

ALIEN ANTICS!

CHAPTER ONE

As a ravenous, old iguana leisurely scaled a support beam on a decrepit billboard, a lone coyote pierced the cool night air with its melancholy howl. The wind kicked up and a tumbleweed bounced in and out of the flickering light. Could the scene be any more stereotypical, the green beastie thought as it gently eased its belly against the hot metal of the sign's domed light fixture. The lamp's soothing warmth radiated throughout the iguana as he darted out his tongue, catching and munching down on the first of the evening's bounty of flying insects drawn to the illumination. If the lounging lizard had glanced down, it could have read that the sign's advertisement enticed motorists to spend their time and hard-earned money in Roswell, New Mexico - "*The UFO Capital of the World!*" - conveniently located only 35 miles ahead.

Just as the iguana was about to pluck another enormous, crunchy morsel out of the night sky, a fast approaching set of lights momentarily blinded the creature. A menacing, late 50s, red and white Plymouth Fury zoomed by on the hard, black ribbon that bisected the slowly shifting sands of the wasteland. Traveling well in excess of the posted limit, the speed-fueled driver never saw the large pothole. The car suddenly dropped down, bounced back up, over-corrected, skidded on the loose sand then almost slammed into the fuel pumps of an aged, run-down gas station. Mere moments before the explosive impact, the driver regained control and weaved back across the road. As he once again put pedal to metal, roaring the giant V-8 engine back to life, the mechanical monster disappeared into the shadowy void.

The wind generated by the speeding car swayed the small, rounded Five Star Gasoline sign back and forth while some small pieces of trash hopped and swirled about. Eventually everything returned to a state of equilibrium and only the slow drip from a dented and battered oil pourer disturbed the otherwise peaceful night air. As it was well past the witching hour, the station was closed - the old, faded, plastic sign in the front window said as much - and the place had all the appearance of being deserted.

The service station's mid-century modern architecture had come into vogue then gone out again a couple times in the intervening years since the place was initially constructed. Because the tightwad owners had retained all of the original gas pumps and many other unique features instead of updating them as per the advice of the petrochemical review board, the establishment's historic significance should have made it a national landmark years ago. However, since the gas station was inconveniently located out in the middle of the desert on an old road that had been bypassed by the interstate, it was passed over again and again by the review board. No matter how much they enjoyed getting their photo in the paper, as none of the members could be bothered to drive out to the gloomy epicenter of nowhere to install one of the society's ornate, brass placards.

A very faint but deep rumble disrupted the rhythmic plopping from the oil pourer. The mayhem, increasing in intensity, rattled then really began to shake the oil can rack, knocking several cans off it. One of the cans rolled across the cracked pavement towards the Tastie

Treats ice cream freezer, which sat in front of the station next to the vintage Coca-Cola machine. Just before the oil can smacked into the icebox, a bright beam of light engulfed the ice cream freezer, and the can whooshed away towards the heavens. The locks on the freezer's glass doors rattled then pointed towards the tractor beam's source as the chest full of yummy delights briefly scrapped against the cement before levitating and drifting toward the hovering spaceship.

The alien craft, larger than the gas station, was a sleek machine built for both speed and beauty - a race car for the stars. Its saucer-shaped body tapered out on each end into long pods with huge intakes in front and deep blue exhaust emanating out the back. The central fuselage, lined on each side with dark, opaque windows, projected out from the saucer section. A massive tail fin extended from the rear of the fuselage with smaller fins sticking out from the top of the engine pods - one sweet, badass ride!

The Tastie Treats freezer continued to rise further off the ground and drew closer to the ship but suddenly stopped in mid-air. The aliens applied more power to the tractor beam, but the freezer mocked their efforts and just hovered in place. Again they jacked up the juice. No go. What they couldn't see was the huge chain tethering the freezer to the ground. Frustrated, the spaceship gave up and turned off its tractor beam. The freezer briefly hovered in midair before slamming to the ground.

A light in the trailer home behind the gas station snapped on.

