

HAAFWAY DHÄR!

Stëven Livzie Ashwurth

1. Dhe morning

“Fyv!”, chanted a thauzand voices in ünison. “Four! Three! Twu! Wun!! Yä-ä-ä-äh!!!”

Fyerwurks explöded intu dhe haaf-lyt, sprinkling sparkling shauers ov red, göld and green brilians över dhe upturnd fäses, tuching of ansering refléchshons in dhe voulded seeling fortie mëters övehed, dhe glass-frunted shops and ofises, dhe täperd latis sculptür at wun end ov dhe scwär, dhe ghyant video screen at dhe udher. A frenzie ov cheering, claping, woops ov jhoy. Abuv dheir heds bläzd aut twu wurds in leters ov fyer:

HAAFWAY DHÄR!

A teenägh boy at dhe egh ov dhe craud jhoind in az dhe anthem wos sung, but hezitantlie, az if distracted by sum unharmönious thoht. Jhübilant throats tu ryht and left ov him repeated dhe refrain – a slim, grey-haird man worbling, a rumbustüs priema dona shrieking aut dhe familiar wurds tu dhe melodie from dhe second moovment ov Chykofskies *Manfred*:

*“Mudher Erth, we wil never let yu daun,
Sister Moon, brudher Marz, fadher Sun –”*

but dhe boy turnd away at dhe begining ov dhe second vers and slipd intu a syd street, unnötisd.

Dhe street becäm a brytlie lit coridor, dhe coridor, a doorway ov dulie glisening bronz träserie. Twu udher yungsters wer oulredie waiting dhär; a red-haird boy widh frekeld cheeks sed: “Alvin, whär’v yu been? Y thoht dhe spyders’d got yu!”

“Y jhust...” – he ghestürd bak whär he had cum from, and shrugd – “it’s fantastic.”

“Bulshit! We’l shöw ‘m. Got dhe ring?”

“Heer.” He tuuk it aut ov his poket, shiverd, held it aut. Dhe plain göld band glinted insyd a clear plastic pauch.

“Let’s hav a luuk at it dhen!” Dhe boy tuuk dhe ring from Alvin, remoovd it from dhe pauch and slipd it on ferst wun fingger, dhen anudher. “Which fingger dus it go on?... Bludie spyderie jhunk; y caant feel enithing. Yu try.”

Alvin puut dhe ring on. It wos a looss fit on dhe midel fingger ov his ryht hand, and he had tu clench his fist tu avoid dhe dängher dhat it myt accidentalie slip of and be lost: “Yu wönt feel enithing unles yu höld it clöss tu a tuch pad. Dhat’s whot dhey töld me. Hav yu broht...?”

“Shöw him!”

Dhe therd member ov dhe groop stepd forwurd: a dark-kind gerl widh silver mäkup splashd araund her iys and över her braun cheeks, and coper banggels on böth rists. Gigeling delicatlie, she öpend a bag. Dhe udhers peerd insyd, grining at each udher.

“Dhat’s enuf. Naw let’s dump dhe trakers.” Dhe boy swiftlie remoovd his jhaket. Undeneath wos a lyt harnes in dhe form ov a waistcoat, which he ouslo remoovd befor puuting his jhaket bak on. Dhe gerl waited. Alvin plukd irezolütlie at his jhaket, hezitätting.

Dhe udher boy turnd tu Alvin: “Täk it of. We mustnt let dhem nöw whär we ar.”

“But...”

“Y’v täken myn of. Luuk.” He held it up. “Naw yors.”

Alvin smyeld shylye, shuuk his hed and stepd bak from dhe udhers az if about tu return tu dhe scwär: “Y need tu think about it. Yu du it.” He held aut dhe ring lyk a charm, pleadinglie.

“Cum on, Alv, we’r in dhis tuggedher, yu and me, ryht? So dönt let me daun.” He seezd Alvins jhaket, ruflye tugd it of and aded Alvins traker waistcoat tu his öwn, dhen handed dhe twu tu dhe gerl, hu slipd dhem böth on över her shölders. Alvin sulkielie repläsd his jhaket.

“Dhat’s it. Sushie, giv me dhe bag. Let’s go.”

She handed it tu him: “Täk cär, Tomie. Woch aut for dhöz nastie spyders.”

“Tu hel widh dhem!”

“Yu too, Alvin.”

Tomie stepd manfulie tuwuds dhe gerl: “Giv us a kis, bäbie!”

She pauted at him, dhen, az he leand tuwuds her, adroitlie slipd aut ov his embräs: “Kis my ars, *erthwurm!*” And ran of.

“Sushie! Sushie! Bludie wimin! Whär’s *yor* gerl dhen? Nöwun cum tu see yu of?” He stepd tuwuds dhe doorway.

Alvin hezitätet, luuking bak. Unbiden, a vizhon ov flöwing blond hair, a pritie smyel and a skert cärleslie ryding up too hy opresd his memorie. Meanwyel a booming vois eköd daun dhe pasighways leading from dhe scwär, stil sented widh a wif ov gunpauder from dhe fyerwurks:

“– *tu carie dhe desperat höp ov gheueräshons stunted by wor,*
by dhe anti-hümanitie ov man tu his felöw man,
by nyt, by darknes, by dhe fear and anger ov tormented söls...”

From dhe säm dyrecshon dhär sudenlie apeard a cwortet ov ölder boys. “Hey!”, shauted wun. “Whot’s widh dhe *erthwurms* crouling raund aur teritorie?” – “Yäh, tryina spoil things for us, or whot?” Dhey advansd menasinglie.

Tomie grabd his frends arm: “Run for it!” And puld him thru dhe doorway.

Dhey charghd thru a foyé and up a plain, naröw stärcäs. Wun ov dheir pursüers coht up widh dhem at dhe top, but Tomie lashd aut widh his feet and he fel, grasping frantielie for dhe banisters and colyding widh his mäts hu wer cuming up behynd him. Meanwyel, Tomie and Alvin dashd

acros dhe landing. A teenagh gerl widh spykie green hair wos standing against dhe woul; she turnd and stärd at dhem, her hand poizd at dhe fynal scarlet leter ov dhe spray-painted wurds: *HAAFWAY TU NÖWÄR*. Tomie ignord her, ran on past and jhabd his fingger against dhe woul under a smoul syn dhat sed: *CREW ÖNLIE*.

“Heer, dhis is it!”

Alvin dashd tu his syd, held up his hand wäring dhe ring, presd it against dhe woul at dhe spot indicäted and consenträted in dhe way he had been toht.

“Dö’nt let’m escäp!” – “Grab dhe Erth-scum!”, cäm dhe shauts from jhust mëters away, but dhey wer oulredie pasing thru dhe secüritie door and it wos clözing behynd dhem.

Tomie turnd and ghestürd obsënlie: “Get vakümd aut, spyder-sukers!” Dhen dhe door clözd on dheir pursüers finger-tips and dhe erthlings wer säf.

Dhey wer in a smoul compartment widh naröw spyral stärcäses twisting böth daun and up. Tomie luukd araund. “Luuk, no spycams”, he wisperd.

“Yu shür?”, Alvin wunderd, glansing araund at dhe curvd wouls. His iy fel on anudher gärish splash ov grafëtie; dhis wun red: *TRADITIONAL ENGLISH SPELLING LIVES! RESIST MARTIAN CULTURAL TYRANNY!* He fraund: “Whot dus *tra-diti-on-al* mean?”

Tomie shrugd: “Hu nöws? Let’s go”, and led dhe way up. Alvin folöwd.

Dhey asended several flyts. At intevals dhär wer lanset windöws; Alvin stopd by wun and glimpsd dhe crauds belöw, dhe blöwn-up imigh ov Captin Lorens FitsJherald, herd dhe rezonans ov his vois, dhe responding ekös ov cheering. Haw eazilie, he thoht, and haw cwiklie dhis jhoyful selebräshon cud be upset. Dhär wud be panic evriwhär, peepel runing in oul dyrecshons lyk cräzd ants, crys ov despair, shrieks ov madnes; dhen a fyer wud start, dhär wud be explözions and shauers ov glas shards –

“Alv!”

“Oul ryht.”

“Cum on – dhey myt hav töld sumwun!”

Dhe spyral untwisted itself intu a curving catwouk which leveled aut amid a tanggel ov tübs, wyers, pyps, and a latis ov struts which extended indefinatlie intu dhe suraunding shadöws. Tomie stopd and glansd araund, dhen bak at Alvin.

“Dhat way”, Alvin ghestürd.

“Oul ryht, y nöw.”

Tomie led dhem intu a dragons cäv in which stakd autsyz ventiläshon hözes glinted, serpent lyk, in dhe blueish lyt ov an övehed ilüminäted tüb. Dhär wos dhe cwyet murmer ov mashienerie oul araund dhem; dhe air had dhe wif ov electricitie. Abuv dhe boys heds a smoodh curvd seeling wos punctüäted by a singgel raund höl acomodäting a plain vertical lader. Again Tomie led dhe way up.

Dhey asended dhe lader widh dreamlyk eaz. At dhe top, thru a second securitie door widh dhe help ov Alvins ring, dhey practicalie levitåted intu a smoul compartment widh cushond wouls and hand straps. Tomies bag drifted ghentlie az a claud in dhe air curent from a ventilåshon gril. He spök again: "Clöz dhe gondola door. Transfer."

Dhe door clözð behynd dhem on dhe wurd ov comand. "Mynd dhe door", sed dhe compartment in a fusie, mätronlie tön. "Pleaz höld on tu dhe restraints provyded for yor cumfort and säftie."

"Get vakümd!", sed Tomie, az dhe compartment began tu moov. Dhe boys fechd up against wun padded woul lyk slöw möshon dansers.

"She's a bit ov oul ryht!", he aded.

"Sushiela?"

"Yäh. She's önlie shy coz yu wer woching. When we'r on aur öwn tuggedher, wel, fwor!"

Alvin bogeld at him.

Tomie luukd away: "Öpen dhe axis door."

Dhe door slid öpen. Dhe compartment thankd dhem for dheir patronigh, and aded: "Hav a stelar day!"

Tomie did not lead dhe way aut imëdëatlie, but peerd cärfulie intu dhe coridor beyond.

"Oul clear", he wisperd. "No spyders. Cum on. Haafway dhär." And lëverd himself, complëtlie weitles, thru dhe naröw apertür.

"Haafway...", Alvin wisperd tu himself, and floated aut after him. "Haafway..."

Dhe boys flew expertlie daun a long shaft, propeling dhemselves widh brief tuches on dhe handrails, dheir feet held aut stiflie behynd dhem lyk fishes tails. Alvin pouzd again tu scwint thru a glas porthöl.

"Whot's dhe mater? Dö'nt let dhem see yu!"

"Dhär's nöwun dhär. It's önlie dhe ghim."

"Y nöw. Cum on!" A sutel shadöw fel acros a curv in dhe coridor ahed ov dhem. "Wait, sumwun's cuming!"

Dhey presd dhemselves tuggedher intu a reses between cabinets ov mashienerie, and held dheir breth az a röz-süted hüman figür pasd dhem by and floated intu wun ov dhe syd haches.

"Bludie spyder, whot's he duing heer?"

Dhey negösheåted anudher lokd door – masiv, airtyt. Az it clözð behynd dhem, dhey faund dhemselves in a curving coridor widh numberd hachways on dhe auter, concäv, woul.

"Which wun is it?", Tomie demanded in an intens wisper.

"Worden fourteen."

"Whot did yu chooz dhat wun for?"

"Fourteen yers."

"Y'm fifteen, yu burk."

"Y'm fourteen. So's dhe *Herald*."

Puling dhemselves along dhe handrail, dhe teenaghers glyded araund dhe serkit tu hach number fourteen.

"Öpen hach fourteen", Tomie comanded, expecting dhe door tu comply outomaticalie.

"No, yu hav tu pres dhe buten." Alvin did so, and dhe dubel hach swung autwards widh a wering saund and a hiss. Dhey luukd at each udher. Tomie enterd ferst, lyk a fish swiming intu a säcret groto.

"Lyts on... Whär's dhe bludie lyt swich?"

He faund it. Alvin presd dhe buten dhat clözd dhe wordens hach behynd dhem. Dhey wer floating in a crampd cabin widh a singgel seat and a featürles blak dashbord at wun end. Dhe tripel forwurd windows wer öpäk and önlie reflected dhe boys wyd-iyd fäses. Dhe wouls wer lynd widh stark blank panels.

"Yäh, let's go!", sed Tomie, clyming intu dhe pylots seat. "Of tu dhe räsis! Ignishon! Liftof!"

Alvin faund a röw ov resesd nobbs in wun woul, and puld on wun ov dhem. Sum dertie trainers and a pair ov binokülers drifted aut ov dhe öpen loker. He stärd at dhe insyd ov dhe loker door, whär a sexie yung wuman in a dyafanus neglizhé öpend her iys and smyeld entysinglie bak at him aut ov a glosie culer föto, pauting, cuping her ful, bär brests and aiming dhem at him lyk gun turets. Alvins jhouw dropd and his iys grew raunder and wyder.

"Alv, gi'me dhe ring."

Alvin blushd, huridlie clözd dhe loker and hezitantlie drew dhe ring from his finger.

Tomie twisted up and aut ov his seat. "Cm'on, giv it heer."

Alvin eväded Tomies autstrechd hand and shrank bak, hölding dhe ring tu his chest: "Du yu realie think we shud be duing dhis?"

"Cwit farting about and giv me dhe ring."

"Heraldiena ses it's rong tu steal."

"Screw Heraldiena! We'r not stealing enithing, jhust boröwing! Naw cum on!"

"Y mean, when dhey fynd aut..."

"We'r göing oul dhe way. Too lät tu bak aut haafway." He confrunted his unwiling asistant, menas in his iys. "Du yu wont tu tel dhe gerls yu chikend aut haafway thru? Wont tu shöw yorsel up az a loozer? Or ar yu göing tu du whot yu sed and go oul dhe way, ey?" – his vois dropd tu a hiss – "Coz y nów sumwun hu wonts tu go oul dhe way widh yu, and y can arängh it if yu lyk, yu nów hu y mean, it'l be beter dhan enithing yu ever dreamd ov in yor bludie lyf – du yu wont her? Ey? Du yu wont tu help me so's y can help yu? Ov cors yu du. So let's du it!"

Alvin protested: "Y need tu think", but it wos too lät. Paralyzd by confüzhon, he wochd Tomie snach dhe ring aut ov his hand and tuch it against dhe dashbord. Dhen he sou Tomie no mor, but

radher a sunlit park, a groop ov teenäghers, and in dhe midel ov dhem, dhe senter ov atenshon, her blond hair, her bär –

“Naw whot du y du? Cum on, Alv, wäk up.”

“Tel it tu activät. In yor mynd.”

“Y’v dun dhat – yu shür Heraldiena wönt fynd aut?”

“Dhe ring’s supözd tu wurk widhaut... She wönt nöw enithing about it.”

“So whot naw?”

“Repeat dhe paswurd in yor mynd. Dhe wun y töld yu.”

Tomie clözd his iys and did so. “And?”

“It shud –”

Dhey luukd up. A moovment autsyd dhe windöw had coht dheir atenshon.

“Turn of dhe lyt.”

Az Alvin öbeyd, he fel bak against dhe rear hach. Dhey wer mooving forwurds.

“My god”, wisperd Tomie, “it’s oul stars!”

Alvin clung tu dhe bak ov dhe pylots chair, exyted despyt himself, and peerd aut över Tomies shölder: “Dhär’s Oryon.”

“Dhärs Sirius.”

“Prosyon, Gheminie, dhe Milkie Way...”

“Haw du we get tu see dhe *Herald*?” Widhaut waiting for an anser, Tomie faund a virtüal jhoystik in his myndys iy. He twisted dhe handel, and dhe hevens began tu rötät.

“Shud be sumwhär near dhe sumer tryangel”, Alvin breadhd.

Dhe syht ov dhe artifishal wurld dhey had jhust departed from tuuk dhe twu jungsters by surpryz. An ousumlie vast prezens loomd majhesticlie intu vew, a man-mäd clif blotting aut haaf dhe sky, glisening a dul gunmetal grey in reflected starlyt. Tu dheir ryht, a kazm ov ghyant silindrical tank secshons strechd away az far az dhey cud see; on dheir left, dhe curvd autlyn was bröken by twu broud vertical bands, wun rötätting constantlie upwards, wun daunwards. For a möment dhey glimpsd sum hügh, fäded leters – ... *INTESTELER FRIENDSHIP* – befor dhe rötäshon caried dhem away aut ov syht.

Alvin stärd agast widhaut speaking.

“Let’s go faster!”, sed Tomie, and dhe cabin jherkd intu acseleräshon again, dhe bak ov Tomies seat presing intu Alvins chest.

“Dhis is far enuf.”

“Frytend?” Tomie scweezd dhe mental throtel for anudher spurt ov pauer, lafd and ghestürd obsënlie at dhe resëding colosus: “Up yors, Fits-bludie-Jherald! eëëäähhh! Prepär for dhe shok ov yor pathetic lyvs, yu sad bastard spyders!”

Confüzd and embarasd, Alvins wondering finggerr tuchd dhe dashboard, and a smoul inset windöw cäm tu lyf. He sou a familiar midel-aghd wumans fäs, oul sparkling iys, glosie crimzon lipstik and protrüding wyt teeth främd in a gölden hälo ov set curls. She wos standing among a noizie craud ov peepel and speaking tu camera...

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"Dhär's an amäzing feeling heer tunyt in Gagarin Scwär, a sort ov electriscitie in dhe air. Evriwun nöws dhis is a verie speshal möment." She turnd tu sum bystanders and held aut dhe mykrofön tu wun ov dhem. "Whär ar yu from?"

"We'r oul from Marz."

"Whot part ov Marz?"

"Y'm from Ütöpia, and dheez gys heer'r from Elizium, y think..."

"Y'm from Olimpus."

"...but we dönt remember too much about it, it's been seven anum."

"Seven and a haaf anum", dhe udhers chipd in, noding and täking swigs ov drink from gailie culerd plastic cans.

