my hand. “That’s why we should leave,” he said. “You might want some privacy.” He palmed the door open and Ed, in a wheelchair, rolled in after they departed.

“Hello, Jefi,” he said, in his soft voice. He rolled up beside my bed. “I’m glad you’re awake.”

I looked at him. The skin of his face was shiny, and there was only a short stubble of hair on his scalp. I looked at his wheelchair. His legs were covered by a blanket. “They remade your face,” I managed, weakly. “I’m glad,” I added, “that you’re alive.” My eyes blurred with tears.

“They remade more than my face,” he said, with that familiar smile on his new lips. He pulled back the blanket, revealing a pair of shorts and new legs. “I’m still learning to walk,” he added, “but I’ll be all right. Please don’t cry!”

“I’m so happy,” I blubbered. “I thought I had lost you.”

“Two more minutes and you would have,” he said. “I’m sure glad you came with me!”

"I had to," I said, smiling back at him. "As I said, you had paid for the night."

Slowly, Ed shook his head. "I have a confession to make. I started to tell you when you first mentioned about me paying for the night." He paused, then went on quickly. "I didn't win the lottery! The drawing was to be for our last night, and I couldn't wait! I knew about Jim, so I looked him up and told him I had to see you. He just kind of smiled and said something about us deserving each other, so why not? Then I came."

A warm feeling swelled over me, and it wasn't fever. "Jim can be sweet," I said. I noticed, then, that there was an envelope and a small box on his lap.

"What's that?" I asked.

He handed me the envelope. "This is from Jim," he said.

I took the envelope, hesitated, then opened it.

Honey --

I'm ashamed of myself. I took advantage of you, used you badly, and did so little for you in return. This is just to let you know that I deposited a large amount of credit with the hospital, probably much more than the bill will be. Spacer's insurance will take care of Ed's bill. Keep whatever is left over.

I'm taking all the rest of it and leaving.

Jim

My warm feeling vanished. My fortune! The money that was going to take care of me and my baby the rest of our lives, the money that would get us off Tolerance Station, where everyone knew me. I sat and stared at the letter. A tear rolled down to the tip of my nose.

"Jefi?" Ed asked, concern in his voice. "What's wrong?"

I handed him the letter. "He -- he sold --" My throat was getting tight. Depression blanketed me. I took a sip of water and a deep breath. "He sold all my children, and now he's taking the money!" I took another breath, and the depression was burned away by anger. "I was going to move offworld with that money, raise my baby where no one would know! He ran off with my future!"

Ed squeezed my hand. "There's no need to run off," he said. "My spacer's contract has a clause in it; if I'm disabled, I get a good lifetime income." He looked down at his legs. "Rebuilt legs are great, but not as good as the original; I also have a rebuilt arm that isn't quite as good. I'll be able to get around okay, but not good enough for space. We can live on Tolerance Station on my income, real easy."

"We'?" I repeated.

"I have something else for you," he said. "I had brought the engagement ring with me, that night, but I had left this. This is why I went back." He handed me the small box. I opened it and saw a beautiful wedding ring.

"Ed! Oh, Ed," I said, crying. He slipped the ring on my finger, and I cried some more. But then --

"You don't understand!" I said. "I have to leave! Here, everyone knows me as the station wench. I couldn't raise a child --"

I was interrupted by the opening of my door. A six-year-old boy stood there, a card in his hand. He

had a big grin on his face, and there was a sense of pride in his manner as he came to me. "This is yours, Mother," he said, handing me the card. It said, in clumsy stick letters, "Happy Mother's Day!" He went on, "I made it myself! Momma told me what letters to make," he added, shyly.

Tears of joy in my eyes, I reached out and hugged him.

Suddenly the room was crowded with people, all happy, some carrying bouquets of daisies. "Happy Mother's Day!" they all said.

A woman standing beside my son said, "We made it an official holiday! That, and Christmas, are the only two days out of the year we shut down our farms!" She leaned down and kissed my forehead. "Thank you, Station Mother!" Then she added, "The children call us Ma or Momma or Mom, or things like that. You, they all know, are Mother."

"We owe it to you," a man said, "and so much more! We took a vote, and all agreed you get free produce for the rest of your life. Also," he added, pulling a folded piece of paper out of his pocket, "here's a deed to your very own farm!"

"But . . . but," I stammered, "I'm not a farmer!"

Another man said, "You grow the most important crop at our station!" He held up a blanket-wrapped baby. "Definitely," he added, kissing the baby's cheek, "the most important crop!"

A smiling doctor had wedged his way into the room. "And totally undamaged by the fire!" he said. "I mean," he added, "your reproductive capacity was undamaged. You are carrying two very healthy twins." He looked at me, the smile fading. "But one very important thing: Jim seemed to think no farmer's wife had babies because they didn't have time. I didn't bother correcting him, but the truth is, the planet has an effect on humans that wasn't discovered, at first because it's slow-acting, cumulative. Any woman who stays here much over a year becomes sterile. For that reason, few females stay here much over six months. But before that was found out, it was discovered that the produce grown here was fantastic. It became highly popular throughout the universe. Those already affected opted to stay, and some -- lured by the financial rewards -- decided to come and settle in any case. But they still wanted children, and adoption was, till you came along, the only way.

