

*The first human space station opened by accident. The crew of the U.S.S. Reagan Deep Exploration Vehicle, after a three year journey, eventually killed each other while their ship was orbiting New Beta Proxima IV. (The ship wasn't actually orbiting Beta Proxima IV, but in fact, a star located nearly ninety degrees opposite, however several decedents of the Congressional committee who demanded the probe be named after Reagan decided that renaming the star would be far easier than admitting that the mission had been going in the wrong direction from the start.)*

*The tragedy was just as quickly buried in confidentiality. The "accident" investigation mission arrived several years later, where they docked and set about the six month investigation of the incident. Afterwards, they sent their report back and promptly killed each other. This incident was also cloaked in secrecy.*

*The cycle of general investigation followed by interpersonal slaughter carried on for several cycles until, thanks to a lesser known dimension, a team actually managed to arrive there and back again with only a few minor fatalities, due in large part to the fact that a group of Y'pipians were immensely thankful that someone had set up such a wonderful trading station right at the point where their crews had traditionally had absolutely enough of each other.*

*The Y'pipians decided not to also thank their newly discovered stations creators for also providing all the yummy dried meat snacks inside.*

# Wafflehouse 5

*Wherein the hero embarks in a  
wondrous journey of great  
derring-do, righting wrongs  
fighting foes, and winning  
the admiration of all.*

---

*Naturally, we'll follow none  
of that, and instead focus on  
a couple of guys walking  
around in the background.*

---

**--JR Conlin**

**<http://unitedheroes.net/>**



<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/>

**Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0**

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/) as of Jan, 03 2005

Please don't steal this. You'll just embarrass yourself in front of your fence.

**B**rian Hughes woke up in a different time zone.

Now, this would not be an altogether uncommon experience, provided that he were on some sort of vessel or otherwise willfully transporting himself about. Sadly, at least for Mr. Hughes, this was not the case. Instead, he simply rolled over at the all too familiar drone of his alarm clock, and slapped the snooze button.

Any other servo drone would probably have taken offense at being so brutishly slapped on the head while attempting service the power coupling laying beside Mr. Hughes' bed. Fortunately, this drone simply continued to work on the giga-joule relay and watched idly as a conducting wire fell against the bed's metal frame. The bot merrily clamped onto the opposite polarity feed and sincerely hoped that the lazy sod of a meatling didn't decide to duplicate his previous action.

Fate smiled broadly on Mr. Hughes that day (or possibly night, it was very difficult to tell) and he simply rustled the covers before stretching, sitting up, and taking a rather sudden ten-foot drop to the superstructure support catwalk below.

The wistful mists of morning departed far faster than they had ever managed to do before.

Brian, being your reasonably average and moderately well rounded individual, immediately surveyed his current conditions, and set about a quite vigorous and healthy round of incoherent screaming, occasionally peppering the experience with bursts of obscenity that would have send drill sergeants scrambling for notepaper.

After coming to from his unexpected morning panicking, Brian once again surveyed his surroundings. Had he been a fan of higher quality science fiction, he might have been awestruck by the majesty of the towering conduits and intricately intertwined structures and passages. Had he been interested in architecture, he would have noted that he was located in some part of a vast building or mechanism as the whole structure vibrated with a faint throbbing hum.

Instead, Brian made vague, monkey-like noises.

It wasn't until after he had leapt into the air and started shaking his fist at what he saw that he noticed the somewhat surprised looking individual dressed in a garish orange and yellow jump suit.

"Ooh-ooh, GAAAH!" Brian yelled in surprise and nearly launched himself over the railing.

"Uhm, Me Tycho. You... err.. I'm sorry, but I have no idea who you are." Tycho shifted on his foot a bit ready to slam the door back in place if the screaming loony started foaming.

"Where the Hell am I?" Brian yelled more than asked.

Tycho smiled weakly, "Boise?"

Brian was about to throw a fit, then stopped. "Boise?"

"Have you ever been to Boise?" Tycho asked.

Brian thought about the question. "Well, no." Brian replied, more honest than confused, but not much more.

Tycho smiled broadly, "Ah, then it's definitely Boise."

Brian folded his arms and looked at his current companion. "Tycho? Do you play poker?"

Tycho quite obviously had no idea what "poker" was and shook his head to confirm it.

"Pity." Brian said, "I have a feeling I could use the money."

Tycho smiled in recognition, which quickly faded as he realized he still had no idea what the strange individual had just said.

Brian, having found a bit of happiness in thoroughly confusing Tycho, stretched out a hand. "My name is Brian Hughes. And I still have no idea where I am."

Tycho looked a bit disappointed, "So you don't believe we're in Boise?"

Brian glared.

"How about Sheboygan?"

Brian continued to glare.

"Ok, ok," Tycho relented. "We're in Cleveland."

Brian was an Olympic quality glarer, and was more than happy to continue to demonstrate that.

"No, really, we're on the third moon of BG-90811. Here."

Tycho produced a small digital pad displaying a stylized star map. He pointed to what first appeared to be a broken pixel. The map shifted focus and zoomed in... several times... to the third moon of the fourth planet. "It's just that folks tend to get a bit depressed when they wind up in Cleveland."

"Some things never change."

Tycho laughed, again having no idea what Brian meant.

"So you mind telling me what I'm doing in this paradise?" Brian asked.

"You mean other than trespassing and nearly becoming forty kilos of ash?" Tycho responded sarcastically.

"Trespassing?" Brian sputtered, his mind carefully editing out his brush with death.

"Look all I know is that last night I'm at some damn sales convention in Maple Ridge and this morning I wake up here. For all I know this is some sort of nightmare or a bad canapé."

"It's not." Tycho responded blandly as he typed a series of strokes into the data pad.

"Oh yeah? Why should I believe you?"

"How often do you recognize a nightmare when you're having one?" Tycho asked never looking up at Brian.

Brian stopped, Tycho had a point.

Tycho continued to enter whatever it was he was entering. "Heck, I've had ones where I'm pursued by giant plates of macaroni and cheese, and do you ever think I suddenly stop dodging yellow death to say, 'Gee, this makes no sense. I must be having a nightmare?' Heck no. I keep running."

"Oh yeah?" Brian said defiantly, "well I'm going to wake up from this one!" Brian then set about slapping himself while yelling for himself to wake up. Tycho simply stood by and watched, moderately entertained by the display.

Five minutes later Brian looked far worse for wear. "This... this isn't a nightmare, is it?"

Tycho slowly shook his head.

"I.. I really am on some moon called 'Cleveland', aren't I?"

Tycho slowly nodded.

"Crap." Brian slid down to the floor.

Tycho finished entering data into this touch pad. "Brian, was it?"

Brian nodded "Yep. Brian Hughes."

"Can I ask you what today's date is?"

"How should I know?" Brian snapped back, "I had no idea where I was until you told me."

Tycho apologized politely, "Sorry. I mean if you were still back in your hotel room and just waking up, what day would you expect it to be?"

Brian mumbled, "Shoot, I don't know. I don't have my PDA. Uhm, I think it would be August twenty-something, two thousand and three."

Tycho stopped entering data into his pad. His eyes grew a bit bigger. "Uh-oh..."

---

**F**ar above (and slightly to the left) a dark ship moves through the blackness of space. On board, the events playing out on a less reputable portion of a long ignored moon quietly unfold on a massive screen.

The flickering light does little to penetrate the dimly lit area as shadows of shadows watch with unblinking eyes.

"Has the human arrived yet?" a voice whispers in a rasp just below a cackle.

"We do not know", the only reply.

A sound, not entirely unlike claws pressing deeper into an armrest is heard. "And why

not?"

"Because we can not see the damn instruments."

"Are you suggesting that we rely on the accursed light? We surrender ourselves to it's glaring? We suffer the pains of it's lashing brilliance?"

A moment of silence.

"Well, yes, actually. Look it doesn't have to be that bright, you know, but it would help."

In a cloud of angst, the first voice concedes, "Alright, turn on your precious light."

There is the sound of skittering claws against metal, followed by the sound of a garbage disposal, then brief apologies, then a garage door opening, stopping, then closing, a few more apologies.

Finally a third voice speaks, "I've got one of those little book light thingies. Would that help?"

"Uh, sure." the second voice responds.

Stacks of unknown items are overturned and the names of several alien deities are invoked as otherworldly shins discover long forgotten furniture.

"Look! We're trying to be dark and sinister here and all this fracas simply isn't helping."

"Well it's not my fault Mister Let's Keep The Ship All Dark And Dangerous, You know we could be just as .. FGRAG! my knee! .. as menacing if we simply turned the damn lights on and... sorry! hand slipped, OW! I said I was sorry! ... and referred to each other by number or something. At least turn on the damn light so I can see where you are, Joe."

The darkness ebbed back as a dim light flicked on.

"Thank you."

"Oh, and you'll need to take this, too" Joe said.

"What is it? It looks like a locket or something."

"It was my mother's. That's her portrait on it."

"Uhm, Joe, why did you give me this? I don't really need it."

"Oh, it's the gratuitous cameo."

**"WOULD YOU TWO CUT IT OUT!"** The first voice boomed.

The dim light bobbed quickly back across the bridge, and darted above several black indicators. "Ah, right, they say..."

"Let me guess, they say that the human is there."

"Uhm, well, yes, but how did you know?"

"Because I'm looking at him on the view screen."

"Oh, whaddya know, so he is."

A sigh that could have set a thousand angry ships to sea leaked slowly from the owner of the first voice. "Set a course for Cleveland. We're going after him."

"Uh, yeah, right. Terry? Can I borrow that light back from you?"

---

**"W**ell how the hell do you expect me to react!" Brian yelled as he followed Tycho.

"The day has just begun, and it's already shaping up to be the worst day on human record."

"I believe that Dr. Chousiv would argue with you about that." Tycho replied rather calmly.

"Oh? And who would that be?"

"The first human to prove that black holes were not a gateway to another dimension, and that Einstein was mostly right about the compression of time as one approaches a black hole." Tycho paused. "You get drawn out as part of the singularity, alright, and time slows down, unfortunately, your realization doesn't."

Brian tried to think about that.

"They said they turned off the radio link after fifty years of him screaming. I guess telling him that he had gotten into Guinness didn't cheer him up. "

"Right, so the second worst?"

"So you never heard how the previous record holder got in? I understand that in involved creating the galaxy's first self adjusting underwear, developed from the DNA of something called a 'wolverine'..."

".. OK! OK! Look, I'm having a pretty bad day, alright? And to top it off you suddenly act like I'm about to be eaten by weasels. And then you get all coy about it."

"I'm not being coy, I'm being defensive. There's a very clear difference. Now, I presume you're hungry?"

It was the first rational thing anyone had asked Brian.

He grasped at that thought like a man who hadn't eaten in several millennium. Brian rubbed his stomach "Yes, actually. That would be wonderful."

Tycho opened the door he had stopped next to and walked into a room that confirmed he had previously been very much alone. The room was filled with various cardboard boxes and metal canisters, each a uniform gray. Brian wondered exactly how Tycho could tell the difference between any of the various cartons, until he blew the thick layer of gray dust off of them.

"Well, looks like we've got... uh.. jerky."

"Jerky?"

"Yes, and from the looks of it, quite a bit of it too. Well, dig in and call me when you're done." Tycho headed back toward the door.

"Wait a minute!" Brian exploded. "I'm not about to eat nothing but Jerky. I'm not even sure what sort of jerky it is."

Tycho stopped and brushed dust off of a box near the door. "Hmm.. it doesn't say what sort of jerky it is, although the ingredients do say, 'Contains less than 20% human' There, see? No need to worry. Well, yum-yum!"

"You mean to tell me you eat nothing but jerky?"

Tycho looked both confused and disgusted. "What?, No, of course not."

"Fine, then why in the world would you expect me to eat this?"

Tycho stopped being disgusted and switched to full on confused. "Because this is all we have? Look, I understand you had quite the fad back in your day, involved eating nothing but meat or something. The Catskin diet was it? Sounds dreadful."

"No, it was.. look, that's not what..." Brian didn't want to try and explain the intricacies of a low carb diet, but instead rubbed his forehead trying to clear the more violent thoughts from his mind. "Are you telling me that the only thing you eat is jerky?"

"Who said I eat jerky?" Tycho responded.

"Well, then what do YOU eat?"

Tycho stared at Brian for a few beats before responding. "Let me ask you something. Let's say that you've got a communications relay station located squarely in the upper colon of the universe. If you're lucky, you might get a human being dropping by maybe once every hundred and thirty years or so, and when they do show up, they're usually screaming looney. You only need one person to run the place so you're not going to fork over the sort of money it would take to move a family out there. You've also got to properly train them in multiple advanced technologies so that when things break, whoever you get can repair them quickly, as in less than an hour quickly. Exactly how much would you have to offer in order to entice someone with a multiple doctorate, single, with no chance of developing any disease, willing to work twenty four hours a day, insane enough to be stuck out in literally the middle of nowhere for years on end, and guaranteed not to become a raging psychopath?"

Brian had no idea why Tycho felt it necessary to discuss his pay rate at this time. "Quite a bit, I'd imagine."

"Precisely, eight times what it would cost to manufacture an android you could crate up for delivery, and you get the added bonus of never having to worry about paying the poor miserable bastard." Tycho stated flatly.