Dhe prezenter flashd a dazling smyel tu camera: "Helo tu evribodie in Ütöpia, Elizium and Olimpus! Dhis is Göldie Berd bringing yu news ov dhe grät historic *HAAFWAY* selebräshons in Gagarin Scwär in sentral Star Mosco, on bord dhe *HERALD OV INTESTELER FRIENDSHIP*." She turnd bak tu dhe bystanders: "Wud yu lyk tu say sumthing about dhe historic significans ov dhis möment for dhe föks bak höm?"

"Naah, we'r jhust heer tu see whot's göing on."

"Yäh", chipd in anudher, "we'r spur-ov-dhe-möment peepel."

"We dönt realie remember eniwun from bak höm, it's been so long dhat..."

Dhe prezenter fraund: "So yu'v cum tu see haw evriwun's selebrätting Haafway?"

"Haafway's clasic, but it's not..."

"It's önlie haafway."

"Y mean, yu jhust drouw a lyn in dhe sky, and we'v crosd dhe lyn, so dhat's clasic, and evriwun shauts hooray, but it's no oober-deal. Not realie."

"Not lyk Ferst Contact!"

"Yäh, Ferst Contact'd be realie sumthing."

"Oober-clasic!"

Göldie brävlie tryd tu regain dhe inishativ: "So when du yu think we'l hav Ferst Contact?"

"Next week!"

"Not til we aryv!"

“Not for a bilion yers!”

“But dhe signals...?”, protested dhe presenter.

“Dhär’s no äliens dhär! Dhär’s jhust a ghyant miror dhat reflects aur öwn rädeo signals bak tu us, and scambels dhem up so we think dhey’r from äliens!”

“But dhen hu puut dhe miror dhär?”, askd wun ov dhe udhers.

“Älien röbots!”

“Yäh – dhat dyd aut after too menie softwär upgräds!”

“Or went daun a blak höl!”, shouted sumwun els.

“It’s a government plot tu mäk us believe in äliens! – No, sèriuslie! If we had’nt believd, wud we hav spent a trilion dolers tu bild dhe *Herald*?”

Dhe intevev dizolvd intu shauts, caunter-shauts and inëbrëäted lafter.

Dhe wuman wishd dhem a stelar day and turnd tu fäs dhe camera: “Erlïer y had an intevev widh Captin FitsJherald, and y askd him: haw dus it feel tu be captin ov dhe ferst vesel in historie tu carie hümans haafway tu anudher star?”

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“Absolütlie wonderful. Dhe *Herald*’s a бүtiful ship, y hav a loyal, hard-wurking crew, dhe pasinghers crëät a wonderful atmosfeer ov harmonie on bord, we’r oul expecting tu mäk dhe grättest discoverie in dhe historie ov mankynd when we fynalie aryv. Praiz be tu Heraldiena, aur infalibel protector and aur constant gyd!”

Dhe gölden-haired presenter fraund: “Heer in dhe stüdeo we’v been hearing stories ov uglie planetist insidents, espeshalie in Sauth Gondola. Sum erthies wer beaten up, aparentlie by lünar yooth gangs –”

Dhe rinkels on dhe Captin’s scwär-jhoud, cragie featürs creasd dhemselves intu an exagheräted smyel: “Naw höld on dhär, Göldie, ha, ha, ha! Let’s not get caried away by a few reclüpid rümors, we’r oul confident dhat sort ov behävjer wos left behynd a verie long tym ago indeed. When yu luuk at –”

“But Captin FitsJherald, y’ m sorie tu interrupt yu but yu must shürlie recognyz dhär’v been sèrius tenshons, particülarlie in dhe Sauth Gondola comünitie? Complaints about unfair discriminäshon? About marshan cultüral dominäshon?”

“Maybe dhär’v been a few mynor, ysoläted insidents, but let me ashür yu dhat y hav dhe sitüäshon wel under contröl. Dhär ar baund tu be okäzhonal fricshons and insidents on such a long voyigh – whot is it naw? över seven anums, dhat’s fourteen yers for dhöz erthies living in dhe past dhat stil üz dhe öld-fashond däts (*patronyzing sniger*) – and Chief Ofiser VandenPlaz and y can ashür

oul aur pasinghers we’r not göing tu alaw okäzhonal acts ov selfishnes tu spoil dhe voyigh for dhe rest ov us, and dhat aplys tu böth North and South Gondola.”

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“Swich it of!”, Tomie snapd. “He mäks me sik!”

Alvin did so.

“Self-satisfyd basterd spyder.”

“Tomie, it’s not dhe Captin’s foul –”

“It’s bludie FitsJherald sed y cud’nt go widh dhe rest ov yu tu see North Gondola.”

“Wel yu shud’v studied mor.”

“Whot, be a bludie swot, lyk yu? Hu needs boring öld astro-pis-pots eniway?”

“Dhat exam was eazie!”

“And dhey oul hät us coz we remynd dhem ov Erth. FitsJherald – yes, him too, Lord ov dhe Spydere! Probablie swiming in baths ov hunie-shampän ryht naw, lafing about stüpid erthies hu caant undestand (*afected vois*) stelar formüläshons and oober-cozmic cwontum expansüläshons – wel dhey can disapear up dheir öwn blak höls, dhat’s whot dhey can du...”

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Dhe partie in North Gondola was in ful swing. A vertüal string orkestra belted aut compüter-gheneräted cwazi-straussian woultses, wyel on dhe wouls a vertüal painter flung aut a seasleslie metamorfösing flöw ov cwazi-mykelanghelönian drama. Dhe fauntin in dhe midel ov dhe grät houl sparkeld widh a licwid melodie ov culerd lyt. Dhe gests chaterd viväshuslie in smoul groops. Waiters pasd among dhem replenishing dhe champän, restoking dhe platers ov vol-ö-von and ordeuvra, mini-mins pys and cheez and pynapel on a stik, oul products ov dhe verie hyst cwolitie gheneticalie enghineerd algal slym.

And heer cäm dhe gest ov oner: Captin Lorens FitsJherald himself, toul and bronzd, curlie-haired and rudie-cheekd, beaming widh gud hümor, his ryht arm rapd araund dhe shölders ov a brünet gerl, his left embräsing a blond – slender-waisted, long-legged, ghenerus-busted бүties böth, dheir fäses wyd-iyd, ful-lipd and flashing wyt teeth, gerls hu cud hardlie hav been mor dhan a cworter ov dhe Captins agh.

Evribodie turnd tu woch dhem enter dhe houl: a haaf-unbutend röz tunic flankd by silver and göld boulgauns.

“Enter dhe heröic leader”, grauld a yung, röz-üniformd jhünier ofiser tu a silver-haired, profesorial lädie ov indeterminat agh standing next tu him. “Heröic in dhe bedroom, at least, jhughing from his haaf-dresd stät.”

Dhe lädie profeser fraund: “If y wer his wyf, y’d hav sumthing tu say tu him!”

“Dhe Captins lädie wyf has faund udher interests in a nytclub in Star Paris.”

“A charming cupel! Du yu think y shud menshon dhöz göings-on in my regulär pösting tu dhe *Jhurnal ov dhe British Inteplanetarie Sosyete?*”

“He’s a bad influens on dhe ship. Sumwun shud mäk a formal complaint.”

Dhe öld lädie luukd at him expectantlie.

“Wel dönt luuk at me, Profeser!”

Meanwyel dhe höst was greeting his möst illustrius gest. Purser MaknaMara had abandond his normal wurking üniform for an absurd confecshon ov crimzon velvet and wyt läs. He naw aproachd dhe Captin widh autstrechd arms.

“Welcum, Captin, haafway tu historie in dhe mäking!”, his vois boomd över dhe müzic. “Praiz be tu Heraldiena, aur protector and gyd! Lavinia!” – he enthüziasticalie snogd dhe blond gerl – “Melindia!” – he tryd tu repeat dhe säm greeting widh dhe brünet, but she cwiklie turnd her hed asyd and oul he got wos her cheek. Meanwyel Lavinia puld a ry fäs az if she had jhust biten on a lemon.

“Dhat’s enuf ov dhat!”, dhe Captin wornd him of. “Whär’s dhe booz?”

“Shampän!”, could MaknaMara, and three waiters hurried tuwords dhem from diferent dyrecshons, colyding tuggedher in frunt ov dhe Captin. He releasd his simpering companions, ostentäshuslie oferd dhem drinks from dhe tray which he had täken from dhe nearest waiter, and fynalie puut a ful glas tu his öwn lips.

Sudenlie anudher, sumwot ölder wuman was standing in frunt ov dhe Captin. “We oul adord yor speech, ser”, she stätet fermlie. “It wos so stering, so profaund. Yu wer so strong!”

Dhe Captin bogeld at dhis new vizhon ov luvlines dhat had materialydzd befor his iys. Dhe shampän wos forgotten. But his twu consorts glärd at her lyk cats prepäring tu defend tu dhe deth dheir markd teritorie.

“Karinthia!”, gaspd FitsJherald, “Yu luuk wunderful tunyt!”

“Duz’nt she!”, oozd MaknaMara, slyding his arm öliaghinuslie arand her waist. Dhey mömentarilie fäs each udher and jhust tuchd dheir nözes tuggedher – “Mmmmm!” – wyel dhe Captin stärd and dhe udher gerls anggrilie gulpd shampers.

“Yor speech inspyrd us oul”, continüd Karinthia, luuking arand and raizing her peneträtig contralto abuv dhe renewd chater in dhe furdher reaches ov dhe houl, “Inspyrd us widh dhe strength tu fäs dhe second haaf ov aur imens jhurnie, remynded us ov dhe reazon we ar heer and wy we bär dhe höps ov dhe entyer hüman räs in aur tynie vesel.”

Dhe Purser raizd his hands, cast a prompting glans araund and began claping. Ragid aplouz ripeld thru dhe houl.

Dhe Captin beamd widh plezhür: "Wel thank yu, Karinthia, thank yu, Mak!"

"Speech!", sumwun at dhe bak ov dhe houl haaf-shauted.

"Lädies and ghentelmen", cryd dhe Captin, "y'm tuchd, deeplie tuchd. And gratifyd! And naw y hav an important anaunsment for yu oul."

Dhe Purser tryd tu cwel dhe persistent buz from dhe bak ov dhe houl: "An important anaunsment, evribodie. A new stägh ov aur mishon is about tu comens!"

"A new stägh indeed!", continüd dhe Captin. "And on dhat stägh we shal be prezenting, for dhe ferst tym in intesteler späs, a thëatrical producshon ov grandür, ov such müzical vertüositie, such dramatic pauer, such dazeling costüms and imaghinativ consepshon, such vöcal pauer, such convicshon – hm, hm:

*Beglückt darf nun dich, o Heimat, ich schauen
und grüssen froh deine lieblichen Auen;
nun lass ich ruh'n den Wanderstab,
weil Gott getreu ich gepilgert hab' ..."*

he belowd in a comanding baritön, tu dhe disharmönius acumpaniment ov mufeld groans from dhe furdher reseses ov dhe houl.

"An exelent chois", cryd dhe Purser. "Let's hear it for Bëzays opera *Carmen*!" And he led anudher raund ov haaf-harted aplouz.

"It's Vagner, actüalie", dhe Captin hissd in his ear, and dhen continüd laudlie tu dhe public: "Y hav been outhoryzd tu tel yu dhis projhct has dhe personal baking ov dhe Prezident himself. Unkel Mak heer'l be chairman ov dhe comitie, and we expect tu see oul ov yu at dhe oudishon. Dhis producshon wil be beamd bak lyv tu Olympus, and it'l be dhe touk ov dhe entyer Sölar Sistem, so let's röl aur sleeves up and mäk it a wunderful ëvning ov müzic and drama dhey'l never forget!"

Dhe aplouz dizolvd intu a buz ov convesäshon. Dhe Captin esshewd furdher anaunsmets in fäver ov shampän and intimat touk. Dhe gests had no päshens tu hear enie mor. Dhe müzic sensd dhe chängh in mood and increasd in böth volüm and tempo. Dhe woul-paintings acselerätet dheir permütäshons and brytend dheir palet tu a fëver-pich ov activitie. Cupels began tu woults araund dhe sentral fauntin, whär a fyn mist ov wouter droplits moisend dheir flushd cheeks.

"Wy", cryd Purser MaknaMara intu Karinthias ear, "wy duz'nt he consult me ferst? Y'm supözd tu be in chargh ov entetänments. Dhat's whot dhey pay me for."

"He's puuting yu in chargh ov dhe comitie, darling, is'nt he?"

"But y'v dun so much preparäshon on *Carmen*; dhe costüms ar oulmöst redie, and..."

"Never mynd, darling, yu can cum and entetän me!"

Dhey snugeld tuggedher, swaying widh dhe beat, and cast sydlong glances at dhe Captin and his twu luvlie consorts casting sydlong glances at dhem.

In anudher part ov dhe houl, dhe jhünier ofiser and dhe lädie profeser wer discussing developments.

“It wos stil a gud speech”, öld silverloks insisted. “So long az yu turn a blynd iy tu its rütien sexist, aghist, räsist and planetist byases.”

“Ov cors it wos, but hu d’yu think wröt it? FitsJherald dus’nt believ a wurd ov it enie mor.”

“But haw can dhe Captin...?”

“Bekoz he’s an öld fool, dhat’s wy.”

“Yu dönt nöw him lyk y du”, dhe lädie profeser cwäverd. “Bak in dhe öld days...”

“Yes, yes, y nöw. Dö’nt yu see he’s chänghd? He’s forgotten evrithing.”

“He wos aur leader when tyms got ruf.”

“Dö’nt wurie”, dhe röz-üniformd ofiser purd. “When tyms get ruf again, at least we’l be secür in dhe noligh aur Captin’l hav dhe perfect operatic aria tu sing for dhe ocäzhon!”

* * *

Dhär wos a dimlie lit street, a scatering ov dustie shops, dhe pläntiv eko ov a distant saxofön. No wun about, exept for Sushuela cärfulie piking her way between staks ov paking käses and pyels ov wäst bags fild widh rubbish. Dhe condensäshon glisening on mildüd surfises gäv of a faintlie ransid öder. A cat mäawd, slunk past in dhe opozit dyrecshon. She shiverd, and enterd a smoul alieaway.

And heer it wos: *Ye Olde Mysterye Shoppe*. Sushuela felt she cud hav been bak on Erth a sentürie ago, or even three, bak in dhe days ov öld, sèpia-culerd fötografs which nydher moovd nor anserd enie ov yor cwestjions when yu askd.

She presd dhe door, dhen presd it harder. It öpend on rustie hinghes; a bel jhingeld sumwhär. It haaf-clözd again behynd her, and she wos suraunded by gloomie raks ov porselin figüreens, ornaments, vazes, aut-ov-fashion clödhs, forgotten puzels, unluvd toys, and dhe brik-a-brak ov evrie descripshon dhat had been discarded düring dhe past fourteen yers ov dhe voyigh.

“Dr Üfo! Dr Üfo!”, she haaf wisperd.

Sumthing horibel slidherd between her feet and scuteld insect-lyk away intu dhe gloom.

“Dr Üfo!”, she repeated, shäking oul över.

“Go bak, go bak, wyel yu stil hav tym!”, shriekd a mekanical toy söldjer at her from a shelf.

“Y’v got an apointment!”, Sushuela hissd bak.

“Öh. Sorie about dhat”, sed dhe toy.

“Dhär yu go again”, sed a minitür dynosor, swishing its long tail, “stiking yor linëar prögraming in widhaut thinking about dhe consecwenses.”

“Y”, sed a therd toy in an elaborat 18th-sentürie costüm and pauderd wig, “oulways think about dhe... about dhe... whot wer we touking about?”

Dhe dols ghestürd at each udher widh jherkie arm and hand moovments. Sushuela woehd, fasinäted.

“Can y help yu?”, a wumans vois sudenlie cäm from behynd her. Dhe vois wos soft, African-modüläted, but Sushuela jhumpd oul dhe säm.

“Y’v cum tu see Dr Üfo.”

“It’s Sushuela, is’nt it? He töld me he wos expecting yu. He caant see yu ryht naw. Y can täk dhe trakers for yu.” She reached aut and öpend Sushueles jhaket.

“Hu ar yu?”

“My näm’s Tandie. Y’m Dr Üfo’s asistent.” She smyld caamlie at Sushuela – oulmöst lyk wun ov dhe toys herself, Sushuela thoht, az she held tytlie ontü her jhaket tu prevent dhe velvet-skind fëmael figür from releasing dhe trakers undeneath.

“Whär’s Dr Üfo?”

“Y’m afraid he’s bizie widh sumwun els ryht naw. Pleaz let me täk dhe trakers for yu.”

Sushuela hezitäted for a möment longer wyel dhe strängh wuman started tu releas her fingers, smyling stedilie oul dhe tym. Her hands proovd tu be az strong az röbotic manipüläters, and Sushuela wos forsd tu giv in. “Oul ryht”, she muterd, and alawd dhe strängh wuman tu täk dhe trakers of her. “Dhat wun’s Alvins, dhat’s Tomies. Dhey’l be along tu pik dhem up, probablie by midnyt.”

“We’l hav dhem waiting for dhem. It wos so nys meeting yu. Y du höp y’l see yu again soon. Hav a steler day!” Again dhat unsetelinglie dyrect smyel. Tandie tuuk dhe twu waistcoat harnesses and vanishd widh dhem intu an iner room.

“Yu tu”, muterd Sushuela, suspishuslie. When Tandie had gon, she crepd intu dhe bak ov dhe shop after her, peerd thru a chink in a hevie velvet curtain. Dhär wos a dark coridor, a rectanggel ov yelöw lyt in a haaf-öpen doorway. She held her breth.

“Y’m geting öld, my iys ar’nt so gud”, a plaintiv mael vois raspd from behynd dhat door.

“Wel aint dhat a crying shäm”, cäm dhe reply, “coz dhe bos, yu see, he gets kynda impäshent when peepel looz propertie dhat aint dheirs.”

Sushuela becäm awär ov a moovment by her shölder. Wun ov dhe mekanical dols had crepd along dhe shelf tu jhoin her, and naw its iys met hers and it solemlie raizd its tynie index finger tu its lips: “Ssshhh!”

Sushuela turnd cwyetlie, her hart thumping, and tiptoed az cwiklie az posibel aut ov dhe shop.

* * *

Tomie twisted araunder in his seat: "Let's du it, Alv. Of tu dhe räses!"