"Produce has to be thoroughly cleaned and inspected before it can be shipped," the doctor continued, "to be certain it won't affect the consumers. But children you produce are another matter." He smiled.

I looked at the crowd. "You mean, it doesn't matter . . . I mean, you don't care . . ." I couldn't go on.

"She's ashamed of being a station wench," Ed finished for me.

"Hey, do you think we're ashamed we have to buy seeds?" a farmer asked. "So long as it's from good stock, the source doesn't really matter. Why do you think we named this Tolerance Station?"

I smiled at Ed. "It'll be from real good stock," I said. "But we're going to keep one for ourselves."

WALKABOUT

by

Shelby Vick and Richard W Brown

Mankind's first fuel was wood for fire; many different fuels have been developed since then, and all had a dangerous potential. Few, however, were as dangerous as the fuel developed by the Flaaxians.

– Oglethorpe's Universal Encyclopedia, Volume Six

Alone.

Many people, at one time or another in our history, have been alone, but none like us.

'Us' - Banti L'Rotte, Creg Whitman and me, Lars Sorenson. While there are three of us, we are far more alone than anyone has ever been, a hundred or more lightyears from the next star. I'm talking to myself, I know. That's supposed to be a sign you're going spacey – and maybe I am. Here on this alien planet, a cold desert with a dim sun overhead, my two partners useless and worse than spacey, why shouldn't I be out of my mind? No way to communicate, no way to get out of here if we can't get our fuel.

But that's not why I keep talking. I'm speaking out loud to myself to keep from losing it, the way Creg and Banti did after walking into this gel I'm slogging through. Their suits didn't protect them from whatever sort of alien danger this is, and I wasn't about to count on my suit protecting me any better.

My partners and I had set down this far from the automated fuel manufacturing depot because, for a brief time while our ship's tanks were still hot, there was just enough fuel left over to make close proximity to more fuel a bad idea. It would take about half an hour to cool down enough for us to install the replacement tank.

When I agreed to be part of this odyssey, I thought I had nothing to lose; no family, no close friends, not really that much to live for, nothing to miss.

Nothing to miss? Right now, I'd love to see blue skies above me, spotted with cumulus clouds. Right now, even a thunderstorm would be great. Snow-capped mountains on the horizon would be wonderful. Or the sea; I never realized how beautiful the sea could be.

The presence of the gel surprised us. It's perfectly transparent, so we didn't realize it was there until Creg started forward, intent on getting to the automated fuel depot half a mile away.

And stopped.

"There's something here!" he said, backing away in surprise. The comealong he'd taken to carry a fuel tank back bumped into his heels as it slid to a stop.

Banti was a tall blonde with a figure our tightfitting suits emphasized. The suit was also built to support her bare breasts, of which she was proud; they were firm, well-rounded, with brown nipples surrounded by a tan aureole. Creg and I often admired those breasts -- with our eyes only, that is. To this point, Banti had not Chosen. Usually, two men and a woman would not be sent on a lengthy trip because of possible . . . ah, "personal conflict," shall we say? This trip was supposed to be quick; either we made it, or we were dead. No one had anticipated what we'd run into. Anyway, Banti

immediately replied to Creg: "Of course! Our fuel."

Creg shook his close-cropped head, visible through his clear helmet. "No; I mean here." He waved his hands in front of him. "Come see. --Well, not see; feel. There's some sort of . . . resistance."

"Let me scan it first," Banti said. "Move aside." Creg did so, and Banti touched her scanner controls. "By my readings, it's an eight-foot thick, mile-wide disk of some kind of transparent gel -- like a giant pancake, with our fuel machine the slice of butter in the middle."

Fuel. It could get you to your destination quick as thought -- all you had to add in was time for the individual steps. When you reach the system specified by your computer, your rockets took over; if that wasn't your end goal, you picked up more fuel and took the next step. The fuel was introduced by the Flaaxians who, despite their longevity, took several generations to reach us from their distant part of the galaxy, since we were out in the fringes, so to speak. Now that the chain of fuel pods are in place, their home planet is within easy reach.

They gave us the fuel when they first joined our Interstellar Council a century ago. "Interstellar Council" sounds grand -- doesn't it? Actually, it had consisted of three races, us plus the Orionids and the Arians; with the addition of the Flaaxians the group became, of course, the Universal Council. Now there are many other members, thanks to the distances made possible by the fuel.

The fuel was perfectly safe as long as you didn't have too much or too little. The only major drawback to Flaaxian fuel -- the thing about it that has yet to be worked around -- is that it's a one-way ticket and you have to use up all 20 Universal Litres to get to where you're going, whether it's the minimum of three quarters of a lightyear or the 119-lightyear maximum. So, before you start, you'd damn well better know where you're going, and it had damn well better be somewhere with more fuel or facilities to make it. Try to activate a tank with more than 20 U.L.s and your ship detonates with the force of a fusion bomb; try to activate it with less than 20 U.L.s and . . . well, we didn't know precisely. Early on, a few ships tried to skim on fuel and they simply disappeared and they've not been seen or heard from since. Maybe they're in another galaxy. Or another dimension. Maybe they no longer exist in any time or space. No one knows; after a few disappearances like that, people became remarkably indifferent to trying to find out.

