

# *Halfway There!*

Stephen Livesey Ashworth

July 2014

## **1. *The Warning***

“Five!”, chanted a thousand voices in unison. “Four! Three! Two! One!! Ye-a-a-ah!!!”

Fireworks exploded into the half-light, sprinkling sparkling showers of red, gold and green brilliance over the upturned faces, touching off answering reflections in the vaulted ceiling forty metres overhead, the glass-fronted shops and offices, the tapered lattice sculpture at one end of the square, the giant video screen at the other. A frenzy of cheering, clapping, whoops of joy. Above their heads blazed out two words in letters of fire:

*HAAFWAY DHÄR!*

A teenage boy at the edge of the crowd joined in as the anthem was sung, but hesitantly, as if distracted by some unharmonious thought. Jubilant throats to right and left of him repeated the refrain – a slim, grey-haired man warbling, a rumbustious prima donna shrieking out the familiar words to the melody from the second movement of Tchaikovsky’s *Manfred*:

*“Mother Erth, we will never let you down,*

*Sister Moon, brother Marz, father Sun –”*

but the boy turned away at the beginning of the second verse and slipped into a side street, unnoticed.

The street became a brightly lit corridor, the corridor, a doorway of dully glistening bronze tracery. Two other youngsters were already waiting there; a red-haired boy with freckled cheeks said: “Alvin, where’ve you been? I thought the spyders’d got you!”

“I just...” – he gestured back where he had come from, and shrugged, “it’s fantastic.”

“Bullshit! We’ll show ‘em. Got the ring?”

“Here.” He took it out of his pocket, shivered, held it out. The plain gold band glinted inside a clear plastic pouch.

“Let’s have a look at it then!” The boy took the ring from Alvin, removed it from the pouch and slipped it on first one finger, then another. “Which finger does it go on?... Bloody spyderie junk; I can’t feel anything. You try.”

Alvin put the ring on. It was a loose fit on the middle finger of his right hand, and he

had to clench his fist to avoid the danger that it might accidentally slip off and be lost: "You won't feel anything unless you hold it close to a touch pad. That's what they told me. Have you brought...?"

"Show him!"

The third member of the group stepped forward: a dark-skinned girl with silver makeup splashed around her eyes and over her brown cheeks, and copper bangles on both wrists. Giggling delicately, she opened a bag. The others peered inside, grinning at each other.

"That's enough. Now let's dump the trackers." The boy swiftly removed his jacket. Underneath was a light harness in the form of a waistcoat, which he also removed before putting his jacket back on. The girl waited. Alvin plucked irresolutely at his jacket, hesitating.

The other boy turned to Alvin: "Take it off. We mustn't let them know where we are."

"But..."

"I've taken mine off. Look." He held it up. "Now yours."

Alvin smiled shyly, shook his head and stepped back from the others as if about to return to the square: "I need to think about it. You do it." He held out the ring like a charm, pleadingly.

"Come on, Alv, we're in this together, you and me, right? So don't let me down." He seized Alvin's jacket, roughly tugged it off and added Alvin's tracker waistcoat to his own, then handed the two to the girl, who slipped them both on over her shoulders. Alvin sulkily replaced his jacket.

"That's it. Sushie, give me the bag. Let's go."

She handed it to him: "Take care, Tomie. Watch out for those nasty spyders."

"To hell with them!"

"You too, Alvin."

Tomie stepped manfully towards the girl: "Give us a kiss, baby!"

She pouted at him, then, as he leaned towards her, adroitly slipped out of his embrace: "Kiss my arse, *erthwurm!*" And ran off.

"Sushie! Sushie! Bloody wimmin! Where's *your* girl then? No one come to see you off?" He stepped towards the doorway.

Alvin hesitated, looking back. Unbidden, a vision of flowing blonde hair, a pretty smile and a skirt carelessly riding up too high oppressed his memory. Meanwhile a booming voice echoed down the passageways leading from the square, still scented with a whiff of gunpowder from the fireworks:

*"– to carry the desperate hope of generations stunted by war,*

*by the anti-humanity of man to his fellow man,  
by night, by darkness, by the fear and anger of tormented souls...*

From the same direction there suddenly appeared a quartet of older boys. "Hey!", shouted one. "What's with the *erthwurms* crawling round our territory?" – "Yeah, tryina spoil things for us, or what?" They advanced menacingly.

Tomie grabbed his friend's arm: "Run for it!" And pulled him through the doorway.

They charged through a foyer and up a plain, narrow staircase. One of their pursuers caught up with them at the top, but Tomie lashed out with his feet and he fell, grasping frantically for the banisters and colliding with his mates who were coming up behind him. Meanwhile, Tomie and Alvin dashed across the landing. A teenage girl with spiky green hair was standing against the wall; she turned and stared at them, her hand poised at the final scarlet letter of the spray-painted words: *HAAFWAY TU NOWÄR*. Tomie ignored her, ran on past and jabbed his finger against the wall under a small sign that said: *CREW ÖNLIE*.

"Here, this is it!"

Alvin dashed to his side, held up his hand wearing the ring, pressed it against the wall at the spot indicated and concentrated in the way he had been taught.

"Don't let'm escape!" – "Grab the Erth-scum!", came the shouts from just metres away, but they were already passing through the security door and it was closing behind them.

Tomie turned and gestured obscenely: "Get vacuumed out, spyder-suckers!" Then the door closed on their pursuers' finger-tips and the erthlings were safe.

They were in a small compartment with narrow spiral staircases twisting both down and up. Tomie looked around. "Look, no spycams", he whispered.

"You sure?", Alvin wondered, glancing around at the curved walls. His eye fell on another garish splash of graffiti; this one read: *TRADITIONAL ENGLISH SPELLING LIVES! RESIST MARTIAN CULTURAL TYRANNY!* He frowned: "What does *tra-ditty-on-al* mean?"

Tomie shrugged: "Who knows? Let's go", and led the way up. Alvin followed.

They ascended several flights. At intervals there were lancet windows; Alvin stopped by one and glimpsed the crowds below, the blown-up image of Captin Lorens FitsJherald, heard the resonance of his voice, the responding echoes of cheering. How easily, he thought, and how quickly this joyful celebration could be upset. There would be panic everywhere, people running in all directions like crazed ants, cries of despair, shrieks of madness; then a fire would start, there would be explosions and showers of glass shards –

"Alv!"

"All right."

"Come on – they might have told someone!"

The spiral untwisted itself into a curving catwalk which levelled out amid a tangle of tubes, wires, pipes, and a lattice of struts which extended indefinitely into the surrounding shadows. Tomie stopped and glanced around, then back at Alvin.

“That way”, Alvin gestured.

“All right, I know.”

Tomie led them into a dragon’s cave in which stacked outsize ventilation hoses glinted, serpent like, in the bluish light of an overhead illuminated tube. There was the quiet murmur of machinery all around them; the air had the whiff of electricity. Above the boys’ heads a smooth curved ceiling was punctuated by a single round hole accommodating a plain vertical ladder. Again Tomie led the way up.

They ascended the ladder with dreamlike ease. At the top, through a second security door with the help of Alvin’s ring, they practically levitated into a small compartment with cushioned walls and hand straps. Tomie’s bag drifted gently as a cloud in the air current from a ventilation grille. He spoke again: “Close the gondola door. Transfer.”

The door closed behind them on the word of command. “Mind the door”, said the compartment in a fussy, matronly tone. “Please hold on to the restraints provided for your comfort and safety.”

“Get vacuumed!”, said Tomie, as the compartment began to move. The boys fetched up against one padded wall like slow motion dancers.

“She’s a bit of all right!”, he added.

“Sushiela?”

“Yeah. She’s only shy cos you were watching. When we’re on our own together, well, phwoar!”

Alvin boggled at him.

Tomie looked away: “Open the axis door.”

The door slid open. The compartment thanked them for their patronage, and added: “Have a stellar day!”

Tomie did not lead the way out immediately, but peered carefully into the corridor beyond.

“All clear”, he whispered. “No spyders. Come on. Halfway there.” And levered himself, completely weightless, through the narrow aperture.

“Halfway...”, Alvin whispered to himself, and floated out after him. “Halfway...”

The boys flew expertly down a long shaft, propelling themselves with brief touches on the handrails, their feet held out stiffly behind them like fishes’ tails. Alvin paused again to squint through a glass porthole.

"What's the matter? Don't let them see you!"

"There's no one there. It's only the gym."

"I know. Come on!" A subtle shadow fell across a curve in the corridor ahead of them. "Wait, someone's coming!"

They pressed themselves together into a recess between cabinets of machinery, and held their breath as a rose-suited human figure passed them by and floated into one of the side hatches.

"Bloody spyder, what's he doing here?"

They negotiated another locked door – massive, airtight. As it closed behind them, they found themselves in a curving corridor with numbered hatchways on the outer, concave, wall.

"Which one is it?", Tomie demanded in an intense whisper.

"Worden fourteen."

"What did you choose that one for?"

"Fourteen years."

"I'm fifteen, you burk."

"I'm fourteen. So's the *Herald*."

Pulling themselves along the handrail, the teenagers glided around the circuit to hatch number fourteen.

"Open hatch fourteen", Tomie commanded, expecting the door to comply automatically.

"No, you have to press the button." Alvin did so, and the double hatch swung outwards with a whirring sound and a hiss. They looked at each other. Tomie entered first, like a fish swimming into a secret grotto.

"Lights on... Where's the bloody light switch?"

He found it. Alvin pressed the button that closed the worden's hatch behind them. They were floating in a cramped cabin with a single seat and a featureless black dashboard at one end. The triple forward windows were opaque and only reflected the boys' wide-eyed faces. The walls were lined with stark blank panels.

"Yeah, let's go!", said Tomie, climbing into the pilot's seat. "Off to the races! Ignition! Liftoff!"

Alvin found a row of recessed knobs in one wall, and pulled on one of them. Some dirty trainers and a pair of binoculars drifted out of the open locker. He stared at the inside of the locker door, where a sexy young woman in a diaphanous negligee opened her eyes and smiled enticingly back at him out of a glossy colour photo, pouting, cupping her full, bare

breasts and aiming them at him like gun turrets. Alvin's jaw dropped and his eyes grew rounder and wider.

"Alv, gimme the ring."

Alvin blushed, hurriedly closed the locker and hesitantly drew the ring from his finger.

Tomie twisted up and out of his seat. "C'mon, give it here."

Alvin evaded Tomie's outstretched hand and shrank back, holding the ring to his chest: "Do you really think we should be doing this?"

"Quit farting about and give me the ring."

"Heraldiena says it's wrong to steal."

"Screw Heraldiena! We're not stealing anything, just borrowing! Now come on!"

"I mean, when they find out..."

"We're going all the way. Too late to back out halfway." He confronted his unwilling assistant, menace in his eyes. "Do you want to tell the girls you chickened out halfway through? Want to show yourself up as a loser? Or are you going to do what you said and go all the way, eh?" – his voice dropped to a hiss – "Cos I know someone who wants to go all the way with you, and I can arrange it if you like, you know who I mean, it'll be better than anything you ever dreamt of in your bloody life – do you want her? Eh? Do you want to help me so's I can help you? Of course you do. So let's do it!"

Alvin protested: "I need to think", but it was too late. Paralysed by confusion, he watched Tomie snatch the ring out of his hand and touch it against the dashboard. Then he saw Tomie no more, but rather a sunlit park, a group of teenagers, and in the middle of them, the centre of attention, her blonde hair, her bare –

"Now what do I do? Come on, Alv, wake up."

"Tell it to activate. In your mind."

"I've done that – you sure Heraldiena won't find out?"

"The ring's supposed to work without... She won't know anything about it."

"So what now?"

"Repeat the password in your mind. The one I told you."

Tomie closed his eyes and did so. "And?"

"It should –"

They looked up. A movement outside the window had caught their attention.

"Turn off the light."

As Alvin obeyed, he fell back against the rear hatch. They were moving forwards.

"My god", whispered Tomie, "it's all stars!"

Alvin clung to the back of the pilot's chair, excited despite himself, and peered out over

Tomie's shoulder: "There's Oryon."

"There's Sirius."

"Prosyon, Djeminie, the Milkie Way..."

"How do we get to see the *Herald*?" Without waiting for an answer, Tomie found a virtual joystick in his mind's eye. He twisted the handle, and the heavens began to rotate.

"Should be somewhere near the summer triangle", Alvin breathed.

The sight of the artificial world they had just departed from took the two youngsters by surprise. An awesomely vast presence loomed majestically into view, a man-made cliff blotting out half the sky, glistening a dull gunmetal grey in reflected starlight. To their right, a chasm of giant cylindrical tank sections stretched away as far as they could see; on their left, the curved outline was broken by two broad vertical bands, one rotating constantly upwards, one downwards. For a moment they glimpsed some huge, faded letters – ... *INTESTELER FRENDSHIP* – before the rotation carried them away out of sight.

Alvin stared aghast without speaking.

"Let's go faster!", said Tomie, and the cabin jerked into acceleration again, the back of Tomie's seat pressing into Alvin's chest.

"This is far enough."

"Frightened?" Tomie squeezed the mental throttle for another spurt of power, laughed and gestured obscenely at the receding colossus: "Up yours, Fits-bloody-Jherald! Eeeaaahhh! Prepare for the shock of your pathetic lives, you sad bastard spyders!"

Confused and embarrassed, Alvin's wandering fingers touched the dashboard, and a small inset window came to life. He saw a familiar middle-aged woman's face, all sparkling eyes, glossy crimson lipstick and protruding white teeth framed in a golden halo of set curls. She was standing among a noisy crowd of people and speaking to camera...

\*

"There's an amazing feeling here tonight in Gagarin Skwär, a sort of electricity in the air. Everyone knows this is a very special moment." She turned to some bystanders and held out the microphone to one of them. "Where are you from?"

"We're all from Marz."

"What part of Marz?"

"I'm from Yutöpia, and these guys here're from Elizium, I think..."

"I'm from Olimpuz."

"...but we don't remember too much about it, it's been seven annums."

“Seven and a half annums”, the others chipped in, nodding and taking swigs of drink from gaily coloured plastic cans.