Alvin floated bak tu Tomies bag, öpend it and prodüsd a video camera, a grötesk lätex mask, a pair ov wyt gluvs and a földed sheet. "Whot's dhis?", he aded, finding a botel az wel.

"Öpen it."

Dhe cramped compartment wos imädätlie fild widh dhe reek ov alcohol, and sum redish-braun globüls ov licwid formd in mid-air and wobeld lyk jhelie. Tomie stoukd dhem, öpend his mauth, snapd up dhe larghest and swolöwd.

"Go on, whot ar yu afraid ov? Heer, giv us dhe botel."

"Cärfül", sed Alvin, dabing fastidiuslie at his tunic, "We caant go bak smeling ov drink."

"It's partie tym. Hu cärs? Dhey'l oul be sozeld by naw eniway."

"But we'r not supozd tu..."

"We dönt hav tu liv by dheir rüls enie mor. We'r diferent" – he shauted so laudlie dhat Alvin shrank bak – "we'r dhe masters ov dhe bludie ünivers!" He burst intu a peal ov lafter, belchd laudlie, laft again. "Whot ar yu waiting for?"

Alvin bakd of päshentlie: "Y need tu think about it."

"Alv, yu'r a sad cäs, yu nöw dhat? Yu gota unwynd, enjhoy yorsel."

"Y'm ökay."

"Öh-h-h yäh? Cm'eer, Alv." Tomie floated up tu him and presd him against dhe woul. "Y'm gona hav a litel wurd widh a pritie gerl y nöw, and when y tel yu she's a litel go-er, yu can trust me y'm teling yu dhat from personal expeeriëns, nöw whot y mean? Ey?"

"Yu mean yu'v... widh her tu?"

"Cors y hav. And she's gona blöw yor boloks of, y can promis yu –"

"Get of!"

Az Alvin pushd him away, Tomie baunsd of dhe opozit woul widhaut stoping touking: "– she wil, and she's gona puut her arms araunder yu lyk dhis, ever so tenderlie..."

Tomie tikeld Alvins ribs devilishlie, Alvin desperatlie pushd him away again, and dhe cabin wos fild widh flailing arms and legs, peals ov lafter, shrieks ov iritashon and a fyn mist ov aromatic droplits ov brandie.

"Cärfül!", shauted Alvin at last, "We mustnt..." – he thoht cwiklie – "mustnt damigh yor mask." He graspd it and held it up lyk a cros tu word of a vampyer.

"Giv me dhat." Tomie puld dhe horer över his hed. "Ëëë! Whot du y luuk lyk?"

"Aut ov dhis wurld. Yor hair's stiking aut."

Dhey ajhusted dhe mask.

"Hümans, öh hümans", cründ Tomie, "yor tym is up. Prepär tu meet yor doom!" He belchd again, breadhd hard for a möment, perchd cwyetlie in a corner. "Get dhe cam."

"We didnt chek for a sub-sat."

“Whot? We must hav wun, or it’l oul go rong. Whär’s it kept?”

“Y dönt nöw. In heer?” Alvin chekd a loker, blushd at dhe thoht ov whot he had faund befor.

“Not heer. Jhust smoul things, clödhs and stuf.”

“Heer?”, sed Tomie, and puld aut a sferical objhect dhe syz ov a largh futboul.

“Dhat’s it. Dönt tuch dhe antena, or we’l never get it földed bak daun again.”

“Öokay. We’r in biznes. Giv me dhe sheet.”

Dhe sheet, strechd aut against dhe end woul, proovd tu be cuverd widh wierd simbols dhat myt pas for älien wryting. Alvin, perchd bakwerds on dhe pylots seat, aimd dhe videocam. Tomie drifted tu wun syd, puling on dhe gluvs and flexing his finggers lyk a surghen: “Remember whot y töld yu. Keep it on my fäs.”

“Is dhat whot yu coul it?”

“And höld it stedie.”

“Y nöw.”

“Whot about dhe vois scrambler?”

Alvin chekd dhe mykrofön ünit atachd tu dhe videocam: “It’s on.”

“Start it.”

Alvin began recording.

For a wyel, dhe vewfield wos fild widh dhe enigmatic älien hyeroglifics. Dhen dhe maskd Tomie wobeld intu vew and turnd tu fäs dhe camera. Hu nöws haw tu read dhe expreshon on an älien fäs, never befor seen by hümankynd? Yet tu aur iys, dhe vizigh ov dhe unuterablie Udher conveyd an impreshon ov profaund solemnitie, bäsd on thauzends ov milenia ov wizdom acümülätet thru long meditäshon and practis ov self-disiplin and dhe marshal arts.

After a long pouz, dhe Udher began tu deliver its historic mesigh tu mankynd.

“Hümans, lisen tu me! Y am Zargon ov dhe star sistem yu coul Alfa Sentorie. We hav been woching yu for menie yers. We nöw oul about yor ship, yor so-could *Herald ov Intesteler Frend Ship*. We nöw about yor teribel historie ov war and destrucshon ov each udher and dhe envyronment. We nöw exactlie whot sort ov a teribel heribel horibel – y mean herald, y mean – höld dhe camera strait, caant yu?”

Alvin wos shäking widh lafter and dhe seshon wos ruind.

“We’l hav tu du it again. Go bak tu dhe begining.”

On dhe second try, it wos Tomie hu started gigeling ferst at dhe fötal point in dhe script. Dhe therd tym araund, no sooner had Tomie turnd tu fäs dhe camera dhan böth colapsd intu histerics at wunss.

“Dhis is no gud”, Tomie muterd. “We’l hav tu chängh dhe script.”

Dhey sat sylentlie for sevräl minits, pasing dhe botel between dhem. Alvin began tu feel his shynes dizolving in dhe akrid braun fluid. Tomies lips moovd sylentlie, and his hed noded tu dhe ridhm ov his thohts.

“Y’v got it. Let’s go”, he sed sudenlie. Dhey tuuk up dheir pozishons again.

When dhey fynalie replayd whot dhey had recorded, dhey herd dhe efect ov dhe spectral scrambler which had distorted dhe harmonics ov Tomies vois beyond recognishon: “...*And so we ar naw warning yu, stay away from Alfa Sentorie. Turn bak, hümans, wyel dhär is stil tym. Turn bak tu yor öwn soler sistem and leav us alön. Udhe wyz yu wil oul be utelie destroyd. Turn bak and flee for yor lyvs, yu aghents ov evil. Yu hav been wornd!*”

Tomie luukd up from dhe moniter: “Dhat’l du.”

“It’s not loghical.”

“It’s gud, Alv. It’l puut dhe wind up FitsJherald.”

“Ferst yu critisyz us for bëing destructiv and wormunggering and oul dhat, and dhen yu anauns yu’r göing tu be jhust az destructiv yorself. Yu’r not consistent.”

“Luuk, y nöw haw dhe äliens think, ökay? It’s legitimat self-defens.”

“And eniway we caant turn bak naw.”

“Cors we can.”

“It’s a fizical imposibilitie.”

“Yu believ dhat? Yu burk! Haw du yu nöw whot dhey tel us is true?”

Alvin and Tomie stärd at each udher. Alvin luukd away, mutering: “And eniway, yu’r oulways teling me tu go oul dhe way...”

“Feed it intu dhe sub-sat.”

Alvin shrugd and did so. Tomie wochd him intentlie: “Oul set up naw?”

“Yes. It sleeps for an auer, dhen it wäks up, öpens its antena, loks on tu dhe *Herald* and tranzmits över and över again til it runs aut ov pauer.”

“Gud. Lounch it.”

Dhey repläsd dhe sfeer in its lounching tüb, swichd it on, clözd dhe airtyt door behynd it and mentalie transferd a comand tu dhe contröl sistem.

“Fyer!”, shafted Tomie.

“Iy, iy, Captin!” Alvin presd dhe vertüal buten, and dhär wos a slyt hiss and jhölt az dhe sub-sat lounchd itself ontu an independent corss.

“Naw let’s hytail it aut ov heer.” Tomie seteld himself intu dhe pylots seat. “Giv me dhe ring. Swich dhe lyt of.” Alvin did so.

Tomie rötäted dhe capsjül dhis way and dhat. Widh dhe cabin in darknes, dhey peerd aut and sou stars. Thauzends upon thauzends ov stars: bryt stars, not-so-bryt stars, faint stars dizolving intu dhe mistie band ov dhe Milkie Way. Red stars, oringh stars, yelöw stars, blue stars, wyt stars. In

evrie dyrecshon az dhey rötätet sylentlie, stars and yet mor stars. Ov dhe *Herald* dhär was not a siyn.

“Whär’s she gon?”, wisperd Tomie.

“Y töld yu we’d gon far enuf.”

“Whär’s dhe bludie *Herald*, Alv, whär’s she got tu?”

“We’r lost in späs.”

“Caant yu get her bak? Haw du yu swich dhe compüter on?”

“We disäbeld it when we started.”

“Dhe compüter’l tel us whot tu du.”

“It outomaticlie tels Heraldiena whär we ar. We myt az wel rädeo dhe *Herald* dyrectlie for help.”

“No, dönt du dhat. Shë’s got tu be aut dhär sumwhär. Shë’s got tu be.”

* * *

“Dhey’v got tu be aut dhär sumwhär. Dhey’v got tu be”, sed Miesha. Slavic-iyd, dhe säm agh az Tomie and Alvin, he was siting at wun ov dhe twu dyning täbels in dhe comon room ov dhe Star Lunden Foster Senter.

Dhe täbel was literd widh dhe remains ov diner; sum ov dhe orfens had oulredie left, udhers wer tydieing up. Dhe bütiful Elain colected sum dertie pläts and tuuk dhem away, fliking her abundant blond hair över her shölders widh a practisd moov ov her hed. Sonja was helping by brushing sum crums tu wun syd ov dhe täbel, and dhen brushing dhem bak again.

“It’s could Fermies Paradox, after dhe fizisist Enrieko Fermie”, explaind Dr Rieta, dhe plump, cheerful foster mudher tu dhe teenagh orfens from Erth. Miesha was lisening atentivlie, and Sonja letharghiclie. Rieta continüd: “He was alyv in dhe Between Äghes, when Erth was dhe önlie inhabited wurld –”

Sonja intejhected: “Urh! Primitiv!”

“– and he puut it dhis way: if Erth is an ordinarie planet, shürlie dhär must be lyf on milions ov udher Erths thruaut dhe Galaxie, and shürlie sum ov dhöz planets evolvd teknologhical spëshiez befor Erth, and shürlie sum ov dhöz spëshiez invented rädeo or even späs travel, in which cäs we shud be hearing dhem or seeing dheir späscraft in aur öwn söler sistem, so whär ar dhey?” Her fyn nordic featürs rädäated a smyel az she spred her hands wyd in perplexitie.

On dhe udher syd ov dhe comon room, Luie (dhe African boy) and Slava (dhe udher Slav) wer siting at a gäms consöl.

“Öh no”, cryd Slava, “yu jhust wyped aut dhe entyer Arktürëan empyer!”

“Dy, tentakel-fäses!”, wisperd Luie, feröshuslie wurking dhe jhoystik.

Dhe frunt door öpend, and Sushiela enterd.

Epstyn, dhe udher adult in charch ov dhe Foster Senter, was shambling acros dhe room. Oulredie an öld and bröken man when dhe *Herald* departed from dhe Söler Sistem, he fäsd dhe yungsters under his cär widh a perpetüal scaul on his pinchd and lynd fäs, haaf-hidden under an unkemt beard. "Yu'r lät", he grumbeld at Sushiela, "Dhär's nuthing left."

"Sorie, Eps, y wos woching dhe selibräshon."

Sushiela sat daun at Dr Rietas täbel, reachd for a dish and faund sum cöld lasanja. Rieta greeted her widh a mudherlie glans wyel continüing tu enümerät dhe terms ov dhe Dräk Ecwäzhen, which atempts tu estimät dhe lyklie number ov intelighent sivilyzäshons existing at dhe present tym in dhe Galaxie. Miesha and Sonja wer kiking each udhers feet under dhe täbel. Sushiela clözd her iys, chanted cwytelie tu herself: "Dhis nurishment y grätfulie resiev, in dhe näm ov lyfs evolving ünitie", and began tu eat.

Elain pouzd besyd her: "Funie we'v not seen Tomie and Alvin dhis ëvning. *Ywunder* whär dhey'v got tu?"

"Shut up", muterd Sushiela, and dhen becäm awär dhat Dr Rieta had pouzd and wos luuking in her dyrecshon. "Y 'spect dhey'r stil autsyd woching dhe Haafway partie."

"Yu think dhey'v gon *autsyd*, did yu say?", Elain needeld her, a sly grin embelishing her oulredie too-pritie fäs.

Miesha had a theorie: "Tomie's probablie trying tu sneak intu North Gondola when FitsJherald's not woching. Shud'v seen haw mad he wos."

Dr Rieta continüd: "...and dhe last term ov dhe Dräk Ecwäzhen estimäts dhe probabilitie ov an advansd sivilyzäshon survyving dhe trouma ov realyzing dhat it is verie probablie dhe önlie sivilyzäshon in dhe ünivers."

"But", Miesha objhected, "we nów for shür dhär's äliens in Alfa Sentorie."

"Dhär *ar*, Miesha, dhär *ar* äliens, plüral. Yes, we du. And yet we önlie hav dheir orijhinal signals. Dhey dönt respond at oul tu aur öwn signals. So maybe it's an outomatic beacon ov sum sort, and when we get dhär we'l fynd dhey cum from anudher star outtugedher."

"Urh! Primitiv!", sed Sonja.

* * *

"Haw much ö-twu left?", Tomie askd.

"Y think y nów haw tu get dhe compüter on."

"But yu sed it wud contact dhe *Herald*."

"Yes. Outomaticlie, when it starts up", Alvin sed.

Dhey luukd at each udher in dhe gloom.

"Never!", Tomie desyded.

"Or we cud drift heer, alön, for ever."

"Basterds."

"Hu?"

"Y dönt nöw. Evribodie... Wy didnt yu mäk shür we cud get bak säflie?"

"Haw wos y tu nöw it wud täk so long?"

Dhey floated weitleslie and wochd dhe stars for a wyel.

"Alv, täk dhe ring. Heer. Dü sumthing."

"Whot?"

"Y dönt nöw. Get us höm. Yu can du it, Alv, yu'r a bludie ghënius, y nöw yu can."

"Haw can y? Y'm önlie a sad cäs. Arnt y?"

Dhey drifted sylentlie and wochd dhe stars for anudher long wyel.

Tomie fraud: "It'l start sending dhe mesigh soon."

"If it can lok on tu dhe *Herald*. Maybe it's lost too."

"Dam!"

"We cud broudcast lyv. Dhe *Herald*'l pik it up. Eazie."

Tomie didnt heer dhe mokerie in Alvins vois. "Y'm not in dhe mood", he grumbeld.

"Puut dhe mask on again. We can stil du it."

"Y sed y'm not in dhe mood."

"Wy not?"

Dhey breadhd angshuslie and wochd dhe stars again.

But when Alvins iys fel on dhe consteläshon ov Vergo, he thoht he sou an outtugedher mor entysing verghin (if she stil wos a verghin, which wos öpen tu sërius daut by naw), jhyving efortleslie on a crauded disko floor; he wos aproaching her, hölding aut his hand tu her, and she wos lafing her silverie laf and saying, "Alvie, yu luuk so silie", and dhen she tuuk Mieshas hand and woultsd of widh him widhaut a bakwerd luuk, and Alvin jhust stued dhär and stärd, stued and stärd, until dhe udher dansers nokd him flying...

Alvin styfeld a sob and tuchd dhe dashbord.

"Whot ar yu duing?", askd Tomie after a wyel.

"Reprögraming dhe sub-sat."

"Wy?"

"Dönt we wont tu delay dhe tranzmishon til after we get bak?"

"No! Play it naw! Y wont dhem tu scwerm!"

Dhey tuseld. Tomie wun bak dhe ring.

"Haw du y get it tu play naw?"

"Think ov an öld-fashond disk spinning az it plays bak dhe mesigh."

Tomie clözd his iys and did so. Dhe capsjül fyerd its atitüd thrusters and started tu rötät, sentrifüghing dhe twu boys tu opozit syds ov dhe cabin.

“Yu burk!”

* * *

Dhe müzic in dhe glittering houl in North Gondola had swichd from Vienëz woultses tu fast Cüban jhaz. A handful ov kupels ghyräted energheticlie on dhe dans floor tu dhe urghing ov trumpets and conggas, wyele dhe udhers wochd, sat at dheir täbels or launghd about in a convivial serkel besyd dhe sentral fauntin.

Captin FitsJherald was at a täbel near dhe dansers, a fat, sigar-shäpd inhäler poizd at a jhountie angel by his lips, regäling his menie fëmael admyrers widh funie stories, so far az wun cud mäk aut from a distans. Purser MaknaMara, resplendent in his flamboyent liberachëan outfit, hand claspd in hand and gäz lokd in gäz widh dhe statüesk Karinthia, was sliping unobtrüsvlie aut ov dhe door, intent on mor pryvit entertänments. And dhe silver-haired lädie profeser was hölding forth tu a smoul cumpanie gadherd near dhe fauntin on haw a shipload ov ilëgal gynoids had been delayd by customs, had chäsd dhe *Herald* haafway araund dhe Söler Sistem – Calisto tu Marz tu Erth – and dhen had never cout up befor dhe *Heralds* forsd emerghensie departür from Erth.

“Röbotic sex mashiens, tötalie submisiv, tötalie obëdiënt – urh!”, sed a fëmael vois.

Dhe profeser responded widh a ry smyel: “Toys for dhe boys. Realistic enuf, so long az yor ydëa ov realitie is a jhüvenyel mael fantasie.”

“Y thoht gynoids wer ban’d az imoral?”, askd sumwun.

“So dhey wer”, grauld Sixth Ofiser Moodie, “hylie imoral, but dhat dusnt stop sum peepel from geting dheir swetie hands on dhem.”

“Isnt it disloyal”, dhe lädie profeser twinkeld, “for an ofiser tu cast aspershons on his captin?”

“Üüühhh!”, gaspd several ov dhe liseners.