But some systems were very far apart and there were no habitable planets in between to create more tanks, and some of them were where hardly anything but space existed.

In our case, there was this one system, halfway to nowhere, or, to be precise, between two spiral arms of our Milky Way galaxy. Both arms are colonized and there's a lot of trade between them, but up to now traffic has first had to go toward the core until a point is reached where the arms are closer together -- down our side and then up theirs. But this one-planet 'orphan' system is adrift between the two arms -- not exactly half way, but close enough for our purposes. Totally uninhabited.

Uninhabited, with no one to produce fuel.

Remember the old saying, 'Luck is 99% perspiration, 1% inspiration?' Inspiration came first, this time. Two things happened: An automated system designed to create fuel pods was perfected and this orphan system was discovered. Maybe I should add in another factor: I heard about it on the same day, and decided two plus two could add up to billions. I went straight to the decision-maker in our company (the president's wife, of course) and laid it out.

"It takes money to make money," I told her, using another ancient saying, "but it's more likely to work when money meets with opportunity. We're pretty much in the middle of our galactic arm. Less

than 200 lightyears away, there's another arm with a highly-developed cluster composing billions of customers with whom we trade on a regular basis."

"True. But it's expensive." she said. "It takes at least twelve steps, twelve very expensive tanks of fuel, to get there!"

"That's where we put it together, the orphan system and this new automated fuel- making mechanism. If our guys can figure some way to get it set up on the one planet in that system, we can use it as a way station and make the trip to the other arm in only two steps!"

"Making us all wealthy!" she said, catching my excitement.

"Yes! But that's where the money's needed -- to develop a way to get that mechanism out there."

"I'm certain it can be done," she proclaimed.

She was right, proving that almost anything can be done with sufficient motivation. Money was the motivation; the perspiration was provided by our thinktank and technicians. Eventually, they produced something they called a "dimensional slingshot." A magnetic bottle containing the system was suspended in space between two drone ships -- little more than fuel tanks inside a controlling computer system far enough apart for each to exist -- which had a magnetic field between them that imparted momentum to the magnetic bottle when they blasted off. The dimensional momentum would carry the bottle's load to its destination; once there, small rockets under its own computer control would carry it to its planetfall.

It got here, and not much later we got here with our cargo, but the system and cargo was doing us no good until we could pick up our fuel. Without it, we were stuck, stranded more than any legend had ever imagined.

Banti looked at her scanner, frowned, and then looked at me. "This is strange," she said, her bafflement showing on her pretty face. She did what testing she could, but we lacked the equipment to be certain about the nature of the gel and whether we could get through it safely. Safe or not, however, our ship could go no further without our fuel tank. We first wondered if the gel was a result of a mixture of leaking fuel and the composition of the planet, atmosphere or ground. Banti, however, was our fuel expert and after a few calculations she announced there was no way the fuel was responsible.

"But it's dead in the middle of this stuff!" I objected. "That's no accident."

"Doesn't matter what caused it," Creg said. "If it's safe, I'm going."

"I didn't say it was safe," Banti objected. "I just can't tell what it is. If you go in--"

"If I don't," Creg interrupted, "we aren't leaving! We can't go anywhere without fuel!" Determined, he turned and started his trek. The comealong, a three-by-five platform, three inches thick, followed, hovering an inch off the ground. "It isn't so hard," Creg said. "Like wading through water. Slows me down a bit, that's all. If I get tired, I can always rest."

"Let's go inside and watch from the console," Banti suggested. It was a good idea; the viewer would let us follow Creg's progress closer than our eyes could.

I turned to Creg before we left. "Tell us if there's anything different," I said, "or if anything changes. It might help us figure this out."

"You got it, Boss," Creg said flippantly.

"Creg . . . be careful," Banti murmured softly. The two of them could bicker over the smallest things, seeming to be at each other's throats, but there were times when their grins and the twinkle in their eyes turned it all to flirtatious banter.

"Like walking on eggshells," Creg answered.

We returned to the ship. Our flexible helmets divided and retracted with the suits into the boots. Banti adjusted the ship's viewer controls until we could see Creg wading on quietly. He moved slowly for a while, then said, "What?"

"We didn't say anything," she said.

"Didn't think you did. But there was something . . . something trying to contact me. I don't know what it was . . ." Because the gel was transparent, we could see him. He wasn't more than five hundred feet away. There was nobody -- nothing -- near him except the rocks and the gel.

"Maybe you'd better come back," I suggested.

"That won't get the fuel cell," he said. "But I am getting tired. I'll rest a bit." We could see him gently begin to lie down.

"Creg?" Banti asked. "Are you really that tired?"

"Need some real rest," he responded. That was the last thing he said that made sense.

"I'm going outside," I told Banti.

"You can't do any more on the ground," she said.

"I know. But I'll feel better."

"Well, take this palm viewer. It'll give you a better look at things."

I took the offered instrument and my suit slid up and enclosed me as I left the ship. When our venturer sat up, I said, "Feeling better, Creg?"