Brian smiled at the suggestion. "Yes, yes I bet it probably would be. That's quite ingenious, really. Simply get some dumb robot out there instead of having to worry about some poor shmuck getting stuck out..." The cold realization of this supposition finally made it's way into Brian's active cortex. He stared at the glaring Tycho. "Oh, you mean

you're... but... are you certain?"

"Would it make you feel better if I started every sentence with 'Biddee-Biddee'?" Tycho commented in a less than happy tone.

Brian supposed that he did indeed expect his first encounter with an android to involve significantly more chrome than Tycho seemed to be sporting. Brian figured that it was simply a cost cutting measure. "It might have helped ease the initial shock."

"Fat lot of good it did me when I woke up in the shipping crate."

Brian tried to make sympathetic noises. Instead he sounded like an overdressed, lisping sex dwarf. Tycho decided not to let Brian know that. Mostly because he found it increasingly disturbing that he even knew what a overdressed lisping sex dwarf might sound like.

He had to lay off monitoring *those* channels.

Like it or not, it was food. Brian opened a jerky sack and pulled out a piece. It had a unique flavor, one that Brian desperately tried not to identify. "Foh... whuf dub woob do har?"

"Either swallow, or learn proper Hwarorf." Tycho chided. "And if you were speaking Hwarorf, I'd note that you wouldn't be able to do that without a rotary engine, three carrots and a very well trained monkey."

---

**D**r. Feldman? How goes the program?

Very well, Senator. We're just setting up one of the last candidates now.

Fascinating. So you were able to recover all of them?

Yes, mostly.

Mostly?

We had a bit of trouble with the last candidate, there was a bit of an anomaly with the first attempt we had.

Anomaly? What happened, Doctor?

Yes, a relay failed. We're not certain, but we believe that the time line is unaffected by it. We aborted the sequence once we detected the problem. We've matched readings and detected no abnormalities beyond what we were planning, which is, of course exactly what we predicted.

Doctor. A lot of very powerful people have very high hopes that you are able to pull this little stunt off without any hitch. Are you telling me that there has been a compromise?

No, absolutely not. Our projections said that there was a slight risk of an incident occurring but that it would have no effect on the outcome. The event merely

occurred as projected with it's expected result. Although we cannot accurately state all of the effects of any action we take, nor can we project what minor events will occur, we are still clearly on course as this chart shows.

Spare me the hocus pocus and gobbledy gook, doctor.

As you can see, all of the candidates have been properly collected and are in perfect isolation. Each is currently existing in a programmed environment we've created. For example this individual currently believes that he is busy working on post-graduate papers for his university study.

Wait, you pulled him at that age? You idiot, he hadn't even earned his first doctorate. Hell, man, he's not even won the Shepherd and Duncan yet!

Relax. He knows more now than he does later. Besides, everyone knew that he won the first Nobel mostly on the swimsuit event anyway.

I suppose. Is.. is he supposed to be twitching like that?

He's a post grad, remember?

Ah, yes, right. Doctor, need I again remind you of the importance of what you're working on here? There is no room for error. The fate of our race depends upon what you're working on, and if you succeed, you will be richly rewarded.

It's not the reward I'm concerned about, it's the punishment.

Good. Good, then it's having just the right effect then.

---

**B**rian followed Tycho fully aware of the generally negative effect it was having on Tycho's personality. "Well, as long as I'm going to be stuck here for the foreseeable future," Brian looked at the bag of jerky, "or at least until rickets set in, I thought it might be nice to know what this place does."

Tycho continued to carefully fill in various monitor values into his tablet as he spoke. "Ah, allow me to lie to you and say that Cleveland fills a vital niche in relaying important pan-galactic communications of the highest importance. That every circuit needs to be kept in optimal conditions at all times so that the staggering amount of critical information that passes through this vital conduit not be delayed even a pico-second."

Brian cocked an eyebrow, "So... this... isn't a communications... relay... thing?"

Tycho turned to face Brian with a pleasant face touched with convivial concern, "Oh, no, rest assured that it is. The whole place was built solely for that and it's more than capable of handling half of the current communications needs of the galaxy. Last I heard, there were twenty of these stations carefully placed at key nexus points all over. They only need that many for massive redundancy. Apart from regular maintenance and the occasional meteor strike, they pretty much run themselves."

Brian didn't buy the sudden show of straight-forward honesty. He mulled over the

statement for a moment before asking, "So, what were you going to lie to me about?"

"Oh, that would be the whole 'really bloody important communications' crap that they wrote at the bottom of the packaging slip. Turns out all that they route through here are billing requests and bulk rate marketing statements. Dreadfully boring stuff, really." Tycho turned back to the monitors.

"Ah." Brian said feeling increasingly more useless.

"Yes, mostly I just use the systems to route porn, run blackmail rings, and break into government systems." Tycho finished his monitoring and pointed down the hallway. "Care to watch?"

---

**T**his is insane. You realize that the captain isn't right in the thorax, don't you?

Is that treason I hear?

I'll choose, 'Yes'.

Oh, sorry, I wasn't sure. Look, we were born and trained in the arts of infiltration and have pledged our lives to gather information for the collective.

Hey, now, look, don't get me wrong. I love gathering information. Hey, who was the guy that tipped you off about all the info stored in that pile of abandoned file cabinets back on 83742.1223M?

You did, Dave.

And who let you look at what I had gathered from those same file cabinets so we could put together a highly detailed report comparing and contrasting the results?

You again, Dave.

And who had you give the final reports, ones that filled nearly five crystals I'd add, to that fresh faced spawn so that he could be blown to atoms for handing the captain several billion pages worth of information about the snack food habits of a long dead race instead of telling him about the automatic plasma breech gun that took out half of his fleet?

\*sigh\* Ok, you made your point.

Darn tootin'. Still even though we love gathering info doesn't mean that I don't consider the old guy a raging nut job for having us waste time monitoring this meat-sack.

Yeah, but you know how touchy he is about that sort of thing.

Eh, whatever. Look do we even have any good idea why we're tailing this bag of protein?

No, of course not. We're just scouts. They never tell us anything. Ooh, looks like he just ate another piece of.. what was it called again?

Jerky, I think. He must really like it. See how his face scrunches up into that smile?

So, they must gag with delight?

S'far as I can guess.

Ok, great. 'Can be lured into dry heaves of pleasure with spiced dried meat products.' Check.

Can we go now? I wanna go recatalog the phone numbers for the gamma quadrant again.

C'mon Dave. Business before pleasure. Our mission is to stay and monitor this human, and that's exactly what we're going to do.

You never let me have any fun.

Ok, look, what if I were to tell you that according to the projected probability tables, this being holds the key to the next Contest.

Seriously? Him? Dave, have you been not looking at mind numbing interest assessment tables for hours on end again?

I am serious, Dave. He really may determine the outcome. I'm guessing that's the reason that we're here. We need to watch and see how or what he'll do.

Huh, I guess that makes us pretty critical then.

Yep, as soon as there's even the slightest edge we can use against these humans, we'll be the first to know.

Hey! You're right! Wow! I feel better about this spoor of an assignment already! Thanks, Dave!

Yep, granted, I'd be even happier if the captain had told us to report it back to him, but I'm sure he has his reasons.

The captain works in mysterious ways.

No. No, I'm pretty sure it's mostly just bipolar.

Yeah. Definitely bipolar. Looks like this guy is getting another hit of convulsive joy.

Looks more like a seizure, Dave.

I dunno. I think he's still chewing.

---

**S**o, what was that 'uh-oh' thing about back then?" Brian asked.

"You know that when I first arrived, we had years and years of instant macaroni and cheese as well." Tycho announced.

"You did?" Brian replied "What happened to it all?"

"Trust me, you simply don't want to know. Bloody awful mess. Did I mention that I had no idea that I wasn't supposed to eat that sort of stuff? It would have been very nice if the

folks that had shipped me out here bothered to include a stupid user manual."

Brian couldn't resist the straight line. "I'm guessing they didn't want to bother with sending a smart user manual. Look fascinating as that may be, I can't help but think you're avoiding the question."

Tycho huffed his indignity. "Nothing of the sort, I'm merely making conversation. I have every intention of answering your question about how to survive the cybernetic rats that prowl the station looking to dine on human flesh."

"The what?" Brian glanced about him.

"Yes, nasty little beasts that live only on the still warm human flesh. They sneak out of nowhere using they're hyper-flommigators and deframmel you, slowly and quite painfully."

Brian went back to glaring. "You're making that up."

Tycho paused. "Possibly."

Brian chortled under his breath. "I knew it. It costs \$50 to flommigate a printer. And a Frammel is the thing that wears out in your software and makes you have to buy the upgrade at twice the price. My IT engineer explained everything to me." Brian looked a bit uncomfortable, "Well, once I paid him. So you're again trying to avoid answering my question."

Tycho sighed. He looked at Brian like a beaten man, he rubbed his eyes trying to clear his mind to find the right words to tell Brian his answer. "Very well. Cheetah."

"What? Tarzan's monkey?"

"No, you idiot!" Tycho railed back, "Just the fourteenth fastest land animal. Right behind the cow! Didn't you learn anything back in school? I can't believe the sorry state of education in your day. Sad. Very, very sad. "

Brian ignored the insults. "The cow?"

Tycho raised his eyebrows. "Oh, yeah, that's right. That was before they introduced the genetically altered version that had gave out espresso."

"You're still evading the question." Brian stated.

"Fine. I'll answer your stupid question. What was it again?"

Brian froze. He couldn't remember. He tried to brush away the cheetah, flesh eating cybernetic rats, bowls of macaroni and cheese that had suddenly taken up residence in his head to try and remember what it was that he wanted an answer to. Mostly he felt that he had to ask quickly or else he'd never hear the end of it from Tycho.

Bathroom? No, although certainly that will come in handy in a while, he felt little pressing need at the moment.

Something to drink? Again, this would also be highly useful, considering the amount of salty, peppered jerky he'd spent the better part of the morning chewing down.

No, Brian was quite sure that it was somehow directly related to him being here now. Yes, that had to be it. Tycho was going to tell him why he was here. Brian knew that he'd remember the answer if he put his mind to it.

Brian looked Tycho squarely in the eye drew a deep breath and never got the chance to ask, "Why did you say 'uh-oh' earlier?"

Brian never got the chance because another voice asked first.

"What? No, I.. " Brian stammered, annoyed at the unusual interruption.

Tycho threw his arms up and yelled "Did a freaking bus stop by? Who else is here?"

"Way to go, Dave. Just blurt out, whydoncha?" A second as yet unaccounted for voice chided.

"Well, it's not like he'd remember. The guy is an idiot." the first voice grumbled back.

"Hey!" Brian replied angrily, at both the comment and Tycho shoving his way past to look among the various shelves behind Brian.

"Dave-ay, We're-ay supposed-ay to-ay be-ay hiding-HEY!"

Tycho pulled two black spidery looking items from behind the shelves. They were about the same size as Tycho's own hands and the legs thrashed about trying to escape his grasp. If it weren't for the various extra pointy bits that appeared to serve no purpose other than decoration and interfering with their escape, they might well have. Eventually they both quit struggling and the legs dangled limply albeit with a certain annoyed tone to them.

"What? What are those things?" Brian stammered.

"These are Shade Scouts." Tycho said angrily. "Alright," he addressed the two crabs. "What were you two spying on?"

"I'm offended at the use of that term." one of the crabs grumbled.

"I'm offended by your lack of Pig Latin skill, now talk."

"Never!", the other crab declared.

"Here," Tycho jabbed one of the crabs in front of Brian. "Take this."

"What?" Brian said, his lingering fear of spiders getting the worst of him. "No, what happens if that thing bites me or spits venom."

"The warrior versions are the size of this room and weigh several tons. This is built for stealth. Just take it, will you."

Brian carefully grabbed the crab. It clattered noisily and ineffectively. "And don't let go," Tycho told Brian before releasing his own hold. "The fall will probably bust it into several million pieces." The crab fell silent.

"If you read most of the official literature about these things, you'd know that these things are the perfect espionage agent. They're capable of storing vast libraries of data, breaking

into even the most secure systems and infiltrating anywhere using any possible point of entry." Tycho stated with a bland note of respect.

"Oh yeah", the crab boasted, "We bad."

"Of course, that's all a load of crap written up by the Shades. Mostly they're cobbled together out of parts the Shades find on auction and those 'Free after rebate' sites."

Tycho fished through the shelves until he located a short cable. As he walked over to a nearby console, he continued to talk. "Ah, there we go." Tycho plugged the cable into a port near the back of the crab. From the looks of it, the crab wasn't quite expecting that. Then it "dinged", and the legs went straight out. Tycho casually tossed it onto a flat surface and went about typing and touching controls. "Let's see now. What should we go for? Ah, perfect!" He pressed a few more keys and the crab dinged a second time.

Then it stood up. Brian felt his body tense, not certain what to expect.

Tycho leaned back against the console, reached over and pressed the center of the Crab.

It started to sing.

"Oh, You can dance, you can jive, having the time of your life,

*(I hate you)*

See that girl, watch that scene, diggin' the Dancing Queen...

*(I really hate you) "*

It was singing rather poorly, and off key as well. Fortunately it was also starting to dance in a airy, and equally annoyed manner.