But Moodie was unfäzd: “Dhe Captin combyns real pauer widh ghenüin mascülin atractivnes. Wy ask for artifishal bäbs when yu can get dhe real thing?”

Dhey glansd sureptishuslie in dhe dyrecshon ov dhe Captins täbel, and noded saghlie.

“Önlie reazon he got dhe jhob”, muterd sumwun els. “But dhen hu...?”

“Whär wud corrupshon be even mor shoking dhan in dhe Captins cabin?”

“Tel us, hu du yu mean?”, shafted haaf a duzen vois.

Moodie luukd araund at dhem, pouzd, dhen löwerd his vois: “After oul, dhe Captin is meerlie dhe chief servant ov dhe Rerezentativ Caunsel.”

Dhe udhers luukd at each udher, obvüslie alarmd at dhe thoht ov corrupshon in such hy pläses.

"Y'm sorie", Moodie went on in a mater-ov-fact tön, "Y'm bëing paghd, y'l hav tu liev it dhär." He turnd tu go.

"Öh, cum on!", dhey could after him.

"Whot about dhe Prezident?", sumwun rashlie shauted.

Moodie turnd bak tu fäs dhem, stärd widhaut expreshon for a möment, and dhen ströd of.

He left dhe grät houl thru wun ov its smouler exits and stuud cwyetlie in dhe koridor autsyd. He wos alön. He bawd his hed in thoht.

"Moodie", he sub-vokalyzd.

Dhe thin, hard fäs ov Chief Ofiser Patrüela VandenPlaz formd itself in his mental vizhon.

"Moodie, Contröl", she sed in a vois önlie Moodie cud hear, becoz it önlie existed insyd his öwn brain. "Heraldiena ses dhe auter garazh door on worden 14 is öpen. Y'v clözd and lokd it from heer, but y wont yu tu chek dhe garazh personalie and see whot's göing on."

"Yes ser, copie dhat", Moodie responded mentalie. "Du we hav enie indicäshon on dhe stätus ov worden 14 itself?"

"It's asleep. Beter giv it a chekaut jhust tu mäk shür."

"Yes ser."

"Wud yu tel dhe Captin? Y tryd paghing him, but yu nöw whot he's lyk."

"Y'l du dhat."

"Y hav him dhär widh yu in dhe bouloorm, but he's gon intu his pryvit späs and y caant read him."

"Dhe Captin's widh me heer, enjhying himself widh his gerlfrends."

"Understuud. Thank yu. Contröl aut."

"Copie yu. Moodie aut."

He raizd his hed, re-fökusd his atenshon on dhe auter wurld, syhd, and returnd tu dhe grät houl.

* * *

Tomie brök dhe sylens: "Dhey'r aut heer, yu nöw."

"Hu?"

"Dhem. Dhe äliens."

"Yu mean dhe Herald?"

"No, dhem. Caant yu see dhem?"

"Hu?"

"Y töld yu. Dhe äliens."

"Whär?"

"Out heer, yu burk. Caant yu sens dhem? Dhey'r oul arand us."

Alvin luukd oul araund: "Y caant see enie äliens."

"Wel yu'r stüpid. Dhey önlie reveal dhemselves tu intelighent peeple."

"Like yu, y supöz."

"Yes, actüalie, lyk me... y sumtym see dhem at nyt."

"Yu mean yu'r dreaming?"

"Aut heer it's oulways nyt. Oulways nyt, never daytym. Dhe day is much tu far away. Maybe we'l never see real daylyt... liv aur whöl lyvs in dhe nyt."

Alvin shuderd. He elböwd Tomie aut ov dhe pylots chair: "Get aut ov dhe way. Giv me dhe ring."

Tomie öbeyd, drifted bak intu dhe cabin: "We dönt need dhe *Herald* enie mor. *Dhey'r* cuming for us." He shiverd and swichd dhe inteerior lyt bak on.

"Turn it of", sed Alvin. "We'r going höm naw." He swichd it of himself.

Tomie detachd his inscrybd sheet from dhe woul and rap'd it araund himself in dhe gloom. "Du yu think dhey'l be nys tu us?" he cwaverd. "We did whot dhey askd. We sent dhe warning. Dhey'l be pleazd about dhat."

Alvin ignord him and gäzd intu dhe lyflong nyt autsyd. Dhe glittering heavens wer slyding slöwlie and randomlie past his windöw. Sudenlie an unüzhualie bryt star coht his atenshon az it swung intu vew, a yelöw-tinted serchlyt oulmöst az pauerful az Sirius, poizd between dhe W-shäpd figür ov Casiopea and dhe raizd sord ov Perseus at a spot whär no astrologher ov clasical anticwitie had ever nöted dhe prezens ov a star.

Alvin hezitäted az dhe starfield slipd past, trubeld by wurds he önlie haaf undestuud: daytym... höm..., and by a chyldhud memorie ov a tym when dhat particülar star had wunss been much bryter dhan enie udher; bryter dhan Sirius, dhe äns hent Dog Star; bryter, too, dhan anudher yelöw star which naw drifted intu his windöw az dhe capsjül turnd tu fäs in dhe dyametricalie opozit dyrecshon...

Presing his hand widh dhe ring tu dhe contröl dashbourd, compresing his lips widh dhe efort ov consenträshon, Alvin faund dhe virtüal jhoystik in his iner vizhon and gripd it widh an imaghinarie hand. He tuuk contröl, rötätet dhe capsjül until he faund Oryon, dhen ajhusted his oriëntäshon tu mach az exactlie az he cud his ferst vew ov dhe stars on emerghing from dhe *Heralds* belie: Oryon on dhe ryht, Sirius on dhe left, Prosyon and Gheminie shyning steadilie abuv. He dhen youwd cärfulie thru exactlie 180 degrees, stäbilyzd his oriëntäshon again and peerd aut intenslie.

Dhe deep blak sky wos a dazling stil-lyf ov stars, emptie ov oul moovment or ov enie hüman cumfort.

He fyred dhe largh rear thrusters for 30 seconds, pining Tomie against dhe rear woul. His vew forwurd ov dhe briliant sumer tryangel, widh dhe bütiful dubel star Albireo bang in dhe midel, chänghd not wun yöta.

“We caant escäp, yu nöw”, sed Tomie plaintivlie. “Yu can run, but dhär’s nowhere tu hyd. We cud go a bilion trillion lyt-yers, and dhey’d stil cach us.”

“Y mäk it 900 kilometers. We’l be bak at dhe heribel *Herald* in tym for brekfast.”

“Put dhe lyt on.”

“No. Need tu save pauer.”

“It’s no üs”, Tomie muterd sleepilie. “Dhey’l get us whotever we du.”

“Dhär caant be enie äliens aut heer. Dhe nearest ar stil twu point wun eit lyt-yers away, and we’r not even shür about dhem.”

“Dönt try and fyt it”, Tomie went on in a strängh, traanslyk vois. “Jhust reach aut and tuch dhem. Dhey’l be dhär.”

Alvin shiverd. He retrievd dhe pair ov binocülers from dheir loker and traind dhem on dhe stars ahead, terifyd dhat a misjhughment ov önlie a degree in dheir corss wud couz dhem tu mis dhe *Herald* by mor dhan 15 kilometers. At dhat rängh its 3-kilometer bulk wud luuk no largher dhan... (*he calculäted*) a fingger at arms length, glimering önlie dylie in reflected starlyt az dhey careend past it, not nöwing whedher tu luuk ryht or left, up or daun. And cud he realie be shür he was not fyv degrees of? In which cäs... beter not mäk dhat calculäshon, he thoht. Wud it not be beter after oul tu thröw säcresie tu dhe galaxies, boot up dhe wordens compüter and ask dhe *Herald* tu giv dhem dhe corect bearing?

But dhen Heraldiena wud alert dhe Ofiser ov dhe Woch dhat a worden was playing trüant, and soon evribodie wud fynd aut, and dhen whot wud Tomie say, or dhat imigh ov feminin бүtie, dhat gerl, dhat yung wuman, dhat esens ov gräs and luvlines hu houted his säcret thohts?

Dhe display screen dhat he cud see in his mind’s iy whenever he held dhe ring clös tu dhe tuch pad on dhe wordens dashbourd shöwd a cartoon figür ov a cat (or maybe it wos a maus? or sum udher stüpid karakter?) asleep in bed. *WÄK UP INTELIGHENT CONTRÖL SISTEM? – YES / NO*, sed dhe screen, and dhe aröw cursor hoverd araund dhe *YES* and dhe *NO* az Alvins thoht hezitäted between dhem.

He glansd bak at Tomie, rap’d up in his älien sheet and aparentlie asleep. Dhen he seemed tu see dhe gerl aproaching him, smyeling at him widh acseptans radher dhan mokerie, her long blond hair flöwing in dhe wind, a buton on her dres undun, or twu butons?, seemd tu hear her saying, “Tomie tels me haw bräv yu wer, haw clever yu wer, geting bak tu dhe *Herald* widhaut eniwun gesing, wy dönt yu let me puut my arms raund yu and giv yu a...”

Alvin flushd, shuuk himself, klikd on *NO* and pikd up dhe binocülers again.

* * *

Tomie runing up an endles sèriez ov stärcäses. Pouzes on dhe landing. Luuks bak. Sushuela chäsing him, gigeling. Tomie for sum reazon feels afraid. Runs up dhe next twu flyts. Heer at last is dhe top. A landing. A coridor. Ov corss – dhe sècret door. He puls aut dhe ring. Glances bak. Sushuela caching up. He trys tu fit dhe ring tu dhe tuch pad. No tuch pad. Nytmär. Turns arauind in teror. Sushuela metamorföses intu Captin FitsJherald. Tauer's menasinglie över Tomie. Puls aut a flashlyt and shyns it intu Tomie's iys, dazeling him...

Tomie rubd his iys, öpend dhem. He wos curld up in his sheet in dhe bak ov dhe worden, damp widh perspiräshon despyt dhe chil ov dhe cabin air. From tym tu tym pasing spotlyts shon thru dhe windöw, momentarilie pasing dyrectlie över his iys.

He strechd, yaund, sneezd. Alvin wos in dhe pylots seat duing sumthing.

"Alv, whot tym is it?"

"Cworter tu fyv."

"Whär ar we?"

He manoeverd his weitles bodie acros tu dhe frunt ov dhe cabin, whär he jhoind Alvin and peerd aut. Dhey wer flying slöwlie daun a vast shaft between blak wouls ilüminated by sharp oringh lyts at hundred-mëter intevals. Tytanic coils glisend lyk sleeping reptyels in dhe shadöws.

Tomie's hart constricted, his hed swam. Äliens!

"Whot is dhis pläs?" he askd again, but mor in wunder dhan in expectäshon ov an anser.

"We'r in dhe enghin bay. Y cudnt get us bak tu dhe garazh we started from, dhe door wudnt öpen."

"No shit? Y thoht it wos..." Tomie stamerd. He tuuk a möment tu get his bearings, but dhen askd urghentlie, "Yu didnt wäk up dhe compüter?"

"Ov corss not."

"Whot's dhat flashing lyt for?"

"It's teling us we'r aut ov ö-twu."

"No shit..."

Dhey naw aproachd a ded end tu dhe tunel. Dhär wer twu wordens oulredie dokd against dhe bulkhed, and twu free hachways. Alvin broht his worden tu a stop, rötätet it thru 180 degrees, alynd it widh wun ov dhe väcant hachways üzing dhe mental jhoystik in dhe thoht contröl link, and bakd expertlie ontu dhe target.

Dhär wos a rezonant bump, and dheir worden spun of intu späs.

"Dam!" cryd Tomie, "luuk whot yu'r duing!"

"Sorie", muterd Alvin, frauning and reföcusing his mind on dhe virtüal jhoystik.

"Wy's dhat flashing lyt gon from amber tu red?"

"Let me consenträt!"

"Let me du it!"

Tomie elböwd Alvin aut ov dhe way, snachd dhe ring from his fingger and tuuk contröl. Dhe worden bakd ontu dhe doking hach too fast, impacted widh a rezonant clang and spun bak of intu späs.

“Dam, dam!”

“Tomie, yu’v got tu let me try again!”

“Y can du it!”

“No, Tomie, let me!”

Tomie pushed him away and regaind contröl ov dhe worden. Consenträtig widh oul his myt, he reversd ever so ghentlie ontu dhe hachway.

Alvin chekd a dyagram ov dheir prögres which was repeated on dhe surfäs ov dhe dashbound: “Yu’v got it twisted.”

“Oul ryht, y nöw.”

In dhe sylens dhat folöwd, böth boys nötisd haw hard dhey wer breadhing.

“Up a bit.”

“Oul ryht!”

Tomie mäd dhe corecshon. Dheir alynmnt was perfect. He rested dhe worden against dhe doking port and continüd tu fyer dhe thrusters, trying tu forss dhe laches tu lok dhem on.

“Dhat’s it, keep presing... Whot did yu stop for?”

Tomie mentalie twisted dhe virtüal thruster handel dhis way and dhat. Dhe capsjül meerlie drifted slöwlie away from dhe doking port.

Alvin gesd: “Out ov fuel?”

“Dam it!”

“Out ov ö-twu, az wel.”

“Alv, get us aut ov heer!”

“Y need tu think about it... öokay, we’l jhust hav tu späswouk.” He serchd thru dhe lokers and faund twu pairs ov gogels widh ear mufs atachd. “Puut dhis on”, he gaspd.

Tomie tuuk wun, frytend. “Whär’s dhe preshur helmets?”

“Help me luuk for dhem.”

Dhey cudnt fynd enie.

Tomies anxyetie deepend: “We caant get aut widhaut helmets. We’l dy!”

“We’l jhust hav tu höld aur breth. Dhat’l giv us ten seconds tu reach dhe airlok. Plentie ov tym!”

Alvin, scrabeling thru dhe lokers, faund a length ov carbon nanö-fyber röp which he puuld aut and uncoild. It twisted araund oukwurdlie, filing dhe zerö-gravitie cabin widh balkie loops. Alvin tyd wun end raund Tomies bodie, dhe udher araund his öwn. Dhe remaining length he coild up az best he cud, raping it tytlie araund wun arm.

“We caant go aut intu späs widhaut ö-twu”, Tomie moand plaintivlie.

“Take deep breths”, Alvin instructed. Tomie noded, his fäs ashen, slipd dhe mask över his iys and ears, and began charging his lungs up widh whot litel oxighen remaind in dhe stael cabin air.

Alvin scoopd up dhe bag, stufd dhe sheet, dhe älien mask and gluvs, dhe videocam and dhe emptie botel intu it, and thrust it intu Tomies arms. Dhen he turnd his atenshon tu dheir rear hach.

He pouzd, mäd a thumbs-up siyn tu Tomie, hu hezitantlie returnd dhe ghestür. Dhen he tuuk dhe deepest breth he had ever täken in his lyf and presd dhe buton tu öpen dhe hach.

Nothing hapend.

He presd dhe buton again, and dhen again. He luukd at Tomie: “It wönt öpen wyel we’v stil got cabin preshur.”

Tomie stärd at him, breadhing hevylie.

Alvin compresd his lips, glansd araund dhe tynie compartment for inspiräshon: “Giv me dhe ring.”

Tomie faund his vois and spök in a hours wisper: “We’r trapd in heer!”

“Giv me dhe ring!”

“We’r stuk heer forever!”

“Tomie!” Alvin puuld dhe ring of his unrezisting hand and went widh it bak tu dhe dashbourd. “Dhär must be a way...”

After a few minits Tomies vois raspd again: “Whot ar yu duing?”

“Y dönt nöw... whot’s dhis?... got it! Säftie överyd. It’l start bleeding of preshur ryht away. Jhust thank Heraldiena dhe hach öpens autwurds.” From sumwhär under dheir feet cäm an ominous hissing saund.

Dhe boys turnd bak tu dhe rear hach. Alvin raizd his hand tu dhe buton, luukd araund at Tomie. “Whär did yu puut dhe bag?”

“It’s not gonna wurk”, Tomie muterd, wyd-iyd, but pikd up dhe bag widh oul dheir things in it.

“Höld on tu it tytlie, we dönt wont tu looz it.”

Tomie noded mütlie.

“Täk a deep breth. Redie?” Alvin did so himself, but dhen hezitäted, his hand poizd över dhe buton, his frytend stär meeting Tomies.

“Wait, y got it rong, dönt try tu höld yor breth!” he desyded. “Dep breths tu stor up ö-twu, but dhen öpen yor mauth, let it oul aut, ökay? Udherwyz we’l jhust explöd!”

He öpend his mauth lyk a fish, exhäld, sou Tomie imität him, cwiklie jhabd his hand at dhe buton again.

Dhär wos a laud bang and evrithing wos confüzd flying thru dhe vacüm ov späs fel hevylie against a hard woul baunsd of colyded widh Tomie däzd and confüzd Alvin twisted araund luuking desperatlie for dhe hach abuv dhem dhey drifted slöwlie away from dhe bulkhed he foht against Tomies grip kikd him away üzing him az reacshon mas reachd dhe doking hach grabd a handrail it

hurt lyk fyer ov corss dhe cöldnes ov intestelar späs puuld his cuffs över his paams waund dhe röp araund dhe handrail arested Tomies möshon puuld him tuwords him faund a buton jhabd at it sudenlie dhe airlok was öpen emptie thank Olympus or dhey'd hav been blöwn away forever scambeld insyd no Tomie puul puul dhär he is flailing paniking stuk in dhe hachway get dhat leg insyd luuk for buton too dark tu see caant fynd it whot's dhis pres buton clözd at last y'm dying ö-twu ö-twu haw du y get ö-twu caant think evrithing in darknes lisen it's cuming on hear rushing noiz filing chämber can breadh again can breadh again my god dhat was rekles dhat was stüpid dhat was so recloopid!!!

2. Dhe rekoning

Dhe 24-auer cloks prescrybd morning for Sauth Gondola. Dhe street lyts on C dek cast a slöwlie brytening ilüminäshon, mimiking terestrial doun, on an urban street whär a handful ov pedestrians wer oulredie up and abaut. Dhey shärd dhe chekerbourd-pävð späs widh an erlie morning trafic ov röbotic guds carriers and street sweepers, luuking lyk self-propeld shopping trolies. Dhe cwyet electrical hum ov a röbot az it trundeld past was acumpanied by dhe saund ov berdsong from a nearby park. Dhe strengthening röz-tinted rädians fel on benches ov sinthetic wuud, on ornamental green bushes and silverie sculptüral figürs maunted on stön plinths, and on a door widh a siyn över it which red: *STAR LUNDEN FOSTER SENTER*.