He looked around, puzzled. Then he turned, looked my direction, and a silly grin smeared across his face. "Dah!" he said. "Dah mah."

"What?" I asked, startled.

"Oooh!" Creg exclaimed.

"Knock it off, Creg!" Banti's voice said sternly. "This isn't funny."

"Baaa," Creg replied, spittle at a corner of his mouth. His eyes were blurred as he attempted a smile.

"Creg!" Banti said, sharply. In response, Creg drew back.

I told the worried woman. "Calm it, Banti, you're scaring him." To Creg, I said, "Creg, come here."

He looked at me questioningly.

"We're your friends, Creg," I said, trying to achieve a soothing, reassuring tone. At his distance, he couldn't recognize me; my voice was what attracted him.

"Mah," Creg said, and this time the smile made it to his lips.

I matched his smile. "Come to your friends, Creg," I said. "We're your friends."

"You said that," Banti hissed at me.

"I know. We need to keep it simple. Somehow, he has regressed. He's like an infant."

"What caused it? The gel couldn't have done that; he was in there a while before this happened."

"Maybe it takes time for it to work," I said. To Creg, who was ambling in our direction, I said, "That's it, Creg. Come to us. Come to your friends. Come on."

He hesitated, then started toward us again. The comealong followed. Its motion caught his attention and he stopped to look back at it. The platform bumped into him. Creg's mouth dropped open and he stared down at the flat little cart. It did nothing, of course. In a few seconds, he started for us again. The comealong followed. He looked down at it, a silly grin on his face, and stopped again. It bumped him. He took two steps forward, then jumped straight up. The comealong slid a few inches and he came down on top of it. The cart stopped sank a fraction of an inch, then resumed its normal height. Grinning broadly, he looked at us, proud of his feat. He sat down on the machine. It didn't move. Carefully, he got off and started walking again, silly look still on his face, mixed with a touch of pride at his own cleverness. He jumped once, twice, then tired of the game and continued on. Creg finally stood beside us, a blankly happy look on his face.

Banti, who had come outside and joined me, looked at Creg, then turned a worried face to me. "Now what?" she asked.

"I've been thinking about that," I said.

After half an hour, we had our infant locked in a storage compartment that contained food and water but, more importantly, things to amuse Creg's currently simple mind. There were small things for him to play with, and a display that showed colored lights in amorphous mixtures. Banti loaded a voder that spoke softly to him in her voice, using his name over and over and expressing approval. On one blank wall we hung bright-colored markers. When we closed the panel, Creg was happily coloring.

In the control room I turned on viewers so we could keep watch in case something went wrong. Banti sat at the ship's console, frowning. "I want to check the transmission band," she explained. Head bent down, she was intent and didn't look at me. "Maybe that thing is broadcasting something, or receiving a broadcast."

"Why?" I asked.

Looking at me, she grinned. "Why not?" she asked. "Creg said he felt something was trying to contact him." Her grin faded. "I must try something!" she said, desperation vibrating in her voice.

I watched as she worked with desperate intensity at the console. Once she shook her head and said something very unladylike. Later, she bit her lip and cursed again. Then her eyes widened. Rapidly, her fingers caressed the console.

"Find something?" I asked.

"Maybe," she said, trying to suppress excitement. "It seems to be . . . digital!" she said.

"Digital?" I repeated blankly.

Her blonde hair swung in front of her face as she nodded. "Digital!" she repeated. Then she looked at me. "Oh, I forgot; computer history isn't your forte. Digital was the original form of computer talk. 'On-off; yes-no; 0-1`," she said, as if that explained things. Seeing the perplexity still riding my expression, she continued, "All data were written in that form; a combination of zeros and ones would represent a small part of the code computers responded to. Zero-zero-one-zero could represent what they referred to as one byte. Dozens of them could represent a word, an action, some command or another."

"Sounds slow!" I said.

"It was clumsy," she went on, "but they could send millions of bytes a second, so it worked. But that was ages ago; we've been using analog for centuries. Allows the uncertainty principle to work, giving computers the semblance of original thought, letting them learn to think for themselves. But," she said, nodding back at the console, "I've been detecting digital signals. I've been trying to interpret them, but I'm not having much luck. We just don't speak the same language."

"Then teach it ours," I suggested.

"What--" she started, then her eyes widened, a smile blossomed on her face, and she stood and kissed me. "Brilliant, Lars!" she said. "That's exactly what I need to do!"

Before I could respond, she was seated again and her fingers danced a tango on the console. Deciding to quit while I was ahead, I sat down and waited.

Later, with a sigh of satisfaction, Banti leaned back and then looked at me. "I started with the standard extraterrestrial-language approach," she said. "You know, simple math, and drawings with a word under each drawing, the table of elements, astrologation charts, something like a child's picture book with a few words to each page, all that sort of thing. Then I put in more complicated math, expanded on the table of elements into more complex science, even a brief history of our culture, and then some literature. Threw in a few comedies, action flicks, philosophy -- a cultural smorgasbord."

I smiled. "You'll give it cultural indigestion."