"They bought up a ton of Karaoke Kompanions. Supposedly you could get one if you liked Karaoke, but were too shy to get on the stage. He reached over and pressed another control on the crab to mostly mute it. It continued to dance anyway. "What's even better is that you could get a hacked version of the software that locked it into one song forever. Well, at least until the batteries run out. Here watch." He grabbed the crab and pressed three controls. It went limp.

"That should have put it to sleep for the night." He put the crab back on the counter and started counting down from five.

"Anybody could be that guyyyyy,

*(I'm going to kill you in your sleep)*

Night is young and the music's... hiiiiigh...

*(no death is too good for you)*

With a bit of rock music, everyth--"

Tycho muted it again.

"It doesn't seem to be very happy." Brian noted.

Tycho watched it silently pirouette, "No, no it wouldn't be. They were particularly popular with Abba fans." He pushed off the counter and bent over to address the now quivering crab in Brian's hand. "Now, either you tell me what you're doing here or else I download the Original Broadway production of Mama Mia."

The crab buzzed. No, not quite buzzed, it was simply shaking that bad. It's eyes darted from Tycho to it's companion and back again.

"Gah!" It screamed, "You win! Look, we're here to monitor the human who we presumed was brought here for the IntraGalactic Governance Challenge that we first found out when you intercepted and decoded that message last year right before you downloaded that Fembots Gone Wild marathon using the credit numbers you stole from the church and posted to your murrph--" Tycho slapped a hand over the robot's mouth. "Ah, right, this one must just be on the blink then."

"Wait!" Brian said, suddenly remembering what it was that he was trying to get Tycho to answer. "What's this about me being here?"

"Oh, you were probably brought forward in time to try and help Humans win the IGC.", the crab replied. "The IGC is how the last supreme race has decided to pass on it's right of governance for the next 100,000 years. Nobody is really sure what the final challenge will be, but the current rumor is that it will consist of a ser-ies of ques-tions."

The pauses in the crab's frantic explanations were probably due to Tycho whacking at it with his hand. Brian swung the crab away from Tycho's assault.

"Don't tell me you actually believe that thing!" Tycho demanded.

"He's giving me more information than you have." Brian replied. Brian asked the crab the next question. "Why me? Why here?"

"The humans are probably trying to hedge their bet by cheating and so their bringing forward all of your species greatest thinkers, scientists and philosophers. It's what we would do. I'd also speculate that they're bringing forward folks at times when they're most "available" potentially before they've made whatever great discovery propelled them into the spotlight and they were far more difficult to acquire. Actually, that may explain the various flashes of brilliance your species has had."

"Tycho, stop it!" Brian said as he tried to keep himself between Tycho and the suddenly very helpful crab.

"As for why you're here instead of with the other geniuses, I can only guess there must have been some sort of malfunction. Possibly it may have occurred when Tycho tried to patch into--"

The crab went silent as Tycho finally managed to hit the right control.

"Bloody Hell!" Brian screamed, "Why did you do that!?"

"Need I remind you that you're holding an alien spybot intent on ruining the plans for humanity?"

"Yes, the same humanity that decided to chuck you into a crate and ship you here for all eternity and yank me out of my time without even asking nicely first. That humanity I presume?"

"Well... yes."

"Turn this thing back on. I have a few more questions I want to ask it."

Tycho paused, then hit a control on the bottom.

**"NO ABBA! PLEASE, MAKER, NO--"**

"Calm Down!" Brian commanded. "You're quite alright for now. I need to ask you a few more questions, and if things go well, maybe we'll even fix your friend. Ok?"

"Uh, sure." The crab answered, still obviously very nervous about things.

"When is this contest?" Brian asked.

"About fifteen and a half megaseconds."

Brian looked to Tycho for help.

"Six months or so. About the only time thing folks could agree on was what a second was, measuring time is pretty easy, but don't ask what time it is. There are still a few wars going on about Daylight Savings Time."

"Ah, fine, six months, then. So where will this contest be held?"

The crab rambled out a long stream of numbers, Tycho entered it in. "Perfect", he sighed, "it's in the Jelva system."

"Is that bad?" Brian asked.

"No, it just means that you'll be gallivanting off to the center of known civilization while I molder here on the ugly side of this festering boil on the buttocks of the galaxy. Sure, you can go chase after your dreams while I have to stay here and ensure that this stinking, rusted lump of metal keeps working. Fine, I don't need you. I've done quite well for myself with absolutely no interaction with the outside world except when I place replacement parts orders with that miserable cuss of a delivery ship. I'll just stay right here, thank you very much, here to rot away in quiet solitude counting the days until a gamma ray burst vaporizes the sector."

"What? What ever gives you that idea?" Brian said in surprise. "Look, I rather like it here. It's nice and quiet, I've got lots of jerky to eat and maybe I can even help you out. The very last thing I want to do is leave this delightful reprieve. No more stressful living, no more wasting my life trying to perpetuate my DNA. Why this is a communications relay station, that means I've got probably the biggest porn collection ever, right? Heck, why would any red blooded human male ever want to leave?"

Brian smiled warmly, "So, tell you what? Let's get you two fixed up and maybe we'll find a nice data relay you can siphon. Does that sound good?"

"Do.. Do you have any phone numbers?" The spider bot asked tentatively.

"How about every phone number ever assigned, with address, tenure of assignment and credit record?" Tycho offered.

"Why, that'd be GREAT!" the crab wiggled it's legs in excitement.

"Right, so let's get started then. Tycho why don't you see about fixing these fellows up.

I'm guessing you may need to get some information from this one to fix up the other. May even require you turning them off for a few seconds, right?"

"Huh?" Tycho blinked before he caught on to the idea. "Oh, right, sure thing." He set about resetting the two crabs, freezing the first in the middle of a particularly interesting break dance move."

"Are they off?" Brian asked when both fell silent.

"Well, they're in standby. It'll take a few minutes to reset this one."

"Good, patch them into some random number generator after you're done. That should give us enough time."

"Enough time for what?" Tycho asked, again, feeling oddly dim.

Brian blinked before he answered, "Uhm, leave..."

"And go where?"

Brian blinked twice. "Oh, I don't know, how about that Intergalactic Contest thingy that I was summoned through time to win."

"Leave?" Tycho said, with a mix of horror and surprise. "But I thought you were going to stay here!"

"You're joking right? Look, I only told that crab thing that so it would throw off whoever sent it. I saw them do something like that in a movie once."

For being an android, and in theory free of things like blood to boil, Tycho did a marvelous job of emulating it. "You lying worthless lump! You're going to leave me here, aren't you!?"

"Nothing of the sort. Look, do you really think I'd last five minutes out there on my own? I need your help."

If anything, Tycho got even angrier. "And what makes you think I can just drop everything and leave? Look, in case it somehow failed to make it deep enough into the meat between your ears, I'm the only thing keeping this station running. Without me, this place would go to pot in a month, and would bring down the comms net with it. We'd be destroying all advanced civilization! I can't simply leave a note saying, 'Sorry, gone on Holiday! Back soon! Kisses!' and join you skipping across the void! Are you really so dense as to think that?"

Brian held up a hand and waited for Tycho to finish screaming his outrage. "Tycho, what sorts of parts do you order?"

"What sort of parts? All sorts of parts! I'm responsible for everything on this station from the smallest screw to the primary core generator. Here, look, here's the parts that have blown since you showed up, and it's already several thousand items."

"So, what you're saying is that you've the authority to order any replacement part this station needs, right?"

"Yes, you monkey, it does. There's no budget or checks since they simply don't have time to doubt me. That's why they put me here."

"Yes, yes it is. So order a replacement."

"A replacement?" Tycho screamed back, "A REPLACEMENT!?" He froze, suddenly realizing that he was just as much a functioning part of the station as the previously mentioned screw and primary core reactor, and as such, should be replaceable." His face shifted from intense fury to a sort of twisted confusion. He typed a few strokes into his tablet and scanned the inventory. Then he put his head back and screamed. He walked over to a bulkhead wall and began slamming his head against it.

"One *KLANK* Hundred *KLANK* and *KLANK* thirty *KLANK* years! *KLANK* ONE *KLANK* HUNDRED *KLANK* AND *KLANK* THIRTY *KLANK* BLOODY *KLANK* YEARS!!"

"See? That's why I'm the genius." Brian said.

---

**"Y**ou're the genius, you figure it out, now, breath out", Tycho pressed his knee against Brian's stomach and tightened the pastel pink environmental suit's belt.

"You're telling me that the best people for maintaining distant space communication arrays are apparently very small women?" Brian groaned.

"Yes, it's the natural role of seventeen year old, fashion conscious girls is the horrid desolation of a grimy, festering pile of orbiting ozone. Brilliant, stunningly brilliant!", Tycho said with altogether too much amazement.

"No you suffering git!" The acid returned to Tycho's voice, "These places were manned by families, remember? This was left over when one of them finally left. Look, aside from the fit and color choice, this is a very well made suit, triple sealed rebreather, liquisteel interior, retro-fashion forward pining and 18 hour support that both lifts and separates."

Brian tried to adjust the snigger portions, "Sorry but I can't help but notice the part that seems to be very intent on the opposite."

"Oh, don't worry about that." Tycho said casually as he continued to close seals. "That will be the last thing on your mind once the suite is pressurized. Now give me your hand."

Brian hesitated, something had poked his arm. "Wait, there's something stuck in the sleeve...". He carefully fished around and pulled out a lace band fitted with what appeared to be a crumbling silk rose. The petals blackened with age. "It's a corsage?"

"Possibly." Tycho said leaning over and poking it harshly with a finger, sending clouds of dust billowing, "It would certainly explain the daring décolletage."

Suddenly a great many mysteries about the suit were resolved. None of which were what Brian had wanted, "This.. This is a prom dress, isn't it?" Tycho nodded pleasantly, the

slight curl of his lip indicating that he knew very well what it was from the start. "Perfect," Brian groaned, "thankfully everyone I know is dead." Brian slacked his shoulders and hung his head, steeping in his own overwhelming black pool of embarrassment that was highlighted by a sudden flash, "Gah! what was that?"

"Oh, nothing." Tycho said as he examined the captured image, "Now, could you turn your hip a bit more to the left and pout?"

Brian did not. He simply glared at Tycho, who continued to take various pictures of Brian. "I can't wait to get on that shuttle and talk," Brian said calmly, "really get to learn more about you, you know, what makes you tick. So I can stuff a wrench into it."

Tycho stopped and smiled warmly, "Oh, you're very sweet, Brian, but I'm still going to insist we go dutch on dinner, and Dad says we have to be back by 10."

Brian snatched the glove from the bench and began squeezing his hand into it. "So when will this rumored supply ship be showing up?"

"Within the next thirty minutes or so. You know if you really like I might be able to find a different suit for you. It might be a bit tighter though, but they all come with their own diaper attachment."

Brian said nothing as he closed the seal on his glove. "What about you?" Brian asked.

"Me?" Tycho asked, "Well, the regulations don't really say anything about androids requiring suits, considering that we're able to handle the whole lack of breathable atmosphere somewhat better than you meaties, but I might as well put on my Sunday best as well." Tycho opened a hatch in the wall and quickly slid in. Moments later a section of what Brian had presumed was the wall turned and faced him. The suit was impressively large and obviously well suited for exterior maintenance.

A massive arm pointed toward Brian's helmet. Brian picked it up and after a few fumbled attempts, managed to seal it as the suit pressurized and came to life.

Tycho was right, the mild discomfort in Brian's crotch was quickly replaced by severe discomfort in a great many other locations.

"--simpering git can't even fasten his. Oh, Hi Brian." Tycho's voice crackled over the suit's intercom.

"Hurrgh!" Brian barely managed to utter.

"Ah yes, see? That's why I told you not to worry about the fit when it was loose. My you look simply lovely tonight."

"Hurfl!"

"Yes, granted if we'd had more time, I could have taught you how to pilot one of these maintenance suits, They're awfully roomy, but they don't take corners all that well. Funny thing, there's bays here for fifty of these suits, yet there are only a few left."

"Urk!"

There was a chime sound followed by a deep, resonating clang. "Ah, that would be our

ride." Tycho chirped.

The access doors cycled. They were easily the size of small buildings, yet they slid aside in a matter of seconds as a small army of crates and boxes rolled out into the previously empty hangar.

"Ey Tycho!" a strange voice spoke through the coms. "You've got company!"

"Rebo!" Tycho replied warmly. "Yes, you wouldn't believe how well we're getting along. I thought I might take her out and show her the universe for a while."

"Yeah, I figured when I got the replacement order. Only took you seventy years longer than normal to figure out that trick."

Even from inside the featureless suit, Brian could tell that Tycho's mood had turned several hundred shades darker. "Right."

"And what is it with you C.O.C.-E.D units always taking the Maint suits. You're going to run out eventually, you know. Well, there's your replacement." the voice said as a coffin-like box rolled out. "You want me to activate him now?"

"What?" Tycho said indignantly, "And give him a head start? Come on Brian, let's go."

"Urg."

Brian hobbled toward the open ship after Tycho. He desperately wanted to leave a message for Tycho's replacement, then realized that if he did, he would have to bend over to do it.

And that simply wasn't going to happen.

---

**T**he first human space station opened by accident. The crew of the U.S.S. Reagan Deep Exploration Vehicle, after a three year journey, eventually killed each other while their ship was orbiting New Beta Proxima IV. (The ship wasn't actually orbiting Beta Proxima IV, but in fact, a star located nearly ninety degrees opposite, however several decedents of the Congressional committee who demanded the probe be named after Reagan decided that renaming the star would be far easier than admitting that the mission had been going in the wrong direction from the start.)