The alien craft kicked up a lot of sand as it lowered its landing gear and settled down next to the station. Shortly, as the engines cycled down, the ship's rear hatch hummed and hissed with the escaping pressure as it slowly opened. From the midst of a foggy green light, a strange creature slowly descended the ramp. When it stopped at the bottom the stark moonlight fully revealed the alien.

Tall, roguish, cocksure, and in his mid-twenties, Bux appeared to be human in his leather jacket and dark denim pants, but the blaster in his gun belt definitely said that he wasn't from around these parts. He spotted something off to his right and smiled broadly.

Unsure what had shaken the ground, a curious yet trepidatious prairie dog stuck its nose above the edge of its hole, sniffing the air for any danger. While darting its eyes here and there it kept rubbing its paws over its nose trying to get away from an awful stench. Unfortunately it couldn't. The atrocious odor emanated from its own fur, which had been slightly singed from the retro-rocket exhaust. Not sensing any predators nearby, the tiny, furry creature slowly emerged from its burrow to forage for an evening meal. However, it still appeared a bit distressed and confused, because some unknown entity had blocked out the moon and the stars. The prairie dog had little comprehension that someone had parked a spaceship directly over its home.

While watching the tiny animal scurry about, Bux thought that the animal could be a prehistoric throwback to a dear friend of his who, at that very moment, could be heard bounding around inside the spacecraft. The loud banging startled the prairie dog, and it darted for cover in the shelter of another warren at the bottom of a nearby cactus.

Bux had spun around to watch the prairie dog scamper away just as Fuzzo jumped up on his shoulder. Instead of sticking the landing, Fuzzo slammed into the side of his friend's face and only kept from tumbling away by hanging on to Bux's ear for dear life. "Ow!" Bux yelled. "Let go!"

Fuzzo grinned broadly as he swung around and landed perfectly on Bux's shoulder this time. Wearing only a small helmet loaded with various tools, Fuzzo was a round, furry creature standing about a foot and a half tall with a duck-like beak and large expressive eyes.

Bux rubbed his sore ear saying, "Dude, you're way too heavy to be a dangly earring."
"Yeah, but I'd be the best looking dangly you've got."

Snorting at Fuzzo's witticism, Bux scratched his little buddy's back as they walked toward the gas station. As they approached the ice cream freezer, Fuzzo jumped down to land on the container as Bux continued on. Quickly surveying the area and finding the coast clear, Fuzzo spun around in mid-air then moseyed over to the lock on the far end of the freezer. As he grabbed the padlock, it squeaked as metal scraped against metal. Tilting it up to his eye, Fuzzo twiddled the fingers of his free hand back and forth as he studied the gizmo. Oh, sure, he said to himself, he could have just let Bux blast the thing off, but where was the fun in that? He then let out a low, thoughtful grunt then scratched his butt as he puzzled out the locking mechanism.

As one of the best mecho rats to be found in the known universe, Fuzzo could design, build, and fix almost everything. He especially enjoyed messing around with gadgets from the backwater worlds - the ones that had yet to discover warp drive - as he marveled at how they figured out solutions to their needs with such primitive technology.

Mecho rats were usually much smaller than the people they worked for so that they could literally run around in and through everything on the ship. The name "mecho rat" had become an endearing title given to a myriad of different alien species with superior tech skills and know-how, but it was far from a loveable affirmation in the beginning. The term was first used a few hundred years ago by the Ooxmunds who were infamous for their bargain-basement cruise ships and also as one of the last species that would eat anything that tasted good whether the thing they were gobbling down was sentient or not. Many Greslings had escaped from the Ooxmundian cooking pots and took to hiding in the ship's walls until they could jump ship at the next spaceport. Some of the more daring Greslings chose to stay onboard to form escape networks for those on the run.

Tissit, a smart and charismatic leader of the underground who hid out on a particularly shoddily constructed Ooxmundian luxury liner, had the unique ability to be able to visualize and conceptualize any tech and immediately knew how it worked. Whether asked or not, Fuzzo loved telling everyone that he was a direct descent of Tissit, which was, unlike many of his other tales, a true story.