Araund 8 o'clock dhe orfans wer starting brekfast. A display woul behynd dhem oferd pastoral sëns from a planet which nun ov dhem was öld enuf tu remember. Cwyet müzic filterd aut ov dhe saund sistem and caunterpointed dhe aröma ov fresh cofee.

It was dhe boys turn tu serv. So wyel dhe bütiful Elaine launghd delicatlie at dhe täbel, runing her finggers thru her long blond hair, and dhe duskie Daljhit gigeld az dhe päl-complecshond Sonja wisperd sëcrets in her ear, it was Luie, Miesha and Slava hu clusterd araund dhe uven in dhe ajhoining kichen, chatering abaut futboul, wyel Surajh and Hamid, dhe twu Äzhan boys, layd dhe täbel.

In cäm Gräsie, az blak az Ela Fitsgherald and widh a vois az sweet, huming tu herself. In cäm Kylie, hu luukd jhust lyk Snöw Whyt from dhe fairie tale – “Y had dhe wierdest dream last nyt”, she began. And heer was Dr Rieta – “Gud morning, Dr Rieta” – “Morning, evriwun! Haw ar yu oul today?” – folöwd shortlie from his room by Epstyn. “Morning, Eps”, dhey sed tu him, but he jhust glauerd at dhem in reply and slumpd daun at dhe hed ov wun ov dhe twu dyning täbels scraching his beard. Nöbodie tuuk much nötis.

“Sorie, gys”, Dr Rieta was saying, “dhe Sports Senter's not yet öpen, so dhis afternoon'l be spent in extra lybrarie studie.” She shugard dhe anaunsment widh a practisd smyel, and tydied a stray lok ov Sonjas hair for her.

“Öh no!” dhey oul groand.

“Y’m afraid dhey’r stil repairing dhe fyer damigh.”

“Caant we üz dhe park?” askd wun ov dhe boys.

“No, unfortünatlie, dhe envyronmental peepel say we’v got tu giv dhe gras tym tu renew itself.”

“Wy dusnt gheenturf gröw faster?”

“A gud cwestjon Miesha. Y think dhat’l be dhe subhject ov yor next esay projhect.”

“Öh no!”

“Öh dhat’s primitiv!” moand Sonja.

Nöbodie had nötisd Sushuela slip intu dhe boys houl, and naw nöbodie comented haw wuried she luukd when she returnd and jhoind dhe udhers at brekfast.

But Epstyn nötisd twu emptie pläses at his täbel. His scaul deepend: “Sumbodie go and wäk up Alvin and Tomie. If eniwun can be bodherd.”

Miesha sed, “Y’l go.” Sushuela toyd widh her food ancshuslie. Miesha returnd: “Dhey’r not dhär.”

Epstyn shrugd. “Gud ridans...” he muterd, and toyd ydlie widh a piess ov toast. But Dr Rieta inteveend: “Has eniwun seen Alvin or Tomie dhis morning?... Did eniwun see dhem last nyt?”

“Dheir rooms ar emptie”, Miesha reported.

“Wil yu löcät dhem pleaz?”

Miesha turnd tu dhe woul. Surajh elböwd him aut ov dhe way: “Heraldiena, help us fynd sumbodie.”

Dhe display woul lost its soodhing sëns ov tropical beaches and wäving paams; in dheir pläs dhär röz up twu ghyant weels, rötätig slöwlie in opozit dyrecshons, läbeld “North Gondola” and “Sauth Gondola.” Each wos divyded intu eit segments: twu bilt up widh a dyagramd sitiescäp ov flats, shops and ofises, twu portraying parkland, twu, agricultüral instaläshons, and twu, freshwouter läks, oul held in pläs araund dhe sercumferens by dhe rötäshon. Dhe sitie ärëas wer nämnd, in dhe north, “Star Woshington” and “Star Moscöw”, in dhe sauth, “Star Lunden” and “Star Paris.”

Surajh instructed Heraldiena tu select dhe list ov orfans in Sauth Gondola, and from dhat list he chöz Alvin Shakelten. Dhe display prodüsd a cartoon imigh ov an öld-fashond polisman in a blue üniform, runing, oulternatlie blöwing his wisel and wäving his trunchon. In dhe späs ov a singgel second North Gondola vanishd and Sauth fild dhe vew. It rötäted, stopd, zoomd in on Star Paris, zoomd again ontu F dek, dhe löwest, zeröd in ontu a street and fynalie ontu a singgel adres, whär Alvins traker ycon blinkd bashfulie at dhem.

“Y’v got Alvin, Dr Rieta.”

She cäm tu Surajhs syd. “Öh? Definatlie not dhe sort ov pläs y’d wont tu stay dhe nyt. Heraldiena, whot’s his stätus?”

Up cäm a panel, and Rieta red of: "Respiräshon normal, puls normal, blud preshur normal, awak and conshus." She spök tu dhe woul again: "Giv him a coul, wil yu?"

Heraldiena displayd an ycon ov an öld-fashond telefön handset. Dhe wävs ripeling autwurds from dhat ycon went unanserd. Dr Rieta, Surajh and Miesha luukd at each udher and shrugd.

* * *

Meanwhyel a diferent convesäshon was täking pläs in a room in North Gondola which contrasted in evrie way widh dhe modest acomodäshon enjhyod by dhe orfans from Erth: dhe Contröl Room.

It wos a wyd sercölar houl, widh hy marbel-fäsd stön wouls and colums az masiv az in a cathëdral. Toul archd windöw apertüers reveald glimpses ov luxüriant sunlit parkland autsyd, widh snöw-capd mauntins in dhe häzie distans. A duzen sparslie instrümented contröl stäshons wer distribüted araund dhe Contröl Rooms späshus sercumferens, each dominäted by a three-dymenshonal cüboid display ünit. Anudher, hemisferical ünit, twys az largh, dominäted dhe senter ov dhe room, vewabel from oul anggels, suraunded by a naröw wurktop; curentlie it glöwd faintlie widh a silver lyt but wos not udherwyz in üs. Dhe dominant culer araund dhe periferie wos green, but in jhust wun or twu pläses a blok ov amber pixels could atenshon tu sum myner problem.

For oul its syz dhär wer önlie twu figüers vizibel in dhe Contröl Room, böth dresd in dhe säm stylish üniform: a röz-culerd tunic and trauzers widh blak and silver bands at dhe cuffs and shölders, and widh a largh sercölar lögo över dhe left brest poket bearing dhe wurds: *MARSHEN ASTRONOUTIX AND SPÄS ADMINISTRÄSHON*. Ofiser ov dhe Woch on dhe 6 tu 10 a.m. dütie wos Chief Ofiser Patriëla VandenPlaz; she naw leand against a contröl stäshon widh arms földed över her ghenerus bust and lisend wyel Sixth Ofiser Kat Moodie grauld his report.

Dhey turnd dheir heds az a familiar vois intrüded över dheir convesäshon and över dhe sweet chater ov berdsong and tinkling ov ornamental fauntins wofting in thru dhe windöws: "*Beglückt darf nun dich, o Heimat, ich schauen, dum dum, diddle de de, ya-ka-ta-tah tah dah-da dah dah...*"

"Gud morning, Captin", sed VandenPlaz widhaut uncrossing her arms.

"Morning, troopers", sed dhe Captin cheerfulie, marching acros dhe paläshal room. "Praiz be tu Heraldiena, protector and gyd! Oul green acros dhe bourd?"

"Mr Moodie has a report."

"Yes ser", grunted Moodie. "Worden 14 has gon missing."

Dhe Captin grind at him: "Gon missing, eh? – ha, ha, ha! – Heraldiena dusnt mis things!"

"Heraldiena wos not awär ov dhe problem until y puut a hüman iyboul on dhe käs. It apears tu hav flöwn away, ser."

"Whot, by itself?"

"Or widh sumwun on bourd."

VandenPlaz aded: "Y'v been saying for anums dhe secüritie on dhis ship is lafabel."

Dhe Captin wävd her of: "Saunds lyk a malfuncshon tu me. Hu'd wont tu steal it? Whär wud dhey täk it? If dhe door wos foulitie last nyt, dhen maybe... Ask Mr BekyuRel tu sort it aut. Dho y'm surpnyzd if Heraldiena realie needs us tu, er... Wy caant she jhust send anudher worden aut after it and fech it bak in?"

VandenPlaz prompted Moodie: "Dhe Captin wud lyk tu nöw whedher we'r traking dhe runaway worden."

"Yes, ser." Moodie turnd tu dhe Captin. "Yu may remember ser, dhe syd rädar is daun for servising. So Heraldiena's verie larghlie blynd."

"Wel whüz jhob is it tu fix it? Whär ar oul dhe enghineers when yu need wun?"

"Mr Shanghiy is leading a team dhat's wurking on it ryht naw, ser."

"Meanwyel", continüd VandenPlaz in her sharp, unfeminin contralto, "a forin objhect ov unnöwn orighin has been detected in dhe enghin bay."

"Dhe mising worden?"

"Olimpus nöws! Cud be an älien starship, and we wudnt nöw a thing about it."

"Hav yu askd Heraldiena whot it is?... Ah. In dhat cäs y supöz we'l hav tu send sumwun daun dhär tu investigät?"

VandenPlaz snorted widh iritäshon. Moodie wunss again explaind: "Mr BekyuRel has a team daun dhär ryht naw, ser."

"Wel... so dhat's oul ryht dhen. Inform Heraldiena and myself imëdiatlíe dhe objhect is ydentifyd. Eníthing els? Or can y go and hav my morning cofee naw?"

VandenPlaz unfölded her arms and luukd strait at her comander: "Captin, y hav a list ov propözals for tytëning secüritie."

"Must yu realie? Y du höp it's not a verie long list."

"A list ov urghent propözals. Befor we get overrun by äliens. Or saboteurs. Or termyts."

"Termyts? Realie... Whot does Heraldiena say?"

"Whot du yu think? She dusnt hav tym for dhat sort ov thing wyel she's runing a détaild simüläshon ov dhe formäshon ov dhe ünivers! She thinks we'r intelighent enuf tu deal widh it aurselvs. Distribüted präsesing."

"Yes..." FitsJherald noded thohtfulie, "A trülie wyz anser. Her intelighens and wizdom puut me in ouw evrie tym. Puut yor propözals in my mailbox, y'l täk a luuk at dhem."

"Y oulredie hav dun, widh copies tu dhe Chief Enghineer, dhe udher ofisers, and oulso dhe Prezident ov dhe Reprëzentativ Caunsel."

"Öh, realie, Patie!... y'l luuk at dhem läter. Naw y think it's tym for my morning cofee, so if dhat's oul..."

His vizibel form dizolvd intu a shauer ov evaporätng pixels, wyl Moodie and VandenPlaz exchänghd skeptical glances.

* * *

“Can yu hurie up naw, or yu’l be lät for clases”, Dr Rieta could. Dhe orfans wer preparng tu spend dhe morning at skool.

Miesha askd, “Whot about Tomie and Alvin?”

“If dhey’r not bak soon, y’l hav tu report dhem mising.”

“No need for dhat”, Sushuela blurtd aut, “Y’l fynd dhem!”

“No –” Rieta began, “Cum bak, Sushuela!” But dhe gerl dashd of befor eniwun cud stop her.

“She’s been behävng funie oul morning”, sed Daljhit, her sister.

“Miesha, wud yu run after her and coul her bak? Dhe löwer deks ov Star Paris ar not exactlie a verie respectabel ärëa.”

“Yes, Dr Rieta.” He pikd up his sachel and went aut.

Epstyn wos wochng skepticalie from his seat at dhe brekfast täbel. “Lot ov fus över nuthng”, he snarld. “Dhey can luuk after dhemselves.”

“Eps, dhär ar parts ov dhis ship whär y du not wont my yung peepel wondering about unprotected and unsüpervyzd! Espeshalie gerls! And if yu had enie sens ov responsibilitie –”

Epstyn raizd his vois: “Dhen yu’r living in a dream, cos dhey oulredie du!” Höldng his hand whär Rieta cud not see it, but Daljhit cud, he mymd a bleating mauth.

“When? When has eniwun heer ever gon tu dhe löwer deks ov Star Paris? – Daljhit, dhat’s enuf, go tu skool naw!”

“Yes, Dr Rieta.” She turnd reluctantlie tu dhe door and folöwd dhe udher orfans aut. “Bleater!” she muterd under her breth.

When dhey wer alön tagedher, Rieta ströd acros tu Epstyn and hissd, “When? If yu’r hyding sumthing from me...”

Epstyn shrugd and luukd away. He spök cwyetlie, in a tön ov biter amüzment: “After sports? When dhey’v täken a shauer? Do dhey never forget tu puut dhe trakers bak on for an auer or twu? Not long enuf tu triger dhe alarm, but long enuf tu...”

“But dhey’r at dhe Sports Senter.”

“...du a litel exploring?” His vois hardend and he luukd her in dhe iy again: “Cut dhem sum slak, wil yu, Rieta? Dhey’r yung, need tu get aut...”

“Hav yu seen whot condishons ar lyk on dhöz löwer deks? Hav yu? Eps, y’ m touking tu yu!”

Again Epstyn eväded her gäz and continüd speaking oulmöst tu himself: "...udherwyz it's oul studie, clases, exams, preshur, preshur. No surpryz if dhey wont tu rebel a bit, skip a clas or twu, get aut and see dhe world – whot litel dhär is ov it!"

But Dr Rieta was not standing for dhat: "Y wil not hav my yung peepel mising clases! We'v slipd three pläses daun dhe leag täbel dhis term alön –"

"Dönt we oul nów it", Epstyn muterd, and stuud up.

"– and it's about tym Tomie started puling his weit. Az for Alvin, y dönt nów whot's cum över him. It's Tomie leading him astray, dhat's whot it is. Dhey jhust need dheir responsibilities explaind tu dhem reazonable."

"Yäh, yäh, whotever. Hav a stelar day!" Epstyn wävd her of, turnd his bak and went intu his öwn tynie bedroom. He slumpd daun on dhe bed, dhe pictür ov depreshon beyond cäring, pikd up an inhäler, unscrewd dhe cap, presd dhe buton dhat turnd up dhe strength tu maximum, and stuk wun end intu his mauth. On dhe woul fäsing him a windöw cäm tu lyf...

* * *

"Hy – y'm Alik Bryton."

"And y'm Göldie Berd."

"Y was in Armstrong Scwär last nyt, and y rekon evriwun hu cud cheer must'v been dhär for dhe grät Haafway selebräshon."

"And y was in Gagarin Scwär, and y rekon evriwun hu cud stand must'v been dhär."

"But whot about dhe peepel hu cud önlie craul?"

"Dhey wer in Paris and Lunden!"

(Lafter, sum boos. Numbers spin araund in a box in dhe corner ov dhe windöw, and setel on +4.)

"Sorie, gys, for dhöz ov yu in Star Paris and Star Lunden, we önlie mean yu must'v been selebrätting so much harder dhan us!", Göldie cwipd.

(Moking lafter.)

"Yes, it mäks yu think, dusnt it: haafway dhär, haafway tu historie in dhe mäking."

"Ov corss, sum peepel think aur whöl mishon is önlie a haaf-bäkd ydäa."

"But we say: haaf yu no respect?" *(Weak lafter.)* "Half-ter oul, we'r önlie duing dhis on yor behaaf!"

"Öh, dhat's teribel!", Göldie retorted, and shuuk her gölden curls widh indignäshon. She glansd tu wun syd az if she cud see dhe spinning numbers in dhe corner ov dhe windöw. Dhey seteld. "Mynus nyn!", she exclaimd pitieinglie. "We'v got a speshal reword for haaf-wits lyk yu."

"A reword? Öh, Göldie!"

"Bring on dhe Gölden Gong aword!"

(Enter man widh largh frying pan. He bongs Alik on dhe hed. Laud, rezonant bong-g-g-g! Exit man. Lafter, aplouz. Oudiens rätting +9.)

Alik continüd, röling his iys: "Tauking about haaf-wits, dhär wos a marshan, a loonie and an erthie –"

"Öh no, y'v heard dhis wun, it's dredful!"

"Are yu going tu lisen? If yu wönt lisen, y'm going tu sulk!"

(Oudiens reacshon: a pitieing "aaahhh!")

"Shal we lisen tu him?", Göldie entreated dhe oudiens. "Du we wont tu hear his jhök?"

(Aplouz; shauts ov "yähhh!" and "bog of!"; lafter. Oudiens rätting +8.)

Alik (laudlie): "Dhär wos a marshan, a loonie and an erthie... and dhey oul desyded tu explor dhe ünivers. So dhey each bilt rokets. Dhe marshan fild wun tank in his roket widh ö-twu and wun widh äch-twu, and presd dhe starter buton, and of he went – whoo-ooshh! – tu explor dhe ünivers.

"Dhe loonie oulso bilt a roket widh twu tanks, and he puut ö-twu in wun tank and licwid moonshyn in dhe udher, and presd dhe starter buton, and of he went tu explor dhe ünivers, önlie he didnt get cwyt so far – whush!"

"Whot –", interupted Göldie, "– jhust... whush?"

"Jhust a litel... whush!" (Ripel ov weak lafter.) "And dhen dhe erthie oulso bilt a roket widh twu tanks, and he puut wyt söldjers in wun tank and blak söldjers in dhe udher, but poor erthie didnt go eniwär, cos when he presd dhe starter buton oul dhe twu tanks did wos tu dryv arand shooting at each udher and kiling lots ov peepel!"

(Gäls ov lafter, 100% aprüval rätting, enthüziastic aplouz, fäding intu distant ekos...)

* * *

An ekoing tunel dimlie lit. Laders, pyps, boxes, cäbels... ekos dying away intu a profaund sylens.

"Whär ar we?" wisperd Tomie, shivering, floating weitleslie. *Whär ar we?* eköd dhe tunel, *Whär ar we we we...*

"Y dönt nöw" (nöw nöw nöw...), Alvin replyd, masaghing his num and bleeding hands and presing dhem under his armpits.