"If this works," she said, a serious look on her face, "I want it to be able to not only communicate, but to understand. If it's some kind of computer, or is using a computer, I'm hoping it'll have the capability of taking everything I downloaded and making sense of it. If it does --" She stopped, as the console started flashing. "Something's happening!" she said, excitedly.

"Put it on voice," I suggested.

"Of course!" she said, and did so.

"Hello," a hollow voice said. "You are . . . people?"

"Yes. Yes! Who are you?" Banti replied.

"I am," the voice started, then hesitated, and then repeated, "I am. . . ." and stopped.

"You have no name," Banti said, understanding. "Then what are you? Animal, vegetable or mineral? What is your purpose?"

"I repair," it said.

"Repair what?"

"You would call them ships."

"Out here?" Banti asked incredulously. "There are no ships here!" Then she added, "At least, not now. Nothing but our ship." She paused, then added, musingly, "How long have you been here?"

"I can only say that, when I was first put here, the stars were much closer. Hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions of your years ago." Did the hollow voice sound wistful or was I just imagining it?

Banti looked at the console, and then at me. "'Millions'?" she asked. "How could you have lasted that long?"

"I believe you would call it hibernation. I only activate when there is a crash. After I repair, I soon return to dormancy."

"Where was this system, back then?"

"It was isolated when I was put here," the voice replied.

"Then why would there have been ships to repair?"

"Cargo was sent from one side to another. All ships would pass close to me as they voyaged. With no other nearby source of gravity, they would crash on me if they malfunctioned. I would repair them, and they would continue."

"Your star would have stronger gravity," Banti said. Then a thought occurred to her. "But they would have been designed to avoid stars, wouldn't they?"

"That is correct. The gravity of the planet would pull them, but only the star of their destination would attract them."

"All this is interesting history," I cut in, "But what about the present? Did you . . . repair . . . our fuel-making system? That 'ship' in the center of you, I mean."

"That is what activated me," the voice acknowledged, "but it was not broken. Besides, it was not like the ships I have repaired. It was all mechanical, with no biological segment. I do not know how it operated. I do not know why it crashed."

"More economical," I said. "The system is almost indestructible. Crashing doesn't require much in the way of programming or guidance systems. But," I continued, "what do you mean by 'biological segment'? Crewmembers? Biological units, like us?"

"No. Do you mean that your ships are not built with biological segments?" Before I could answer, it went on: "I see! Looking at the information you gave me, I understand. Your people devised a way to navigate and move with no biological segment. Fascinating! The closest you ever came to using anything like a biological segment was when you had animals to ride, or to pull vehicles. A totally different approach."

"Okay," Banti said, now totally business. "Then you must understand that we need our fuel cell. Is there any reason I can't go in and bring it out?"

"It is totally undamaged," the voice said.

"I am undamaged, too," Banti said. "I am a biological unit that does not need fixing. I am going to take the comealong, walk through you to get the fuel cell, and bring it back here. Understood?"

"I comprehend your meaning," the voice said.

"Good!" Banti got to her feet. "I'm coming out."

"Wait a minute, Banti," I objected. "We still don't--"

Turning at the door, she snapped, "We still don't have the fuel and we don't have much time. I'm going!" Her suit encased her as she went out.

I started to tell her that sounded much like what Creg had said before entering the gel, but I stopped. She was right. Besides, this was different from Creg's entrance; this time we knew what we were dealing with.

I thought.

I watched from the ship as Banti, the comealong tagging behind her, entered the gel. "Don't rush!" I cautioned her. "Just strike a decent pace. Don't wear yourself out too early, the way Creg did."

There was a moment's pause, and then she answered, "Good advice. I'll watch it."

"Good." Then I thought of something else. "Keep talking to me," I said. "That way I can be certain everything's all right."

There was a shrug in her voice as she replied, "If you say so."

"Are you into the gel?"

"Just a few steps," she said. "It does hold you back a bit, but not that bad."

"Slow and steady," I cautioned her.

"Yes, mamma hen," Banti said, a little humor in her voice and a touch of irritation at my caution.

"I don't want two infants to care for," I said. "I'll need help hooking up the fuel cell and setting the course."

"Have I ever let you down?" She was moving smoothly along.

"That's the whole idea," I said. "I depend on you." I didn't add that I also wanted her; this wasn't the time. She was already as far along as Creg had gotten.

"You're pushing it," I warned her. "Don't get tired. A slow, steady trip there and back."

Again, she paused. At last she said, "Okay. I am getting a bit impatient," she admitted. She slowed. "How's this?"

"Better. Remember the story of the tortoise and the hare?"

"Just don't ask me to be a snail," she said, a smile in her voice. Then she said, "No! Not necessary."

"Huh?"

"Not necessary. It really isn't needed."

What was she talking about? "Banti?"

"I don't need. . . . At least, I don't think. . . . Oh, all right; but for just a moment." She stopped.

"Banti, what are you talking about?" I asked, worried.

"Just a moment," she repeated, and sat down on the comealong.

In half an hour, I had a second occupant for the storage room.

Standing in front of the console, I said, angrily, "Why did you do it to her? She told you she didn't need fixing!"

"I am the technician. I can detect abnormalities that need repair."