The presenter flashed a dazzling smile to camera: “Hello to everybody in Yutöpia, Elizium and Olimpus! This is Göldie Berd bringing you news of the great historic *HAAFWAY* celebrations in Gagarin Skwär in central Star Moscöw, on board the *HERALD OV INTESTELER FRIENDSHIP*.” She turned back to the bystanders: “Would you like to say something about the historic significance of this moment for the folks back home?”

“Naah, we’re just here to see what’s going on.”

“Yeah”, chipped in another, “we’re spur-of-the-moment people.”

“We don’t really remember anyone from back home, it’s been so long that...”

The presenter frowned: “So you’ve come to see how everyone’s celebrating Haafway?”

“Haafway’s classic, but it’s not...”

“It’s only halfway.”

“I mean, you just draw a line in the sky, and we’ve crossed the line, so that’s classic, and everyone shouts hooray, but it’s no über-deal. Not really.”

“Not like First Contact!”

“Yeah, First Contact’d be really something.”

“Über-classic!”

Göldie bravely tried to regain the initiative: “So when do you think we’ll have First Contact?”

“Next week!”

“Not till we arrive!”

“Not for a billion years!”

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

“There’s no aliens there! There’s just a giant mirror that reflects our own radio signals back to us, and scrambles them up so we think they’re from aliens!”

“But then who put the mirror there?”, asked one of the others.

“Alien robots!”

“Yeah – that died out after too many software upgrades!”

“Or went down a black hole!”, shouted someone else.

“It’s a government plot to make us believe in aliens! – No, seriously! If we hadn’t believed, would we have spent a trillion dollars to build the *Herald*?”

The interview dissolved into shouts, counter-shouts and inebriated laughter.

The woman wished them a stellar day and turned to face the camera: “Earlier I had an interview with Captin FitsJherald, and I asked him: how does it feel to be Captin of the first

vessel in history to carry humans halfway to another star?"

\*

"Absolutely wonderful. The *Herald's* a beautiful ship, I have a loyal, hard-working crew, the passengers create a wonderful atmosphere of harmony on board, we're all expecting to make the greatest discovery in the history of mankind when we finally arrive. Praise be to Heraldiana, our infallible protector and our constant guide!"

The golden-haired presenter frowned: "Here in the studio we've been hearing stories of ugly planetist incidents, especially in South Gondola. Some earthies were beaten up, apparently by lunar youth gangs –"

The wrinkles on the Captain's square-jawed, craggy features creased themselves into an exaggerated smile: "Now hold on there, Göddie, ha, ha, ha! Let's not get carried away by a few reklopid rumours, we're all confident that sort of behaviour was left behind a very long time ago indeed. When you look at –"

"But Captain Fitzjerald, I'm sorry to interrupt you but you must surely recognise there've been serious tensions, particularly in the South Gondola community? Complaints about unfair discrimination? About martian cultural domination?"

"Maybe there've been a few minor, isolated incidents, but let me assure you that I have the situation well under control. There are bound to be occasional frictions and incidents on such a long voyage – what is it now? over seven annums, that's fourteen years for those earthies living in the past that still use the old-fashioned dates (*patronising snigger*) – and Chief Officer Vandenzyl and I can assure all our passengers we're not going to allow occasional acts of selfishness to spoil the voyage for the rest of us, and that applies to both North and South Gondola."

\*

"Switch it off!", Tomie snapped. "He makes me sick!"

Alvin did so.

"Self-satisfied bastard spyder."

"Tomie, it's not the Captain's fault –"

"It's bloody Fitzjerald said I couldn't go with the rest of you to see North Gondola."

"Well you should've studied more."

"What, be a bloody swot, like you? Who needs boring old astro-piss-pots anyway?"

“That exam was easy!”

“And they all hate us cos we remind them of Erth. FitsJherald – yes, him too, Lord of the Spyderys! Probably swimming in baths of honey-champagne right now, laughing about stupid erthies who can’t understand (*affected voice*) stellar formulations and über-cosmic quantum expansulations – well they can disappear up their own black holes, that’s what they can do...”

\*

The party in North Gondola was in full swing. A virtual string orchestra belted out computer-generated quasi-straussian waltzes, while on the walls a virtual painter flung out a ceaselessly metamorphosing flow of quasi-michelangelonian drama. The fountain in the middle of the great hall sparkled with a liquid melody of coloured light. The guests chattered vivaciously in small groups. Waiters passed among them replenishing the champagne, restocking the platters of vol-au-vents and hors d’oeuvres, mini-mince pies and cheese and pineapple on a stick, all products of the very highest quality genetically engineered algal slime.

And here came the guest of honour: Captin Lorens FitsJherald himself, tall and bronzed, curly-haired and ruddy-cheeked, beaming with good humour, his right arm wrapped around the shoulders of a brunette girl, his left embracing a blonde – slender-waisted, long-legged, generous-busted beauties both, their faces wide-eyed, full-lipped and flashing white teeth, girls who could hardly have been more than a quarter of the Captin’s age.

Everybody turned to watch them enter the hall: a half-unbuttoned rose tunic flanked by silver and gold ballgowns.

“Enter the heroic leader”, growled a young, rose-uniformed junior ofiser to a silver-haired, profesorial lady of indeterminate age standing next to him. “Heroic in the bedroom, at least, judging from his half-dressed state.”

The lady profeser frowned: “If I were his wife, I’d have something to say to him!”

“The Captin’s lady wife has found other interests in a nightclub in Star Paris.”

“A charming couple! Do you think I should mention these goings-on in my regular posting to the *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society*?”

“He’s a bad influence on the ship. Someone should make a formal complaint.”

The old lady looked at him expectantly.

“Well don’t look at me, Profeser!”

Meanwhile the host was greeting his most illustrious guest. Purser MaknaMara had abandoned his normal working uniform for an absurd confection of crimson velvet and white lace. He now approached the Captin with outstretched arms.

"Welcome, Captin, halfway to history in the making!", his voice boomed over the music. "Praise be to Heraldiena, our protector and guide! Lavinia!" – he enthusiastically snogged the blonde girl – "Melindia!" – he tried to repeat the same greeting with the brunette, but she quickly turned her head aside and all he got was her cheek. Meanwhile Lavinia pulled a wry face as if she had just bitten on a lemon.

"That's enough of that!", the Captin warned him off. "Where's the booze?"

"Champagne!", called MaknaMara, and three waiters hurried towards them from different directions, colliding together in front of the Captin. He released his simpering companions, ostentatiously offered them drinks from the tray which he had taken from the nearest waiter, and finally put a full glass to his own lips.

Suddenly another, somewhat older woman was standing in front of the Captin. "We all adored your speech, sir", she stated firmly. "It was so stirring, so profound. You were so strong!"

The Captin boggled at this new vision of loveliness that had materialised before his eyes. The champagne was forgotten. But his two consorts glared at her like cats preparing to defend to the death their marked territory.

"Karinthia!", gasped FitsJherald, "You look wonderful tonight!"

"Doesn't she!", oozed MaknaMara, sliding his arm oleagiously around her waist. They momentarily faced each other and just touched their noses together – "Mmmmmm!" – while the Captin stared and the other girls angrily gulped champers.

"Your speech inspired us all", continued Karinthia, looking around and raising her penetrating contralto above the renewed chatter in the further reaches of the hall, "Inspired us with the strength to face the second half of our immense journey, reminded us of the reason we are here and why we bear the hopes of the entire human race in our tiny vessel."

The Purser raised his hands, cast a prompting glance around and began clapping. Ragged applause rippled through the hall.

The Captin beamed with pleasure: "Well thank you Karinthia, thank you Mak!"

"Speech!", someone at the back of the hall half-shouted.

"Ladies and gentlemen", cried the Captin, "I'm touched, deeply touched. And gratified! And now I have an important announcement for you all."

The Purser tried to quell the persistant buzz from the back of the hall: "An important announcement, everybody. A new stage of our mission is about to commence!"

“A new stage indeed!”, continued the Captin. “And on that stage we shall be presenting, for the first time in interstellar space, a theatrical production of grandeur, of such musical virtuosity, such dramatic power, such dazzling costumes and imaginative conception, such vocal power, such conviction – 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 bellowed in a commanding baritone, to the disharmonious accompaniment of muffled groans from the further recesses of the hall.

“An excellent choice”, cried the Purser. “Let’s hear it for Bizet’s opera *Carmen!*” And he led another round of half-hearted applause.

“It’s Wagner, actually”, the Captin hissed in his ear, and then continued loudly to the public: “I have been authorised to tell you this project has the personal backing of the Prezident himself. Uncle Mak here’ll be chairman of the committee, and we expect to see all of you at the audition. This production will be beamed back live to Olympus, and it’ll be the talk of the entire Söler Sistem, so let’s roll our sleeves up and make it a wonderful evening of music and drama they’ll never forget!”

The applause dissolved into a buzz of conversation. The Captin eschewed further announcements in favour of champagne and intimate talk. The guests had no patience to hear any more. The music sensed the change in mood and increased in both volume and tempo. The wall-paintings accelerated their permutations and brightened their palette to a fever-pitch of activity. Couples began to waltz around the central fountain, where a fine mist of water droplets moistened their flushed cheeks.

“Why”, cried Purser MaknaMara into Karinthia’s ear, “why doesn’t he consult me first? *I’m* supposed to be in charge of entertainments. That’s what they pay me for.”

“He’s putting you in charge of the committee, darling, isn’t he?”

“But I’ve done so much preparation on *Carmen*; the costumes are almost ready, and...”

“Never mind, darling, you can come and entertain me!”

They snuggled together, swaying with the beat, and cast sidelong glances at the Captin and his two lovely consorts casting sidelong glances at them.

In another part of the hall, the junior ofiser and the lady profeser were discussing developments.

“It was still a good speech”, old silverlocks insisted. “So long as you turn a blind eye to its routine sexist, ageist, racist and planetist biases.”

“Of course it was, but who d’you think wrote it? FitzJherald doesn’t believe a word of it any more.”

“But how can the Captin...?”

“Because he’s an old fool, that’s why.”

“You don’t know him like I do”, the lady profeser quavered. “Back in the old days...”

“Yes, yes, I know. Don’t you see he’s changed? He’s forgotten everything.”

“He was our leader when times got rough.”

“Don’t worry”, the rose-uniformed ofiser purred. “When times get rough again, at least we’ll be secure in the knowledge our Captin’ll have the perfect operatic aria to sing for the occasion!”

\*

There was a dimly lit street, a scattering of dusty shops, the plaintive echo of a distant saxophone. No one about, except for Sushuela carefully picking her way between stacks of packing cases and piles of waste bags filled with rubbish. The condensation glistening on mildewed surfaces gave off a faintly rancid odour. A cat miaowed, slunk past in the opposite direction. She shivered, and entered a small alleyway.

And here it was: *Ye Olde Mysterye Shoppe*. Sushuela felt she could have been back on Erth a century ago, or even three, back in the days of old, sepia-coloured photographs which neither moved nor answered any of your questions when you asked.

She pressed the door, then pressed it harder. It opened on rusty hinges; a bell jingled somewhere. It half-closed again behind her, and she was surrounded by gloomy racks of porcelain figurines, ornaments, vases, out-of-fashion clothes, forgotten puzzles, unloved toys, and the bric-a-brac of every description that had been discarded during the past fourteen years of the voyage.

“Dr Yufo! Dr Yufo!”, she half whispered.

Something horrible slithered between her feet and scuttled insect-like away into the gloom.

“Dr Yufo!”, she repeated, shaking all over.

“Go back, go back, while you still have time!”, shrieked a mechanical toy soldier at her from a shelf.

“I’ve got an appointment!”, Sushuela hissed back.

“Oh. Sorry about that”, said the toy.

“There you go again”, said a miniature dinosaur, swishing its long tail, “sticking your

linear programming in without thinking about the consequences.”

“I”, said a third toy in an elaborate 18th-century costume and powdered wig, “always think about the... about the... what were we talking about?”

The dolls gestured at each other with jerky arm and hand movements. Sushuela watched, fascinated.

“Can I help you?”, a woman’s voice suddenly came from behind her. The voice was soft, African-modulated, but Sushuela jumped all the same.

“I’ve come to see Dr Yufo.”

“It’s Sushuela, isn’t it? He told me he was expecting you. He can’t see you right now. I can take the trackers for you.” She reached out and opened Sushuela’s jacket.

“Who are you?”

“My name’s Tandie. I’m Dr Yufo’s assistant.” She smiled calmly at Sushuela – almost like one of the toys herself, Sushuela thought, as she held tightly onto her jacket to prevent the velvet-skinned female figure from releasing the trackers underneath.

“Where’s Dr Yufo?”

“I’m afraid he’s busy with someone else right now. Please let me take the trackers for you.”

Sushuela hesitated for a moment longer while the strange woman started to release her fingers, smiling steadily all the time. Her hands proved to be as strong as robotic manipulators, and Sushuela was forced to give in. “All right”, she muttered, and allowed the strange woman to take the trackers off her. “That one’s Alvin’s, that’s Tomie’s. They’ll be along to pick them up, probably by midnight.”

“We’ll have them waiting for them. It was so nice meeting you. I do hope I’ll see you again soon. Have a stellar day!” Again that unsettlingly direct smile. Tandie took the two waistcoat harnesses and vanished with them into an inner room.

“You too”, muttered Sushuela, suspiciously. When Tandie had gone, she crept into the back of the shop after her, peered through a chink in a heavy velvet curtain. There was a dark corridor, a rectangle of yellow light in a half-open doorway. She held her breath.

“I’m getting old, my eyes aren’t so good”, a plaintive male voice rasped from behind that door.

“Well ain’t that a crying shame”, came the reply, “cos the boss, you see, he gets kinda impatient when people lose property that ain’t theirs.”

Sushuela became aware of a movement by her shoulder. One of the mechanical dolls had crept along the shelf to join her, and now its eyes met hers and it solemnly raised its tiny index finger to its lips: “Ssshhh!”

Sushiela turned quietly, her heart thumping, and tiptoed as quickly as possible out of the shop.

\*

Tomie twisted around in his seat: "Let's do it, Alv. Off to the races!"

Alvin floated back to Tomie's bag, opened it and produced a video camera, a grotesque latex mask, a pair of white gloves and a folded sheet. "What's this?", he added, finding a bottle as well.

"Open it."