The tragedy was just as quickly buried in confidentiality. The "accident" investigation mission arrived several years later, where they docked and set about the six month investigation of the incident. Afterwards, they sent their report back and promptly killed each other. This incident was also cloaked in secrecy.

The cycle of general investigation followed by interpersonal slaughter carried on for several cycles until, thanks to a lesser known dimension, a team actually managed to arrive there and back again with only a few minor fatalities, due in large part to the fact that a group of Y'pipians were immensely thankful that someone had set up such a wonderful trading station right at the point where their crews had traditionally had

absolutely enough of each other.

The Y'pipians decided not to also thank their newly discovered stations creators for also providing all the yummy dried meat snacks inside.

War was neatly avoided when, after contentious debate, the ceremonial head of the deep space exploration program, a G. R. W. Cheney-Bush XVII, pointed out that the dad-burned aliens were probably the strategerists behind the mass-suicidalizing that has plagerized the deep explorerationing effort so far.

Sadly, this slip counteracted the very long standing administration policy that the missing explorers had simply stopped off for donuts on the way home and ooh, isn't that a new episode of Buddies on the holo? In a rather surprising turn of events, several months later most of that administration bravely joined a deep space exploration program to discover Old Beta Proxima VII, but apparently decided to stop off for donuts on the way.

The reports filed all indicated one thing, stuffing a bunch of folks on a spaceship for that long without a rest stop is not advised.

The initial station was created to serve as a political and trade outpost featuring cross cultural museums and vast arrays of the finest literature the planet could produce. In other words, it was immensely dull place built by folks who never stepped foot in space and were trying to convince various races that their particular planet was far better than it really was. How anyone would recoup the several hundred billions required to build the station was a time honored question left for future generations.

The following crew, being both a future generation and far smarter than the original designers at home, spent the first three days taking lots of pictures of themselves enjoying the many original amenities. Several painted themselves various colors and glued false eyes onto random locations in an attempt to look sufficiently alien. They sent those pictures back home to the delight of the various committees providing funding for that year and then chucked it all and unloaded the porn. The station was a roaring success. The original crew later went on to buy their own stations (yeah, did I mention that it was successful?)

Eventually, the high minded goals of the initial developers were quietly pushed aside, mostly by the tremendous wash of money from various trade deals. The original crew realized that while certainly lucrative, it was hard to talk about how you sold porno to aliens with Mom at the Thanksgiving table. So they went for the even lower common denominator.

"Now approaching Twin Pines Space Center, a StarGate Shopping Base." the chipper female voice beamed through the speaker, she prattled on about various stores and offers fully intent on being heard only as background noise to other conversations.

Unfortunately, neither Brian or Tycho were feeling very conversational, and her occasional murmured "spend more" and "buy two, they're not on sale" were not quite as subliminal as the original designers had hoped.

"You seem oddly complacent." Tycho noted his companion's demeanor. Brian, continued to make "adjustments" to his suit, rendering it from blood restricting to merely intensely

uncomfortable. He embarked on his tailoring endeavors once he determined that not only was the vessel they were traveling in properly pressurized, but that he had split several of the seams an hour into the flight.

Thanks to several sharper edges in the washroom, Brian had managed to transform his space-worthy designer suit into a hot pink set of bike cutoffs and a poorly fitting T-top. He looked like a 31st century renegade from the Village People, but at least he could feel his legs.

Brian looked up, "Complacent? No. But I'm not very surprised that we're orbiting a mall either, in fact I think it's pretty natural. About the only thing I would find unusual would be not finding a food court featuring 700 varieties of deep fried bland delicacies located just across the way from a slightly used granny shop."

"Good As New Grannies, ring five, sector twelve, B1029" the female voice offered helpfully before continuing her slightly subliminal drone. Brian simply smiled and held his hand toward the speaker.

"Tycho", Rebo's disembodied voice filled the compartment, "I'm going to dump you and your date off at the next portal. You two be good kids and never call me if you get into trouble. Actually, I take that back. Go ahead and call me. I'll need something to cheer me up on the long trips and playing your pleading voice again and again is bound to give me the giggles. Oh, and leave the hardware, Tycho. You'll never make it through the doorway."

Tycho didn't respond since he was busily loading pockets with various devices, including several that were obviously never intended to be removed. There was a dull thud and the airlock cycled green. Tycho keyed in the opening sequence into the hatch-pad before removing that as well.

"I can tell you're an engineer", Brian said as he watched his cohort's larceny, "you're certainly thorough." Tycho smiled at the compliment before walking into the mall's airlock.

---

**T**he station was huge on the inside, filled with the lights, sounds and bored looking sample drones of commerce. Various, often indefinable, species roamed the escalators and passageways loaded with equally indefinable packages emblazoned with bright logos. To Brian's mild amusement, he noted that they were often needlessly large. He also noted that no matter what he described, it held true for both the customers as well as what they were carrying.

"That's the worst part about going to a station," Tycho noted as he scanned the monumental store index, "every one you go to looks the same."

Brian raised an eyebrow, "How many stations have you been in?"

"One, if you count this one", Tycho replied. He turned to Brian and asked, "so, now what,

Mr. Genius?"

"Brian stared at the index waiting for inspiration to strike. Sadly, inspiration was not to be found in the Grilyxian text, or in the uncomfortable binding sensation that was again setting into his crotch. He decided to go shopping instead. "So, where's the nearest Old Navy?"

Tycho tapped the blue and white speckled circle and the index switched to English. A few more taps and a strobing circle illuminated a very large shop located near one of the ends of the station. Typical spot for an anchor store.

"Looks like we're in luck." Tycho noted, "So how do you plan on paying?"

Brian finally realized that his wallet currently resided several hundred years away, both in time and space. Well, time at the very least since he was equally confident that someone got a rather nice tip a millennium ago. To his surprise, Brian didn't get in touch with his inner simian, but instead actually remembered possibly one of the oldest, and most abused time travel clichés on record. He smiled broadly, "Alright then, side trip. Where's there a bank?"

---

**T**his is ludicrous.

I told you we should have taken the elevator, but no, Mr. 'I haven't worked out in a thousand years' has to take the stairs.

Ok, fine, Tycho, next time we'll take the express elevator. The one marked "South Landing Bay Only" that you seemed to believe would magically take us to the east ring.

Did you stop to consider that there might be additional elevators located in the Landing Bay that just may have taken us there?

...

Well, the fate of humanity is surely secure resting in your vast cranium, there's absolutely no threat of anything bumping into it.

Fine. Ugh, I knew I shouldn't have had that last Meat Toobz.

Yes, I was wondering why you decided to try their new calamari flavor. That sample drone certainly seemed happy to be rid of them. Probably had been holding them for months.

They weren't jerky.

Neither were the hand dipped soft pretzel pups, the kiwi and koala Mrs. Fizzy, the bako-bit banana, four variously flavored biscuits, and the monkeymallow milky you had before that.

Go suck a light socket. How much further to the bank?

That should be up ahead. I'll warn you that if you're planning on using me as a

getaway vehicle, my top speed is suitably less than the plasma discharges the guards will be firing with impunity.

How much less?

If I'm lucky, you'll be absorbing the bulk of it.

I'd remind you that I wasn't the one sucking wind on the eightieth stairway. Still, as much as I'd love to witness your demise just before my own, that won't be necessary, What I have in mind will require absolutely no exertion on either of our parts. I'll be out shortly. Why don't you go chat up a nice ATM?

Sweet Maker, no thank you. Sure, they're nice enough at first, but then they lose interest.

Well, whatever. I'll be back in a few.

---

**T**ychos disconnected his console from the stations Comms channel moments before he heard Brian's chipper voice. "See Tycho, I told you I wouldn't be long."

"You certainly look peppy." Tycho observed.

Brian gracefully fumbled with a small rectangle like a pretty, new bauble. "Rightly so, thanks to a quick DNA scan, a remembered social security number, and many, many years of compound interest in a 401k."

"Wonderful!" Tycho smiled warmly, "So how much do we have?"

If Brian heard the sudden declaration of partnership, he didn't let on. "About a hundred and forty-nine credits. Apparently, I need to have a few stern words with my financial advisor...", Brian thought about that for a moment, "...s ancestors.", he added.

Tycho actually felt his schemes of wealthy exorbitance evaporate. It was not a very comfy feeling.

"Fortunately," Brian continued once Tycho's jaw had dropped sufficiently, "it was more than enough to secure me a very nice credit line." He showed the credit chip to Tycho.

Tycho puzzled over the name, "Gustav P. Hughes? I thought your name was Brian."

"It is. I wasn't dumb enough to get a credit card with no financial backing using my own name. I used my Gran'dad's. I'm even having the invoices sent to his address."

Tycho sat, staring at his companion. He wasn't quite sure what to make of the situation. Dumb? Oh quite possibly it was the dumbest thing he had ever imagined, yet somehow Brian had managed to pull it off without a hitch, very impressive. That wasn't what was bothering him, however. "You...", Tycho stammered, "you travelled through time and billed your Grandfather?"

"Yep", Brian beamed.

"I'm not quite sure, but if the entire financial industry suddenly disappears in a puff of paradox because of this, I'll certainly know who to blame."

---

**F**or the history of literature, meetings such as these are nearly always held in the shadows. Secretive kings confer with their current assassins of choice in darken rooms or caverns that may never have been touched by daylight. Calculating cardinals indirectly specifying their wishes to masters of the vicious arts beneath starless skies. Sadly such meetings are the stuff of fiction.

In reality, most such transactions like these are done in the open. It's far less suspicious for a small gathering to occur in a clean well lit conference room where alibis are simple to create and suspicion is never a thought.

The covert director of an agency who's very letters had been classified as top secret (which had led to the untimely arrest and prosecution of Timmy Johnson, as well as the loss of his Spelling Bee title) sat rigid while this deep fried clam strips grew cold. Across from him sat the grizzled bounty hunter known only as Prop.

Prop was more a collection of muscles and scars with occasional odd bulge hiding either a broken bone or a concealed weapon or both. The worn chrome of his mechanical leg one of the few bright spots to his otherwise dark demeanor. His grease speckled container of equally deep fried shrimp long emptied. Prop took a long draw from his large soft drink.

"Are you going to eat those", Prop asked around his straw, waving the bottom of the nearly empty drink container toward the director's rapidly congealing meal.

With fluid speed the Director snatched a handful of the content and flashed them into his mouth. Prop had only seen speed like that once before and involuntarily adjusted his artificial leg.

The director smiled thinly and leaned forward, he had Prop's full attention. "Mahhffd hurrved foo feekug--" The Director bent over gagging from the unchewed clam strip that had decided to remind him that one should not talk with one's mouth full. Prop reached across the table and slapped the Director across his back in an attempt to help. It didn't.

Several embarrassed moments of chewing followed by a rather large gulp of soda and some wheezing later, the Director snapped back to his original position. Prop decided to ignore the moment as well, and soon the Director once again had the full attention of Prop and the five year old at the next table over, intently staring at the two funny men.

Prop glanced at the wide eyes of youth and scratched the side of his chin, "Shouldn't we be somewhere a little less crowded than here at the Food Court?"

The thin smile returned to the director's face. "I find this location perfect. It's loud enough that we can be very open and with so many here, why would we talk about anything other than the sorts of things good friends talk about. So, about the contract I've asked you to

carry out on this man, Brian Hughes. We require your team to isolate, capture and return him to our facilities. Alive."

The Director paused for effect,

"And we require utmost discretion."

"Yeah." Prop said as he sent a wayward glance toward the increasing crowd of children that surrounded them. "I can tell."

Prop stood, and without excuse or comment, took the proffered data card, turned and headed out of the Food Court. The Director snatched a second handful of clam strips into his mouth, and then quickly left the table choking on yet another trachea bound morsel, barely avoiding a number of the surrounding children.

It wasn't until the children left that the two crabs climbed down from beneath the table.

---

█ told you that would be the place to hide, Dave.

"Fine. Look, how did I know that bin was for Cap'n Crusty's Crispy Crustaceans?"

You mean other than it being filled with breaded shrimp, lobster and sentenced Xaxnii felons?

Fine, but I still think that prison tattoo was just the UPC code.

He was part of the DeadEx gang, the deadliest overnight delivery gang in the galaxy. 'when you absolutely, positively have to kill someone before 10am' gang.

I said I was sorry, Dave!

Well 'sorry' isn't going to help MadKrill, is it?

Do you think he meant our Brian?

Who meant our Brian?

The guy with the eating disorder, Dave! Weren't you listening to that conversation?

Sorry, no, I was more interested in looking out for Cap'n Crusty's hired executioner. You remember him, Dave. Loud chap waving the cleaver, covered with bits of shrimp and MadKrill? Seemed a trifle upset that we hadn't decided on a dip in the boiling oil?

I swear Dave, it's like you're completely oblivious to the obvious some times.

You're right Dave. I'm terribly sorry for putting my general interest in survival above the ill defined screeching orders of our supposed superior. Next time I'll pay more attention to the mission and just find something handy to distract the crazed fast food employee. How good are you at breeding yourself, Dave?

It means that we definitely need to find Brian, Dave, Before something terrible

happens to him.