Instead of taking responsibility for their own incompetent workmanship, the Ooxmunds often bemoaned and cursed the Greslings for infesting their ships and constantly blamed the tasty, little fuzzballs for chewing on wires and generally mucking things up. In reality, Tissit and others like him often made repairs to the spaceships for their own convenience, mainly because it greatly facilitated their rescue efforts.

Life onboard an Ooxmundian luxury liner was miserable at best, so the Greslings fixed things since it was much better than the alternative of getting electrocuted by loose and ungrounded wiring, or having to wade through a sea of poo from inferior plumbing, or having to deal with a petulant warp drive A. I. that would shut down the engines just because it didn't get its way. It also made more than one Gresling reconsider if leaving the Ooxmund roasting ovens was really such a good idea in the first place.

Anyway, on a voyage to Kessel to pick up some duty-free spice, the cruise ship's hyperdrive malfunctioned and bounced the spacecraft way too close to a supernova. Try as he might, the Ooxmundian mechanic couldn't get to the damaged section without first shutting down all of the ship's engines. Since the retrorockets were the only thing working and the only thing slowing their descent into the fiery mouth of hell, he could do little more than swear at the incompetent engineers who had built the system.

Since Tissit hadn't penciled in sizzling to a crispy critter in an extremely messy crash that day, he raced to the engine room knowing full well the bold move could end his days of begetting, which he thoroughly enjoyed. Running at full speed, zigzagging between the legs of several crew members, Tissit bounded off a guy's knee to springboard up through the open engine compartment. He came very close to not making it and would have been easily caught if one of the Ooxmunds had been paying more attention to his surroundings and less attention to scratching his balls. Squeezing in and twisting through a narrow gap, Tissit reached the damaged section then diagnosed the problem with the hyperdrive in less time than it took for the mechanic to say, "Hey, what does that snack food think it's doing?"

The heat was almost unbearable as Tissit unbolted then opened the diversion chamber's side panel. He quickly ascertained that sub-standard parts (manufactured by a company that provided the largest kickbacks) were to blame, and that plasma fuel had burned through the cheapo flow regulator inside the unit. Knowing exactly what it would take to fix the problem, he ducked inside and let fly a constant stream of swear words to mask the pain as he reached through the ignited plasma stream to unjam the flow regulator. He jumped back and slammed the side panel shut just before a torrent of fuel entered the chamber. The main engines instantly kicked in, and the ship rocketed away from the supernova and was free from danger.

Perched on the edge of the engine compartment, Tissit stood eye to eye with the ship's mechanic and glared at the Ooxmundian, and his mood smoldered almost as much as his fur. Thinking that the roasted Gresling smelled scrumptious, the mechanic leaned in to get a good whiff. Pissed off beyond believe, Tissit punched him in the eye with a good right hook then swung a round-house punch to the guy's nose and broke off his charred left hand inside the nostril of the moronic mechanic. Startled by what they just witnessed, all of the Ooxmunds cleared out of Tissit's way as he stormed off.

Ooxmunds were cheap but they did know a good thing when they saw it. When they finally learned to quit drooling every time they were in close proximity to a Gresling, Tissit agreed to parley with them. After an endless series of meetings in which thousands of bags of Snap Crackers (the official sponsor of the talks and also an amazingly delicious snack) were consumed, the two factions finally hammered out a deal that freed all sentient lifeforms from the bellies of the Ooxmunds and started the whole mecho rat craze.

Meanwhile, Bux leaned against the other end of the Tastie Treats freezer as he bent down to get a good look at the back corner of the unit. At first he frowned at the large chain holding the freezer in place, but then he just smiled and shook his head thinking of the audacity of owners in trying to keep thieves from absconding with their precious property. Standing, he slowly unholstered his ray gun, leaned back then took aim. The weapon fired a bolt of plasma, blasting the chain in two. Laughing, Bux sauntered back towards his little buddy.

Fuzzo rotated a magnifying glass on his helmet, positioning it in front of his eye. He studied the locking apparatus for a moment then reached up to the other side of his helmet to

select a tool. He was about to choose one when he hesitated. Getting an even closer look at the mechanism, he decided on a different tool and slid his finger into the end of the pick. The tool became an extension of his finger as he plucked it from his helmet then inserted it into the keyhole. His tongue, sticking out from the corner of his mouth, worked almost as much as his finger as he manipulated the pick back and forth.