The cramped compartment was immediately filled with the reek of alcohol, and some reddish-brown globules of liquid formed in mid-air and wobbled like jelly. Tomie stalked them, opened his mouth, snapped up the largest and swallowed.

"Go on, what are you afraid of? Here, give us the bottle."

"Careful", said Alvin, dabbing fastidiously at his tunic, "We can't go back smelling of drink."

"It's party time. Who cares? They'll all be sozzled by now anyway."

"But we're not supposed to..."

"We don't have to live by their rules any more. We're different" – he shouted so loudly that Alvin shrank back – "we're the masters of the bloody universe!" He burst into a peal of laughter, belched loudly, laughed again. "What are you waiting for?"

Alvin backed off patiently: "I need to think about it."

"Alv, you're a sad case, you know that? You gotta unwind, enjoy yourself."

"I'm okay."

"Oh-h-h yeah? C'm'ere, Alv." Tomie floated up to him and pressed him against the wall. "I'm gonna have a little word with a pretty girl I know, and when I tell you she's a little go-er, you can trust me I'm telling you that from personal experience, know what I mean? Eh?"

"You mean you've... with her too?"

"Course I have. And she's gonna blow your bollocks off, I can promise you –"

"Get off!"

As Alvin pushed him away, Tomie bounced off the opposite wall without stopping talking: "– she will, and she's gonna put her arms around you like this, ever so tenderly..."

Tomie tickled Alvin's ribs devilishly, Alvin desperately pushed him away again, and the cabin was filled with flailing arms and legs, peals of laughter, shrieks of irritation and a

fine mist of aromatic droplets of brandy.

"Careful!", shouted Alvin at last, "We mustn't..." – he thought quickly – "mustn't damage your mask." He grasped it and held it up like a cross to ward off a vampire.

"Give me that." Tomie pulled the horror over his head. "Eeeeeee! What do I look like?"

"Out of this world. Your hair's sticking out."

They adjusted the mask.

"Humans, oh humans", crooned Tomie, "your time is up. Prepare to meet your doom!" He belched again, breathed hard for a moment, perched quietly in a corner. "Get the cam."

"We didn't check for a sub-sat."

"What? We must have one, or it'll all go wrong. Where's it kept?"

"I don't know. In here?" Alvin checked a locker, blushed at the thought of what he had found before. "Not here. Just small things, clothes and stuff."

"Here?", said Tomie, and pulled out a spherical object the size of a large football.

"That's it. Don't touch the antenna, or we'll never get it folded back down again."

"Okay. We're in business. Give me the sheet."

The sheet, stretched out against the end wall, proved to be covered with weird symbols that might pass for alien writing. Alvin, perched backwards on the pilot's seat, aimed the videocam. Tomie drifted to one side, pulling on the gloves and flexing his fingers like a surgeon: "Remember what I told you. Keep it on my face."

"Is that what you call it?"

"And hold it steady."

"I know."

"What about the voice scrambler?"

Alvin checked the microphone unit attached to the videocam: "It's on."

"Start it."

Alvin began recording.

For a while, the viewfield was filled with the enigmatic alien hieroglyphics. Then the masked Tomie wobbled into view and turned to face the camera. Who knows how to read the expression on an alien face, never before seen by humankind? Yet to our eyes, the visage of the unutterably Other conveyed an impression of profound solemnity, based on thousands of millennia of wisdom accumulated through long meditation and practise of self-discipline and the martial arts.

After a long pause, the Other began to deliver its historic message to mankind.

"Humans, listen to me! I am Zargon of the star system you call Alfa Sentorie. We have been watching you for many years. We know all about your ship, your so-called *Herald ov*

*Intesteler Friend Ship*. We know about your terrible history of war and destruction of each other and the environment. We know exactly what sort of a terrible horrible horrible – I mean herald, I mean – hold the camera straight, can't you?"

Alvin was shaking with laughter and the session was ruined.

"We'll have to do it again. Go back to the beginning."

On the second try, it was Tomie who started giggling first at the fatal point in the script. The third time around, no sooner had Tomie turned to face the camera than both collapsed into hysterics at once.

"This is no good", Tomie muttered. "We'll have to change the script."

They sat silently for several minutes, passing the bottle between them. Alvin began to feel his shyness dissolving in the acrid brown fluid. Tomie's lips moved silently, and his head nodded to the rhythm of his thoughts.

"I've got it. Let's go", he said suddenly. They took up their positions again.

When they finally replayed what they had recorded, they heard the effect of the spectral scrambler which had distorted the harmonics of Tomie's voice beyond recognition: "...And so we are now warning you, stay away from Alfa Sentorie. Turn back, humans, while there is still time. Turn back to your own solar system and leave us alone. Otherwise you will all be utterly destroyed. Turn back and flee for your lives, you agents of evil. You have been warned!"

Tomie looked up from the monitor: "That'll do."

"It's not logical."

"It's good, Alv. It'll put the wind up FitsJherald."

"First you criticise us for being destructive and warmongering and all that, and then you announce you're going to be just as destructive yourself. You're not consistent."

"Look, I know how the aliens think, okay? It's legitimate self-defence."

"And anyway we can't turn back now."

"Course we can."

"It's a physical impossibility."

"You believe that? You burk! How do you know what they tell us is true?"

Alvin and Tomie stared at each other. Alvin looked away, muttering: "And anyway, you're always telling me to go all the way..."

"Feed it into the sub-sat."

Alvin shrugged and did so. Tomie watched him intently: "All set up now?"

"Yes. It sleeps for an hour, then it wakes up, opens its antenna, locks on to the *Herald* and transmits over and over again till it runs out of power."

"Good. Launch it."

They replaced the sphere in its launching tube, switched it on, closed the airtight door behind it and mentally transferred a command to the control system.

"Fire!", shouted Tomie.

"Aye, aye, Captin!" Alvin pressed the virtual button, and there was a slight hiss and jolt as the sub-sat launched itself onto an independent course.

"Now let's hightail it out of here." Tomie settled himself into the pilot's seat. "Give me the ring. Switch the light off." Alvin did so.

Tomie rotated the capsule this way and that. With the cabin in darkness, they peered out and saw stars. Thousands upon thousands of stars: bright stars, not-so-bright stars, faint stars dissolving into the misty band of the Milky Way. Red stars, orange stars, yellow stars, blue stars, white stars. In every direction as they rotated silently, stars and yet more stars. Of the *Herald* there was not a sign.

"Where's she gone?", whispered Tomie.

"I told you we'd gone far enough."

"Where's the bloody *Herald*, Alv, where's she got to?"

"We're lost in space."

"Can't you get her back? How do you switch the computer on?"

"We disabled it when we started."

"The computer'll tell us what to do."

"It automatically tells *Herald* where we are. We might as well radio the *Herald* directly for help."

"No, don't do that. She's got to be out there somewhere. She's got to be."

\*

"They've got to be out there somewhere. They've got to be", said Miesha. Slavic-eyed, the same age as Tomie and Alvin, he was sitting at one of the two dining tables in the common room of the Star Lunden Foster Senter.

The table was littered with the remains of dinner; some of the orphans had already left, others were tidying up. The beautiful Elain collected some dirty plates and took them away, flicking her abundant blonde hair over her shoulders with a practised move of her head. Sonja was helping by brushing some crumbs to one side of the table, and then brushing them back again.

"It's called Fermie's Paradox, after the physicist Enrico Fermie", explained Dr Riita, the plump, cheerful foster mother to the teenage orphans from Erth. Miesha was listening

attentively, and Sonja lethargically. Riita continued: "He was alive in the Between Ages, when Erth was the only inhabited world –"

Sonja interjected: "Urh! Primitive!"

"– and he put it this way: if Erth is an ordinary planet, surely there must be life on millions of other Erths throughout the Galaxie, and surely some of those planets evolved technological species before Erth, and surely some of those species invented radio or even space travel, in which case we should be hearing them or seeing their spacecraft in our own solar system, so where are they?" Her fine nordic features radiated a smile as she spread her hands wide in perplexity.

On the other side of the common room, Looie (the African boy) and Slava (the other Slav) were sitting at a games console.

"Oh no", cried Slava, "you just wiped out the entire Arctiurian empire!"

"Die, tentacle-faces!", whispered Looie, ferociously working the joystick.

The front door opened, and Sushuela entered.

Epstyn, the other adult in charge of the Foster Senter, was shambling across the room. Already an old and broken man when the *Herald* departed from the Söler Sistem, he faced the youngsters under his care with a perpetual scowl on his pinched and lined face, half-hidden under an unkempt beard. "You're late", he grumbled at Sushuela, "There's nothing left."

"Sorry, Eps, I was watching the celebration."

Sushuela sat down at Dr Riita's table, reached for a dish and found some cold lasagne. Riita greeted her with a motherly glance while continuing to enumerate the terms of the Draek Equaezhon, which attempts to estimate the likely number of intelligent civilisations existing at the present time in the Galaxie. Miesha and Sonja were kicking each other's feet under the table. Sushuela closed her eyes, chanted quietly to herself: "This nourishment I gratefully receive, in the name of life's evolving unity", and began to eat.

Elain paused beside her: "Funny we've not seen Tomie and Alvin this evening. *I wonder* where they've got to?"

"Shut up", muttered Sushuela, and then became aware that Dr Riita had paused and was looking in her direction. "I 'spect they're still outside watching the Haafway party."

"You think they've gone *outside*, did you say?", Elain needled her, a sly grin embellishing her already too-pretty face.

Miesha had a theory: "Tomie's probably trying to sneak into North Gondola when FitsJherald's not watching. Should've seen how mad he was."

Dr Riita continued: "...and the last term of the Draek Equaezhon estimates the probability of an advanced civilisation surviving the trauma of realising that it is very

probably the only civilisation in the universe.”

“But”, Miesha objected, “we know for sure there’s aliens in Alfa Sentorie.”

“There *are*, Miesha, there *are* aliens, plural. Yes, we do. And yet we only have their original signals. They don’t respond at all to our own signals. So maybe it’s an automatic beacon of some sort, and when we get there we’ll find they come from another star altogether.”

“Urh! Primitive!”, said Sonja.

\*

“How much oh-two left?”, Tomie asked.

“I think I know how to get the computer on.”

“But you said it would contact the *Herald*.”

“Yes. Automatically, when it starts up”, Alvin said.

They looked at each other in the gloom.

“Never!”, Tomie decided.

“Or we could drift here, alone, for ever.”

“Bastards.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. Everybody... Why didn’t you make sure we could get back safely?”

“How was I to know it would take so long?”

They floated weightlessly and watched the stars for a while.

“Alv, take the ring. Here. Do something.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Get us home. You can do it, Alv, you’re a bloody genius, I know you can.”

“How can I? I’m only a sad case. Aren’t I?”

They drifted silently and watched the stars for another long while.

Tomie frowned: “It’ll start sending the message soon.”

“If it can lock on to the *Herald*. Maybe it’s lost too.”

“Damn!”

“We could broadcast live. The *Herald*’ll pick it up. Easy.”

Tomie didn’t hear the mockery in Alvin’s voice. “I’m not in the mood”, he grumbled.

“Put the mask on again. We can still do it.”

“I said I’m not in the mood.”

“Why not?”

They breathed anxiously and watched the stars again.

But when Alvin’s eyes fell on the constellation of Vergo, he thought he saw an altogether more enticing virgin (if she still was a virgin, which was open to serious doubt by now), jiving effortlessly on a crowded disco floor; he was approaching her, holding out his hand to her, and she was laughing her silvery laugh and saying, “Alvie, you look so silly”, and then she took Miesha’s hand and waltzed off with him without a backward look, and Alvin just stood there and stared, stood and stared, until the other dancers knocked him flying...

Alvin stifled a sob and touched the dashboard.

“What are you doing?”, asked Tomie after a while.

“Reprogramming the sub-sat.”

“Why?”

“Don’t we want to delay the transmission till after we get back?”

“No! Play it now! I want them to squirm!”

They tussled. Tomie won back the ring.

“How do I get it to play now?”

“Think of an old-fashioned disk spinning as it plays back the message.”

Tomie closed his eyes and did so. The capsule fired its attitude thrusters and started to rotate, centrifuging the two boys to opposite sides of the cabin.

“You burk!”

\*

The music in the glittering hall in North Gondola had switched from Viennese waltzes to fast Cuban jazz. A handful of couples gyrated energetically on the dance floor to the urging of trumpets and congas, while the others watched, sat at their tables or lounged about in a convivial circle beside the central fountain.

Captin FitsJherald was at a table near the dancers, a fat, cigar-shaped inhaler poised at a jaunty angle by his lips, regaling his many female admirers with funny stories, so far as one could make out from a distance. Purser MaknaMara, resplendent in his flamboyant liberacean outfit, hand clasped in hand and gaze locked in gaze with the statuesque Karinthia, was slipping unobtrusively out of the door, intent on more private entertainments. And the silver-haired lady profeser was holding forth to a small company gathered near the fountain on how a shipload of illegal gynoids had been delayed by customs, had chased the

*Herald* halfway around the Söler Sistem – Calisto to Marz to Erth – and then had never caught up before the *Herald's* forced emergency departure from Erth.

“Robotic sex machines, totally submissive, totally obedient – ugh!”, said a female voice.

The profeser responded with a wry smile: “Toys for the boys. Realistic enough, so long as your idea of reality is a juvenile male fantasy.”

“I thought gynoids were banned as immoral?”, asked someone.

“So they were”, growled Sixth Ofiser Moodie, “highly immoral, but that doesn’t stop some people from getting their sweaty hands on them.”

“Isn’t it disloyal”, the lady profeser twinkled, “for an ofiser to cast aspersions on his Captin?”

“Ooohhh!”, gasped several of the listeners.

But Moodie was unphased: “The Captin combines real power with genuine masculine attractiveness. Why ask for artificial babes when you can get the real thing?”

They glanced surreptitiously in the direction of the Captin’s table, and nodded sagely.

“Only reason he got the job”, muttered someone else. “But then who...?”

“Where would corruption be even more shocking than in the Captin’s cabin?”

“Tell us, who do you mean?”, shouted half a dozen voices.

Moodie looked around at them, paused, then lowered his voice: “After all, the Captin is merely the chief servant of the Rerezentativ Caunsil.”

The others looked at each other, obviously alarmed at the thought of corruption in such high places.