"You can? You are possibly millions of years old, yet you are an expert on today's lifeforms? Have you ever seen biological specimens like us?"

"Biology is biology," the voice said, a little smugly.

"And error is error!" I retorted. "They are now useless! You reduced those two back to infancy! Their minds are destroyed!"

"I only defragmented them!" the voice protested. "Their minds were full of clutter and wasted space! I removed the inconsequential and made room for development!"

"And left them helpless!" I said. "Those inconsequential items were part of their lives! They are useless! Now," I went on, "I am going to get that fuel cell and you will not repair me! No matter how messed up you might think I am, leave me alone!"

Then I stormed out of the ship and went into this gel, the comealong behind me. The voice keeps trying to talk to me, but I continue with this talking of my own, and ignore the words that try to get through to my mind. As long as I talk, it cannot reach me.

Speaking of reaching something, here is the fuel cell, right beside the system that produced it. I've made it this far, and I shall return. There's no problem rolling the cell onto the back of the comealong. I push a button on the side of the platform, and straps whip out and tie the fuel tank into place. Its weight is no problem to the comealong; even though it was designed to carry the fuel tank, it was given the capacity of at least a ton more.

Now, I am going back. I am tired, even though I followed the advice I gave Banti and paced myself. Pushing against the gel is tiring, but I will not rest.

I go on and on, one foot in front of the other, while the voice keeps picking at my mind.

"I know my thoughts and mind are fragmented," I tell it. "I like it that way. Back off!"

Saying that makes me feel better, but does nothing to reduce the constant attempts to get to my mind.

I go on, determined.

I'm trying to think of a way to restore my crew. Getting the fuel tank in place on my own may not be impossible, but it will be very difficult. Also, Banti is the best at setting the full results from a tank of fuel. Full results are what we will need; every erg is important to be sure we reach the other side. Creg is the best navigator there ever was; his expertise will be needed to make a successfully short route.

But what will I do?

Sure, the voice says their minds are now better than ever, but I don't have the knowledge to retrain them - or the time! There's only so much food, so much air, so much water. The longer we take, the

closer we are to starvation. Starvation? Suffocation will come first.

Voice, you had better come up with something, and soon! I know, I know; you thought you were doing the best for them. You thought you were repairing them. But you have never dealt with human minds before. We are not the sort of biological units you are used to. We are not computers in need of reprogramming!

I talk.

And talk.

And talk, until the ship is just ahead. As I near the edge of the gel, the voice practically screams to my mind. "I'll talk to you from the ship console!" I respond, and step out of the gel.

Leaving the comealong at the door, I enter the ship and cross to the console. "All right," I say. "What was so important? This better be good."

"You really are in need of repair. Your mind is -"

"Forget it!" I snapped. "Tell me what I can do to help my friends. I need them back in full working order, and soon."

There was a moment of silence that made me think the voice was sulking, but then it said, "Their minds just need restarting."

"How?"

"Because of your strange distress, I have been going over all the material your friend fed me. It appears they need some strong, basic emotional boost."

"Emotional boost?" I asked.

"Something integral to your kind," it said. "Tap a strong, fundamental emotion."

"'Emotional boost'," I repeated, musing. "Fear is basic." I thought a moment, then manipulated the console. The light in their compartment died. Another adjustment, and spooky music welled up, then a fiendish laugh, turning suddenly into a scream. I flashed the lights back on, darkness again, the scream, and bright light.

Revealing Banti and Creg looking curiously around, puzzled but definitely not scared.

"Their minds aren't sophisticated enough for that to affect them," I told the voice. "And," I added, "our ship isn't sophisticated enough to make them think they are falling. Falling is a fear to humans of all ages, I believe."

"Other than fear," the voice asked, "what would you suggest?"

"Well, hunger is basic, but that takes too long to create. Maybe anger . . . ?" I considered that, but couldn't think of anything to make them mad which was also safe; I certainly didn't want them in a destructive mood. . . .

"Procreation seems to be one of your basic drives," the voice commented.

"Sex?" I asked. "Infants know little about sex . . . but their bodies are mature!" I said, getting excited. "Maybe that would do it!"

"From the information I have, that sounds feasible. The society your group is from still has a high

response to sex."

But how . . . ?

I headed for the converted storage room. Creg was trying to take a marker away from Banti. "No, no, Creg," I said. "Play nice! She is your friend."

Creg looked at me. "Friend," he said, and released the marker.

"Thank him, Banti," I said.

"Thank . . . you," Banti said. Good; the voder had improved their talking ability.

"Now," I said, "you should kiss and make up."

"Kiss?" Banti asked.

"And make up," I said. "Just do as I say." Now, if this would just work. "Both of you take off your clothes," I told them.

"Clothes?" Banti asked.

I plucked at her the material of her uniform. "This," I said. "The stuff that covers you."

"Yes," Banti said, and pulled the hem of her shirt up.

"You, too, Creg," I said.

They were cooperative. In minutes, they were both nude. Just by looking at Creg, it was obvious he was having a sexual response to Banti's body. "Now," I said. "Put your arms around each other. Hold tight. Place your lips together, and kiss." Their lips met, and their hands fondled the other's warm flesh. "Continue," I said. "I'll leave you, now."