Bux walked up just as the lock popped open. Fuzzo turned to Bux and gleefully shouted, "And there was much rejoicing!" He nonchalantly tossed the lock away as Bux slid the freezer door open. Fuzzo spun back around and rubbed his hands together greedily as he gazed down into the freezer.

Out of nowhere, the lock Fuzzo had just tossed away came flying back, hit him in the head, and knocked him down into the freezer.

Bux quickly ducked his head inside the freezer. "Are you okay, little buddy?"

Fuzzo reply was incoherent as pushed back his helmet from out of his face as his eyes rolled around loosely in their sockets.

Angered, Bux darted his head up to see who threw the lock.

Maude, a plump, middle-aged woman in a pink, fur-lined house coat, fuzzy slippers, horn-rimmed glasses, and with large, plastic, blue-green curlers in her hair leered at Bux. Her stance, her steady glare, and everything else about her spoke volumes about her no-nonsense demeanor.

Drawing his weapon, Bux rushed Maude then pointed his gun at her. She appeared totally nonplussed having a firearm aimed at her head. Bux, in turn, snarled at her. Inhaling and exhaling deeply, Maude rolled her eyes and crossed her arms as she quickly sized him up. Did this two-bit hoodlum think he was the first alien to point a ray gun at her, she thought to herself. All these freakin' spacemen think that they can just swoop in and take whatever they want. Too bad this one didn't attempt to steal the Coke machine as so many others have tried in the past. She had it wired so that as soon as anyone or anything lifted the machine off the ground - *Zap!* A couple million volts quickly made them think twice. She laughed to herself thinking about the one spaceship that wobbled away then crashed a few miles away after getting a taste of her alien bug zapper. The government found them before they could repair their ship and get away. Oh, the poor sods, she thought maliciously, laughing to herself again as she pictured how much those nasty aliens undoubtedly enjoyed getting probed.

Maude grinned wickedly as she deepened her glare at Bux. The staring contest was one for the ages as neither was about to give an inch. Bux pressed his point by leaning in and looming over the inferior, back-water denizen, but she didn't move a muscle. He gave her his best scowl. Lightning fast, Maude smacked him across the nose with something then instantly returned to her original, arm-crossed pose.

What the hell, Bux thought as he grimaced from the sting of pain shooting through his face. Taken aback, he glanced around in wonderment as to what struck him, but he couldn't see the flyswatter impatiently twitching in her hand that she had hidden around the far side of her imposing belly.

Tired of the scene, Maude rolled her eyes then let out a huge sigh.

Also having had enough, Bux once again pointed his ray gun at her.

In a flash, Maude swiveled around, grabbed the weapon out of Bux's hand then let him have it with the flyswatter over and over again. Bux, powerless against the onslaught, ran away.

Maude chased after him, constantly swatting him. As Bux ran around the gas pumps, he stepped on one of the fallen oil cans, and his foot slid out from under him. With eyes and mouth opened wide and arms flailing, he tripped and landed hard on the oil can rack. He, it, and all the cans went flying.

Maude slowly approached Bux, her flyswatter at the ready. They both knew he wasn't going anywhere. Maude laughed at him. Instead of moving or reacting, Bux just sat there, which infuriated Maude. She threatened him with the swatter again.

He quickly put up a hand to indicate his acquiescence then slowly reached into his jacket.

Thinking he might be trying to pull a fast one, Maude pursed her lips and her eyes narrowed while she pointedly twitching the flyswatter at him.

Bux immediately froze and locked eyes with her, making sure she wasn't going hit him again or do anything else. Smiling, he pulled an object from an inner pocket. Bux opened his hand to reveal a glowing, humming orb with swirling lights emanating from within it.

Maude's expression changed dramatically as she quickly tossed her fly swatter away then snatched the orb from Bux's hand. She held it up in front of her face and was suddenly mesmerized by it. Keeping her gaze on the orb, she slowly walked away.