Wait, wasn't he one of the folks that turned you into the darling of the dance floor? Someone you swore eternal vengeance upon?

Yes and I don't want to miss a moment of the carnage.

---

In the mid twenty-first century, cultural anthropologists discovered that there were a few fundamentals of human culture that could be traced back to the first time that man stood above the tall grasses of the African Veld. The first is that the search for value drives most human existence. The unrelenting, primal need to seek out a great bargain is so core to existence that it can change us in unexpected ways.

Through careful analysis, they determined that what drove us to stand up was the pure thrill of exuberance in getting several large, flavorful roots for a few small crickets.

The other thing that could be traced back to those early moments was that it's a really bad idea to jump and shout for joy when surrounded by lions.

A few dozen millennium of lion free existence later the drive to save a buck or two still looms strong in the homo sapien race. One of the latter steps was the slowly increasing privatization of nearly everything, with the exception of the legislative branch of the government. (Not for lack of effort of the Executive Company, but mostly because no company was willing to do that sort thing cheap enough).

The military, to nearly no civilian's surprise, was one of the first of the branches to go private. (One of the last branches to concede to the inexorable march of capitalism, turned out to be the Department of Interior. While there's ample speculation for why that particular branch held out for so long, there's no official word yet from the private sector of the galaxy the former employees purchased after the transaction).

It was without that tidbit of information that Brian threw open the door to the Old Navy depot and yelled "Take me to your khakis!"

He held the door open for himself a few moments waiting for his vision to clear and be filled with racks of heavily branded affordable clothing, that despite his waning cheer, failed to materialize. He closed the door, and opened it yet again, still unable to cause the spontaneous creation of rows of moderately priced jeans or a single surly, be-headphoned staff member.

Morgan Fairchild, had quite definitely left the building.

The inhuman wailing cry of unfulfilled commercial need rang through the oil and dust encrusted reaches of the bay and echoed long after the dull thud of a socket wrench ricocheting off of Brian's head.

"Ah, there you are Brian," Tycho smiled down at the pink clad, prone figure grasping his head. "I was afraid I lost you, thankfully, your ape like nature managed to help me solve

that little problem."

"KEEP IT DOWN", a newly awakened voice screeched hoarsely from the lower nacelle of a ancient warcraft.

"I try, believe me," Tycho yelled back, "but he just keeps getting back up." Suddenly, Tycho's own geek nature kicked in, "Good Sagan on a stick, is that a P-901?" he asked with barely contained glee. "Maker, that old relic is in beautiful shape!"

The greasy and undoubtedly equally ancient figure wasn't quite sure what to make of the sudden switch in tone. "Eh? What about it, then?" He yelled back suspiciously.

Tycho slid down the ladder and let out a low whistle of appreciation. "It's an absolute beauty. Needs a bit of paint, though, but with drives like that, paint would just slow you down. How long did it take to rebuild it?"

"Rebuild it?" the old figure said, "Never. I've kept this ol' heap running myself. Just in case."

On another day, Brian might have shared Tycho's joy of futuristic antique military hardware. Today, however, he was positive that any future child of his would suffer from acute claustrophobia. That and the grizzled plasma monkey that seemed to be in charge wasn't the faux friendly, beheadphoned sales drone he was looking for. This, as was becoming the norm, did not stop Brian in the least.

"Yes," Brian announced to all, "can you tell me where the pants are?"

Tycho and the old man paused their conversation just long enough to give Brian an appropriately confused annoyed look. The older man opened his mouth ready to give Brian an inappropriate remark, then paused as he realized how Brian was dressed. Any insult he could hurl at the bright pink idiot would probably be taken as a compliment. His faced scrunched into a tight wad as he contemplated the situation.

"Through that door, down the hall, third locker on the right."

Brian smiled warmly, thanked the man and set about his quest for proper slacks.

"In my Navy, your friend wouldn't have lasted ten minutes." The old man grumbled.

"Oh, considering what he's going through, I'd say he's doing remarkably well."

"Really?"

"Yes, he's managed not to fling poop at you so far. Although he may still try to pick nits. My name is Tycho, my traveling associate with questionable shopping skills is Brian."

"Commander Douglas Corrigan"

A sound something between a hippo being tickled and a hyena with nasal congestion emanated from the side hallway. Brian leapt out wearing a pair of slightly bulky olive pants and a pair boots. He had traded out the altered halter for a worn navy jacket. Brian made another sound reminiscent of a chicken having a seizure and did a little dance. "I don't care what they cost, these are the best fitting trousers I've ever worn. They're fantastic. I'll have to have them hemmed a bit, but all tolled, these are better than I

imagined. How much do you want for them?"

Corrigan hesitated. "If you like them that much, sonny, you can keep them. No charge."

"Really?" Brian chortled disturbingly (not that there was any intent behind the chortle, just that the sound might have been considered painful). "That's wonderful! I'm going to see what other goodies I can find." Brian ran back down the hallway not quite singing a tune.

"Well, I suppose considering his other garb as of late, those would be preferable. Are you going to tell him?" Tycho asked.

"Nope, not until the AI syncs. I've been trying to figure out how to get rid of those for years." Corrigan replied and once again set his attention on whatever task he had been doing.

Tycho tapped the hull of the craft with the back of his knuckles. "So, the P-901... is it space ready?"

"Of course she's space ready. She's been space ready every single day for forty years." Corrigan stuck his head back out of the hatchway. "What you got in mind?"

---

**"T**wo million chits? What were you thinking, Prop?"

Prop ignored his partner's complaint, and simply let a slight smile crook one side of his mouth. He lit the cigarette dangling from the other side. "We, need the money, Bolt. Things have been slow and I wasn't about to pass on this cakewalk."

Bolt stared out the main view port at the station, the garish neon flashed against the unblinking stars in a pale attempt to draw attention. Bolt could partially make out his own reflection, impossibly thin with a mop of unruly black hair, dressed in shades of gray, as he struck a match to light a cigarette that dangled from his lips. He leaned his head back over the seat and blew a cloud of smoke that hung in the air like a ghost. "Wonderful. So now were stuck here.", he sulked.

Prop lit a cigarette and took a long draw. "You saw the repair bills for your ship from the last little mix up. I'm amazed you managed to hold that thing together. Anyone tell you you're an amazingly lucky guy?"

Bolt struck a match for a cigarette as he stretched his long legs on top of the console. "Yay, Lucky me." he said blandly. "Out here waiting for some ancient geezer to come out of a station so we can jam his driver and haul him back to the authorities." He lit a cigarette and took a deep draw. "I don't know how I managed to get this sort of luck."

"Would you prefer another go at those Bio-weapon guys?" Prop grumbled as he lit a cigarette.

Bolt knew what Prop meant, and knew that mix up had nearly gotten them all dead. No, once was enough for that sort of thing, thank you. Bolt lit a cigarette, properly chided and

leaned back further into his chair. "Just wake me when we've got the guy."

Prop chuckled as he lit a cigarette. Yeah, nothing to do but keep an eye out for the ship and jam it's auto pilot board if need be, collect the fossil and then collect the reward. A real cakewalk. He lit a cigarette.

---

**A**re you sure this is the place Dave? I thought that this was old navy storage.

Dave? When have I steered you wrong?

How would you like that list sorted, Dave?

Dave, you were there. You heard the ATM, the elevator and the light switch, and they all said what?

That Brian needs to wash his hands afterwards?

Besides that.

Oh, that they were headed this way and went in this door.

So, why wouldn't this be the place where Brian is at?

Well, it's not really his sort of place, is it? I mean he seemed more like the kind of person who'd be more into that catalog place with the electronic doohickeys.

Dave, we're not going to that shop. The last time we went there you tried to pick up the air filter.

I tell you, she was hot.

Dave, you really, really need to get out more.

You're just jealous.

Me? Jealous, nothing of the sort. I could care less what sort of perverted activities you and that little dust hussy might get into.

I offered to set you up with that doctor's assistant.

Dave, I told you no when you said she worked with a Proctologist.

Dave, I told you that she...

I'm sorry Dave, but I wasn't going to make that mistake again. I told you I used to date a girl like that once before and she only wanted one thing, every single night again and again. I tell you it was unnatural. I mean it was uncomfortable at first, then it became fun later, but I still never quite got into it the same way she did.

I tell you Dave, you missed out. She was an anal probe.

What? An anal probe? I thought she was a muzak system.

Nope, a fully automated anal probe and biopsy analyzer.

Why didn't you tell me that earlier.

And she was fast and easy too. I heard she did 300 samples in less than an hour, and the doctor never broke a sweat. Only one or two critical injuries too, from what I understand. A real precision girl.

So, no tuneless humming through out the night?

Nope, just the occasional scent of seared flesh.

Dang it. I miss out on all the good ones.

Ok, so you're sure that Brian is in here.

Yeah, I guess.

Dave? Aw man, Dave, look, there will be someone else.

I suppose. I 'm just not getting any younger you know.

True, but.. uhm. Dave. It's not like that really matters.

Of course it matters, Dave, I don't want to settle down one day, build a family.

Dave? Uhm, we... we can't really do that.

What? Why not?

Dave, Look at me. Do you see a toolkit?

What? No! Gah! I.. I don't believe it. I..

Shoot. Dave, look I know it's hard.

\*sniff\* I had dreams..

I know, Dave, we all do.

playing with the kids,

There are other options, Dave.

helping them load their first missile array.

Maybe you can adopt or something.

It's just not the same.

No, Dave, it can be better. Hey, I know what will turn that frown up-side down.

Dave? We don't have mouths.

How about we go ruin a certain someone's day. That always brings a little skip to your step.

\*sniff\*, Yeah, I suppose.

Betcha we can make him cry. You love making folks cry.

What? No, that's you.

Oh, right. sorry.

Well let's go make matters worse. I'll start cutting through the door.

Yeah, sure whatever. Wait. You hear something?

---

**C**orrigan continued checking off items from his clippad as Tycho excitedly slid into the seat next to him. Corrigan looked apprehensively at Tycho, who busied himself by fastening belts and adjusting straps. He smiled like a three year old on Christmas morn as he studied the cockpit. At least until he got to the large, highly unfamiliar looking device situated between his legs. "What's that?" He asked as he pointed to the roughly semi circular device stuck at the top of a pole.

"Steerin' wheel." Corrigan spat.

Tycho poked at the device tenetively, unsure exactly what to make of the thing. "Don't you use a Driver syste--" His sentence was cut short as he tried to dodge the thick manual thrown at his head. It fell into his lap as Corrigan continued down his check list. Tycho looked at the cover, then flipped it over so it was facing him correctly. *P-900 Series Heavy Transport Operations Manual Vol. 14* The large, plain print informed him. A line of smaller type read *Getting out alive when your pilot isn't.*

The side of the manual was worn, but the pages were still fairly crisp. Tycho had heard of these sorts of analog storage systems, but was still amazed when he actually held one. They were impressively heavy, immune to power failures and a ready source of combustibile material if need be.

Tycho considered asking a few more questions, then realized that he had indeed been handled the Forgotten Manual and had best occupy himself by reading it. His core operating system, having been built by programmers, was well tuned to taking that particular hint. Plus, Tycho had little interest in becoming a backup heat shield.

"Man, these pants are great!" Brian called up. "they're a little too lo-- perfect." Brian paused. He studied the way that the pants seemed to flow over his shoes, the in seam crinkling like those MTV pop stars. "Odd. I thought I was going to say that they need to be taken up because they're perfect, but I guess they are perfect." They were. In fact these were cut just like all the fashionable magazines showed. No doubt about it, these were styling pants. "I'm telling you guys," Brian called up again, giggling with joy, "these are GREAT pants!"

"Yes, Brain," Tycho called back, "I understand you've taken quite a shine to your trousers."

"I'm betting the feeling's mutual." Corrigan mumbled. "Ok, preflight's done. Let's get ol' Hildegard underway."

"Hildegard?" Tycho said with a note of distaste. "That's not exactly the sexiest name, is it?"

Corrigan shrugged, "You've never been to New Amsterdam."

"Ah, I see. Mind if I watch?" Tycho asked.

"Nope, done this a thousand times. I could do it in my sleep." Corrigan quickly pointed to indicators while adjusting switches.

Tycho had already gotten through several hundred pages of the manual by the time they were ready to go, but nothing beat watching a pro. He did thank his speed scanning abilities since Corrigan was obviously not going to offer a great deal of instruction himself. He carefully noted each indicator and the number of times Corrigan tapped it to get it to read normally. He watched attentively as Corrigan placed small bits of black tape over several of the flashing red indicators and silenced a number of alarms. He noted the settings for the acceleration compensators and thrust gages that were just above the yellow zone like the manual had noted, and set the phasing shield to the proper mass allowances. Finally he entered the code to open the docking bay and once they cleared the span, he held his finger over the magnetic lock.

"Got that?" Corrigan asked, positive that he had lost his 'co-pilot' in the flurry of activity.

"Absolutely. Easy as pie." Tycho smiled back as he continued to process the slight blur of activity.

Corrigan smiled. He had rushed through that just to see if the lad could keep up. "Well, we'll take her out nice and easy. This is the hard part."

He pressed the release.

The book that momentarily resided in Tycho's lap was open to the following page.