I was embarrassed, partly because what they were doing should be a private matter, and partly because I was responding to Banti's nudity myself. And I felt jealous; I was pushing Creg into Joining with Banti, something I had wanted to do myself, if she had Chosen me. Some cultures encourage three-way sex, but ours was not one. We had reverted to what some referred to as a fairly primitive attitude towards sex in general. Social attitudes towards sex worked in cycles. There were two extremes - total denial of sex and total acceptance in all forms. We were somewhere in the middle, right now.

Back at the console, I turned off connection to their room. If this worked, they would return to normal. Of course, it might take them a while to - ah - complete the recovery process.

"This had better work," I said.

". . . It will," the voice said, after a slight hesitation.

"You don't sound certain," I told it, accusingly.

"If they received the proper stimulus, it will . . . it should work."

"There was definitely a strong sexual response," I said, recalling the scene.

"It will work." Then it added, "I have been considering you . . . humans. You are definitely different from the race that built me. It is possible I incorrectly interfered."

"More than possible," I replied, sarcastically. Then I decided the voice was trying to apologize, and dropped it.

After more than thirty minutes, proof was delivered. I heard laughter, then the two walked into the command room, fully dressed and obviously happy, fulfilled, and . . . satiated.

"Thank you, Lars," Banti gushed. "Thank you so much!"

"Don't thank me," I said, pleased. "Thank our buddy, the voice."

Banti turned to the console. "Thank you, Buddy," she said, with strong feeling.

"There is no anger in your voice," the newly-named Buddy said.

"Anger? Why should there be anger?"

"I expressed enough anger for all three of us," I said.

Banti turned a puzzled face to me. "Why were you mad?" she asked.

"Because of what Buddy did to you! Don't you remember?"

"What he did to us was wonderful!" Banti objected. "I've never felt better in my life. My mind is clear as bell. Everything is fine!"

"Well, it wasn't. You and Creg were absolutely useless."

"Not now; we're great!"

"Now, yes; but you weren't, until just now."

Banti looked at Creg and then reached out and took his hand. "'Just now' was wonderful," she said, looking at Creg and smiling. "We finally realized we were . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Compatible" I suggested. I smashed my feeling of loss; a Joined Banti was better than Banti with an infant's mind. I kept telling myself. . . .

Smiling at Creg, she said, "Much better than compatible." She looked back at the console. "Thanks again, Buddy. We'll never forget you."

"I think I will remember you, too," the voice said. "The new information you fed into me, the ability you gave me to work on analog instead of digital, all that has changed me."

"Enough, I hope, so that you'll leave others alone," I said. "If this works, there will be more fuel tanks here and more ships with crews to pick them up. They won't have ways to recover from the 'fixing' you do. Will you remember?"

"I will remember," Buddy said. "You're walkabout taught me something. You have taught me many things. I will . . . restrain my old programming. Now, comes the time when I must hibernate again."

"Not yet, Buddy!" Banti said, urgently. "There's something else you have to do, first."

"I do not have long," Buddy said. "I have fulfilled my obligations to repair."

"But you have new programming, now," Banti said. "You can resist."

"Why?"

Banti looked at me. "Lars, as the captain of this ship, you have the power to marry Creg and me." She looked back at the console. "Buddy, I want you to take part in the ceremony."

All this was piling up on me too quickly. "Marry? What are you talking about?"

"Buddy knows," Banti replied. "Don't you, Buddy?"

"Marriage is an important institution, bonding of male and female with a commitment to remain together. I could act as the father of the bride, who gives the bride away."

"I know all that," I said, curtly. Then I looked at the two people standing in front of me. I saw softness, mixed with intensity and, I would guess, love. With a sigh, I smiled. "That 'father of the bride' bit is old-fashioned, but I suppose it would do." I asked them, "You two really mean it, don't you?"

They both nodded, but didn't take their eyes off each other.

"Just proves I was right," I said. "I always knew you would make an excellent match." Second to a match between Banti and me, but true. "Okay, let's get with it."

After a brief ceremony, Buddy said, "I really must go, now. It is the sleeping that enables me to continue."

"We'll miss you, Buddy," Banti said.

They might, but I wasn't at all sure that I would. I didn't enjoy my long walk.



FROM THE VIBRATING ETHER

Send letters of comment to [EDITOR](#) by clicking on the link, 'EDITOR'.

Welcome to my world! I'm Lt Luna, and we want to hear from you! (By the way; yes, I am a distant relative of Sgt Saturn. He made the rank of Major before he retired.)

Now, for our first letter:

CHARLES
Palo Alto, California

Liked what I saw, Luna! (And the stories weren't bad, either!)
—Charles

Luna back at you. Nice you have your perspectives in the right place, Charles!

JENNY
Las Vegas
You got it! Most of your stories read right out of the old days!
—Jenny

"Most"? Hey, you want me to sic Saturn on you? (In all honesty, thanx, Jenny!)

And NOW (blare of space trumpets) our first complete letter of comment! Followed by others. (Unlike pulp letter columns, back in Sarge Saturn's days, we don't hafta cut the letters short!)