“I’m sorry”, Moodie went on in a matter-of-fact tone, “I’m being paged, I’ll have to leave it there.” He turned to go.

“Oh, come on!”, they called after him.

“What about the Prezident?”, someone rashly shouted.

Moodie turned back to face them, stared without expression for a moment, and then strode off.

He left the great hall through one of its smaller exits and stood quietly in the corridor outside. He was alone. He bowed his head in thought.

“Moodie”, he sub-vocalised.

The thin, hard face of Chief Ofiser Patruela VandenPlaz formed itself in his mental vision.

“Moodie, Contröl”, she said in a voice only Moodie could hear, because it only existed inside his own brain. “Heraldiena says the outer garage door on Worden 14 is open. I’ve closed and locked it from here, but I want you to check the garage personally and see what’s

going on.”

“Yes sir, copy that”, Moodie responded mentally. “Do we have any indication on the status of Worden 14 itself?”

“It’s asleep. Better give it a checkout just to make sure.”

“Yes sir.”

“Would you tell the Captin? I tried paging him, but you know what he’s like.”

“I’ll do that.”

“I have him there with you in the ballroom, but he’s gone into his private space and I can’t read him.”

“The Captin’s with me here, enjoying himself with his girlfriends.”

“Understood. Thank you. Contröl out.”

“Copy you. Moodie out.”

He raised his head, re-focused his attention on the outer world, sighed, and returned to the great hall.

\*

Tomie broke the silence: “They’re out here, you know.”

“Who?”

“*Them*. The aliens.”

“You mean the *Herald*?”

“No, *them*. Can’t you see them?”

“Who?”

“I told you. The aliens.”

“Where?”

“Out here, you burk. Can’t you sense them? They’re all around us.”

Alvin looked all around: “I can’t see any aliens.”

“Well you’re stupid. They only reveal themselves to intelligent people.”

“Like you, I suppose.”

“Yes, actually, like me... I sometimes see them at night.”

“You mean you’re dreaming?”

“Out here it’s always night. Always night, never daytime. The day is much too far away. Maybe we’ll never see real daylight... live our whole lives in the night.”

Alvin shuddered. He elbowed Tomie out of the pilot’s chair: “Get out of the way. Give me the ring.”

Tomie obeyed, drifted back into the cabin: "We don't need the *Herald* any more. *They're* coming for us." He shivered and switched the interior light back on.

"Turn it off", said Alvin. "We're going home now." He switched it off himself.

Tomie detached his inscribed sheet from the wall and wrapped it around himself in the gloom. "Do you think they'll be nice to us?", he quavered. "We did what they asked. We sent the warning. They'll be pleased about that."

Alvin ignored him and gazed into the lifelong night outside. The glittering heavens were sliding slowly and randomly past his window. Suddenly an unusually bright star caught his attention as it swung into view, a yellow-tinted searchlight almost as powerful as Sirius, poised between the W-shaped figure of Casiopeia and the raised sword of Persius at a spot where no astrologer of classical antiquity had ever noted the presence of a star.

Alvin hesitated as the starfield slipped past, troubled by words he only half understood: daytime... home..., and by a childhood memory of a time when that particular star had once been much brighter than any other; brighter than Sirius, the ancient Dog Star; brighter, too, than another yellow star which now drifted into his window as the capsule turned to face in the diametrically opposite direction...

Pressing his hand with the ring to the control dashboard, compressing his lips with the effort of concentration, Alvin found the virtual joystick in his inner vision and gripped it with an imaginary hand. He took control, rotated the capsule until he found Oryon, then adjusted his orientation to match as exactly as he could his first view of the stars on emerging from the *Herald's* belly: Oryon on the right, Sirius on the left, Prosyon and Djeminie shining steadily above. He then yawed carefully through exactly 180 degrees, stabilised his orientation again and peered out intensely.

The deep black sky was a dazzling still-life of stars, empty of all movement or of any human comfort.

He fired the large rear thrusters for 30 seconds, pinning Tomie against the rear wall. His view forward of the brilliant summer triangle, with the beautiful double star Albireo bang in the middle, changed not one iota.

"We can't escape, you know", said Tomie plaintively. "You can run, but there's nowhere to hide. We could go a billion trillion light-years, and they'd still catch us."

"I make it 900 kilometres. We'll be back at the horrible *Herald* in time for breakfast."

"Put the light on."

"No. Need to save power."

"It's no use", Tomie muttered sleepily. "They'll get us whatever we do."

"There can't be any aliens out here. The nearest are still two point one eight light-years

away, and we're not even sure about them."

"Don't try and fight it", Tomie went on in a strange, trancelike voice. "Just reach out and touch them. They'll be there."

Alvin shivered. He retrieved the pair of binoculars from their locker and trained them on the stars ahead, terrified that a misjudgement of only a degree in their course would cause them to miss the *Herald* by more than 15 kilometres. At that range its 3-kilometre bulk would look no larger than... (*he calculated*) a finger at arm's length, glimmering only dully in reflected starlight as they careened past it, not knowing whether to look right or left, up or down. And could he really be sure he was not five degrees off? In which case... better not make that calculation, he thought. Would it not be better after all to throw secrecy to the galaxies, boot up the worden's computer and ask the *Herald* to give them the correct bearing?

But then Heraldienna would alert the Ofiser of the Watch that a worden was playing truant, and soon everybody would find out, and then what would Tomie say, or that image of feminine beauty, that girl, that young woman, that essence of grace and loveliness who haunted his secret thoughts?

The display screen that he could see in his mind's eye whenever he held the ring close to the touch pad on the worden's dashboard showed a cartoon figure of a cat (or maybe it was a mouse? or some other stupid character?) asleep in bed. *WÄK UP INTELIGHENT CONTRÖL SISTEM? – YES / NO*, said the screen, and the arrow cursor hovered around the *YES* and the *NO* as Alvin's thought hesitated between them.

He glanced back at Tomie, wrapped up in his alien sheet and apparently asleep. Then he seemed to see the girl approaching him, smiling at him with acceptance rather than mockery, her long blonde hair flowing in the wind, a button on her dress undone, or two buttons?, seemed to hear her saying, "Tomie tells me how brave you were, how clever you were, getting back to the *Herald* without anyone guessing, why don't you let me put my arms round you and give you a..."

Alvin flushed, shook himself, clicked on *NO* and picked up the binoculars again.

\*

Tomie running up an endless series of staircases. Pauses on the landing. Looks back. Sushuela chasing him, giggling. Tomie for some reason feels afraid. Runs up the next two flights. Here at last is the top. A landing. A corridor. Of course – the secret door. He pulls out the ring. Glances back. Sushuela catching up. He tries to fit the ring to the touch pad. No touch pad. Nightmare. Turns around in terror. Sushuela metamorphoses into Captin FitsJherald. Towers

menacingly over Tomie. Pulls out a flashlight and shines it into Tomie's eyes, dazzling him...

Tomie rubbed his eyes, opened them. He was curled up in his sheet in the back of the worden, damp with perspiration despite the chill of the cabin air. From time to time passing spotlights shone through the window, momentarily passing directly over his eyes.

He stretched, yawned, sneezed. Alvin was in the pilot's seat doing something.

"Alv, what time is it?"

"Quarter to five."

"Where are we?"

He manoeuvred his weightless body across to the front of the cabin, where he joined Alvin and peered out. They were flying slowly down a vast shaft between black walls illuminated by sharp orange lights at hundred-metre intervals. Titanic coils glistened like sleeping reptiles in the shadows.

Tomie's heart constricted, his head swam. Aliens!

"What is this place?", he asked again, but more in wonder than in expectation of an answer.

"We're in the engine bay. I couldn't get us back to the garage we started from, the door wouldn't open."

"No shit? I thought it was...", Tomie stammered. He took a moment to get his bearings, but then asked urgently, "You didn't wake up the computer?"

"Of course not."

"What's that flashing light for?"

"It's telling us we're out of oh-two."

"No shit..."

They now approached a dead end to the tunnel. There were two wordens already docked against the bulkhead, and two free hatchways. Alvin brought his worden to a stop, rotated it through 180 degrees, aligned it with one of the vacant hatchways using the mental joystick in the thought control link, and backed expertly onto the target.

There was a resonant bump, and their worden spun off into space.

"Damn!", cried Tomie, "look what you're doing!"

"Sorry", muttered Alvin, frowning and refocusing his mind on the virtual joystick.

"Why's that flashing light gone from amber to red?"

"Let me concentrate!"

"Let me do it!"

Tomie elbowed Alvin out of the way, snatched the ring from his finger and took control. The worden backed onto the docking hatch too fast, impacted with a resonant clang and

spun back off into space.

"Damn, damn!"

"Tomie, you've got to let me try again!"

"I can do it!"

"No, Tomie, let me!"

Tomie pushed him away and regained control of the worden. Concentrating with all his might, he reversed ever so gently onto the hatchway.

Alvin checked a diagram of their progress which was repeated on the surface of the dashboard: "You've got it twisted."

"All right, I know."

In the silence that followed, both boys noticed how hard they were breathing.

"Up a bit."

"All right!"

Tomie made the correction. Their alignment was perfect. He rested the worden against the docking port and continued to fire the thrusters, trying to force the latches to lock them on.

"That's it, keep pressing... What did you stop for?"

Tomie mentally twisted the virtual thruster handle this way and that. The capsule merely drifted slowly away from the docking port.

Alvin guessed: "Out of fuel?"

"Damn it!"

"Out of oh-two, as well."

"Alv, get us out of here!"

"I need to think about it... okay, we'll just have to spacewalk." He searched through the lockers and found two pairs of goggles with ear muffs attached. "Put this on", he gasped.

Tomie took one, frightened. "Where's the pressure helmets?"

"Help me look for them."

They couldn't find any.

Tomie's anxiety deepened: "We can't get out without helmets. We'll die!"

"We'll just have to hold our breath. That'll give us ten seconds to reach the airlock. Plenty of time!"

Alvin, scrabbling through the lockers, found a length of carbon nano-fibre rope which he pulled out and uncoiled. It twisted around awkwardly, filling the zero-gravity cabin with balky loops. Alvin tied one end round Tomie's body, the other around his own. The remaining length he coiled up as best he could, wrapping it tightly around one arm.

“We can’t go out into space without oh-two”, Tomie moaned plaintively.

“Take deep breaths”, Alvin instructed. Tomie nodded, his face ashen, slipped the mask over his eyes and ears, and began charging his lungs up with what little oxygen remained in the stale cabin air.

Alvin scooped up the bag, stuffed the sheet, the alien mask and gloves, the videocam and the empty bottle into it, and thrust it into Tomie’s arms. Then he turned his attention to their rear hatch.

He paused, made a thumbs-up sign to Tomie, who hesitantly returned the gesture. Then he took the deepest breath he had ever taken in his life and pressed the button to open the hatch.

Nothing happened.

He pressed the button again, and then again. He looked at Tomie: “It won’t open while we’ve still got cabin pressure.”

Tomie stared at him, breathing heavily.

Alvin compressed his lips, glanced around the tiny compartment for inspiration: “Give me the ring.”

Tomie found his voice and spoke in a hoarse whisper: “We’re trapped in here!”

“Give me the ring!”

“We’re stuck here forever!”

“Tomie!” Alvin pulled the ring off his unresisting hand and went with it back to the dashboard. “There must be a way...”

After a few minutes Tomie’s voice rasped again: “What are you doing?”

“I don’t know... what’s this?... got it! Safety override. It’ll start bleeding off pressure right away. Just thank Heraldienna the hatch opens outwards.” From somewhere under their feet came an ominous hissing sound.

The boys turned back to the rear hatch. Alvin raised his hand to the button, looked around at Tomie. “Where did you put the bag?”

“It’s not gonna work”, Tomie muttered, wide-eyed, but picked up the bag with all their things in it.

“Hold on to it tightly, we don’t want to lose it.”

Tomie nodded mutely.

“Take a deep breath. Ready?” Alvin did so himself, but then hesitated, his hand poised over the button, his frightened stare meeting Tomie’s.

“Wait, I got it wrong, don’t try to hold your breath!”, he decided. “Deep breaths to store up oh-two, but then open your mouth, let it all out, okay? Otherwise we’ll just explode!”

He opened his mouth like a fish, exhaled, saw Tomie imitate him, quickly jabbed his hand at the button again.

There was a loud bang and everything was confused flying through the vacuum of space fell heavily against a hard wall bounced off collided with Tomie dazed and confused Alvin twisted around looking desperately for the hatch above them they drifted slowly away from the bulkhead he fought against Tomie's grip kicked him away using him as reaction mass reached the docking hatch grabbed a handrail it hurt like fire of course the coldness of interstellar space pulled his cuffs over his palms wound the rope around the handrail arrested Tomie's motion pulled him towards him found a button jabbed at it suddenly the airlock was open empty thank Olympus or they'd have been blown away forever scrambled inside no Tomie pull pull there he is flailing panicking stuck in the hatchway get that leg inside look for button too dark to see can't find it what's this press button closed at last I'm dying oh-two oh-two how do I get oh-two can't think everything in darkness listen it's coming on hear rushing noise filling chamber can breathe again can breathe again my god that was reckless that was stupid that was so rekloopid!!!

## ***2. The Reckoning***

The 24-hour clocks prescribed morning for South Gondola. The street lights on C deck cast a slowly brightening illumination, mimicking terrestrial dawn, on an urban street where a handful of pedestrians were already up and about. They shared the checkerboard-paved space with an early morning traffic of robotic goods carriers and street sweepers, looking like self-propelled shopping trolleys. The quiet electrical hum of a robot as it trundled past was accompanied by the sound of birdsong from a nearby park. The strengthening rose-tinted radiance fell on benches of synthetic wood, on ornamental green bushes and silvery sculptural figures mounted on stone plinths, and on a door with a sign over it which read: *STAR LUNDEN FOSTER SENTER.*

Around 8 o'clock the orphans were starting breakfast. A display wall behind them offered pastoral scenes from a planet which none of them was old enough to remember. Quiet music filtered out of the sound system and counterpointed the aroma of fresh coffee.