*The 901 class of the P-900 series of heavy transports is designed to haul medium to large masses in the range of 8 to 40 kilotons. To accomplish this, the vehicle uses four St. Claire Industries M-Quanta drives in combination with a Bifold Series III WIMP supplemental maneuvering system. FOR OPERATOR SAFETY It is imperative to note that the 901 series should not be operated in this configuration if the mass is less than 8 kilotons.*

It should be noted that the current mass of the Hildegard was just over four kilotons.

By the third nanosecond, the Hildegard having long since cleared the bay doors, Tycho realized that there was indeed a greater teacher than just watching a pro. The survivalist section of his main cortex determined that he alone was the only thing that will prevent their trip from ending in a blaze of Sport Utility Capsules, so he grabbed hold of his "wheel" and saw about taking guidance. A nanosecond later he abruptly adjusted the ships course to not intersect the lengthy parade of incoming vessels that had yet to fully relay the very large, very high speed imminent threat. A pico second later he realized how incredibly sensitive the steering can be as he brought the vessel so close past a parked ship that Tycho could later remember the brand of cigarettes that filled the main cabin. A quarter second into the flight they were already well beyond the orbit of the station and Tycho busied himself narrowly avoiding the various moon-sized chunks of matter that

insisted on orbiting the planet at that moment.

Tiny portions of his mind told him that his servos were simply not enjoying the sudden exuberant workout and that they were definitely planning on filing a complaint at the next opportunity.

Five seconds into the flight Tycho had abandoned the original flight path in favor of a direction with significantly less material in it. He headed solar north and prayed that his memory of old astronomy programs would pay out in significantly less bits of orbiting chaos.

He calculated he'd find out in a few minutes anyway.

"I beg anyone's pardon," Tycho said having finally gotten a few seconds to not dodge imminent death, "but would you mind throttling this back just a bit?"

Corrigan was about to do that when he noticed a rather angry flashing display. "Uhm, no. Looks like there's a problem."

"Ah good. I hate odd problems." Tycho replied. "Always best if they come in pairs."

"Looks like the WIMPs extended a bit further than we expected."

"WHAT!?" Tycho looked at the display. Following too close was a section of something. Corrigan brought up the rear monitor. It was a chunk of the Station. "Great, if we stop, we get a one ton solid steel enema."

"Well, there is one other option. Think you can keep it steady for twenty minutes?"

"Provided there are no orbiting surprises. What do you have in mind?"

"Option number two." Corrigan replied as he made his way toward the back of the cabin. "In reverse."

---

"...and so Lord, we commit the souls of these trav--" Prop switched off the Collision Avoidance/Last Rite-o-matic and leaned back into his chair.

"Prop? Should we expense our Laundry bill?"

"How did you think they knew we were out here?" Prop asked his companion.

Bolt dropped back into his seat. "Prop, the guy is supposed to be a super-genius. My bet is that he probably decrypted and monitored the station nav traffic channel, spotted our ship in the radar signature and hot wired that old cruiser knowing that it's stripped down and the heavy haul engines would make it the fastest ship in the sector. The guy is also a galaxy class pilot and decided to give us a suitable warning."

Prop sat thinking about that. "You think?"

"That or he's an unbelievably lucky bastard in the company of total idiots. Either way it's the same."

Prop smiled. "Yep, we charge more."

They lit cigarettes and headed in the direction of the Hildegard

---

**D**ave?

yes Dave?

Next time we go in for service remind me to ask for a bladder.

A bladder, Dave?

Yes, because right now I have the irresistible urge to apologize for soiling myself.

Ah good. It's not just me then.

So, where are we now?

I'd guess the rear hanger of the ship who's prop field we were caught up in.

So-- we weren't eaten by a space halibut?

Space halibuts don't have steel alloy guts Dave.

Oh right. They' re mostly aluminum.

No Dave, they're mostly fictional.

So.. magnesium then?

Uhm, sure.

Well, then, now what?

One option is to try and find Brian. He's probably on this ship somewhere. And if not we'll have to figure out where he is so that we can catch up with him again.

and the other option?

Report in that we may have lost him and are now possibly on a stolen military craft that is going to be vaporized by DefenCo within the next decasecond or so.

Right, well that looks like a data jack. Let's get busy shall we?

---

**"H**ow are our guests, Doctor?" The Director asked as he entered the darkened room.

At the far end sat a man in a white trench coat fashionable with the physicians of most generations, and far more comfortable than the chafing leather and palm fronds that were all the rage for a few years in the 2080s. The doctor sat, studying the screens silently as the Director approached from behind him.

"Not as well as I had hoped, I'm afraid." the doctor noted somberly.

The Director frowned. "Are there any health issues, psychological? You assured me that this process would do no harm to these people, doctor."

"No, they're fine."

"So what is the problem?"

The doctor turned his chair so that he could stare into the eyes of the Director. "We've gathered the greatest minds of the past two millennium and then some for this alleged contest, a contest we know precious little about, I'd add. We've used arrays of remote neural sensors to track their thoughts and query them without their being aware of where they are or what our intent is so that we can implant these thoughts into our own operative candidates for the contest, a group we've also selected for having many of the same traits and skills as those we've collected. In short, we've got some of the greatest minds history has ever produced internetworked."

"Yes, Doctor, I understand that." the Director dismissed the unwanted tutorial angrily, "Hell, I'm the one who has to oversee this little operation. I'm very well aware of what we are doing. Are you telling me that this little network of yours isn't working?"

"On the contrary, Director. It's working perfectly."

"Well then, what's the problem."

"They can't agree which movie version of Tolkein was the coolest."

"What?"

"Director, these are brilliant people, but they're also incredible geeks. That group already figured out that this is a network and is spending most of their time bickering about how it works and what language it was written in, that group launched into a flame war about which science fiction series had the hottest cast members, that group is busily reworking the neural interface back end to play something called Nethack, and this group is insisting that they be able to check their email accounts."

The doctor spun around to glare at the screens again. "It's like being a den mother for a bunch of horny nerd scouts who just found a year's supply of Super Pixie Sticks."

"But what of the transfer? Is that going well?"

"Sure, it's fantastic. Bevans there can recite every single episode of Hydrogen Guy, including the movie scripts, oh, and he also mentioned something about tuned polyphasic energy matrix configurations in short field burst dynamics, but he only got about half an hour of that before Evans found out they made the movie starring Gary Coleman's grandkid. I think he's still sobbing."

"Hmm. Probably shouldn't mention the musical ice show remake they did a few years back."

"No, I cut the connection before they mentioned that."

"What do you think our chances of success are then?"

"They'd be higher if we had some idea of what we're getting into."

"There's still no word from our agents in the field, doctor. All we know is what comes from the historical record. Apparently it's up to the previous office holder to determine how the next office holder is going to be selected. We know it's going to be a contest, but those damn Jelvans are completely indecipherable. It could be physical, it could be luck, heck, it'll probably be playing 'Rock, Paper, Sissors' for all we know."

The Director let out a heavy sigh. "We just have to win, that's all there is to it. The Galaxy can't take this sort of chaos and turmoil. It needs structure and by God we're going to give it to them whether they like it or not. We've got teams of specialists training in every aspect of possible competition. Trained psychics, expert gamblers, masters of the physical arts, and your team of super geniuses. We're going to win this one, because we have to."

The doctor ignored him, having returned to his screens and displays just before the Director's soapbox lecture began. He'd heard it nearly as often as he'd heard the virtues of the various Star Trek Captians, and it was equally boring to him. The doctor shot an angry glare toward the director as the doctor's chair swayed from the director's encouraging slaps. "We're doing the right thing." The Director parroted back the slogan that had filled their days since the project started five years ago. The doctor hated it, and recognized the manipulative psychological principle behind it. Still, as manipulative and egotistical as this whole program was, it did pay nicely.

The Director marched off, oblivious to the report, and muttering to himself about how their work really was important, regardless of those lingering evidence to the contrary. The doctor simply returned to finishing adding the automatic shock relay tied to a keyword file he was building. 120 volts for "bat'lyth" seemed about appropriate.

---

**"A**re you... quite sure that this is the way to go?"

Corrigan deeply lusted for a hand held EMP. Just something he could use to finally answer the question that had plagued him for the past week.

Well, not so much the question as the questioner. Sadly, the EMP had been removed several years ago and was currently in use keeping the cybernetic rats at bay back in the mall and no matter how annoying Tycho was, there was no way he'd be able to go back and get it, or the deposit on the space he had been renting.

"Yes.." Corrigan growled, visibly bristling, "unless you've got some way to make the Jelva system closer, or want to queue up for the jump gates, we're still around a gigasecond out."

Tycho hrmmed in an annoyed fashion. Corrigan considered whether he could find the android's off switch with the six foot crowbar near the rear of the cabin. "Don't you have someone else to annoy?"

"I suppose, but he's sleeping."

"I thought you said he was studying."

"Apparently I was wrong. Humans cannot absorb information by osmosis."

Corrigan groaned. He had to think fast.

"Of course not. It needs to be kinetic."

Tycho raised an eyebrow. "Kinetic?"

"Absolutely. Haven't you heard the old expression. 'Throw the book at him'? It's part of the re-education system. Started by nuns, I think." Corrigan ruffled through a small pile of manuals in a pocket next to his chair. "Try whacking him with this."

"You're saying he'll learn it if I hit him with it?"

"He'll learn something, alright."

"Oh what the hell. It means me whacking him in the head for no apparent reason. I'm game." Tycho practically giggled as he headed out of the cockpit.

Moments later Corrigan heard a dull thud and a groggy yelp of pain.

Accompanied by the sweet sound of discord between his passengers, Corrigan got up and locked the cabin door. He was getting darn good money for this little joy ride, but he already knew that no matter what he did, he wasn't going to be getting a tip.

---

In the course of the universe's history, there will be much debate about what the greatest contributions to general society may be. The greatest and most universally revered invention being the fully automatic defrabilizer, but each society would be duly credited with their own innovations, some even garnering multiple such honors.

Humanity, or as they were known in the rest of the galaxy the residents of Chester-4, are generally credited with contributing the most enduring trend of newscasting. Having a well dressed, reasonably friendly being deliver news in calm, deliberate tones simply simply wasn't done until the Chesterians showed up. Up until that point, news and information was screamed out by an being while strapped to a table and undergoing bizarre medical experimentation. It wasn't until much later that the very apologetic Gris noted that they were simply trying to keep the Chesterian's up to date.

The fact that they were also able to turn a rather healthy profit from recording the "rebroadcasts", and supplying a heavy bass and synth soundtrack was never mentioned.

Yggrt Blffrn smiled warmly into the opticam as the opening music played. The stage manager squirted the countdown.

"Greetings. In our lead story tonight, Most of the galaxy is wriggling about the upcoming contest to determine the next Governing species. As is usual, few details of what exactly the contest will be have been officially declared, however that's not stopped various booking agents from calculating odds."

"The few details we have are that the contest will be limited to only one representative

from each contesting species. This announcement was quickly followed by a formal protest from the Hive Beings of Lower Bzzprzzz which was later followed by a moment of silence after the entire population became stuck in a window and died of massive concussions."

"Currently, bookies are giving the best odds to a rather large contest of Rock, Paper, Scissors, Spatula, Weird Melty Thing, Pool of Acid, Fred. The second choice is Spelling Bee followed by Professional Wrestling, Pick-a-card, and I-Spy."

"Construction of the massive Contesting Facility are reported to be completed on the home world of Jelva just in time for a record audience. We, along with every other network, will be carrying exclusive coverage of the contest, along with pre-contest coverage of the favorites beginning-- now".

What followed could only be described as a blur of flashing images and a strange buzz as the billions of prospective candidates from the thousands of candidate races were each individually profiled within the following few days. Billions more maternal, paternal, parent clones and hosts beamed with joy as they fleetingly thought they recognized the fifteen microseconds allotted to each candidates profile. Many of whom wound up pointing with joy at an entire subcontinent of flies.

---

**S**neaking an unarmed ex-military transport through something as busy as a harbor is rather difficult. Fortunately sneaking an unarmed ex-military transport through close orbital space is slightly easier, mostly because as immense as a harbor is, it's still far smaller than the amount of space that surrounds most planets. However, most harbors aren't filled with massive news broadcasting ships, catering shuttles, and billions of other self guiding ships in various orbits. Tracking that mess is nearly impossible. In some respects it's like trying to spot one bee in a hive the size of Switzerland, with the exception that most bees are not actively trying to run into each other.

Corrigan, knew this, but still had no intention of simply going in on the straight route. Instead, he carefully picked his way through various radio shadows from the larger vessels or fell in with a group of smaller automatic service fleets. Had he known that the ground control group couldn't have cared less if he were to have gone straight in with his non-existent guns blazing, he could have saved himself sometime.

Of course, it would have also been far less fun.

Still it was a good thing that he was taking the more fun route, since Prop was having a significantly harder time keeping up. He cursed mildly as he continually scanned for the Hildegard. He could have contacted fleet control to find the ship in an instant, but Prop knew that the Hildegard would be gone in the next instant. It was better to play this game of cat and mouse.

"Can't we just land and nab them on the ground?" Bolt whined from the chair next to Prop. His eyes were closed and he rested his boots on his console in clear violation of

nearly every single piloting convention.

"We let them land, and we're going to be trying to find them in among several trillion beings. Here we only have to look through a few hundred million ships. The odds are better."