D GARY GRADY
DGary.Grady@GTE.NET

I've read three of the stories at Planetary Stories (which I printed out the other day to take with me) and just went looking for more, but all the links on the contents page appear to be broken. Anyway, the stories I read I enjoyed quite a lot. They're well above the level of typical fan-written fiction and better than quite a lot that was published in the pulp era.

Brief comments on specific stories: "Darkstar Silverarm" by Rick Brooks: A pretty good example of what it's intended to be -- straightforward pulp space-opera adventure. It never drags for a moment, and the super-cat sidekick makes the story as far as I'm concerned.

Your own "Space Marshal vs King Jorx" was a good take-off on Captain Future that managed to have some nice twists and surprises mixed in with the parody. Not great literature, I suppose, but considerably brainier than a lot of sf adventure movies.

Your "Moult Revolt" surprised me, since I was expecting all space opera, and this story is more straight sf and original as well. I'd definitely rate it my favorite of the three. I'm looking forward reading more when they come back on line.

[By email, gave Gary the links to other stories while Lloyd was repairing damage I had done to the Contents page.](#)

Thanks for the links. Just printed out several stories to read later, but since "Tolerance Station" didn't look too interesting, I decided just to skim it. I wound up reading the whole thing and to my surprise enjoyed this very bizarre blending of true confession and primitive sf. Some good story-telling techniques here as well, such as successfully giving the impression that the hero/boyfriend was dead and then pulling a surprise. The scene where the kids came in was also remarkably effective. And all this despite the sheer pulp ridiculousness of the plot! (Produce grown to ship thru space was the least of it.) Maybe my standards are slipping but I liked it.

I've read what I think are the remaining stories, and my reactions follow.

"Walkabout" was quite entertaining and original, though one could quibble about the high-speed language teaching business and some implausible character actions, such as Banti's over-hasty attempt to cross the gel when the reason for the urgency had not been established. I also wondered why the protagonist didn't try traveling above the gel, using something as simple as a pair of stilts. The need to go thru the gel could have been addressed, perhaps by having Banti try both convincing the alien not to harm her and by using stilts just in case. (And for that matter, four bits don't make a byte any more than they make a dollar.) But those are quibbles and details that didn't really detract from the story.

"Revolt on Mimas" is of course more Hamiltonesque space opera (with more robots and another space cat, I note). It was quite readable, though a steady diet of this sort of thing would get old after a while. The references to Susan Calvin and the Demon Knight were amusing enough.

Finally, I enjoyed the more-or-less straight comedy of Neutron McGurk. Grabby Haze armed not with a six gun but with six guns, yet. . . . Liked the bit about chewing up the universe before swallowing it. I suspect I should get Earle K Burgery, but I don't. "She wore the elaborately revealing black gown of a lady mad scientist." Ah, word pictures. . . .

[I've noticed that cats kinda mix well with sf, pulp or otherwise! As for 'Earle K Burgery', there was a cover artist in the pulp days named 'Earle K Bergey'. Did Startling Stories, Planet Stories, and just about all of them. I'll try to slip in a copy -- but you can always google him!](#)

And now, another letter, from an old friend.

JOYCE WORLEY

JoyceWorley1@cox.net

This is so beautiful, ShelVy. . .I am so happy for you!

--Joyce Katz

Sez Luna: I'm blushing! . . .OH! You're talking about Planetary Stories!

And here's another fan who seems satisfied! (Like -- what else would you expect, with Luna here?!!!)

CHRIS

Christopher J Garcia

garcia@computerhistory.org

Fantastic Stuff! It's great to get this type of stuff without having to scrounge thru flea markets or pay an arm and a leg on eBay!

I have to say that I had a hard time reading Tolerance Station -- it hit a little close to home. I've known too many women who had far too much Jefferson in them.

Revolt on Mimas reminded me of 1940s and 50s Science Fiction Radion dramas. There are a few college stations that still play them once a week, and I'm hooked on them. I'd love to hear a recorded version of RoM, since it seems like it would work so well. I loved Neutron McGuirk, too. There was a 'Rassler in the 1960s named Neutron McGuirk that was a total wash-out. It's the type of story that I love, with heroes that are far beyond the scope of normal humans. Just great stuff.

The Headline and the cover page are both really good. You've done a great job recreating the age of Space Opera that I sadly missed by being born a little too late.

CHRIS

Appreciate the kind words, Chris! You're just the sort we're after -- along with the older fans who were around to see it all and miss it!

Next one comes from an old friend of ShelVy's:

TIM RILEY

trnco@bellsouth.net

Have been meaning to send a LOC for awhile, so here it is. Your on-line zine came out looking great!! From what we've talked about and what your editorial says, you still think PS is not as close as it could be to the old pulps of yesteryear.

Well, after checking it over from cover to cover (or should I say, mouse click to mouse click) I think I may have figured out the thing that's missing: the smell -- the old pulp paper smell :) Other than that, I think you've got PS heading in the right direction.



I look forward to visiting your site to peruse each new issue -- and possibly contributing to it in the future as well!

Thanks for the wonderful trip to the past!!

TIM

Thanks for the vote of confidence. We'll be looking for that contribution!

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STORIES –

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