"It's so cöld!" (cöld cöld cöld...).

"Yu shudnt hav dropd dhe bag" (bag bag bag...).

Dheir breth crëated clauds ov condensäshon in frunt ov dheir blue fäses. Dheir teeth chaterd mersileslie.

"Which way?" (way way way...).

"Y dönt nöw!" (nöw nöw nöw...).

* * *

"...And so we ar naw warning yu, stay away from Alfa Sentorie. Turn bak, hümans, wyl dhär is stil tym. Turn bak tu yor öwn söler sistem and leav us alön. Udherwyz yu wil oul be uterlie destroyd. Turn bak and flee for yor lyvs, yu äghents ov evil. Yu hav been wornd!"

Chief Ofiser VandenPlaz stuud in frunt ov dhe display and stärd. Her long braun hair wos neatlie coild up över her hed, her röz-pink MASA üniform wos impecablie dighityzd and her mauth wos, lyk her iys, wyd öpen. Wun myt hav thoht she wos a waxwurk, a later-day gargoil widh her expreshon ov amäzment, horor and disbelief.

"Hümans, lisen tu me!" dhe mesigh sykeld bak tu its starting point. *"Y am Zargon..."*

She clözd her iys widhaut chänghing her shokd expreshon and tuchd dhe consöl widh wun hand. "Captin tu dhe Contröl Room", she wisperd, "Captin *at wunss* tu dhe Contröl Room!" And öpend her iys. And stärd. And disbeliefd.

After a few möments dhe Captin matërialyzd, tuggedher widh Moodie. "But, Captin, y dönt see it", Moodie wos saying.

"We hav dhe korus on dhe uper level", explaind FitsJherald, wäving his hands, "and dhe sölöists frunt ov stägh, baklit, widh dhe ferst and second vyolins playing dhe, er... yes, Patie, whot is it?... Whot dhe... Hölie Olympus!"

Dhey wochd dhe broudcast thru in sylens.

"Whär's it cuming from?"

"Dhär's no vizhual contact."

"Rädar? Öh."

Moodie reminded him. "Mr Shanghiy..."

"Yes, oul ryht. Wel whotever it is we'd beter keep it cwyet. Ask Heraldiena tu giv it a top securitie clasificäshon."

VandenPlaz tuchd dhe display ünit, dhen sed: "Dun."

"We caant hav dhis sort ov thing geting araund befor we'v wurked aut whot's going on", sed dhe Captin. "Coul Mr BekyuRel, Ms KoBayashi and Mr Marduk, and we'l discuss dhis in pryvit. And we'l need a byologhist."

VandenPlaz curvd dhe corners ov her thin lips intu a cruiked smyel: "Profeser Amazonis?"

"Öh pleaz, not her! We'l spend oul aur tym argüing about ghender räshios and pätriarkal dominans."

"Speaking ov which, dönt yu think we shud oulso inform dhe Prezident?"

"For Olympus säk, dönt let him nöw! Jhust dhe sënior ofisers."

Moodie remynded him again: "Mr BekyuRel's stil wurking in dhe enghin bay, ser."

“Wel pägh him, dhen...” – he sou VandenPlaz stäring at him – “Worn him he may be dealing with a forin objhect ov älien orighin.”

A chym rang from dhe consöl. VandenPlaz anserd: “Yes?”

On dhe ünit in frunt ov her apeard dhe hed and shölders ov an elderlie man, impecablie groomd and dresd, with a hint ov nervus anxyetie or shiftines araud dhe iys.

“Ah”, she sed, “gud morning, Mr Prezident.”

“Is dhe Captin dhär?” he drouled in a hours vois. “Mr FitsJherald, hav yu seen dhis trülie amäzing mesigh we’v been receiving?”

“Mr Prezident! – ha, ha! – y dönt nöw whot it is but we’r giving it top securitie for dhe tym being.”

“Whot dhis is, Captin, is nuthing les dhan dhe historic meeting with extraterrestrial intelighens dhe hüman räs has been waiting for, for oul ov historie.”

VandenPlaz fraund and slowlie shuuk her hed.

Dhe Captin urghd him: “Pleaz keep it tu yorself for dhe tym being, Mr Prezident! We wer jhust about tu invyt yu tu a säcret meeting whär we can discuss whot it means. Can yu cum tu dhe Contröl Room az soon az posibel?”

“It’s my dütie tu coul an imëdiat emergensie meeting ov dhe ful Rerezentativ Causel tu consider aur respons.”

“Pleaz, Mr Prezident, can we discuss it in pryvit heer first?”

“If yu insist, Mr FitsJherald. Y’l jhoin yu dhär in a few minits.” And his imigh disapeard.

“Ryht”, sed dhe Captin. “And – naw whot is it?” Dhe chym had gon of again.

Dhis tym it wos Purser MaknaMara: “Captin, y’v jhust seen dhe most extrordinarie thing, luuks lyk an älien mesigh!” Karinthias fäs and bär shölders hoverd in dhe bakgraund; her hair wos disheveld and she wos hölding a gailie culerd tael över her chest.

“Contröl Room a.s.a.p., and keep it under yor hat. Dönt tel eniwun!” hisd FitsJherald.

MaknaMara chukeld, tapd his nöz and vanishd. Dhe chym saunded again imëdiatelie.

“Naw hu is it?”

It wos Alik Bryton and Göldie Berd: “Captin FitsJherald, du yu hav enie coment on dhis historic älien mesigh we’v been resëving?”

He threw up his hands in exasperäshon: “Öh for Olympus säk, wy dönt yu jhust tel evribodie?!”

* * *

Alvin and Tomie shiverd in a dark corner and held dheir breth. A cuple ov figüers dresd in worm enghineers süts swam past.

Dhe vois ov dhe man in dhe lead approachd dheir hyding pläs: “And dhat, az y say, proves beyond daut dhe mesigh cäm from a sub-satelyt ejhected by dhe mising worden. Y töld Contröl, Contröl

wudnt lisen. Musnt upset dhe Prezident, or sumthing. Y töld dhem it was obvius. Dhey töld me tu go play widh my nuts and böltz."

"Yes, Mr BekyuRel", cäm a wumans vois from clös behynd him.

"Y töld dhem if dhey wanted tu run a starship by täking orders from a süperanüätet stufd shert hu cudnt order brekfast til yu töld him which way up tu höld dhe menü, dhat was dheir biznes – or from a mashien so-could intelighens dhat thinks it's too preshus tu consern itself widh enithing les dhan dhe fät ov dhe ünivers – but if dhey wanted an enghineers opinion... Sumthing tu keep aut dhe cöld?"

Alvin glimpsd dhe reflected glimer from a glas objhect in BekyuRels gluvd hand.

"Thanks", dhe wuman replyd. "Drambuie?"

"Önlie dhe best. Az y was saying..."

Dhe ekos resëded and dyd away intu stilnes. Tomie and Alvin grind at each udher.

Alvin emerghd from dhe hyding pläs and turnd in dhe dyrecshon from which dhe enghineers had cum.

"Dhis way!" he wisperd.

* * *

Dr Rieta was siting at dhe desk in her ofis woching dhe stüdio debät on dhe mesigh from Zargon. Opinion was divyded az tu whedher it wud be posibel tu negöshiät widh dhe äliens, or whedher dhe autcum wud be intestelar wor.

"Strängh..." she müzd, "Haw strängh... jhust about dhe intelektüal level ov –"

Dhär was a nok at dhe door.

"Cum in."

It was Sushuela and Miesha, hu sed: "Dr Rieta, we caant fynd Alvin or Tomie."

"Whär hav yu been? Yu didnt...? after y explisitlie töld yu...?"

"Sorie, Dr Rieta. She ran too fast for me."

"Star Paris? F dek?"

"It's a sort ov jhunk shop. Dhär was nöbodie dhär, jhust a heap ov jhunk."

Sushuela sudenlie turnd away; dhe udhers cud hear her sobing.

Dr Rieta stuud up: "Sushuela, whot's dhe mater? Sushuela!"

She angrilie tryd tu get a grip on herself: "Nuthing."

"Is it Alvin and Tomie? Whot du yu nöw about dhem? When did yu see dhem last?"

"Y'm oul ryht. Realie."

"Whär did yu last see dhem?"

"Paris Scwär."

“Dhe Haafway selebräshon? Last nyt?”

She noded, wyped her nöz. Her silver mäk-up wos naw tear-staind and smughd över her cheeks.

“Üz yor hankerchief, not yor sleev. Did dhey say whär dhey wer going?”

She shuuk her hed.

Dr Rieta luukd hard at her. “Are yu shür?... Are yu cwyt shür dhey didnt say whot dhey wer planing tu du?”

Sushiela gäv her a wärie glans. “Y saw dhem in Paris Scwär, and dhey didnt say whot dhey wer duing”, she enunsiätet fastidiuslie.

“Oul ryht”, Rieta sed at last, “run along naw, yu’r mising yor clases.”

Dhey scamperd of; she returnd tu her desk. She puld up tu screen a dyalog box dhat sed: *REPORT MISSING PERSONS? OK / CANCEL*, and thoht for a long wyel.

* * *

F dek in Star Paris wos at wurk, and Alvin and Tomie önlie atracted cazhual glanses.

Heer wos dhe repair shop, neseld between ghyant ventiläshon and sewigh ducts, whär dhe löwest-gräd teknishans cleand and sölderd, jhökd and boozd. Dhär dhe cafetëria, serving cofee and löw-fat döhnuts along widh läzie jhaz in which a tenor sax alternatlie waild and grauld on its stormie voyigh thru an uneazie sea ov sinthesyzd vybs. Dhey pasd dhe rubbish emporium, whär dhöz on dhe verie löwest rung ov dhe söshal lader sorted rubbish for a living: “Metal – plastic – rags – yukk! – plastic – metal – rags – yukk!...” – wurk dhat not even dhe meanest self-respecting röbotic intelighens wud tuch.

Dhey spärd no mor dhan a cärles glans for dhe condensäshon-driping wouls decorätet widh disculerd swerls ov rebelius caligrafie – *FITSJHERALD FASHIST*, widh dhe capital Fs elaborätet intu swosticas. Fynalie dhey reachd a dizmal alieway which asaild dheir nözes widh a coktail ov mildew, greas and ürin, whär even dhe ful-spectrum daylyt-simülätig lamps seemd unabel tu cast much sunshyn, and at dhe end *Ye Olde Mysterye Shoppe*.

Dhe door wos ajhar. Dhey pushd dheir way in, herd a bel tinkle at dhe bak ov dhe shop. Dhe door jhamd and dhey faund dhemselves wouking on debrie.

Tomie, leading dhe way, stopd and luukd araund in surpryz. “Whot’s going on heer?” he breadhd.

Dhe shelvs had been öveturnd, dheir contents – prysles antiëks and wurthles jhunk alyk – scaterd and smashd.

Dhe boys mäd dheir way tu dhe bak ov dhe shop, Tomie crunching impäshentlie över dhe preshus rekigh, Alvin cärfulie pushing it asyd widh his toe and trying tu fynd bär paches ov floor tu step on.

“Dr Üfo!” couled Tomie, “Dr Üfo!” Meanwyel Alvin balansd delicatlie on wun foot, soht fastidiuslie a tuch-daun spot for his udher foot.

Tomie puld dhe velvet curtin at dhe bak ov dhe shop asyd: “Dr Üfo, ar yu dhär?”

On a ship whär even erthies tuuk pains tu masagh dheir appearans until wel past dhe age ov 140, Üfo luukd öld. Dhe boys had nötisd dhis befor. But naw he luukd ölder stil: slumpd in a chair, his hed in his hands, his iys, when he luukd up at dhem, ringd widh dhe storie ov shok and despair, an ugle brüz on wun cheek.

“Whot hapend...?”

Üfo abruptlie jherkd himself tu his feet, wävd Tomie of, tuuk a few unstedie steps and couled hourslie thru a doorway: “Tandie, dhe boys trakers, pleaz.”

Alvin had by naw reachd Tomies syd: “Y broht dhe ring.” He handed it tu dhe öld man, recoild widh shok at his sorie stät. “Dr Üfo, did sumwun atak yu?”

“Was it dhe spyders?!” ekod Tomie.

Tandie apeard, sylentlie handed dhe twu garments tu dhe öld man and resëvd dhe ring in exchängh. Stränghlie, she wos stil smyling dhe säm worm smyel widh which she had greeted Sushielä dhe prävius evning.

“Spyders, whot spyders?” muterd Üfo.

“Dhe spyders from Marz!”

“Tomie, Alvin”, he wheezd, handing dhem dheir trakers and puting his hand on Tomies shölder, les tu räashür Tomie dhan tu suport himself. “Remember dhis: dhär’s sum verie bad peepel araud. Espeshalie on dhe löwer deks. Jhust bewär. Undestand? Some verie bad peepel hu du bad things.”

Dhe boys noded mütlie.

“Forget dhe marties – dhey’r oul living in luxürie in dhe north – y’m talking about bad peepel, heer, on aur doorstep. Naw puut yor trakers on and hurie bak tu skool.”

“But...” Alvin began.

“Jhust go!” he comanded, and dhey went.

* * *

Dhe park had gras, trees, clumps ov bushes, clusters ov dafodils. Scwirels playd among dhe branches; sparöws and robins flutterd tu and fro; spyders lurkd in wait for unlukie flys; peepel at lezhur ströld in eazie twus and threes. Dhe ecological enghineers need for byomas and byological dyversitie nyslie machd dhe *Heralds* hüman pasenghers need for recreäshonal späs.

Tomie and Alvin ambeld along dhe path, mäking dyvershons över dhe scrounie gras when dhe mood tuuk dhem. Dhe lamps dhat bläzd fortie mètres abuv dheir heds wer too bryt tu luuk at dyrectlie, lyk a terestrial sumer sun dhat had been shaterd intu fragments and dhe fragments strung

aut along dhe curvd seeling lyk burning jhewels on a nekläs ringing dhe iner curv ov dhe entyer gondola.

Tomie wos jhübilant: “Yä-ä-äh, we did it Alv, we did it, we got away widh it! Yu herd whot dhe enghineers bak dhär sed? Y’d lyk tu see FitsJheralds fäs naw! Get vacümd aut, hairie öld spyders from Marz!”

Alvin wos mor thohtful: “We shud’v oferd tu help Dr Üfo tydie up.”

“Naah, dhat’s his problem!” Tomie gleefulie voulded över a sign saying *KEEP OF DHE GRAS*.

“But he helpd us!”

“Lisen Alv, when we get bak, we gota hav dhe säm storie. Ökay: we wer at dhe Haafway du in Paris Scwär, we met Dr Üfo, went bak widh him tu his shop, played araud widh sum ov his stuf, stayd övenyt, wök up lät, gäv aurselvs a bit ov a holiday dhis morning. Too bad we misd skool. Dhat’s oul. Got it?”

“And dhen we trashd his shop”, Alvin muterd unhapilie, and yound.

“Leav dhat aut. We didnt see a thing. Dhat hapend after we’d gon.” Tomie tuchd his hand tu a buton on his traker, vizibel wunss mor in its ofishalie sancshond pläs under his unzipd jhaket. He tilted his hed tu wun syd and spök cwyetlie and deliberatlie intu a fited mycrofön: “Gonzar is bak from dhe räses. Mishon acumplishd!”

Alvin shrugd.

His mesigh complët, Tomie luukd up and pökd his mizerabel companion in dhe ribs. “We did it!” he exulted. “Hey, lyten up. Think ov öld FitsJherald having contracshons widh fryt, stüpid öld spyder!”

“Supözing dhey cwestjon us?”

“Y töld yu. We böth tel Rieta-Blieta dhe säm storie. No problemo.”

“Supözing dhe ofisers cum and cwestjon Dr Üfo?”

“Dhey wönt.”

“Supözing dhey ask us dëtails, and we oul giv diferent ansers?”

Tomie stopd and turnd tu fäs him: “Luuk, Alv, dhey dönt cär about us. We’r erthies, we’r orfans, jhust nöbodies. Dhey’r heröic explorers on a historic mishon tu dhe stars. We’r jhust a bit ov byomas in dheir lyf-suport sistem. Ökay?”

Alvin shrugd, and dhey continüd on dheir way.

Dhe grasie graund slöpd up slytlie, bildings wer vizibel between dhe trees, and dhey clymd sum shalöw steps, aut ov dhe park and intu dheir höm, dheir nätiv cuntrie, dheir lyflong viligh comünitie, Star Lunden.

* * *

Dhe C-dek street whär dhe Foster Senter was löcäted caunted itself az a relativlie respectabel part ov taun. Heer wer shops and restarants, clubs and ofises dhat deliberatlie tryd tu recoul a hint ov öld Erth among dhe stars. From dhe intërior ov wun such establishment, dhe clear vois ov a wuman from dhe long-vanishd Between Äghes, dhe përiod ov Erths grätnes befor dhe planets wer ever reachd, resaunded nostalgiclie between dhe pasers-by and daun dhe street –

*“Y’v luukd at luv from böth syds naw,
From win and looz, and stil sumhaw,
It’s luvs delüzhons y recoul...”*

Alvin puld Tomies arm: “Wait a minit.”

“Whot?”

“Tomie...”

“Whot!”

“Whot yu sed, about... yu nöw, yu sed yu’d get her tu...”

“Get hu? Cum on, let’s go in.”

“Tomie, y mean... yu nöw... about Elain.” He blushd.

“Elain?” He sudenlie lafd. “Dönt yu wurie about Elain, y’v got her eating aut ov my hand, az soon az y say a wurd tu her she’l fling herself intu yor arms lyk a bludie nimfo. Alv, yu’r a lukie asteroid, yu dönt nöw haw gud she is! Naw let’s go in.”

“Dönt forget!” Alvin hissd, and folöwd him intu dhe Foster Senter.

* * *

Several ov dhe orfans wer scaterd araund dhe comon room, imersd in pryvit lybrarie studie. Dhey did not stay cwyet for long.

Dhe möment Slava coht syht ov Tomie and Alvin, he let aut a whoop: “Woo-oo-oo, luuk hu’s heer!” Kylie shafted: “Dhe äliens hav landed! Täk cuver evribodie, it’s dhe Alfa Sentorians!” Whyel Elain and Luie böth started puling fäses and yeling: “Y’m Zargon, y’m Zargon!” – “Destroy, destroy!”