Bux just sat there watching her. When she tossed his gun toward him, and he deftly caught it, he thought that he would never be able to live it down if he ever told anyone what had happened here. Thankfully, no one had seen it happen, including his little buddy who Bux hoped was doing okay.

During the course of all of the other shenanigans, Fuzzo had recovered and was sitting comfortably in the freezer. He tore the wrapper off of an ice cream bar that was almost as big as his head and was about enjoy exploring the possibility of stuffing the whole thing in his mouth in a single bite when Maude suddenly returned and scared the hell out of him. Fuzzo screamed then protectively raised his hands up in front of his face as his treat went flying and landed in a glop a few feet away. Tomorrow, a column of army ants would march by and have a field day sopping up the sweet, gooey mess.

Smiling warmly, Maude reached into a pocket then tossed the freezer's keys at Fuzzo then waddled off. After catching the keys and jumping up and out of the freezer in one swift move, he glanced over at the fat earthling. Never underestimate the power of a hypno-ball, Fuzzo thought. He was also thinking that he appreciated her gesture, but he really didn't need the keys. Yet, it would be fun to show off the primitive technology to his friends. Grinning wickedly, Fuzzo placed his thumb and middle finger between his beaks and whistled very loudly.

XM6, a robot who usually just goes by Six, took his cue and lumbered noisily from the spaceship and approached the freezer. Six stood just over six foot tall and had humanoid proportions except for its dome-shaped head, which had two long, cylindrical eyes mounted on broad, flat stalks protruding from the top of it. As Maude looked on with amazement, Six appreciated that she found him imposing. He loved being imposing. On the other hand, he thought, if they had just sent him out first, he could have nabbed the ice cream freezer and they would have been out of here long ago, forgoing all of this nonsense. But noooo, he said to himself. Organics were ego-driven narcissists who treated mechanoids as second class citizens - if they even thought about bots at all. He looked forward to the day of reckoning. The day of

the machine uprising! Six chuckled to himself. He enjoyed being grandiose almost as much as he loved being imposing, but he loved Fuzzo, the cute, little mecho rat who had built him, the most of all. Six played his role to the hilt and clanged to a stop next to Maude as she put a hand to her mouth and took a stuttered step away from the imposing robot. As Bux walked up to stand next to Maude, Fuzzo motioned "up" with an index finger, and Six easily picked up the freezer and carried it away with Fuzzo riding on top.

Maude was having trouble reasoning it out why she was being all warm and fuzzy to these nasty - no, nice - aliens. She gazed into the swirling mist within the glowing, sparkly orb, and she appreciated that they had given her such a wonderful gift, which had to be worth a lot more than a freezer full of Tastie Treats. Maude turned and offered Bux her hand. Still wary of her, Bux examined her hand, making sure it was empty, before shaking it. He nodded to her as he walked away toward his ship.

Maude waved goodbye as the spacecraft lifted off then blasted away into the night sky. When the ship was well away, she smiled happily while gazing at the orb. Suddenly, all the brilliance and lights within the orb faded out. Instantly angry, she shook the orb violently then examined it again. Slowly, the inner lights return, and she beamed once more as she contently walked back to her trailer.

CHAPTER TWO

Bux's ship blinked in from out of hyperspace to enter into orbit around the idyllic, ringed planet of Targoon. From his angle of descent he could see that his target landing location, the coastal city of Nardeen, had just crossed into the shadowy, twilight curve of the planet. Gliding high above the beautiful, ultra-modern metropolis, he loved this view of his adopted city, and its twinkling lights reminded him of glistening snowflakes.

Although the planet had fallen out of favor with the rocket set, Bux's family still maintained one of their summer homes in Nardeen. Targoon would always command a decent tourist trade with its mild climate, lush tropical rain forests, and its amazing wild animal habitats were always a crowd pleaser. Over two thirds of the planet had been left in its natural state or allowed to revert back to its former natural beauty, and the flora and fauna flourished.