It was the boys' turn to serve. So while the beautiful Elain lounged delicately at the table, running her fingers through her long blonde hair, and the dusky Daljihit giggled as the pale-complexioned Sonja whispered secrets in her ear, it was Looie, Miesha and Slava who clustered around the oven in the adjoining kitchen, chattering about football, while Surajh and Hamid, the two Asian boys, laid the table.

In came Graesie, as black as Ella Fitzgerald and with a voice as sweet, humming to

herself. In came Kylie, who looked just like Snow White from the fairy tale – “I had the weirdest dream last night”, she began. And here was Dr Riita – “Good morning, Dr Riita” – “Morning, everyone! How are you all today?” – followed shortly from his room by Epstyn. “Morning, Eps”, they said to him, but he just glowered at them in reply and slumped down at the head of one of the two dining tables scratching his beard. Nobody took much notice.

“Sorry, guys”, Dr Riita was saying, “the Sports Senter’s not yet open, so this afternoon’ll be spent in extra library study.” She sugared the announcement with a practised smile, and tidied a stray lock of Sonja’s hair for her.

“Oh no!”, they all groaned.

“I’m afraid they’re still repairing the fire damage.”

“Can’t we use the park?”, asked one of the boys.

“No, unfortunately, the environmental people say we’ve got to give the grass time to renew itself.”

“Why doesn’t geneturf grow faster?”

“A good question Miesha. I think that’ll be the subject of your next essay project.”

“Oh no!”

“Oh that’s primitive!”, moaned Sonja.

Nobody had noticed Sushuela slip into the boys’ hall, and now nobody commented how worried she looked when she returned and joined the others at breakfast.

But Epstyn noticed two empty places at his table. His scowl deepened: “Somebody go and wake up Alvin and Tomie. If anyone can be bothered.”

Miesha said, “I’ll go.” Sushuela toyed with her food anxiously. Miesha returned: “They’re not there.”

Epstyn shrugged. “Good riddance...”, he muttered, and toyed idly with a piece of toast. But Dr Riita intervened: “Has anyone seen Alvin or Tomie this morning?... Did anyone see them last night?”

“Their rooms are empty”, Miesha reported.

“Will you locate them please?”

Miesha turned to the wall. Surajh elbowed him out of the way: “Heraldiena, help us find somebody.”

The display wall lost its soothing scenes of tropical beaches and waving palms; in their place there rose up two giant wheels, rotating slowly in opposite directions, labelled “North Gondola” and “South Gondola.” Each was divided into eight segments: two built up with a diagrammed cityscape of flats, shops and offices, two portraying parkland, two, agricultural installations, and two, freshwater lakes, all held in place around the circumference by the

rotation. The city areas were named, in the north, "Star Woshington" and "Star Moscöw", in the sauth, "Star Lunden" and "Star Paris."

Surajh instructed Heraldiena to select the list of orphans in Sauth Gondola, and from that list he chose Alvin Shakelton. The display produced a cartoon image of an old-fashioned policeman in a blue uniform, running, alternately blowing his whistle and waving his truncheon. In the space of a single second North Gondola vanished and Sauth filled the view. It rotated, stopped, zoomed in on Star Paris, zoomed again onto F deck, the lowest, zeroed in onto a street and finally onto a single address, where Alvin's tracker icon blinked bashfully at them.

"I've got Alvin, Dr Riita."

She came to Surajh's side. "Oh? Definitely not the sort of place I'd want to stay the night. Heraldiena, what's his status?"

Up came a panel, and Riita read off: "Respiration normal, pulse normal, blood pressure normal, awake and conscious." She spoke to the wall again: "Give him a call, will you?"

Heraldiena displayed an icon of an old-fashioned telephone handset. The waves rippling outwards from that icon went unanswered. Dr Riita, Surajh and Miesha looked at each other and shrugged.

\*

Meanwhile a different conversation was taking place in a room in North Gondola which contrasted in every way with the modest accommodation enjoyed by the orphans from Erth: the Contröl Room.

It was a wide circular hall, with high marble-faced stone walls and columns as massive as in a cathedral. Tall arched window apertures revealed glimpses of luxuriant sunlit parkland outside, with snow-capped mountains in the hazy distance. A dozen sparsely instrumented control stations were distributed around the Contröl Room's spacious circumference, each dominated by a three-dimensional cuboid display unit. Another, hemispherical unit, twice as large, dominated the centre of the room, viewable from all angles, surrounded by a narrow worktop; currently it glowed faintly with a silver light but was not otherwise in use. The dominant colour around the periphery was green, but in just one or two places a block of amber pixels called attention to some minor problem.

For all its size there were only two figures visible in the Contröl Room, both dressed in the same stylish uniform: a rose-coloured tunic and trousers with black and silver bands at the cuffs and shoulders, and with a large circular logo over the left breast pocket bearing the

words: *MARSHAN ASTRONOUTIX AND SPÄS ADMINISTRÄSHON*. Ofiser of the Watch on the 6 to 10 a.m. duty was Chief Ofiser Patruela VandenPlaz; she now leaned against a control station with arms folded over her generous bust and listened while Sixth Ofiser Kat Moodie growled his report.

They turned their heads as a familiar voice intruded over their conversation and over the sweet chatter of birdsong and tinkling of ornamental fountains wafting in through the windows: *"Beglückt darf nun dich, o Heimat, ich schauen, dum dum, diddle de dee, ya-ka-ta-tah tah dah-da dah dah..."*

"Good morning, Captin", said VandenPlaz without uncrossing her arms.

"Morning, troopers", said the Captin cheerfully, marching across the palatial room. "Praise be to Heraldiena, protector and guide! All green across the board?"

"Mr Moodie has a report."

"Yes sir", grunted Moodie. "Worden 14 has gone missing."

The Captin grinned at him: "Gone missing, eh? – ha, ha, ha! – Heraldiena doesn't miss things!"

"Heraldiena was not aware of the problem until I put a human eyeball on the case. It appears to have flown away, sir."

"What, by itself?"

"Or with someone on board."

VandenPlaz added: "I've been saying for annums the security on this ship is laughable."

The Captin waved her off: "Sounds like a malfunction to me. Who'd want to steal it? Where would they take it? If the door was faulty last night, then maybe... Ask Mr BekjuRel to sort it out. Though I'm surprised if Heraldiena really needs us to, er... Why can't she just send another worden out after it and fetch it back in?"

VandenPlaz prompted Moodie: "The Captin would like to know whether we're tracking the runaway worden."

"Yes, sir." Moodie turned to the Captin. "You may remember sir, the side radar is down for servicing. So Heraldiena's very largely blind."

"Well whose job is it to fix it? Where are all the engineers when you need one?"

"Mr Shanghiy is leading a team that's working on it right now, sir."

"Meanwhile", continued VandenPlaz in her sharp, unfeminine contralto, "a foreign object of unknown origin has been detected in the engine bay."

"The missing worden?"

"Olimpus knows! Could be an alien starship, and we wouldn't know a thing about it."

“Have you asked Heraldiena what it is?... Ah. In that case I suppose we’ll have to send someone down there to investigate?”

VandenPlaz snorted with irritation. Moodie once again explained: “Mr BekjuRel has a team down there right now, sir.”

“Well... so that’s all right then. Inform Heraldiena and myself immediately the object is identified. Anything else? Or can I go and have my morning coffee now?”

VandenPlaz unfolded her arms and looked straight at her commander: “Captin, I have a list of proposals for tightening security.”

“Must you really? I do hope it’s not a very long list.”

“A list of urgent proposals. Before we get overrun by aliens. Or saboteurs. Or termites.”

“Termites? Really... What does Heraldiena say?”

“What do you think? She doesn’t have time for that sort of thing while she’s running a detailed simulation of the formation of the universe! She thinks we’re intelligent enough to deal with it ourselves. Distributed processing.”

“Yes...”, FitsJherald nodded thoughtfully, “A truly wise answer. Her intelligence and wisdom put me in awe every time. Put your proposals in my mailbox, I’ll take a look at them.”

“I already have done, with copies to the Chief Enjhineer, the other ofisers, and also the Prezident of the Rerezentativ Caunsil.”

“Oh, really, Patie!... I’ll look at them later. Now I think it’s time for my morning coffee, so if that’s all...”

His visible form dissolved into a shower of evaporating pixels, while Moodie and VandenPlaz exchanged skeptical glances.

\*

“Can you hurry up now, or you’ll be late for classes”, Dr Riita called. The orphans were preparing to spend the morning at school.

Miesha asked, “What about Tomie and Alvin?”

“If they’re not back soon, I’ll have to report them missing.”

“No need for that”, Sushuela blurted out, “I’ll find them!”

“No –”, Riita began, “Come back, Sushuela!” But the girl dashed off before anyone could stop her.

“She’s been behaving funny all morning”, said Daljhit, her sister.

“Miesha, would you run after her and call her back? The lower decks of Star Paris are

not exactly a very respectable area.”

“Yes, Dr Riita.” He picked up his satchel and went out.

Epstyn was watching skeptically from his seat at the breakfast table. “Lot of fuss over nothing”, he snarled. “They can look after themselves.”

“Eps, there are parts of this ship where I do not want my young people wandering about unprotected and unsupervised! Especially girls! And if you had any sense of responsibility –”

Epstyn raised his voice: “Then you’re living in a dream, cos they already do!” Holding his hand where Riita could not see it, but Daljhit could, he mimed a bleating mouth.

“When? When has anyone here ever gone to the lower decks of Star Paris? – Daljhit, that’s enough, go to school now!”

“Yes, Dr Riita.” She turned reluctantly to the door and followed the other orphans out. “Bleater!”, she muttered under her breath.

When they were alone together, Riita strode across to Epstyn and hissed, “When? If you’re hiding something from me...”

Epstyn shrugged and looked away. He spoke quietly, in a tone of bitter amusement: “After sports? When they’ve taken a shower? Do they never forget to put the trackers back on for an hour or two? Not long enough to trigger the alarm, but long enough to...”

“But they’re at the Sports Senter.”

“...do a little exploring?” His voice hardened and he looked her in the eye again: “Cut them some slack, will you, Riita? They’re young, need to get out...”

“Have you seen what conditions are like on those lower decks? Have you? Eps, I’m talking to you!”

Again Epstyn evaded her gaze and continued speaking almost to himself: “...otherwise it’s all study, classes, exams, pressure, pressure. No surprise if they want to rebel a bit, skip a class or two, get out and see the world – what little there is of it!”

But Dr Riita was not standing for that: “I will not have my young people missing classes! We’ve slipped three places down the league table this term alone –”

“Don’t we all know it”, Epstyn muttered, and stood up.

“– and it’s about time Tomie started pulling his weight. As for Alvin, I don’t know what’s come over him. It’s Tomie leading him astray, that’s what it is. They just need their responsibilities explained to them reasonably.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Have a stellar day!” Epstyn waved her off, turned his back and went into his own tiny bedroom. He slumped down on the bed, the picture of depression beyond caring, picked up an inhaler, unscrewed the cap, pressed the button that turned up

the strength to maximum, and stuck one end into his mouth. On the wall facing him a window came to life...

\*

"Hi – I'm Alik Bryton."

"And I'm Göldie Berd."

"I was in Armstrong Skwär last night, and I reckon everyone who could cheer must've been there for the great Haafway celebration."

"And I was in Gagarin Skwär, and I reckon everyone who could stand must've been there."

"But what about the people who could only crawl?"

"They were in Paris and Lunden!"

*(Laughter, some boos. Numbers spin around in a box in the corner of the window, and settle on +4.)*

"Sorry, guys, for those of you in Star Paris and Star Lunden, we only mean you must've been celebrating so much harder than us!", Göldie quipped.

*(Mocking laughter.)*

"Yes, it makes you think, doesn't it: halfway there, halfway to history in the making."

"Of course, some people think our whole mission is only a half-baked idea."

"But we say: half you no respect?" *(Weak laughter.)* "Half-ter all, we're only doing this on your behalf!"

"Oh, that's terrible!", Göldie retorted, and shook her golden curls with indignation. She glanced to one side as if she could see the spinning numbers in the corner of the window. They settled. "Minus nine!", she exclaimed pityingly. "We've got a special reward for half-wits like you."

"A reward? Oh, Göldie!"

"Bring on the Golden Gong award!"

*(Enter man with large frying pan. He bongs Alik on the head. Loud, resonant bong-g-g-g! Exit man. Laughter, applause. Audience rating +9.)*

Alik continued, rolling his eyes: "Talking about half-wits, there was a martian, a loonie and an erthie –"

"Oh no, I've heard this one, it's dreadful!"

"Are you going to listen? If you won't listen, I'm going to sulk!"

*(Audience reaction: a pitying "aaahhh!")*

“Shall we listen to him?”, Göldie entreated the audience. “Do we want to hear his joke?”

*(Applause; shouts of “yeahhh!” and “bog off!”; laughter. Audience rating +8.)*

Alik (*loudly*): “There was a martian, a loonie and an erthie... and they all decided to explore the universe. So they each built rockets. The martian filled one tank in his rocket with oh-two and one with h-two, and pressed the starter button, and off he went – whoo-ooshh! – to explore the universe.

“The loonie also built a rocket with two tanks, and he put oh-two in one tank and liquid moonshine in the other, and pressed the starter button, and off he went to explore the universe, only he didn’t get quite so far – whush!”

“What –”, interrupted Göldie, “– just... whush?”

“Just a little... whush!” (*Ripple of weak laughter.*) “And then the erthie also built a rocket with two tanks, and he put white soldiers in one tank and black soldiers in the other, but poor erthie didn’t go anywhere, cos when he pressed the starter button all the two tanks did was to drive around shooting at each other and killing lots of people!”

*(Gales of laughter, 100% approval rating, enthusiastic applause, fading into distant echoes...)*

\*

An echoing tunnel dimly lit. Ladders, pipes, boxes, cables... echoes dying away into a profound silence.

“Where are we?”, whispered Tomie, shivering, floating weightlessly. *Where are we?* echoed the tunnel, *Where are we we we...*

“I don’t know” (*know know know...*), Alvin replied, massaging his numb and bleeding hands and pressing them under his armpits.

“It’s so cold!” (*cold cold cold...*).

“You shouldn’t have dropped the bag” (*bag bag bag...*).

Their breath created clouds of condensation in front of their blue faces. Their teeth chattered mercilessly.

“Which way?” (*way way way...*).

“I don’t know!” (*know know know...*).