"Looks like they just improved." Bolt said as he pointed up through the roof of the cockpit. Prop leaned forward to see what Bolt was pointing out, and nearly fell out of his seat. There, using the Fandango as a radio shield, was the Hildegard. The Fandango lurched slightly as Prop jumped in surprise. He quickly steadied the controls and punched in several controls. He glanced up again but the Hildegard had already moved on.

No matter, Prop thought, they finally had them.

---

**T**wo ships broke orbit and dropped into the approach channel. Had anyone been paying closer attention, they would have noticed three. Had they actually been there, they would have seen four.

Beneath the shield shadow of the second catering vessel, a drop of sweat formed near Prop's brow. Flying in the bubble was insane. A single wrong move would expose them to quintajoules of every type of energy he cared to imagine. None of them good. Still, with that much noise all around them it was impossible for anything to track their movements.

Of course, it was also just as easy to slide out of the pocket and become a brighter spot in the night sky, then a bunch of small bright spots in the night sky.

Prop was getting too old for this.

"I've got a clear shot at them, Prop." the coms channel crackled.

"Hold your fire, Bolt. We've got to bring them in alive. Plus the ion cloud would knock us out of the bubble."

"So what are we supposed to do? Yell nasty names at them?"

"No, we follow them down and nail them wherever they land. We'll have one shot at that, and I'll need you and that gun of yours to hang tight until then. Understood?"

There was no response from the intercom. Nor was there any motion from the forward guns. Prop took that as an acknowledgement and spent the rest of the time staying out of the plasma atmosphere that coiled just outside of their hull and wondered what the other ship was doing.

He could really use a cigarette.

---

**E**ven with the restraining straps securely fastened, Tycho managed to float several

millimeters off of his chair. This was probably due to the fact that his fingers gripped the steel armrests so tightly that they were starting to give off a slightly acrid smell. Fortunately it was easily masked by the delightful scent that temperatures well over 1400° C make as the atmosphere ionized against the perimeter shielding.

Even if he was the only one to smell it. He tried to calm himself by singing a happy little tune, but instead wound up repeating "We're all going to die" in varying tone and cadence. It didn't help.

"Two Pair!" Corrigan called out as he laid his cards down. Brian glowered at his busted straight as he realized he shouldn't have passed the three and seven he had.

"Shouldn't you be," Tycho blurted out toward the card table where Brian and the Captain sat, "oh, I don't know, GUIDING THE DECENT!?"

"Nope." Corrigan replied, "the docking coils will hold just fine 'til we're at atmospheric speeds. Besides, that big scow is well over five times our mass and it's not even full. I doubt they'd even notice us tagging along."

"You could have at least mentioned the fact that the landing shields were removed." Tycho blurted as his subconscious once again rose to predominance.

"Didn't seem like it was an issue at the time."

Tycho hovered flabbergasted. "Didn't.. seem... How did you expect us to reach the planet?"

Corrigan smiled. "That's easy! I didn't expect us to make it out of the airlock. Everything beyond that has been gravy." He turned back to Brian. "Five card, spit in the ocean, high, ante up."

Brian tossed a couple of chips toward the side and examined his cards.

Tycho simply stared at his traveling companion. Here was a man he discovered making monkey noises and was now playing cards while sitting less than a meter away from temperatures that could render him well done in microseconds. A tiny portion of Tycho was impressed that anyone that skittish could have that sort of capacity for denial. Tycho managed to suppress that tiny portion by concentrating on the jealous anger instead. "Brian, how can you be so damnably calm while the fires of hell are licking away outside like the short bus riders as they pass the candy factory."

Brian looked over his cards. "Well, for one, even if I were to panic like you are, I'd feel very silly that I spent the final moments of my existence sitting in a puddle of my own urine, and secondly..." Brian patted the side of his leg, "I did mention that these are really, really comfortable pants, didn't I?"

Bloody pants, probably keeping Brian calm so that he doesn't soil them. Tycho went back to making chair origami and tried to remember that they'd be free of this in a few more minutes. He caught a another whiff of phantom ozone and started the third chorus of "we're going to die".

---

**E**ven through the heavy optic filtering Prop still found himself squinting against the plasma's glare. He knew he was at a disadvantage being behind the Hildegard. They'd come out of it sooner and be able to make a dash.

"I still don't see anything, Prop."

Prop jabbed at the com panel. "I told you, keep your eyes shut, Bolt. I don't want both of us going blind, and you've got the trigger. I need you to take out their primaries so that they don't run for it." It was a risky move, sure. As soon as the gun fired, the authorities would be scrambling to intercept them. Prop wasn't overly concerned, though. He already had things in place proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that the ship he disabled was filled with puppy clubbing terrorists who had just completed the most intricate credit card fraud in modern history.

There was a consistently glowing spot in the brilliant haze, just left of the center of Prop's view. It was the ship ahead. It was like trying to follow one spark in the middle of a welding job, but Prop focused on it, It started to flicker. They were clearing the burn. "Arm the gun Bolt, they're coming clear."

The plasma around them started flickering as well. Prop smiled. The ship above the Fandango was lighter than the one above the Hildegard. Even if the Hildegard bolted as soon as they cleared the plasma, he'd still have the drop by a good half second.

Suddenly the screen went black as the outside temperature dropped below ionization levels, by reflex prop cleared the filters from the view giving them a blurry view of the ship ahead.

"NOW Bolt!" Prop yelled as a lance of energy shot from the main cannon and struck beneath the vessel ahead. Bolt was an incorrigible scamp, and an all around pain in the ass sometimes, but he also was a brilliant marksman. A stream of molten metals shot from beneath the forward ship. Prop swerved the Fandango out from beneath it's massive ship cover ship and angled for a second shot. That was when the catch release on the freshly shot and now smoking garbage scow ahead of them released it's port load.

A several ton unidentifiable mass of unmentionables poured from the rear hold and exploded in the multi-mach air stream. Prop fought against the controls, as his console became a sea of red lights. The Fandango's engines fought against an airborne tsunami of half eaten breakfasts. A Day-old danish clipped one of the ailerons as Prop felt the ship going into a harder spin, he banked further into the morass than he wanted and became even more mired.

Prop hit the main engines, in clear violation of a great many laws, and the Fandango shot from the mass of garbage and filth, His atmospherics were completely gone. If he wanted to survive, he'd have to find a space dock somewhere. Preferably one that didn't mind the smell. He swerved again to avoid the ship that had been following them in.

A ship with the Hildegard fastened beneath it.

He throttled up more while pressing the coms button one last time, "Shut Up, Bolt!"

"**A**uthorities are not certain why the unregistered ship fired on the garbage scow but have released the crew of the Grumpy Poodle Fried Gorf Biscuit Delivery vessel after reviewing the recordings. Mrval Furgr of the hamlet of Ffuivr has also requested compensation for his prized tomato garden, which is currently sitting beneath the newly designated Ffuivr solid waste holding facility. Ffuivr plans on celebrating later with an All you can Eat buffet at the new facility."

The news broadcast disappeared in a swirl of static as Tycho continued looking for any news about the contest.

"You'd think, with the fate of the galaxy hanging on this, that someone here would be mentioning it more often."

"Tycho?" Brian asked, "How many times have they had this contest?"

"I don't know. I think this is like the thousandth time or something."

"Thousandth time?" Brian asked as he furrowed his brow. He snapped his fingers, "That's easy. Bring up the oldest media form you have. Newspaper, radio or something."

Tycho stared at Brian for a few quizzical seconds, but failing to come up with any better idea, decided to humor him. He spent a few moments bringing up the old dual channel broadcast system and waited for the news to download. "There," Tycho noted as the headline announced continuing investigations into some sort of beetle infestation.

"Fine, whatever," Brian dismissed, "is this a weekday or weekend paper?"

"How should I know?" Tycho complained, "I'm not a social expert in giant tree people!"

"Fine," Brian dismissed in the same tone he did before, "we'll do it the easy way, just find the mattress section."

"Mattress? I don't even think Jelvans have beds!"

Brian pressed a few buttons until he found the page button. He then rapidly scanned pages while Tycho railed on about how he doubted how a society that had yet to determine the need for chairs would require something like a mattress. Tycho stopped arguing the point when he saw a screen filled with various ads offering "Fantastic Contest Day Mattress Savings!". Now, show me locations of the businesses running most of these ads. Tycho's annoyance was replaced by growing curiosity as to where this was going. He plotted the ads out onto a map of the continents. The pattern was pretty obvious as the density grew toward the edge of one. Oddly, things came to an abrupt end within a radius of one location. Tycho turned and stared to ask why that would be when Brian cut him off with the obvious answer.

"Restraining orders." Brian pointed to the center of the clear spot. "That's where we need to go, Captain."

"Just give me the coordinates and I'll get us there." The captain called back.

Tycho punched in his best estimate before staring at the screen a final time. He turned to Brian. "Ok, I've got to ask. How did you figure that out?"

"Easy. They've held enough of them that they're no longer "cool", even more so to the folks that are losing their crown, or whatever. Very little local interest, that's why the news isn't carrying it. Plus, they've been around long enough that all the importance wore off, so the anniversary sales way outweigh news articles about it. And the sales are more centralized around the place where it's happening because folks on the other side of the globe could care less."

"Ah", Tycho said, not really understanding the principles of marketing. He decided to press on with his second question, "but how did you know about the mattresses?"

Brian shrugged his shoulders. "There appear to be more universal constants than we're aware of."

---

**"Y**ou're sure this is the right line to get in?" Tycho asked.

"Sure, it is." Brian said. "It's the longest."

"One at a time please, unless you're symbiotic or otherwise biologically linked", the being monitoring the gate called out. "One at a time."

Brian walked through first. "Section E, Seat 20915. Here's your map." the gatekeeper said as he thrust the map into Brian's stomach. "Uhm? Thanks?"

"Next!"

Tycho was similarly greeted and walked away with his map. "At least we're sitting next to each other. How do you plan on getting into the actual contest itself?"

"I hadn't really thought about that.", Brian said bluntly. I've been sort of playing it all by ear. Maybe I'll be lucky enough to spot someone from history or some official and be able to get on the team that way."

"I suppose, or maybe you can just shout out answers from the audience."

Brian thought about that, but realized that for such a competition, such things might be frowned upon. "I don't know, I might be penalized or something."

"Nah," Tycho responded, "Atomized, yes, but I don't think they'd penalize you anything."

"Thanks," Brian said with less comfort, "that's less than reassuring."

"I think these are our seats." Brian looked at the designated apparatus checking his map a second time. "That or we'll be ready for the spin cycle in twenty minutes." The chair, if it could be called that, was a puzzle of hoses, harnesses, platforms and supports that reminded Brian of his High School prom dates undergarments. "Well, at least you won't be sobering up anytime soon", he mumbled beneath his breath as he tried to pull or push various contrivances into something similar to a seat.

Tycho cleared his throat. Brian glanced over to see the android press his palm to one side panel and his foot to a lower one. With a moderate amount of reshuffling, the contraption quickly became a very recognizable and surprisingly comfortable looking chair. Tycho spun and settled himself in.

Brian glanced at his own seating and noticed the faint outline of a palm on a similar panel. With a footprint on a second. Apparently most of what he had previously mistaken for intricate design were other such panels matching various other species pincers, pseudopods, and other protrusions. Brian chair also quickly formed itself. Still not quite trusting the contraption, Brian carefully tested it before settling himself in. The chair was remarkably comfortable, and Brian felt more like he was floating than actually sitting. "Oh, I am so getting one of these." He remarked.

"Get two." He heard Tycho chime in next to him.

Brian settled himself in more and tried to see the stage. That's when he noticed that there was no stage to be seen. "Oh, great. We're in the cheap seats!"

"Left side, first pocket." Tycho replied in a tired tone.

Brian reached into the pocket and pulled out a pair of viewing goggles. Inside he could see two tiny images of something that appeared to be a pre-contest show. "We have to watch this on the goggles?" Brian said in some disappointment.

"You'd rather try to watch things from a quarter mile away?" Tycho responded.

Brian couldn't argue with that logic. Still, if this was all he got, he could have stayed at home and watched on TV. He slid the goggles on and leaned back. This place, however, had better chairs. The earphones delivered alien jabbering in true-to-life stereo sound. Not wanting to ask yet another question, Brian played a hunch. "English"

It worked.

"and the last contestant is in place. We're ready to get this contest started."

Just in time, Brian thought.

"I'm Har'din, and this is my associate Wvvr, Welcome contestants! Annnnnnd, Begin!"

Brian's world suddenly went white.

---

**W**e're well into the six thousand seconds of this contest, and still no clear winner has emerged. We're down to the final batch of species, let's look at a few of the favorites, shall we Har'din?

You bet Wvvr. The Grylix seems to be fairing moderately well in his challenge, looks like he's debating the worth of his species principle beliefs against his species greatest cynics.

I sure wouldn't want to be in his head.

From the looks of it, I don't think there's enough room.

Moving on to the Human called Tim Bevans--

--Yes, there was quite some controversy about the human entry. Do you have any more details?

You bet Har'din. It appears that the humans have been accused of doping.

Doping?

Yes, apparently they've imprinted one of their greatest physicists mind on some dope named Tim Bevans. The judging panel has allowed this entry, however.

Well, I'm sure that ruling will be questioned for millennia to come. Turning to the display, it appears that... I'm sorry, I'm having a hard time understanding this. It appears that he's in an alternate dimension of hell fighting... is that a lobster guiding a panda?