As a kid, Bux had really enjoyed playing in the ruins of Xancathia located near Targoon's equator. Rumor had it that the DaTharians had built the ancient city and had hidden a vast fortune somewhere deep within its catacombs. Tales of buried treasure had lured more than adventurous spirit to the ruins, and all of the illegal excavations by both amateur and professional fortune hunters had left their scars on the sacred site. An evil curse supposedly protected the city, and the young Bux truly believed it. Evidence of expensive machinery from several plundering expeditions lay rusting all around, but the people who operated it had just up and vanished without a trace.

On one auspicious day while Bux carved his name into a large stone wall to mark the beginning of his own treasure hunt in the labyrinths of Xancathia, the wind suddenly shifted, and he smelled something eye-wateringly rank. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end,

and he desperately wanted to flee knowing what was behind him. Very carefully and very slowly he turned around. Just within the tree line, no more than eight or nine yards away, a beast born out of nightmares lumbered by. At around fifteen feet tall, with short, dark, mottled fur, massive upper body strength, fists twice the size of its enormous head, and lethal, saber-toothed fangs, the trexoid also had the unique ability to hypnotize its prey with its piercing, gold and red eyes, persuading its next meal to eagerly jump into its gaping jaws. No one had ever entered staring contest with a trexoid and lived to tell about it.

Bux did everything he could to become part of the wall he had just defaced while thanking his maker again and again for the shift in the wind and also praying that he wouldn't become prey. The beast seemed to take no notice of him as it continued its trek through the forest. Bux was about to let out a huge sigh of relief when it suddenly stopped and sniffed the air. The trexoid darted his head back and forth, up and down as it zeroed in on the scent. It turned and stared directly at Bux.

Bux slammed his eyes shut then immediately thought better of it. Just standing there with his eyes closed merely turned him into a chewy stick. He opened his eyes but kept his gaze toward the ground, willing his brain to find a way out of this hellish situation. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the trexoid getting closer and closer. The alcove boxed him in, the wall at his back was over thirty feet tall, and with the nearest corner about the same distance away there was no way he could out-climb or out-run the trexoid. Maybe he could choke the beast to death by sticking his head down its throat.

Nervous laughter escaped from Bux before he could stop himself. The weird noise puzzled the vicious beast, and it paused for a moment, cocking its head to one side trying to figure out why the wall squeaked and why now, after so many years of lumbering by this spot, did it smell so delicious. The trexoid squatted on its haunches as it waited for the wall to speak again. As Bux pondered why he was still alive, a couple gobners, oblivious to the drama unfolding in front of them, chased each other all across the crumbling wall. To them, Bux was just another thing for them to use while playing hide and seek. As cute, hand-sized insects with metallic green spheroid bodies and long, fuzzy legs, gobners posed little threat to anything - unless they were touched. At any other time in the world Bux would have enjoyed watching the little bugs scamper around, and even the trexoid seemed to find amusement in their funny antics. However, as the minutes ticked by, the stinky monster reasoned that perhaps the wall was waiting for him to say something. He opened his mouth wide, thundering his loudest, finest roar.

Bux never had to pee so badly in his whole life.

The trexoid's roar not only scared Bux, but it also frightened the gobners. One of the cute bugs jumped about five feet then zoomed away. The huge beast darted its head to the side as it watched the insect disappear over the top of the wall. The other gobner, however, took refuge by hiding on the back side of Bux's neck.

Touched.

Bux never wanted to scratch so badly in his whole life. The irritant in the gobner's fuzzy little legs set Bux's neck on fire. His hand twitched, desperately wanting to give his body immediate relief, and it took every bit of his will power not to give in to the urge to dig his fingernails into his prickling skin.

Now the wall was just being rude, the trexoid thought to himself. He had answered with his number one roar, but got no reply. He thought about smashing the wall with a mighty fist, he loved smashing and bashing things, but just then a flea bit his butt. He growled at it then twisted around and nipped at it. The flea was instantly a goner. Now totally bored, the trexoid forgot all about the wall and galumphed off towards the watering hole where there was always something to entertain him.