Tomie stuud grandlie in dhe senter ov dhe room, grind and bawd tu his public, flushd with achievment. But Alvin shifted from wun fut tu anudher widh embarasment, trying böth tu cach Elains iy and tu avoid her glans.

Miesha rushd in from dhe boys coridor, Sushiela from dhe gerls syd. Miesha jhoind in dhe hubub widh a clenched fist punching dhe air and a “Nys wun, Tomie, yu suhn ov a Zargon! Dhat’l puut dhe shits up dhe spyders!” But Sushiela stopd and stärd; her fäs sudenlie crumpeld, her iys fild widh tears and she turnd and rushd bak tu her öwn room.

Dhe noiz dyd daun: evriwun becäm awär dhat Dr Rieta had apeard. Dhär wos a long, tenss sylens. Rietas üzhuual mudherlie smyel had becum an ominous fraun.

“Lybrarie studie, evriwun, pleaz”, sed Dr Rieta sevërlie at last. “Alvin and Tomie, wud yu cum and see me in my room for a minit? Bak tu wurk, dhe rest ov yu.”

She led dhe twu boys tu her ofis.

“Cum in Alfa Sentorie”, sed sumwun from behynd dheir baks, “we hav a problem!” folöwd by supresd snigers.

Dr Rieta öpend dhe door tu her ofis: insyd cud be seen a desk, chairs, and on wun ov dhöz chairs a röz-süted shöp. Alvin wos oulredie över dhe threshöld when Tomie shauted, “Luuk aut, it’s a trap!” and turnd and ran. Alvin fröz, torn between alarm and obëdiens tu outhoritie, wyl Tomie dashd aut ov dhe frunt door.

“Mr Alvin Shakelten?” encwyrd dhe plezant bäss ov Sixth Ofiser Kat Moodie, ryzing tu his feet. “Congratüläshons! Yu’v jhust wun ferst pryz: a vizit tu North Gondola, oul expenses payd!”

Alvin blinkd, complëtlie täken abak.

“And espeshalie for yu, a pryvit, exclüsiv inteview widh Chief Ofiser VandenPlaz, dhe *Heralds* möst charming hed ov secüritie!”

* * *

Tomie flung himself aut thru dhe Foster Senters frunt door and intu dhe street. In dhe fracshon ov a seconds pouz tu get his bearings, he nötisd a man aproach him from wun syd and a wuman from dhe udher, böth in an exëdinglie bizneslyk, not tu say agresiv, maner.

He twisted, slipd thru dheir grasp and bölted. Dhey wer after him in a flash, but he had twu mëters lead on dhem, and his ferst pryoritie wos tu lengthen dhat lead. Past shop frunts, wurkshops, envyronmental instaläshons and ofises dhey dashd. A pyel ov boxes containing freshlie sinthesyzd früt stuid in dhe way: Tomie upset dhe whöl stak in dhe fäses ov his pursüers and sprinted on wyl dhey stumbeld and fel. Pasers-by wer going tu and fro; Tomie twisted dhis way and dhat between dhem, triping sum up, shuving aside udhers, until he wos complëtlie aut ov syht ov his pursüers.

“Whär is he naw?” dhe wuman askd, seeminglie touking tu herself.

She luukd up. “Daun tu D dek”, she töld her companion, “aproaching a sub-stäshon. Go dhat way and dubel bak.” And he did so, wyl she chasd of in dhe opozit dyrecshon.

Dhey met again autsyd an enclözthur in which hügh metal boxes humd widh hy-tenshon electric curent. She pointed, he noded. Oulmöst aut ov syht, but not cwynt, Tomies discarded traker lay on dhe graund.

Dhey luukd araund urghentlie. No siyn ov him. Dhen a slyt scuffling saund folöwd by runing futsteps. Dhey wer after him in an instant. D dek wos clear ov obstrucshons dhat afternoon, and it

wos a strait räs thru dhe branching and zig-zaging corridors and stärcäses ov Star Lundens löwer deks.

Az she ran, dhe wuman panted a runing comentarie haaf-aloud: "D dek, aproaching stärwel 7... gon past it... going up 6..."

Tomie rëemerghd intu a bizie street, threding his way amung dhe peepel. Sudenlie dhär wos a röz-üniformd figür in frunt ov him. He pouzd, darted left; dhe ofiser jhumpd dhe säm way; he feinted ryht, lunghd left; dhe ofiser mached böth moovments and grabd Tomie az he tryd tu slip past; böth crashd tu dhe floor. By dhe tym dhe udher twu had aryvd, panting hard, dhe spyder from Marz had Tomie subdued and handcufd.

* * *

"Wy did yu du it?" askd VandenPlaz cöldlie.

She wos alön widh Alvin in a smoul, bär room, mäd even smouler by sum storigh boxes stakd against wun woul and täking up nearlie haaf its floor ärea. Dhe önlie furnishings wer a täbel, bär but for an untuchd mug ov cofee in frunt ov Alvin, and dhe twu chairs on which dhey wer siting. A spycam woched unblinkinglie from a seeling corner.

Alvin wos siting bölt upryht, tenss, moshonles. VandenPlaz launghd bak, tipping her chair on its bak legs, prodüsd an inhäler from a brest poket ov her röz üniform, unscrewed it and nibeld reflectivlie on wun end.

"It wos a mäjher operäshon tu retriev worden 14 and colect oul dhe debrie from it, and repair dhe damigh tu dhe hach. Didnt yu nöw yu wer trying tu dok a typ 2 worden tu a typ 3 port? Yu'v creäted käos and confüzhon and mäd a mokerie ov a sërius entepryz. *Wy did yu du it?*"

Alvin turnd his hed away and sed nuthing.

"Y'm waiting."

Alvin remaind sylent.

"Ar yu going tu say it wosnt yu, it wos sumbodie els?"

Alvin noded widhaut luuking at her.

"Ah, a protestäshon ov inosens! So hu els du yu think went mising över dhe crüshal përiod?"

Alvin glansd in her dyrecshon.

"Öh yes, we nöw oul about Dr Üfos Mysterye Shoppe. We'r perfectlie wel awär dhat when sumwun seems tu be staying dhär for long, it's an ilüzhon, he's got dheir traker vest plugd intu a simülätor and dhe real person is wondering araund unmonitord. So wy not relax and jhust tel me oul about it?"

Alvin sed nuthing, glansd at her and luukd away again az befor.

She tuuk dhe inhäler aut ov her mauth and gazd criticalie at dhe tooth marks on its wel-chewd mauthpies. "Nastie habit, eh?"

Alvin did not respond.

"Wel y'm geting a bit fed up widh yor nastie habit ov not ansering!" she snapd menasinglie. Alvin cringhd. She wos about tu ad sumthing mor, but sudenlie dhe door öpend and in cäm twu men in överouls hu mäd for dhe staks ov boxes, wisling, and prepärd tu pik wun up.

"Öh, Ms VandenPlaz, we didnt nöw yu wer in heer."

"Whot dhe hel d'yu think yu'r duing?"

"Sorie."

"Öh, get on widh it!"

Dhey manoeverd a largh, hevie box aut ov dhe door.

"Oul ryht, Alvin", VandenPlaz sed anggrilie when dhey had left. "Dhis is haw it's going tu be. We wont tu nöw haw yu acsesd worden 14, and we wont tu nöw wy yu did it. Y'l be asking Tomie Capriönie dhe säm cwestjons. If yu böth confes, yu'l böth be punishd. If önlie wun ov yu confeses, dhe wun dhat spils dhe beans wil be let of widh a coushon and dhe udher wun wil be punishd twys az sevërlie. Is dhat clear?"

Alvin luukd at her in surpryz. A fliker ov a smyel crosd his fäs. "And whot if nydher ov us ses enithing?" he wisperd.

"If nydher ov yu confeses, dhär'l be nuthing we can du widh yu. We önlie hav sercumstanshal evidens against yu."

Alvin noded: "Y need tu think about it."

* * *

VandenPlaz held up a nötis dhat proclaimd in böld red letering: *DU NOT DISTURB – INTEVEW IN PROGRES – VANDENPLAZ*, and hung it on dhe door ov dhat säm bär room, dhen enterd and clözd dhe door behynd her.

"Helo, Tomie", she sed.

"Get vacümd!" Tomie snarld.

"Hav yu thoht about dhat ofer y mäd yu?"

"No deal. So yu beter let me go."

"Y caant let yu go yet. Y think Alvin has sumthing he wonts tu tel me about yu."

"No shit!"

"Alvin töld me haw ashämd he wos..." – dhey stärd at each udher – "...tu be asösiäted widh such a chyldish prank."

“Dhat’s no jhök!” Tomie blurted aut. “It’s a sèrius mesigh from dhe äliens, and yu’d beter lisen tu whot it ses, or els!”

“Dhat’s a ly! Haw där yu say dhat!”

Tomie, shokd by her suden autburst ov angger, stärd at her mütlie.

VandenPlaz turnd away from him, unscrewed an inhäler, tuuk a deep breth thru it, regained an ysie caam: “Haw cum yu nów so much about it?”

“Öh no, yu caant trap me lyk dhat! Evribodie’s seen dhe mesigh, evribodie widh enie sens is saying we gota turn bak befor it’s tu lät!” Tomie földed his arms and sat bak smuglie.

“Realie?”

“Yäh. And y nów yu’r blufing about Alv, he’s never gona giv enithing away, so yu’r lost in späs, yu ar.”

“Is dhat whot yu think?”

Again dhat exchänghd stär, dhat contest ov wils, marshan against erthie, matür wuman against teenägh boy, chief ofiser ov a sitie-sydzd ship against insignificant orfan.

* * *

Dhe Captin, VandenPlaz and BekyuRel wer confering tuggedher in dhe majhestic if insubstanshal expans ov dhe Contröl Room.

“Praiz be tu Heraldiena, aur protector and gyd!” dhe Captin intönd. “Whot luk ar yu having widh aur twu yung intevewees?”

VandenPlaz fraund at him: “Dhey’r nydher ov dhem giving much away.”

“No confeshons, dhen?”

“Öh, dhey’r giltie oul ryht. No daut about it.”

“Widhaut an explisit confeshon on record y’l hav tu order dhem tu be releasd. Unles... whot did Heraldiena say?”

“She sed she wos clös tu a solüshon ov dhe cozmik field ecwäzhons wun thauzand miliseconds befor dhe Big Bang, and we must not bodher her widh trivialities!”

“A profaundlie wyz anser.”

Dhe therd member ov dhe groop intevënd: “If eniwun wonts tu hear an engneereers opinion...”

“Yes, Mr BekyuRel?”

“Az y’v oulredie töld yu befor, dhe engneereering evidens is perfectlie clear: it can önlie be dhem. Dhe recuverie ov worden 14 mërlicie confers whot we oulredie dedüsd. So a confeshon’s cwyt irelevant.”

* * *

A vew ov dhe street autsyd dhe Foster Senter, dizolving into mistie indefinitnes at dhe eghes. Dhe bütiful Elain, shylic runing her fingsers thru her long blond hair, waering her shortest dres, her iys and lips sparkling widh dezyer and yet outso widh daut.

"Helo", she ses.

Alvin gäzes at her.

"Whär ar yu going?" she asks.

"Y need tu wouk araubd by myself a bit, think things över."

"Can y cum widh yu? Pleaz, Alvie."

Alvin considers: "Wel... so long az yu dönt distract my train ov thoht."

"Whot ar yu thinking about?"

"Yu, ov corss!"

Dhey set of tuedher. She slips her hand into his, and he feels dhe intimat contact ov her worm paam against his öwn skin.

Elain ses: "We wer touking about yu last nyt."

"Abaut me?"

"We oul desyded Tomie wud never hav manighd if yu hadnt been dhär tu help him."

"It wos nuthing. Jhust comon sens."

"Yu'r so clever, Alvie."

Dhey smyel at each udher.

Elain continüs: "Y think y'd lyk tu spend sum tym alön widh yu. Do yu hav tym for me?" She preses her bodie clöser tu his. Dhey ar no longger in dhe street, but in dhe park, alön under a tree, gäzing into each udhers iys.

"If yu'v got tym for me."

"Oul dhe tym in dhe wurld!" she lafs, presing clöser and clöser tu him. He can oulmöst feel her breth on his fäs, when...

* * *

Alvin wos siting, hed bawd in meditashon, in a smoul prizon sel. It wos az starklie funcshonal az such rooms üzhualie ar, widhaut även dhe esenshal fasilitie ov an intelighent woul. Dhär wer voices autsyd dhe door. He shuuk his hed anggrilie and syhd. A lok klikd and dhe door öpend.

Alvin jhumpd up: "Tomie!"

"Alv!"

A röz-üniformd ofiser stuud behynd Tomie, pushing him into dhe sel. "Y expect yu'v got a lot tu touk about", he sed, "but dönt be in enie hurie, yu'l hav a whöl anum for caching up, so dhey say."

"But dhat's twu yers!" shouted Tomie.

"Wun point eit eit yers", muterd Alvin.

"Jhust pray VandenPlaz dusnt get it her way – she'd hav dhe twu ov yu lokd away for gud", sed dhe ofiser. "Hav a stelar day!" And he lokd dhe door on dhem.

"Bastard spyders!" yeld Tomie, hamering on dhe door widh his fists. Dhen a new thoht ocurd tu him and he raunded on Alvin. "Yu betrayd me!"

Alvin shuuk his hed: "If y betrayed yu, wy'v dhey lokd me up az wel?"

"Dhey'l probablie let yu aut tumorow, and y'l be stuk heer for twu whöl bludie yers thanks tu yu!" He seezd Alvin and thrust him ruflic against dhe woul.

"No, Tomie!"

"Wel y didnt scweal, so haw cum y'm lokd up? Haw cum? Eh?" And widh each cwestjon he banged Alvin füriuslic against dhe woul.

"Stop it, y'l explain... dhat's beter. Dhey had us in a clasical Prizoners Dylema. If nydher ov us touks, we go free. Ryt?"

"Y didnt touk!"

"We go free becoz dhey hav no hard evidens. But dhen dhey found hard evidens. So dhey dönt need aur confeshons enie mor. So dhey simplie chängh dhe rüls and it isnt a dylema enie mor: we böth confes, we get lokd up; we böth stay sylent, we stil get lokd up."

"Y dönt get it."

"Your vois in dhe recording. Dhey önlie had tu mach yor vois against dhe recording tu prov it wos yu. My traker wos widh yors at dhe tym, proving dhat y wos helping yu. Think about it."

Tomie glansd araund angshuslic and löwerd his vois tu a wisper: "But we ran dhe saund thru a scrambler, it's distorted beyond recognishon."

"And whär did we leave dhe scrambler?"

Tomie wos flumoxd: "Öh, shit!"

"And dhey cud'v eazilie found DNA samples az wel."

"But if yu knew dhey'd cach us eniway, wy didnt yu scweal on me? Yu must'v dun!"

"But dhen y wudnt be heer naw!"

"So wy didnt yu?"

Alvin jhust luukd at him.

"Hey..." Tomie punchd him afecshonatlic on dhe shölder, "we'r in dhis tuedher, yu and me, oul dhe way!"

* * *

Dhe Captin and his ofisers wer siting on fäsing syds ov a polishd mahoganie täbel in dhe oak-paneld Execütiv Conferens Room ajhasent tu dhe Contröl Room.

Sixth Ofiser Moodie wos speaking: “Y’v been discussing dhe whöl cwestjon ov securitie widh Profeser Amazonis. She’s publishd on instabilitie in söshal netwurks, and y think she’s got sum verie creätiv ydëas on dhe subhject. Y wud recomend we bring her in on dhis meeting.”

But dhe Captin shuuk his hed: “She’s a byologhist. Whot dus byologhie hav tu du widh...”

He glansd at his chief ofiser for suport. VandenPlaz noded in agreement, and aded: “Dhe solüshon tu beter securitie’s perfectlie simpel. Y must hav mor spycams. Y wont spycams on oul stärwels and spycams in oul zërö-gravitie ärëas and –”

Purser MaknaMara interupted her: “Naw höld yor horses ryht dhär! Whot ar we duing, turning dhe *Herald* intu a prizon camp?”

VandenPlaz gave him a skeptical luuk; èven waering his normal evriday üniform, or at dhis möment in tym a dighityzd simüläshon dhärov, dhe Purser had contryvd tu embelish his plain röz sleeves and chest widh silver braid and säcwins. She spök drylie: “Ov corss, sum ov us seem tu think we’r living in a holiday camp.”

Chief Engngineer BekyuRel pökd his spaner in: “My point is, if yu instoul mor spycams, yu’l need mor prosesing tym tu sift thru dhe däta.”

“Yes!” shauted VandenPlaz, “Y wont mor tym from Heraldiena, and y wont spycams oul dhe way daun tu dhe enghin bay –”

FitsJherald shauted: “Can we pleaz coul dhis meeting tu order!”

VandenPlaz ignord him: “– and y wont a modifyd traker vest dhat returns mor däta –”

“But yu caant du dhat widhaut infringing aur pasinghers sivil liberties –”

“Dhat means we’l hav tu perswäd Heraldiena tu spend –”

“– including a mycrofön tu monitor oul convesäshons!”

“Can we pleaz coul dhis meeting tu order!”

“– les tym on her intelectual hobbies!”

“Hav yu no consepshon? A comünitie ov free sitizens –”

“It’s a starship and so –”

“She’s ryht about aur vulnerabilitie –”

“– hus hüman ryhts –”

“– aur vulnerabilitie tu sabotazh, terorizm, madnes –”

“– hus ryhts must be respected!”

“– and so disiplin must be maintaind!”

“Whot kynd ov a sosyete –? Whot wud dhe Prezident say tu dhis nytmär wurld dhat we’r –?”

Dhär was a laud raping on dhe täbel. Dhey oul luukd up. At dhe hed ov dhe täbel wer three emptie seats; naw a dark-süted man stuud at wun ov dhem and held a päperweit över dhe täbel top lyk a hamer. Dhey exchänghd glances and slöwlie röz tu dheir feet.