Sure looks like it. I don't believe that Pandas often had shoulder mounted missile launchers. We're going to have to have someone on our in depth action news team do a bit more research on that for us. I can only presume that it's some sort of odd experiment in... ballistics.

Well, while we try to get an answer on that, let's move on to the next three contestants. They're all late entries, are they not?

Yes, apparently one is a C.O.C.-E.D unit hailing in from Cleveland, who seems to be doing rather nicely in some sort of argument with, ah, apparently he's completely reprogrammed his interface.

Does he know his stand is completely self contained?

No, it doesn't look like it, and the secondary simulation is kicking in. Interesting, apparently he's now trying to disrupt the stand of one of the contestants next to him to increase the difficulty rating.

I'm hearing some laughter.

Yes, that would be the C.O.C. unit.

Well, we'd be worried if it didn't try, eh Wvvr.

That we'd be. So let's turn our attention to the supposed target of the attack, a non-implanted human named Brian Hughes...

---

**B**rian blew a long, bored breath and rubbed his eyes. He looked again at the single magazine laying on the reading table. It was a copy of Highlights, from 1989. This was exactly like his old dentist's office. Only white. Everything was white. Well, not everything. He was still the same color as he was before, as was the pen in the receptionist's cup, and the stray issue sitting in the magazine rack had a dingy color to it,

but the vast majority of the rest of the world was white.

White, and utterly, utterly, boring.

There he was, stuck in some galactic waiting room thousands of years from home and the one magazine there was ancient. Actually, it was museum quality ancient and several cultural historians would have come very close indeed to offering their tenure for just a peek inside. Brian didn't care. He remembered reading it.

He picked it up anyway and leafed through the thing, mentally checking off each page as it had originally been seared into his brain the countless times he had read it while waiting for his appointment. He stopped when he got to the JumbleFun.

JumbleFun was one of those scrambled letter puzzles. Brian hated those. They weren't as hard as crosswords or the various other word games he hated more, but Brian undoubtedly would get stuck and have to flip to the back for the answer. Naturally, Highlights never provided that sort of temptation, since they needed something to encourage you to get the next issue. The strange thing was he had always remembered that the JumbleFun was filled in. This was the first time he had ever encountered it blank.

Brian stared at the empty puzzle asking himself if he was *\*that\** bored. He had already gotten up and gotten the pen before the answer managed to form into a full word.

He folded back the magazine to the horror of millions of antiques collectors and studied the clue. It always was some horribly pun. "He knew to stop cooking." The picture was even less help. He'd have to unscramble the main words and then unscramble the answer from the letters in the highlighted squares.

Brian sighed and started unscrambling the first word.

---

I'm just saying that it was very rude of them to turn us away like that.

Dave, they said they already had someone from our group. He was awfully nice about it. He only fired a few times.

I didn't see a single crab up there.

Dave, we're part of the shade group. Shades were eliminated in the first round when the representative melted down the testing booth.

I knew they shouldn't have picked a war crab. Seems like the only way they want to carry on a conversation is with a turbine plasma gun.

Dave? They don't have comms. They only have turbine plasma guns. It's how they talk. There was that after school special.

"Krowgar's Last Debate" I remember that one. Krowgar tries something new and winds up vaporizing the opposing team, along with most of the school. Then they had a party and ate crackers. I never really understood the point of that one.

---

Dave? It was obvious. Don't try to do something different. It was the same moral as every other After school Special.

I thought it was 'Don't argue with a fully armed war crab'.

That too, but I think most folks figured that one out themselves.

So... Now what?

Well we can either sit here and watch the show until we're hunted down and destroyed for blowing the mission.

Tell me there's an alternative.

We could have a couple of hot dogs.

You know Dave, you're not very good at keeping panic at bay.

What? I'm sorry? Look, I'm not really looking forward to being tossed, screaming, into a black hole anymore than you're looking forward to being slowly melted down to component elements in an antimatter fusion chamber.

Really starting to panic, Dave.

But the sad fact is that we'll never again be able to while away the hours verifying the Bacon Numbers for Nomadic Plugarian Lint herders. Instead we'll simply be frozen to near absolute zero and then shattered into billions of still conscious, superconducting particles writhing in untold agony, the microseconds passing like eons.

DAVE!! Look, I appreciate the problem, but cataloging the our demise isn't helping me do anything other than hyperventilate.

We don't have lungs, Dave.

Well it certainly isn't because I'm not trying! Now we need to come up with some plan, some way to save our shells. Think Dave, think!

Say, you think that it would hurt to be thrown into an induction loop?

*ABOUT HOW WE CAN SURVIVE, DAVE, ABOUT HOW WE CAN SURVIVE!*

Ok, ok, no need to start jumping up and down like that, and where did you get that froth?

Dave? Do you think I could get amnesty if I kill you and save them some effort?

Well, you know, there are a few other options

---

**N**aturally, things were far from silent. A great cacophony of conversation rang throughout the vast auditorium as various societies tried to determine the outcome, most of the conversations naturally involved bookies and lawyers, proving the highly profitable

business genius for O'Sullivan and De Notte, the first Paramutal Paralegal organization on the floor.

Within minutes the Calling Bell sounded and the judges again filed out onto the dais. The gathered crowd dimmed to just a few news reporters who were doing their best to describe the events they were displaying on the various video and holographic devices, eventually even these quieted down to single whispers and the occasionally shuffle-flop of those the species that communicated via interpretive dance.

One judge stepped forward and spoke to the gathered. "We have calculated the scores for the respective species and have meditated on the results." He, She or It held an archaic looking envelope in his leafy hands, and appeared to contemplate the content. The judge shuffled almost uncomfortably before speaking again.

"I'll have you know that this result surprised even us. As some of you know, it is not uncommon for the selection process to take a rather, how shall we say, unexpected turn. In fact, it is recorded in the original doctrine of the Polygon that the selection process should not be biased in any respect, to allow for only the most qualified race to achieve this most vaulted position. Even the selection of the Jelvans came as a great surprise since we had been created only a few cycles earlier. Still, the decision was made, and it became our responsibility to see it through. A job that we are now thankful to turn over."

"The winner is once again new, but has far older roots than we had when we took the role. They are guided by principles that we have determined are only the purest. They did not seek the position, nor do they have any desire to impose their will upon others. They hold what many see as precious and what can only be considered the ultimate goal that we should all try to achieve."

The judge opened the envelope and again spent several long moments reading what was written within with a deeply furrowed brow. The judge turned to look at the others who simply stared or shrugged. The judge turned and made the proclamation.

"It is hereby our established opinion, as the duly appointed and decreed High Counselors of the 09281 Galaxy for the three thousand eight hundred and forty first Greater Orbit, that the new High Counselor for the next Orbit be a Mechano Sentient Life Form."

Tycho blinked. He then looked first to his left, and then to his right at the various contestants assembled on the lower dais. There was no applause, since the greater population was doing the same. Suddenly, as the slow realization that he was the only individual currently fitting that description began to sink in, he started to giggle. He then started to laugh as he realized that he had gone from a discarded and mostly ignored piece of equipment left to rot in some orbiting galactic wart to the Ultimate Speaker of Destiny.

His laughter became increasingly wild as thoughts of the sort of power he could rule over the various collected bags of protein bubbled through his head like particularly evil beer foam. This, he reasoned, had nearly made spending the last excruciating months with Brian nearly tolerable. The endless whining about food, water, air and other distractions could finally cease, by his nearly divine decree. Oh, what a glorious time this will be!

Tycho's glee had reduced to mad cackling as he knelt on the stage, hands upturned and

clawing at the nearly visible reigns of newly acquired power.

Brian felt himself become increasingly nervous, with the vision of exactly what Tycho could unleash upon the galaxy becoming all to clear in his head. He felt warm with terror and felt his shoulder tap with horror.

It took several more shoulder taps of horror before Brian realized that there was a very good reason that particular aspect of fear was seldom mentioned in Edgar Allen Poe novels. Nor, apparently did fear whisper into his ear, "Number 182, please step forward."

Tears of mad joy streamed down Tycho's face as he continued to drip them into his eyes all the while continuing his near insane cackling. It slowed to highly confused cackling when he realized that while he was one of the few left on the stage, he was quite obviously not the center of attention.

That happened to be Brian.

"Uhm, excuse me." Tycho raised a finger to correct the obvious misunderstanding that these bloody stupid trees seemed to have. "I think there's been some sort of mistake." He nearly jumped to his feet and continued to raise his voice as he approached. "I said--"

"I will NOT take off these pants!" Brian yelled as he shoved away a fawning sapling who was trying to do things he had only dreamed super models would do before.

Several of the Judges attempted to discuss the matter in quieter tones, while quite obviously also trying to make their decision eminently clear. Tycho, much like the gathered dumb-struck collective simply tried to make the best of what they were seeing. The ultimate position of authority in the Galaxy, a position to be held for the next 10,000 years would be held by a pair of trousers.

Smart pants, but pants none the less.

Pants that Brian seemed to have little desire to remove. "Absolutely not! You have no idea what I went through to get these! These are the best pants I've ever owned and you're simply not going to have them. These are my pants! Go get your own pair." Brian was struggling furiously trying to escape the gathered group before he caught a glimpse of a slightly bemused Tycho. "Oh, thank God! Tycho! Tell these leafy bastards that they can have my pants over my de--"

Minutes after Tycho's rabbit punch to Brian's forehead, the pants were officially sworn in as Grand High Councilor and quickly put under the Councilor's heavy guard.

---

**"H**ere, have another Geckoroni, on me." Tycho slid a can of the hot musical lizard based ravioli next to the several empty containers strewn in front of Brian.

"I'm still not talking to you." Brian grumbled. The swelling and bruising had long since resided leaving Brian pouting and miserable for purely emotional reasons.

"Look, if you had left them on I'm pretty sure they would have simply carved you out of them." Tycho said honestly. "In their grand scheme of things, you were far more disposable. I was simply looking out for a friend."

"And the chance to knock my head in?"

"Purely a benefit."

They sat and continued to watch the entitlement festivities as billions gathered to either celebrate or protest the official change of office. The various news channels split their coverage between groups wearing ceremonial pants (many simply donning them in ways that pants had never been intended) and others decrying the basic unfairness to those species that believed in lower body nudity. In addition, there were several lengthy reports about the various legal briefs that had been filed challenging the ultimate decision, however many of those challenges were delayed by the Post Electoral System Eradication Fleets that were parked just outside of the various filing legal offices.

"Besides," Tycho said warmly, "we're both doing reasonably well now, what with being the Couriers of the Pants, and all."

"I suppose, but there is that legal bill from the family that lives in my Grandfather's old house."

"Yes," Tycho agreed, "having a secret division of Earth's Competitive Forces break into your house looking for a highly wanted individual who simply used that for the billing address can certainly put a damper on the Sunday Dinner with the pastor."

"No, that's not what they're upset about. They're more angry about the bill collectors putting a lien on their DNA."

"Ah. Yes, well, they're a bit stricter about that sort of thing nowadays. Still, I'm certain that most of their kids will thaw out just fine and the surgical scars will be hardly noticeable. With any luck they'll even afford doctors who know who gets which part back."

The monitors switched to a small group of chanting pants wearers. Sadly, most of the group had taken more creative methods to adorn themselves and their pants, but were needlessly excitable about the entire affair.

"You know, you really could parlay that into something." Tycho said as he pointed to the monitor.

"What? Instructional videos about pants?" Brian muttered back.

"No, nothing so banal. Besides, I'm already working on one of those. No you've got to think big. You're the official expert, you know. You're the only one who's really gotten into those pants, and seen how they think. I'd say go big. Start a religion."

Brian lifted his head "Start a what?"

"A religion. Call it the First Holy Discipline of the Sacred Slacks. Espouse that you never really know a person until you get into their pants."

"Oh, that will go over big."

"Depends on how you sell it, lad, and how fast you can grow your supporter base. Get a group of highly attractive models to be your Undie Fundies, put together a few calendar shoots and you'll have your churches packed in no time."

Brian stared at Tycho. "That-- that sounds more like you're selling porn than religion."

"Why not? Sure, traditional religion pish-poshes the idea, but just think how far a porn based religion would go? Heck, eventually you'd probably be able to buy out some of the others. I mean, the only difference between your religion and some others is that your booths cost a quarter and are more entertaining."

"And would require hosing out at the end of the day. What would be in it for you?"

"Me? Nothing. I'd do this for the benefit of all beings in the Galaxy, a chance to throw off the oppressive reigns and bring the Good Mood to everyone capable of getting randy while watching someone else."

"And you'd be running the media empire that would result?"

"It's always nice to find a job you enjoy and can make great heaping gobs of cash from."

"Let me think about it." Brian said as he sank his head back down onto the table.

All in all, it wouldn't be that bad, he supposed, provided there were no sudden appearances by any recently displaced and rather put upon omnipotent deities looking for Union dues. Brian still had no idea how to get back or really what else to do.

Well, besides find a nice pair of pants. Preferably ones without aspirations to rule the galaxy, this time. Maybe he'd get a pair of sans-a-belts with ambitions in local government or some corduroys with an interest in the school board.

Brian smiled, possibly for the first time that was not a direct response to someone else's suffering, there was at least one shining point to this whole mess. He had the answer that philosopher's had struggled over for countless generations.

When it came to running things, he alone, knew who the pants wore.