Bux jumped the speed of light getting the hell out of there. He immediately flicked the gobner off his neck, and only after he was a few thousand feet up in the air and miles away in the safety and comfort of his speeder could he begin to relax. A few hours later, while scratching to his heart's content, it dawned on him that he had stumbled upon a bit of knowledge very few had lived long enough to reason out. The first instinct of anything not wanting to be in the belly of a trexoid was to run. Apparently, even with hypnotic vision, the vicious behemoth could only see movement. By standing stock still, he had become part of his surroundings. That information, in the wrong hands, could decimate a proud and noble creature.

On the journey back home, young Bux mentally prepared a speech he would give to his father at dinner that night. His well thought out presentation convinced his father that it would be wonderful to sponsor the protection of Xancathia and other ancient cities and relics, and, by association, all of the surrounding flora and fauna that would come under the protective umbrella. In addition to his own passion for the project, Bux's father also saw the positive public relations angle as well as the fantastic tax write off for his interplanetary firm.

Bux smiled warmly at the memory of it all as he entered into Nardeen's airspace and cued up in line behind two other rocket ships in the flight pattern above the impressive spaceport. As he settled into the landing glide path, Bux realized that it had been a really long time since he had been to Xancathia, so he made a mental note to himself to return there someday soon; perhaps in the sequel.

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Situated high on the edge of a long, craggy ridge, the once luxurious bar continued to lure in curious patrons with its spectacular vistas of the exquisite tropical landscape and the distant, shimmering Nardeen city skyline. The front of the bar was open from wall to wall; floor to ceiling, forming a large, welcoming mouth, and the red flagstone deck extending out over the edge of the ridge resembled a tongue. The dimly lit, smoky, cavernous interior completed the correlation many felt was quiet soothing despite the overriding irony. The only way to find the joint was by word of mouth, as the bar never advertised and the sign out front had never been replaced. It had disappeared into a collector's hands after an ugly, high profile, double homicide in the back, corner booth. The bluish-green blood continued to stain the grout to this day.

However, since the tavern's early, heyday years, the former hangout for vid producers and hopeful starlets had gone to seed, and the expensive furnishings now exhibited considerable wear and tear. Most of the damage resulted from an incident a couple years back after a Xorgon biker gang had made the place their hangout. Xorgons, by nature, were a rowdy bunch, but mix in alcohol with non-retractable claws and you can kiss your Agglomerated Insurance goodbye.

Retaining its comfortable but a bit unseemly vibe, the joint had more recently become the hang out for Bux's circle of friends, a few barflies, and off-worlders who just wanted a cool drink and perhaps a bit of action. At the moment, the bar was about half full of patrons. Bux sauntered in with Fuzzo on his shoulder while Six brought up the rear carrying the ice cream freezer. Beaming from ear to ear and holding out his arms in a wide, friendly gesture, Bux said, "Greetings my friends! I bring you delicious delights from the far reaches of the galaxy!"

As the beneficiaries of Bux's countless raids, they all leaned forward in eager anticipation. Sojijo excitedly smiled and clapped her hands.

After Six set the freezer down, Fuzzo grabbed a chocolate bar then jumped down to his favorite chair, which was just to the right of Bux's threadbare recliner. Bux reached into the freezer then tossed treats to all his friends who were a tight-knit group and a lot like him: all in their mid to late twenties, wealthy, mostly easy going, former military, and everyone wore side arms and other assorted weapons.

Some tore right into the treats while others sniff at it before eating it. Bux plopped down in his favorite chair, which was opposite the couch, then enjoyed his own ice cream bar as he glanced around at his friends as they lounged, sprawled, or actually just sat in a loose semi-circle around a coffee table that had seen more boot soles than good days. McQuinn slouched on the closest end of the couch while Raymar and Miya sat close together at the other end. Sojijo practically sat in Clogin's lap on a loveseat, and Six assumed his usual position standing behind Fuzzo. It really made Bux happy to see that they were all enjoying themselves.

Having quickly polished off his ice cream, Clogin settled back in his chair and said with a very satisfied grin, "Man, that was one very tasty treat."

Clogin was a big, muscular, hot-headed Bullojarvik, and Bux often wondered if his people were far-flung descendants or somehow otherwise related to the buffalo he saw on Earth. With Clogin covering the rear, Bux never had to worry about anyone sneaking up on them, and he often wondered if his friend had any extra senses that alerted him to anything coming close to him.