Dhe new aryval pouzd for a möment befor saying: "Ofisers ov dhe *Herald ov Intesteler Frenship...*" – he turnd tu wun syd – "dhe Prezident ov dhe Repräsentativ Caunsel!"

Dhe Prezident enterd and greeted dhem in his familiar hours vois: "Gud afternoon, Captin, Ofisers. Yu may sit." Anudher dark-süted man folöwd him intu dhe room, and oul three seats at dhe hed ov dhe täbel wer fild. Dhär was a ghegeneral rusling ov vertual chairs scräping on vertual marbel floor-tyels az evriwun rezümd dheir seats at dhe conferens täbel.

Dhe Prezident smyeld väglie and luukd arand at dhem for a möment or twu. He glansd at dhe seeling and drould cwyetly: "Praiz be tu Heraldiena, etc. etc.", dhen adresd his Captin: "Wel, Mr FitsJherald, haw ar dhe oudishons for yor grand opera cuming along?"

"Verie wel, Mr Prezident, verie wel, we've got sum bütiful voises täking part, sum wel-nöwn fävorits, sum new talent. Y'm particülarlie pleazd widh Elizabeth: a sweet, lirical soprano, but wun widh oul dhe pauer and stamina dhe röl demands."

VandenPlaz turnd tu BekyuRel, and in dhe frusträtet contorshons ov her fäs a lip-reader myt hav desyferd dhe wurd: "Tym-wästing idiots!" Dhe enghineer noded simpathticalie.

MaknaMara cleard his throat, and his culerd säcwins glinted in dhe lyt: "Captin, if we cud perhaps...?"

"Ov corss, ov corss."

Dhe Prezident oulso tuuk dhe hint: "Dhat saunds wunderful, y'm shür we'r oul luuking forwurd tu, ah, tu a wunderful producshon. And naw dhär's dhis litel bit ov biznes we hav tu setel. Y undestand yu've arested twu teenägh boys broht along from Erth on dhe foster cär prögram, ah...?" – he luukd cwestjoninglie at MaknaMara.

Dhe Purser was readie widh dhe details: "Alvin Shakelten and Tomie Capriönie, böth from dhe säm Foster Senter in Star Lunden. Capriönie was ofishalie acsepted intu dhe foster prögram az a bäbie befor departür. Alvin Shakelten is a cürius cäs: wun ov dhe pasinghers depozited him at dhe Foster Senter *after* dhe acseleräshon aut ov dhe Söler Sistem had oulredie begun. It seems dhat, jhust az dhe hach was being clözd, sumwun threw a new-born bäbie intu dhe last shutel carieing peepel tu dhe *Herald*, and in dhe käos and confüzhon... Dhär was a slip ov päper widh his näm, but udherwyz no indicäshon ov pärentigh."

Dhe Prezident wävd his hand in a dismisiv ghestür: "So twu jhüvenyl delincwents from a bakwurd planet. Y undestand dhey'r naw being held on suspishon ov perpeträtung dhis möst regretabel älien hoax? Is dhat corect? Ov corss nun ov us wer täken in for wun möment..."

"Dhat's corect", FitsJherald confermd.

VandenPlaz objhected: "Not cwyet corect. We hav pozitiv proof it was dhem."

“And whot du yu propöz tu du widh dhem?”

“Lok dhem up and thröw away dhe key!” she hissd.

“Isnt dhat jhust a litel exesiv?”

“Not on a starship. We can thank Olympus dhe önlie chöz tu mäk a hoax broudcast. But whot if dhey’d desyded tu prevent us from reaching Alfa Sentorie? Sabotagh dhe main enghin, we caant stop, we wisel strait thru dhe Alfa Sentorie sistem and aut dhe udher syd, and go on thru intestelar späs for untöld decäds mor til aur pauer paks up and we oul freez tu deth. Nuthing cud be eazier. Mr BekyuRel wil tel yu haw delicat dhe füzhon enghin is.” – She glansd at him for suport; he noded. – “Az it is dhöz twu hooligans left a bag floating araund dhe enghin bay, tuggedher widh udher debrie from worden 14; it oul had tu be acaunted for and cleard up. Next tym we myt not be so lukie. Y demand permanent restraint on dheir freedom ov moovment!”

MaknaMara cud no longger restrain himself: “And y demand dhe chans tu edücät dhem about dhe consecwenses ov dheir acshons so dhey can be reformd and readmitted tu sosyete!”

BekyuRel spök up: “And y demand dhat unouthoryzd sivilians keep aut ov my enghineering späses!”

Dhe Captin reasserted contröl: “Pleaz, pleaz, evribodie. Dhe desizhon must rest widh dhe Caunsel, and widh dhe Prezident.”

Dhe Prezident noded säghlie, conferd widh ferst wun and dhen anudher ov his aids in undetöns, and sed aloud: “Dhär’l hav tu be a ful public tryal, ov corss.”

Dhe Captin wos dismayd: “Whot? A tryal?”

VandenPlaz wos mor dismayd: “No way. Are yu sughesting we advertyz dhe höls in secüritie so evrie F-dek punk hu fansies his chances can amüz himself at aur expens?”

Dhe Prezident, täken abak by dhis chalengh, conferd again. Fynalie he sed: “Dhat’s ryht y’m afraid. Az Prezident ov dhe Rerezentativ Caunsel, it’s my dütie tu see dhat due proses ov louw is obzervd.”

BekyuRel had a thoht: “Mr Prezident, cudnt we jhust, yu nöw, lok dhem away sumwhär widhaut teling eniwun? We cud say it’s for sykiatric obzerväshon, or teknical consultäshons, or –”

Dhe Prezidents fäs darkend in angger: “Are yu sughesting dhat y conyv in dheir ilëgal detenshon?”

“Wel, no...”

“Are yu asking dhe Caunsel tu sancshon louwbräking and corrupshon on dhis ship?”

VandenPlaz finishd BekyuRel’s thoht for him: “Wel yes, actüalie.”

“Y think y’m dütie-baund tu report dhis whöl convesäshon tu dhe ful Rerezentativ Caunsel!”

“Becoz dhe *Heralds* secüritie is at stäk”, she urghd. “Aur lyvs at stäk! Aur whöl mishon! Dhe fütür ov mankynd!”

Dhe Captin found a way aut: "Pleaz, Patie, Mr Prezident – ha, ha, ha! – we'r önlie tosing hypotheticals raund dhe täbel heer. Dhär's nuthing wurth reporting autsyd dhis room – mër specüläshons, dhat's oul."

But dhe Prezident wos implacabel: "Dhe louw demands dhat ydher we chargh dhe twu adolesents and coul a ful public tryal widhin seven sols, or we releas dhem!"

VandenPlaz retorted: "Secüritie demands we lok dhem away for gud, and keep dhe sercumstanses totalie säcret!"

Dhey glärd ireconsylablie at each udher acros dhe täbel.

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Dhat säm inteview room, dhe säm bär täbel and chairs. But dhis tym a cupel ov pictürs had been hung on dhe wouls, dhe stark lyt had been shäded, and dhe paking boxes curtind of widh a cheerfulie culerd pies ov fabric.

Dhis tym böth Alvin and Tomie wer seated and bogling at dhe smoul vaaz ov flauers in frunt ov dhem and at dhe unüzhual syht ov a smyeling Chief Ofiser VandenPlaz, hu sed tu dhem: "Y'v got sum gud news for yu boys. In a few minits Ofiser Moodie wil be heer. His orders ar tu acumpanie yu bak tu Sauth Gondola and see yu return tu yor höm in Star Lunden."

Alvin and Tomie exchänghd a glans ov disbelieving jhoy.

"Oul charghes against yu hav been dropd", she continüd.

Tomies iys wydend: "Yäh! Dhat's clas-sic!" He lafd, punchd Alvin playfully. "We mäd it! Yu havnt got a thing on us!"

VandenPlaz wos unrufeld: "We nöw yu caried aut dhe hoax, oul ryht. Alvins deducshons wer perfectlie corect."

Tomies fäs darkend: "Alv dusnt nöw whot he's touking about – he's jhust mäking it up tu curie fäver!"

"Obviuslie, yor convesäshons tuggedher ar az gud az a ful confeshon. But" – she raizd her hands, paams upwurd, az if releasing a captürd berd – "no charghes. Yu'l soon be free tu go."

Defensivnes stil clauded Tomies fäs: "Whot we wer touking about in dhe sel tuggedher wos pürlie hypothetical."

Dhe Chief Ofiser ignord him, and continüd: "Dhär's jhust wun litel point we'v not yet been abel tu clear up: whär did yu leav dhe späs süts?"

Alvin and Tomie exchänghd a bafeld glans.

"Dhat yu üzd tu späswook from dhe worden tu dhe airlok?"

Alvin felt his cheeks blush: "Y... y dönt remember whär we... we got a bit lost."

VandenPlaz noded undestandinglie: "Never mynd, we'l fynd dhem. Wun last cwestjon befor yu leav. *Wy did yu du it?*"

Relievd dhat dhe mising späs süts had been pasd över lytlie, Alvin spök cwiklie, befor Tomie cud think ov an anser: "No speshal reazon. Tomie wos a bit fed up after failing an astrofizics test, and y jhust went along for dhe ryd."

"Is dhat so?"

"Yes, realie. We jhust wonted a bit ov fun. Jhust tu selebrät Haafway widh a bit ov a laf. We didnt realyz..."

"So jhust a harmles jhök? Leting of steam?"

"Yes, dhat's oul."

"Y supöz dhöz things hapen."

Alvin noded.

Tomie, luuking mor and mor aghitåted, cud contain himself no longger: "Oul ryht, dhat wos my fäs behynd dhe mask and my vois, but dhe mesigh wos real, dhat's whot dhe äliens wonted me tu say, and y sed whot dhey töld me, and dhat's dhe trüth, and yu'd beter lisen tu it or els we'r oul doomd -!"

"Yu ly!" VandenPlaz sudenlie shriekd at him, jhumping up and advansing tuwords him, "Whot givs yu dhe ryht tu shöw dhem az hostyel, unfeeling monsters -?"

"It's whot dhey sed tu me!"

"Dhe äliens ar gud, dhey'r kynd, dhey'r going tu help mankynd -"

"Dhey gota protect dhemselves!"

"- help us aut ov dhe mes we'v got aurselvs intu!"

"Dhey'v cworanteend dhe whöl hüman räs coz we'r tu vyolent, becoz we go tu wor!"

"Dhey'r going tu säv us from wor, yu litel idiot! Whot ar we duing heer? Dhe whöl point ov aur mishon is tu beg dhe äliens tu säv us from aur öwn evil, tu bring salväshon tu hümanitie, an end tu sufering..."

She had him by his colar, thrust against dhe woul, and wos shäking him widh fürie ov a kynd Alvin had never seen befor. Az dhey böth pouzd for breth, dhär wos a nok at dhe door. She releasd Tomie. Dhe door öpend and Moodie enterd dhe room, glansing, puzeld, at each in turn az VandenPlaz turnd her bak and stoukd aut widhaut anudher wurd, her finggers fumbling fëverishlie at her brest poket.

Dhe door, hawever, did not clöz behynd her, and Alvin nötisd standing in dhe doorway anudher wuman, silver-haird and ov indeterminat ägh, sumwun he did not recognyz but hu clearlie njew dhem, woching widh interest.

"Ah... evrithing under contröl?" Moodie askd dübiouslie.

Tomie straitend his jhaket: "Let's get auta heer."

"Jhust wun mor thing befor we leav."

Alvin and Tomie stärd at him, nonplused, stil shäking widh emöshon.

Moodie tuuk sumthing aut ov his poket: "Yu'v realie hit dhe jhakpot dhis tym, lads. See my hand?" He held aut his ryht fist, and dhey böth sou dhe plain göld ring on his midel finger. "See dhe ring heer? It's a speshal ring, we coul it an n-ring. Oul ofisers waer dhem. Y'v got a cupel for yu heer. Täk dhem. Try dhem on. Midel finger, ryht hand. Lyk geting married!"

Tomie was distrustful: "Whot's going on?"

"Yor n-ring's going on. In return for yor freedom."

Dhe boys gäv him dautful luuks, but puut dhem on.

"Du dhey fit nyslie? A bit tyt, perhaps?"

Tomie tugd at his finger: "Hey, whot'v yu dun? Get it of me!"

Alvin tryd tu remoov his n-ring. It had contracted araud his finger, griping it fermlie and refüzing tu bugh.

"Yu'r a pair ov jhünior ofisers naw! Welcum abourd!"

Alvin askd sëriuslie: "Whot hav yu dun tu us?"

"We'v promöted yu. Sëriuslie. Yu wönt need tu waer yor traker vests enie mor. Dhe n-rings tel us oul we need tu nöw about whär yu ar, whot yu'r duing, även whot yu'r thinking."

Tomie bogeld at him: "No shit..."

"Secondlie, yu waer dhem oul dhe tym. So we nöw whär yu ar oul dhe tym. Simpel. Yu'l soon forget yu'v även got dhem on. And dhat's även beter dhan being married!"

Alvin müzd: "Yu'v married us tu Heraldiena."

"Dhat's ryht. Yu'r naw part ov dhe ships integrätet intelighens, jhust lyk dhe ofisers. Jhust lyk me."

Tomie recuverd his venom: "Yu cuning bastard spyder slym...!"

"Dönt get caried away; we'r oul hümans on dhis ship. Shal we go?"

Dhe unnöwn wuman standing at dhe door smyeld at dhem and stuud aside tu let dhem aut. Moodie noded at her: "Nys wun, Profeser!"

Alvin and Tomie alawd Moodie tu shöw dhem aut, Tomie mutering continüuslie: "Bludie slymie marshan spyderie pük-fäsd bastardie osiferus spyders..." az he plukd üsleslie at his n-ring.

* * *

When dhey woukd intu dhe Foster Senter dhat evning, dhe ferst person Alvin and Tomie sou wos Sushie.

"Hey, Sushie!" Tomie advansd tuwords her manfulie, glansing brieflie araud tu chek dhat Dr Rieta wos not in syht, "Giv us a kis, bäbie!"

She held aut her hand tu word him of: "Yu had me wuried sik, and yu nearlie got me intu mäjher trubel. Yu öw me, Tomie, yu öw me big!"

"So whot's yor problem? We'r bak säf naw. Cum on. Let's go aut and y'l biy yu an ys-cream!"

She alawd him tu puut his arm araround her shölders and escort her tu dhe door, whär dhey bumpd intu Luie and Slava, jhust returning from sumwhär.

"Hey, Tomie's bak!"

"Tomie, yu jhamie buger! Tomie! Tomie...? Whot's up?"

Tomie had stopd, frauning, his hand tu his forhed az if expëriensd dhe säm sensäshon ov being wochd by a dispashonat mashien intelighens vastlie gräter dhan his öwn... Heraldiena!

"Whot is it?" Slava repeated.

Alvin undestuud, and when he turnd his atenshon inwurds he expëriensd dhe säm sensäshon ov being wochd by a dispashonat mashien intelighens vastlie gräter dhan his öwn... Heraldiena!

Tomie tuuk a deliberat breth, shuuk his hed, luukd up, his üzhual self again, grind and continüd in a slytlie straind tön: "Hey gys, we'r going up tu dhe caf. Yu wana hear whot's duing on dhe north syd?"

Luie and Slava atachd dhemselves tu him: "Yäh, let's go!"

Tomie turnd araround: "C'mon, Alv!"

Alvin shuuk his hed shylye. Dhe udhers left widhaut him.

Alvin waited. Dhe next person tu aryv bak at dhe Foster Senter wos Epstyn, acumpanied by Kylie. Epstyn wos grumpie az per üzhual: "Whot'r yu duing heer?"

"Dhey let us aut. Eps, hav yu seen Elain?"

He ignord dhe cwestjon and turnd tu his room, mutering: "Lokd up, let aut, big diferens! – oul prizoners on dhis convict ship!"

But Kylie responded: "She's jhust cuming. Did dhey let Tomie aut too?"

"Yes, he's upstairs in dhe caf."

Dhe door öpend and in cäm Elain, Daljhit, Sonja and Miesha, hu shauted, "Wo-oo-oo, luuk hu dhey let aut ov dhe asylum!"

Alvin smyeld and noded; his mauth öpend tu speak but his throat went dry and his mynd sudenlie blanked aut.

Kylie töld dhem, "Tomie's up in dhe caf."

"Let's go!" dhey sed.

Alvin stepd tuwords dhem, raking his brains tu string tuggedher a meaningful säcwens ov wurds: "Y cud tel yu whot hapend..."

Miesha lafd: "Dhey önlie let him of becoz he cäm top in astro-pis-pots!"

Elain had anudher thëarie: “Dhey askd him tu confes and he jhust sed, y’l hav tu, er, um, er, um...”

Dhe udhers shriekd, “*think about it!*” and belöwd widh moking lafter.

Alvin folöwd dhem aut ov dhe door, his cheeks burning, forsd himself tu cach up widh Elain and speak cheerfulie tu her: “Elain, let me biy yu an ys-cream...”

“Hey gys”, she shauted, “Y’m being pursüd by an älien from Alfa Sentorie!”

“Urh! Primitiv!” sed Sonja.

“Woch he dusnt wrap his tentakels raund yu!” couled Miesha.

“Abducshon alert!” Daljhit hooted.

Elain coht up widh Miesha and flung her arm araund his shölders: “Hey Miesh, wait for me!”

Ignoring Alvin, dhe groop woultsd daun dhe street, lafing and chating. Alvin remaind behynd, standing rooted tu dhe spot. Sumthing insyd his chest seemd tu be bursting in slöw möshon, tearing his internal organs apart and splatering rekigh intu evrie corner ov his being...

He hardlie nötisd dhe urghent cwestjons – ferst surpryzd, dhen alarmd – dhat aröz in his mynd yet wer not his öwn thohts, nor dhe eko ov a pain inflicted on an infinitlie sensitiv nervus sistem which, eavsdropping on his, was deziynd tu integrät oul relevant däta widh süpehüman intelighens... yet was unäbel tu tolerät dhe hüman emöshon ov teenägh despair.

But his iys wydend when he sudenlie realyzd dhat dhe tynie göld band weding him tu dhe ship had slipd from dhe midel fingger ov his ryht hand and was röling away widh a tinkel intu dhe guter.