\*

*“...And so we are now warning you, stay away from Alfa Sentorie. Turn back, humans, while there is*

*still time. Turn back to your own solar system and leave us alone. Otherwise you will all be utterly destroyed. Turn back and flee for your lives, you agents of evil. You have been warned!"*

Chief Ofiser VandenPlaz stood in front of the display and stared. Her long brown hair was neatly coiled up over her head, her rose-pink MASA uniform was impeccably digitised and her mouth was, like her eyes, wide open. One might have thought she was a waxwork, a latter-day gargoyle with her expression of amazement, horror and disbelief.

*"Humans, listen to me!"*, the message cycled back to its starting point. *"I am Zargon..."*

She closed her eyes without changing her shocked expression and touched the console with one hand. "Captin to the Contröl Room", she whispered, "Captin *at once* to the Contröl Room!" And opened her eyes. And stared. And disbelieved.

After a few moments the Captin materialised, together with Moodie. "But, Captin, I don't see it", Moodie was saying.

"We have the chorus on the upper level", explained FitsJherald, waving his hands, "and the soloists front of stage, backlit, with the first and second violins playing the, er... yes, Patie, what is it?... What the... Hölie Olimpus!"

They watched the broadcast through in silence.

"Where's it coming from?"

"There's no visual contact."

"Radar? Oh."

Moodie reminded him. "Mr Shanghiy..."

"Yes, all right. Well whatever it is we'd better keep it quiet. Ask Heraldiena to give it a top security classification."

VandenPlaz touched the display unit, then said: "Done."

"We can't have this sort of thing getting around before we've worked out what's going on", said the Captin. "Call Mr BekjuRel, Ms KöBajashi and Mr Marduk, and we'll discuss this in private. And we'll need a biologist."

VandenPlaz curved the corners of her thin lips into a crooked smile: "Profeser Amazonis?"

"Oh please, not her! We'll spend all our time arguing about gender ratios and patriarchal dominance."

"Speaking of which, don't you think we should also inform the Prezident?"

"For Olimpus' sake, don't let him know! Just the senior ofisers."

Moodie reminded him again: "Mr BekjuRel's still working in the engine bay, sir."

"Well page him, then..." – he saw VandenPlaz staring at him – "Warn him he may be dealing with a foreign object of alien origin."

A chime rang from the console. VandenPlaz answered: "Yes?"

On the unit in front of her appeared the head and shoulders of an elderly man, impeccably groomed and dressed, with a hint of nervous anxiety or shiftiness around the eyes.

"Ah", she said, "good morning, Mr Prezident."

"Is the Captin there?", he drawled in a hoarse voice. "Mr FitsJherald, have you seen this truly amazing message we've been receiving?"

"Mr Prezident! – ha, ha! – I don't know what it is but we're giving it top security for the time being."

"What this is, Captin, is nothing less than the historic meeting with extraterrestrial intelligence the human race has been waiting for, for all of history."

VandenPlaz frowned and slowly shook her head.

The Captin urged him: "Please keep it to yourself for the time being, Mr Prezident! We were just about to invite you to a secret meeting where we can discuss what it means. Can you come to the Contröl Room as soon as possible?"

"It's my duty to call an immediate emergency meeting of the full Rerezentativ Caunsil to consider our response."

"Please, Mr Prezident, can we discuss it in private here first?"

"If you insist, Mr FitsJherald. I'll join you there in a few minutes." And his image disappeared.

"Right", said the Captin. "And – now what is it?" The chime had gone off again.

This time it was Purser MaknaMara: "Captin, I've just seen the most extraordinary thing, looks like an alien message!" Karinthia's face and bare shoulders hovered in the background; her hair was dishevelled and she was holding a gaily coloured towel over her chest.

"Contröl Room a.s.a.p., and keep it under your hat. Don't tell anyone!", hissed FitsJherald.

MaknaMara chuckled, tapped his nose and vanished. The chime sounded again immediately.

"Now who is it?"

It was Alik Bryton and Göldie Berd: "Captin FitsJherald, do you have any comment on this historic alien message we've been receiving?"

He threw up his hands in exasperation: "Oh for Olympus' sake, why don't you just tell everybody?!"

\*

Alvin and Tomie shivered in a dark corner and held their breath. A couple of figures dressed in warm engineers' suits swam past.

The voice of the man in the lead approached their hiding place: "And that, as I say, proves beyond doubt the message came from a sub-satellite ejected by the missing worden. I told Contröl, Contröl wouldn't listen. Mustn't upset the Prezident, or something. I told them it was obvious. They told me to go play with my nuts and bolts."

"Yes, Mr BekjuRel", came a woman's voice from close behind him.

"I told them if they wanted to run a starship by taking orders from a superannuated stuffed shirt who couldn't order breakfast till you told him which way up to hold the menu, that was their business – or from a machine so-called intelligence that thinks it's too precious to concern itself with anything less than the fate of the universe – but if they wanted an engineer's opinion... Something to keep out the cold?"

Alvin glimpsed the reflected glimmer from a glass object in BekjuRel's gloved hand.

"Thanks", the woman replied. "Drambuie?"

"Only the best. As I was saying..."

The echoes receded and died away into stillness. Tomie and Alvin grinned at each other.

Alvin emerged from the hiding place and turned in the direction from which the engineers had come.

"This way!", he whispered.

\*

Dr Riita was sitting at the desk in her office watching the studio debate on the message from Zargon. Opinion was divided as to whether it would be possible to negotiate with the aliens, or whether the outcome would be interstellar war.

"Strange...", she mused, "How strange... just about the intellectual level of –"

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

It was Sushiel and Miesha, who said: "Dr Riita, we can't find Alvin or Tomie."

"Where have you been? You didn't...? after I explicitly told you...?"

"Sorry, Dr Riita. She ran too fast for me."

"Star Paris? F deck?"

"It's a sort of junk shop. There was nobody there, just a heap of junk."

Sushiela suddenly turned away; the others could hear her sobbing.

Dr Riita stood up: "Sushiela, what's the matter? Sushiela!"

She angrily tried to get a grip on herself: "Nothing."

"Is it Alvin and Tomie? What do you know about them? When did you see them last?"

"I'm all right. Really."

"Where did you last see them?"

"Paris Skwär."

"The Haafway celebration? Last night?"

She nodded, wiped her nose. Her silver make-up was now tear-stained and smudged over her cheeks.

"Use your handkerchief, not your sleeve. Did they say where they were going?"

She shook her head.

Dr Riita looked hard at her. "Are you sure?... Are you quite sure they didn't say what they were planning to do?"

Sushiela gave her a wary glance. "I saw them in Paris Skwär, and they didn't say what they were doing", she enunciated fastidiously.

"All right", Riita said at last, "run along now, you're missing your classes."

They scampered off; she returned to her desk. She pulled up to screen a dialogue box that said: *REPORT MISING PERSONS? OK / CANCEL*, and thought for a long while.

\*

F deck in Star Paris was at work, and Alvin and Tomie only attracted casual glances.

Here was the repair shop, nestled between giant ventilation and sewage ducts, where the lowest-grade technicians cleaned and soldered, joked and boozed. There the cafeteria, serving coffee and low-fat doughnuts along with lazy jazz in which a tenor sax alternately wailed and growled on its stormy voyage through an uneasy sea of synthesized vibes. They passed the rubbish emporium, where those on the very lowest rung of the social ladder sorted rubbish for a living: "Metal – plastic – rags – yukk! – plastic – metal – rags – yukk!..." – work that not even the meanest self-respecting robotic intelligence would touch.

They spared no more than a careless glance for the condensation-dripping walls decorated with discoloured swirls of rebellious calligraphy – *FITSJHERALD FASHIST*, with the capital Fs elaborated into swastikas. Finally they reached a dismal alleyway which assailed their noses with a cocktail of mildew, grease and urine, where even the full-spectrum

daylight-simulating lamps seemed unable to cast much sunshine, and at the end *Ye Olde Mysterye Shoppe*.

The door was ajar. They pushed their way in, heard a bell tinkle at the back of the shop. The door jammed and they found themselves walking on debris.

Tomie, leading the way, stopped and looked around in surprise. "What's going on here?", he breathed.

The shelves had been overturned, their contents – priceless antiques and worthless junk alike – scattered and smashed.

The boys made their way to the back of the shop, Tomie crunching impatiently over the precious wreckage, Alvin carefully pushing it aside with his toe and trying to find bare patches of floor to step on.

"Dr Yufo!", called Tomie, "Dr Yufo!" Meanwhile Alvin balanced delicately on one foot, sought fastidiously a touch-down spot for his other foot.

Tomie pulled the velvet curtain at the back of the shop aside: "Dr Yufo, are you there?"

On a ship where even erthies took pains to massage their appearance until well past the age of 140, Yufo looked old. The boys had noticed this before. But now he looked older still: slumped in a chair, his head in his hands, his eyes, when he looked up at them, ringed with the story of shock and despair, an ugly bruise on one cheek.

"What happened...?"

Yufo abruptly jerked himself to his feet, waved Tomie off, took a few unsteady steps and called hoarsely through a doorway: "Tandie, the boys' trackers, please."

Alvin had by now reached Tomie's side: "I brought the ring." He handed it to the old man, recoiled with shock at his sorry state. "Dr Yufo, did someone attack you?"

"Was it the spyders?!", echoed Tomie.

Tandie appeared, silently handed the two garments to the old man and received the ring in exchange. Strangely, she was still smiling the same warm smile with which she had greeted Sushielia the previous evening.

"Spyders, what spyders?", muttered Yufo.

"The spyders from Marz!"

"Tomie, Alvin", he wheezed, handing them their trackers and putting his hand on Tomie's shoulder, less to reassure Tomie than to support himself. "Remember this: there's some very bad people around. Especially on the lower decks. Just beware. Understand? Some very bad people who do bad things."

The boys nodded mutely.

"Forget the marties – they're all living in luxury in the north – I'm talking about bad

people, here, on our doorsteps. Now put your trackers on and hurry back to school.”

“But...”, Alvin began.

“Just go!”, he commanded, and they went.

\*

The park had grass, trees, clumps of bushes, clusters of daffodils. Squirrels played among the branches; sparrows and robins fluttered to and fro; spiders lurked in wait for unlucky flies; people at leisure strolled in easy twos and threes. The ecological engineers’ need for biomass and biological diversity nicely matched the *Herald’s* human passengers’ need for recreational space.

Tomie and Alvin ambled along the path, making diversions over the scrawny grass when the mood took them. The lamps that blazed forty metres above their heads were too bright to look at directly, like a terrestrial summer sun that had been shattered into fragments and the fragments strung out along the curved ceiling like burning jewels on a necklace ringing the inner curve of the entire gondola.

Tomie was jubilant: “Ye-a-ah, we did it Alv, we did it, we got away with it! You heard what the engineers back there said? I’d like to see FitsJherald’s face now! Get vacuumed out, hairy old spyders from Marz!”

Alvin was more thoughtful: “We should’ve offered to help Dr Yufo tidy up.”

“Naah, that’s his problem!” Tomie gleefully vaulted over a sign saying *KEEP OF DHE GRAS*.

“But he helped us!”

“Listen Alv, when we get back, we gotta have the same story. Okay: we were at the Haafway do in Paris Skwär, we met Dr Yufo, went back with him to his shop, played around with some of his stuff, stayed overnight, woke up late, gave ourselves a bit of a holiday this morning. Too bad we missed school. That’s all. Got it?”

“And then we trashed his shop”, Alvin muttered unhappily, and yawned.

“Leave that out. We didn’t see a thing. That happened after we’d gone.” Tomie touched his hand to a button on his tracker, visible once more in its officially sanctioned place under his unzipped jacket. He tilted his head to one side and spoke quietly and deliberately into a fitted microphone: “Gonzar is back from the races. Mission accomplished!”

Alvin shrugged.

His message complete, Tomie looked up and poked his miserable companion in the ribs. “We did it!”, he exulted. “Hey, lighten up. Think of old FitsJherald having contractions

with fright, stupid old spyder!”

“Supposing they question us?”

“I told you. We both tell Riita-Bleeta the same story. No problemo.”

“Supposing the ofisers come and question Dr Yufo?”

“They won’t.”

“Supposing they ask us details, and we all give different answers?”

Tomie stopped and turned to face him: “Look, Alv, they don’t care about us. We’re erthies, we’re orphans, just nobodies. They’re heroic explorers on a historic mission to the stars. We’re just a bit of biomass in their life-support system. Okay?”

Alvin shrugged, and they continued on their way.

The grassy ground sloped up slightly, buildings were visible between the trees, and they climbed some shallow steps, out of the park and into their home, their native country, their lifelong village community, Star Lunden.

\*

The C-deck street where the Foster Senter was located counted itself as a relatively respectable part of town. Here were shops and restaurants, clubs and offices that deliberately tried to recall a hint of old Erth among the stars. From the interior of one such establishment, the clear voice of a woman from the long-vanished Between Ages, the period of Erth’s greatness before the planets were ever reached, resounded nostalgically between the passers-by and down the street –

*“I’ve looked at love from both sides now,*

*From win and lose, and still somehow,*

*It’s love’s delusions I recall...”*

Alvin pulled Tommy’s arm: “Wait a minute.”

“What?”

“Tomie...”

“What!”

“What you said, about... you know, you said you’d get her to...”

“Get who? Come on, let’s go in.”

“Tomie, I mean... you know... about Elain.” He blushed.

“Elain?” He suddenly laughed. “Don’t you worry about Elain, I’ve got her eating out of my hand, as soon as I say a word to her she’ll fling herself into your arms like a bloody nympho. Alv, you’re a lucky asteroid, you don’t know how good she is! Now let’s go in.”

"Don't forget!", Alvin hissed, and followed him into the Foster Senter.

\*

Several of the orphans were scattered around the common room, immersed in private library study. They did not stay quiet for long.

The moment Slava caught sight of Tomie and Alvin, he let out a whoop: "Woo-oo-oo, look who's here!" Kylie shouted: "The aliens have landed! Take cover everybody, it's the Alfa Sentorians!" While Elain and Looie both started pulling faces and yelling: "I'm Zargon, I'm Zargon!" – "Destroy, destroy!"

Tomie stood grandly in the centre of the room, grinned and bowed to his public, flushed with achievement. But Alvin shifted from one foot to another with embarrassment, trying both to catch Elain's eye and to avoid her glance.

Miesha rushed in from the boys' corridor, Sushuela from the girls' side. Miesha joined in the hubbub with a clenched fist punching the air and a "Nice one, Tomie, you son of a Zargon! That'll put the shits up the spyders!" But Sushuela stopped and stared; her face suddenly crumpled, her eyes filled with tears and she turned and rushed back to her own room.

The noise died down: everyone became aware that Dr Riita had appeared. There was a long, tense silence. Riita's usual motherly smile had become an ominous frown.

"Library study, everyone, please", said Dr Riita severely at last. "Alvin and Tomie, would you come and see me in my room for a minute? Back to work, the rest of you."

She led the two boys to her office.

"Come in Alfa Sentorie", said someone from behind their backs, "we have a problem!", followed by suppressed sniggers.

Dr Riita opened the door to her office: inside could be seen a desk, chairs, and on one of those chairs a rose-suited shape. Alvin was already over the threshold when Tomie shouted, "Look out, it's a trap!", and turned and ran. Alvin froze, torn between alarm and obedience to authority, while Tomie dashed out of the front door.

"Mr Alvin Shakelton?", enquired the pleasant bass of Sixth Ofiser Kat Moodie, rising to his feet. "Congratulations! You've just won first prize: a visit to North Gondola, all expenses paid!"

Alvin blinked, completely taken aback.

"And especially for you, a private, exclusive interview with Chief Ofiser VandenPlaz, the *Herald's* most charming head of security!"

\*

Tomie flung himself out through the Foster Senter's front door and into the street. In the fraction of a second's pause to get his bearings, he noticed a man approach him from one side and a woman from the other, both in an exceedingly businesslike, not to say aggressive, manner.

He twisted, slipped through their grasp and bolted. They were after him in a flash, but he had two metres lead on them, and his first priority was to lengthen that lead. Past shop fronts, workshops, environmental installations and offices they dashed. A pile of boxes containing freshly synthesised fruit stood in the way: Tomie upset the whole stack in the faces of his pursuers and sprinted on while they stumbled and fell. Passers-by were going to and fro; Tomie twisted this way and that between them, tripping some up, shoving aside others, until he was completely out of sight of his pursuers.

"Where is he now?", the woman asked, seemingly talking to herself.

She looked up. "Down to D deck", she told her companion, "approaching a sub-station. Go that way and double back." And he did so, while she chased off in the opposite direction.

They met again outside an enclosure in which huge metal boxes hummed with high-tension electric current. She pointed, he nodded. Almost out of sight, but not quite, Tomie's discarded tracker lay on the ground.

They looked around urgently. No sign of him. Then a slight scuffling sound followed by running footsteps. They were after him in an instant. D deck was clear of obstructions that afternoon, and it was a straight race through the branching and zig-zagging corridors and staircases of Star Lunden's lower decks.

As she ran, the woman panted a running commentary half-aloud: "D deck, approaching stairwell 7... gone past it... going up 6..."

Tomie re-emerged into a busy street, threading his way among the people. Suddenly there was a rose-uniformed figure in front of him. He paused, darted left; the ofiser jumped the same way; he feinted right, lunged left; the ofiser matched both movements and grabbed Tomie as he tried to slip past; both crashed to the floor. By the time the other two had arrived, panting hard, the spyder from Marz had Tomie subdued and handcuffed.

\*

"Why did you do it?", asked VandenPlaz coldly.

She was alone with Alvin in a small, bare room, made even smaller by some storage boxes stacked against one wall and taking up nearly half its floor area. The only furnishings were a table, bare but for an untouched mug of coffee in front of Alvin, and the two chairs on which they were sitting. A spycam watched unblinkingly from a ceiling corner.

Alvin was sitting bolt upright, tense, motionless. VandenPlaz lounged back, tipping her chair on its back legs, produced an inhaler from a breast pocket of her rose uniform, unscrewed it and nibbled reflectively on one end.

"It was a major operation to retrieve Worden 14 and collect all the debris from it, and repair the damage to the hatch. Didn't you know you were trying to dock a type 2 worden to a type 3 port? You've created chaos and confusion and made a mockery of a serious enterprise. *Why did you do it?*"

Alvin turned his head away and said nothing.

"I'm waiting."

Alvin remained silent.

"Are you going to say it wasn't you, it was somebody else?"

Alvin nodded without looking at her.

"Ah, a protestation of innocence! So who else do you think went missing over the crucial period?"

Alvin glanced in her direction.

"Oh yes, we know all about Dr Yufo's Mysterye Shoppe. We're perfectly well aware that when someone seems to be staying there for long, it's an illusion, he's got their tracker vest plugged into a simulator and the real person is wandering around unmonitored. So why not relax and just tell me all about it?"

Alvin said nothing, glanced at her and looked away again as before.

She took the inhaler out of her mouth and gazed critically at the tooth marks on its well-chewed mouthpiece. "Nasty habit, eh?"

Alvin did not respond.

"Well I'm getting a bit fed up with your nasty habit of not answering!", she snapped menacingly. Alvin cringed. She was about to add something more, but suddenly the door opened and in came two men in overalls who made for the stacks of boxes, whistling, and prepared to pick one up.

"Oh, Ms VandenPlaz, we didn't know you were in here."

"What the hell d'you think you're doing?"

"Sorry."

"Oh, get on with it!"

They manoeuvred a large, heavy box out of the door.

“All right, Alvin”, VandenPlaz said angrily when they had left. “This is how it’s going to be. We want to know how you accessed Worden 14, and we want to know why you did it. I’ll be asking Tomie Kapriönie the same questions. If you both confess, you’ll both be punished. If only one of you confesses, the one that spills the beans will be let off with a caution and the other one will be punished twice as severely. Is that clear?”

Alvin looked at her in surprise. A flicker of a smile crossed his face. “And what if neither of us says anything?”, he whispered.

“If neither of you confesses, there’ll be nothing we can do with you. We only have circumstantial evidence against you.”

Alvin nodded: “I need to think about it.”

\*

VandenPlaz held up a notice that proclaimed in bold red lettering: *DU NOT DISTURB – INTEVEU IN PROGRES – VANDENPLAZ*, and hung it on the door of that same bare room, then entered and closed the door behind her.

“Hello, Tomie”, she said.

“Get vacuumed!”, Tomie snarled.

“Have you thought about that offer I made you?”

“No deal. So you better let me go.”

“I can’t let you go yet. I think Alvin has something he wants to tell me about you.”

“No shit!”

“Alvin told me how ashamed he was...” – they stared at each other – “...to be associated with such a childish prank.”

“That’s no joke!”, Tomie blurted out. “It’s a serious message from the aliens, and you’d better listen to what it says, or else!”

“That’s a lie! How dare you say that!”

Tomie, shocked by her sudden outburst of anger, stared at her mutely.

VandenPlaz turned away from him, unscrewed an inhaler, took a deep breath through it, regained an icy calm: “How come you know so much about it?”

“Oh no, you can’t trap me like that! Everybody’s seen the message, everybody with any sense is saying we gotta turn back before it’s too late!” Tomie folded his arms and sat back smugly.

“Really?”

“Yeah. And I know you’re bluffing about Alv, he’s never gonna give anything away, so you’re lost in space, you are.”

“Is that what you think?”

Again that exchanged stare, that contest of wills, marshan against erthie, mature woman against teenage boy, chief ofiser of a city-sized ship against insignificant orphan.

\*

The Captin, VandenPlaz and BekjuRel were conferring together in the majestic if insubstantial expanse of the Contröl Room.

“Praise be to Heraldiena, our protector and guide!”, the Captin intoned. “What luck are you having with our two young interviewees?”

VandenPlaz frowned at him: “They’re neither of them giving much away.”

“No confessions, then?”

“Oh, they’re guilty all right. No doubt about it.”

“Without an explicit confession on record I’ll have to order them to be released. Unless... what did Heraldiena say?”

“She said she was close to a solution of the cosmic field equations one thousand milliseconds *before* the Big Bang, and we must not bother her with trivialities!”

“A profoundly wise answer.”

The third member of the group intervened: “If anyone wants to hear an engineer’s opinion...”

“Yes, Mr BekjuRel?”

“As I’ve already told you before, the engineering evidence is perfectly clear: it can only be them. The recovery of Worden 14 merely confirms what we already deduced. So a confession’s quite irrelevant.”

\*

A view of the street outside the Foster Senter, dissolving into misty indefiniteness at the edges. The beautiful Elain, shyly running her fingers through her long blonde hair, wearing her shortest dress, her eyes and lips sparkling with desire and yet also with doubt.

“Hello”, she says.

Alvin gazes at her.

“Where are you going?”, she asks.

"I need to walk around by myself a bit, think things over."

"Can I come with you? Please, Alvie."

Alvin considers: "Well... so long as you don't distract my train of thought."

"What are you thinking about?"

"You, of course!"

They set off together. She slips her hand into his, and he feels the intimate contact of her warm palm against his own skin.

Elain says: "We were talking about you last night."

"About me?"

"We all decided Tomie would never have managed if you hadn't been there to help him."

"It was nothing. Just common sense."

"You're so clever, Alvie."

They smile at each other.

Elain continues: "I think I'd like to spend some time alone with you. Do you have time for me?" She presses her body closer to his. They are no longer in the street, but in the park, alone under a tree, gazing into each other's eyes.

"If you've got time for me."

"All the time in the world!", she laughs, pressing closer and closer to him. He can almost feel her breath on his face, when...

\*

Alvin was sitting, head bowed in meditation, in a small prison cell. It was as starkly functional as such rooms usually are, without even the essential facility of an intelligent wall. There were voices outside the door. He shook his head angrily and sighed. A lock clicked and the door opened.

Alvin jumped up: "Tomie!"

"Alv!"

A rose-uniformed ofiser stood behind Tomie, pushing him into the cell. "I expect you've got a lot to talk about", he said, "but don't be in any hurry, you'll have a whole annum for catching up, so they say."

"But that's two years!", shouted Tomie.

"One point eight eight years", muttered Alvin.

"Just pray VandenPlaz doesn't get it her way – she'd have the two of you locked away

for good", said the ofiser. "Have a stellar day!" And he locked the door on them.

"Bastard spyders!", yelled Tomie, hammering on the door with his fists. Then a new thought occurred to him and he rounded on Alvin. "You betrayed me!"

Alvin shook his head: "If I betrayed you, why've they locked me up as well?"

"They'll probably let you out tomorrow, and I'll be stuck here for two whole bloody years thanks to you!" He seized Alvin and thrust him roughly against the wall.

"No, Tomie!"

"Well I didn't squeal, so how come I'm locked up? How come? Eh?" And with each question he banged Alvin furiously against the wall.

"Stop it, I'll explain... that's better. They had us in a classical Prisoners' Dilemma. If neither of us talks, we go free. Right?"

"I didn't talk!"

"We go free because they have no hard evidence. But then they found hard evidence. So they don't need our confessions any more. So they simply change the rules and it isn't a dilemma any more: we both confess, we get locked up; we both stay silent, we still get locked up."

"I don't get it."

"Your voice in the recording. They only had to match your voice against the recording to prove it was you. My tracker was with yours at the time, proving that I was helping you. Think about it."

Tomie glanced around anxiously and lowered his voice to a whisper: "But we ran the sound through a scrambler, it's distorted beyond recognition."

"And where did we leave the scrambler?"

Tomie was flummoxed: "Oh, shit!"

"And they could've easily found DNA samples as well."

"But if you knew they'd catch us anyway, why didn't you squeal on me? You must've done!"

"But then I wouldn't be here now!"

"So why didn't you?"

Alvin just looked at him.

"Hey...", Tomie punched him affectionately on the shoulder, "we're in this together, you and me, all the way!"

\*

The Captin and his ofisers were sitting on facing sides of a polished mahogany table in the oak-panelled Execjutiv Conferens Room adjacent to the Contröl Room.

Sixth Ofiser Moodie was speaking: "I've been discussing the whole question of security with Profeser Amazonis. She's published on instability in social networks, and I think she's got some very creative ideas on the subject. I would recommend we bring her in on this meeting."

But the Captin shook his head: "She's a biologist. What does biology have to do with..."

He glanced at his Chief Ofiser for support. VandenPlaz nodded in agreement, and added: "The solution to better security's perfectly simple. I must have more spycams. I want spycams on all stairwells and spycams in all zero-gravity areas and –"

Purser MaknaMara interrupted her: "Now hold your horses right there! What are we doing, turning the *Herald* into a prison camp?"

VandenPlaz gave him a skeptical look; even wearing his normal everyday uniform, or at this moment in time a digitized simulation thereof, the Purser had contrived to embellish his plain rose sleeves and chest with silver braid and sequins. She spoke dryly: "Of course, some of us seem to think we're living in a holiday camp."

Chief Enjhineer BekjuRel poked his spanner in: "My point is, if you install more spycams, you'll need more processing time to sift through the data."

"Yes!", shouted VandenPlaz, "I want more time from Heraldiena, and I want spycams all the way down to the engine bay –"

FitsJherald shouted: "Can we please call this meeting to order!"

VandenPlaz ignored him: "–and I want a modified tracker vest that returns more data–"

"But you can't do that without infringing our passengers' civil liberties –"

"That means we'll have to persuade Heraldiena to spend –"

"– including a microphone to monitor all conversations!"

"Can we please call this meeting to order!"

"– less time on her intellectual hobbies!"

"Have you no conception? A community of free citizens –"

"It's a starship and so –"

"She's right about our vulnerability –"

"– whose human rights –"

"– our vulnerability to sabotage, terrorism, madness –"

"– whose rights must be respected!"

"– and so discipline must be maintained!"

“What kind of a society –? What would the Prezident say to this nightmare world that we’re –?”

There was a loud rapping on the table. They all looked up. At the head of the table were three empty seats; now a dark-suited man stood at one of them and held a paperweight over the table top like a hammer. They exchanged glances and slowly rose to their feet.

The new arrival paused for a moment before saying: “Ofisers of the *Herald ov Intesteler Frendship...*” – he turned to one side – “the Prezident of the Rerezentativ Caunsil!”

The Prezident entered and greeted them in his familiar hoarse voice: “Good afternoon, Captin, Ofisers. You may sit.” Another dark-suited man followed him into the room, and all three seats at the head of the table were filled. There was a general rustling of virtual chairs scraping on virtual marble floor-tiles as everyone resumed their seats at the conference table.

The Prezident smiled vaguely and looked around at them for a moment or two. He glanced at the ceiling and drawled quietly: “Praise be to Heraldiena, etc. etc.”, then addressed his Captin: “Well, Mr FitsJherald, how are the auditions for your grand opera coming along?”

“Very well, Mr Prezident, very well, we’ve got some beautiful voices taking part, some well-known favourites, some new talent. I’m particularly pleased with Elizabeth: a sweet, lyrical soprano, but one with all the power and stamina the role demands.”

VandenPlaz turned to BekjuRel, and in the frustrated contortions of her face a lip-reader might have deciphered the words: “Time-wasting idiots!” The engineer nodded sympathetically.

MaknaMara cleared his throat, and his coloured sequins glinted in the light: “Captin, if we could perhaps...?”

“Of course, of course.”

The Prezident also took the hint: “That sounds wonderful, I’m sure we’re all looking forward to, ah, to a wonderful production. And now there’s this little bit of business we have to settle. I understand you’ve arrested two teenage boys brought along from Erth on the foster care programme, ah...?” – he looked questioningly at MaknaMara.

The Purser was ready with the details: “Alvin Shakelton and Tomie Kapriönie, both from the same Foster Senter in Star Lunden. Kapriönie was officially accepted into the foster programme as a baby before departure. Alvin Shakelton is a curious case: one of the passengers deposited him at the Foster Senter *after* the acceleration out of the Söler Sistem had already begun. It seems that, just as the hatch was being closed, someone threw a newborn baby into the last shuttle carrying people to the *Herald*, and in the chaos and confusion... There was a slip of paper with his name, but otherwise no indication of

parentage.”

The Prezident waved his hand in a dismissive gesture: “So two juvenile delinquents from a backward planet. I understand they’re now being held on suspicion of perpetrating this most regrettable alien hoax? Is that correct? Of course none of us were taken in for one moment...”

“That’s correct”, FitsJherald confirmed.

VandenPlaz objected: “Not quite correct. We have positive proof it was them.”

“And what do you propose to do with them?”

“Lock them up and throw away the key!”, she hissed.

“Isn’t that just a little excessive?”

“Not on a starship. We can thank Olympus they only chose to make a hoax broadcast. But what if they’d decided to prevent us from reaching Alfa Sentorie? Sabotage the main engine, we can’t stop, we whistle straight through the Alfa Sentorie system and out the other side, and go on through interstellar space for untold decades more till our power packs up and we all freeze to death. Nothing could be easier. Mr BekjuRel will tell you how delicate the fusion engine is.” – She glanced at him for support; he nodded. – “As it is these two hooligans left a bag floating around the engine bay, together with other debris from Worden 14; it all had to be accounted for and cleared up. Next time we might not be so lucky. I demand permanent restraint on their freedom of movement!”

MaknaMara could no longer restrain himself: “And I demand the chance to educate them about the consequences of their actions so they can be reformed and readmitted to society!”

BekjuRel spoke up: “And I demand that unauthorised civilians keep out of my engineering spaces!”

The Captin reasserted control: “Please, please, everybody. The decision must rest with the Caunsil, and with the Prezident.”

The Prezident nodded sagely, conferred with first one and then another of his aides in undertones, and said aloud: “There’ll have to be a full public trial, of course.”

The Captin was dismayed: “What? A trial?”

VandenPlaz was more dismayed: “No way. Are you suggesting we advertise the holes in security so every F-deck punk who fancies his chances can amuse himself at our expense?”

The Prezident, taken aback by this challenge, conferred again. Finally he said: “That’s right I’m afraid. As Prezident of the Rerezentativ Caunsil, it’s my duty to see that due process of law is observed.”

BekjuRel had a thought: “Mr Prezident, couldn’t we just, you know, lock them away

somewhere without telling anyone? We could say it's for psychiatric observation, or technical consultations, or –"

The Prezident's face darkened in anger: "Are you suggesting that I connive in their illegal detention?"

"Well, no..."

"Are you asking the Caunsil to sanction lawbreaking and corruption on this ship?"

VandenPlaz finished BekjuRel's thought for him: "Well yes, actually."

"I think I'm duty-bound to report this whole conversation to the full Rerezentativ Caunsil!"

"Because the *Herald's* security is at stake", she urged. "Our lives at stake! Our whole mission! The future of mankind!"

The Captin found a way out: "Please, Patie, Mr Prezident – ha, ha, ha! – we're only tossing hypotheticals round the table here. There's nothing worth reporting outside this room – mere speculations, that's all."

But the Prezident was implacable: "The law demands that either we charge the two adolescents and call a full public trial within seven sols, or we release them!"

VandenPlaz retorted: "Security demands we lock them away for good, and keep the circumstances totally secret!"

They glared irreconcilably at each other across the table.

\*

That same interview room, the same bare table and chairs. But this time a couple of pictures had been hung on the walls, the stark light had been shaded, and the packing boxes curtained off with a cheerfully coloured piece of fabric.

This time both Alvin and Tomie were seated and boggling at the small vase of flowers in front of them and at the unusual sight of a smiling Chief Ofiser VandenPlaz, who said to them: "I've got some good news for you boys. In a few minutes Ofiser Moodie will be here. His orders are to accompany you back to Sauth Gondola and see you return to your home in Star Lunden."

Alvin and Tomie exchanged a glance of disbelieving joy.

"All charges against you have been dropped", she continued.

Tomie's eyes widened: "Yeah! That's clas-sic!" He laughed, punched Alvin playfully. "We made it! You haven't got a thing on us!"

VandenPlaz was unruffled: "We know you carried out the hoax, all right. Alvin's

deductions were perfectly correct.”

Tomie’s face darkened: “Alv doesn’t know what he’s talking about – he’s just making it up to curry favour!”

“Obviously, your conversations together are as good as a full confession. But” – she raised her hands, palms upward, as if releasing a captured bird – “no charges. You’ll soon be free to go.”

Defensiveness still clouded Tomie’s face: “What we were talking about in the cell together was purely hypothetical.”

The Chief Ofiser ignored him, and continued: “There’s just one little point we’ve not yet been able to clear up: where did you leave the space suits?”

Alvin and Tomie exchanged a baffled glance.

“That you used to spacewalk from the worden to the airlock?”

Alvin felt his cheeks blush: “I... I don’t remember where we... we got a bit lost.”

VandenPlaz nodded understandingly: “Never mind, we’ll find them. One last question before you leave. *Why did you do it?*”

Relieved that the missing spacesuits had been passed over lightly, Alvin spoke quickly, before Tomie could think of an answer: “No special reason. Tomie was a bit fed up after failing an astrophysics test, and I just went along for the ride.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, really. We just wanted a bit of fun. Just to celebrate Haafway with a bit of a laugh. We didn’t realise...”

“So just a harmless joke? Letting off steam?”

“Yes, that’s all.”

“I suppose these things happen.”

Alvin nodded.

Tomie, looking more and more agitated, could contain himself no longer: “All right, that was my face behind the mask and my voice, but the message was real, that’s what the aliens wanted me to say, and I said what they told me, and that’s the truth, and you’d better listen to it or else we’re all doomed –!”

“You lie!”, VandenPlaz suddenly shrieked at him, jumping up and advancing towards him, “What gives you the right to show them as hostile, unfeeling monsters –?”

“It’s what they said to me!”

“The aliens are good, they’re kind, they’re going to help mankind –”

“They gotta protect themselves!”

“– help us out of the mess we’ve got ourselves into!”

“They’ve quarantined the whole human race cos we’re too violent, because we go to war!”

“They’re going to save us from war, you little idiot! What are we doing here? The whole point of our mission is to beg the aliens to save us from our own evil, to bring salvation to humanity, an end to suffering...”

She had him by his collar, thrust against the wall, and was shaking him with fury of a kind Alvin had never seen before. As they both paused for breath, there was a knock at the door. She released Tomie. The door opened and Moodie entered the room, glancing, puzzled, at each in turn as VandenPlaz turned her back and stalked out without another word, her fingers fumbling feverishly at her breast pocket.

The door, however, did not close behind her, and Alvin noticed standing in the doorway another woman, silver-haired and of indeterminate age, someone he did not recognise but who clearly knew them, watching with interest.

“Ah... everything under control?”, Moodie asked dubiously.

Tomie straightened his jacket: “Let’s get outa here.”

“Just one more thing before we leave.”

Alvin and Tomie stared at him, nonplussed, still shaking with emotion.

Moodie took something out of his pocket: “You’ve really hit the jackpot this time, lads. See my hand?” He held out his right fist, and they both saw the plain gold ring on his middle finger. “See the ring here? It’s a special ring, we call it an n-ring. All oficers wear them. I’ve got a couple for you here. Take them. Try them on. Middle finger, right hand. Like getting married!”

Tomie was distrustful: “What’s going on?”

“Your n-ring’s going on. In return for your freedom.”

The boys gave him doubtful looks, but put them on.

“Do they fit nicely? A bit tight, perhaps?”

Tomie tugged at his finger: “Hey, what’ve you done? Get it off me!”

Alvin tried to remove his n-ring. It had contracted around his finger, gripping it firmly and refusing to budge.

“You’re a pair of junior oficers now! Welcome aboard!”

Alvin asked seriously: “What have you done to us?”

“We’ve promoted you. Seriously. You won’t need to wear your tracker vests any more. The n-rings tell us all we need to know about where you are, what you’re doing, even what you’re thinking.”

Tomie boggled at him: “No shit...”

“Secondly, you wear them all the time. So we know where you are all the time. Simple. You’ll soon forget you’ve even got them on. And that’s even better than being married!”

Alvin mused: “You’ve married us to Heraldiena.”

“That’s right. You’re now part of the ship’s integrated intelligence, just like the ofisers. Just like me.”

Tomie recovered his venom: “You cunning bastard spyder slime...!”

“Don’t get carried away; we’re all humans on this ship. Shall we go?”

The unknown woman standing at the door smiled at them and stood aside to let them out. Moodie nodded at her: “Nice one, Profeser!”

Alvin and Tomie allowed Moodie to show them out, Tomie muttering continuously: “Bloody slimy martian spyderie puke-faced bastardie ossiferous spyders...”, as he plucked uselessly at his n-ring.

\*

When they walked into the Foster Senter that evening, the first person Alvin and Tomie saw was Sushuela.

“Hey, Sushie!” Tomie advanced towards her manfully, glancing briefly around to check that Dr Riita was not in sight, “Give us a kiss, baby!”

She held out her hand to ward him off: “You had me worried sick, and you nearly got me into major trouble. You owe me, Tomie, you owe me big!”

“So what’s your problem? We’re back safe now. Come on. Let’s go out and I’ll buy you an ice-cream!”

She allowed him to put his arm around her shoulders and escort her to the door, where they bumped into Looie and Slava, just returning from somewhere.

“Hey, Tomie’s back!”

“Tomie, you jammy bugger! Tomie! Tomie...? What’s up?”

Tomie had stopped, frowning, his hand to his forehead as if experiencing a headache. His eyes met Alvin’s, and Alvin heard his hoarse whisper: “It knows... where I am... what I want... what I’m thinking... everything...”

“What is it?”, Slava repeated.

Alvin understood, and when he turned his attention inwards he experienced the same sensation of being watched by a dispassionate machine intelligence vastly greater than his own... Heraldiena!

Tomie took a deliberate breath, shook his head, looked up, his usual self again, grinned

and continued in a slightly strained tone: "Hey guys, we're going up to the caf. You wanna hear what's doing on the north side?"

Looie and Slava attached themselves to him: "Yeah, let's go!"

Tomie turned around: "C'mon, Alv!"

Alvin shook his head shyly. The others left without him.

Alvin waited. The next person to arrive back at the Foster Senter was Epstyn, accompanied by Kylie.

Epstyn was grumpy as per usual: "What're you doing here?"

"They let us out. Eps, have you seen Elain?"

He ignored the question and turned to his room, muttering: "Locked up, let out, big difference! – all prisoners on this convict ship!"

But Kylie responded: "She's just coming. Did they let Tomie out too?"

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

The door opened and in came Elain, Daljhit, Sonja and Miesha, who shouted, "Wo-oo-oo, look who they let out of the asylum!"

Alvin smiled and nodded; his mouth opened to speak but his throat went dry and his mind suddenly blanked out.

Kylie told them, "Tomie's up in the caf."

"Let's go!", they said.

Alvin stepped towards them, racking his brains to string together a meaningful sequence of words: "I could tell you what happened..."

Miesha laughed: "They only let him off because he came top in astro-piss-pots!"

Elain had another theory: "They asked him to confess and he just said, I'll have to, er, um, er, um..."

The others shrieked, "*think about it!*", and bellowed with mocking laughter.

Alvin followed them out of the door, his cheeks burning, forced himself to catch up with Elain and speak cheerfully to her: "Elain, let me buy you an ice-cream..."

"Hey guys", she shouted, "I'm being pursued by an alien from Alfa Sentorie!"

"Urh! Primitive!", said Sonja.

"Watch he doesn't wrap his tentacles round you!", called Miesha.

"Abduction alert!", Daljhit hooted.

Elain caught up with Miesha and flung her arm around his shoulders: "Hey Miesha, wait for me!"

Ignoring Alvin, the group waltzed down the street, laughing and chatting. Alvin remained behind, standing rooted to the spot. Something inside his chest seemed to be

bursting in slow motion, tearing his internal organs apart and splattering wreckage into every corner of his being...

He hardly noticed the urgent questions – first surprised, then alarmed – that arose in his mind yet were not his own thoughts, nor the echo of a pain inflicted on an infinitely sensitive nervous system which, eavesdropping on his, was designed to integrate all relevant data with superhuman intelligence... yet was unable to tolerate the human emotion of teenage despair.

But his eyes widened when he suddenly realised that the tiny gold band wedding him to the ship had slipped from the middle finger of his right hand and was rolling away with a tinkle into the gutter.

---

Stephen Livesey Ashworth, Oxford, UK  
sa@astronist.co.uk / [www.astronist.co.uk](http://www.astronist.co.uk)