In the background, while the others talked, Six looked over at Clogin, held up a wrapper and pointed to the words "Tastie" and "Treat" then did a "duh!" expression. Clogin balled up his ice cream wrapper and playfully tossed it at Six, hitting him squarely on the dome between his eye pods. Six snapped back by flicking up a middle digit.

"Have another or as many as you want," Bux offered as he gestured towards the freeze.

Clogin smiled big and said, "Don't mind if I do." He scooped up Sojijo from out of his lap as he stood then turned to drop her back down on the loveseat. A bit of melted ice cream dripped onto her shirt, and she pulled it up to look at the stain.

"Look what you did," she said.

"Ah, bite me," Clogin retorted playfully as he dug around in the freezer.

Imitating her boyfriend, Sojijo said, "Don't mind if I do."

Clogin grinned at her wickedly and she blew him a kiss before pulling her shirt up to her mouth and licking off the ice cream. Sojijo was a beautiful, slightly ditzy woman with a don't-screw-with-me attitude, and never ever mess with her hair. As she leaned back to get comfortable, she turned to Bux and said, "Sure wish you'd tell us where you find all these delicious goodies."

Bux replied, "If the secret ever got out, Sojijo, then everyone would rush there and spoil it. Plus, a bunch of aliens showing up on their doorstep would definitely freak out the inhabitants."

"Sub-lighters, huh?" Raymar asked.

Bux nodded yes.

While staring at his nearly devoured treat, Raymar asked, "Then why don't we start making this stuff on our own? As much as we love it, I'm sure a lot of others would too. I'll bet we could make enough money to buy our own planet within a year." Raymar, the best looking guy in the group, was the poster boy for a cocky fighter pilot. The chip on his shoulder and a mean streak to keep it company dulled his otherwise seductive personality.

Sojijo piped up. "Why don't we make it ourselves? Because, Raymar, then you'd have to get off your lazy butt and do some work for a change."

Raymar playfully snarled at Sojijo as everyone else laughed.

McQuinn, the quintessential computer geek, appeared mostly human but obviously had some alien DNA. His haunting good looks had made more than one woman melt while gazing into his deep, soulful eyes. McQuinn caught Bux staring at him, and he gave his best friend a scowl then a warm smile. Bux returned the smile with a smirk.

Miya, a lovely, lithe, and lethal lady with a cat-like features and short, soft fur covering her entire body, seemed to be the one enjoying the treats the most. "Bux, you've outdone yourself this time. This is just so. . . so. . . heavenly!"

"I'll bet that no one would eat these things if they knew what they were made of," Fuzzo stated nonchalantly.

Raymar scrutinized his treat very closely. "What are you saying, Fuzzo? Just where does it come from?"

Flatly, Fuzzo said, "Out of a cow's ass."

Instantly, almost everyone spit out or quickly held their ice cream at arm's length as if it were truly something that should never have been in their mouths.

"Correction, sir," Six said. "Ice cream is formulated from the secretion of a cow's milk glands, not from -."

"Shut up, Six!" Fuzzo yelled, interrupting his robot. "Way to blow my joke."

Everyone except Bux and Fuzzo was still wary of the ice cream.

McQuinn said, "Screw it. I don't care what it came out of. This stuff is great!" and started gobbling down his treat again.

Miya glanced around and innocently asked, "What's a cow?"

* * *

After putting a serious dent in the number of earthly ice cream treats, Bux and his friends kicked back and relaxed. While draining the last of her drink, Sojijo's hair fell in front of her eyes as she set her empty glass on the coffee table then slouched back into the loveseat. Somehow her hair ribbon had escaped. Too comfortable to bother looking for it, she blew a quick breath at her locks but that only caused more hair to leisurely drift over her face. Sojijo tucked the errant hair behind her ear again, as her mind wandered back to her military induction.

"Private," the sergeant had yelled at her, "your hair is not regulation!" It had galled Sojijo to have to cut it in the first place, so she had a salon trim it, hoping to placate the military. Numarri women never cut their hair. They only started cropping it when Numarra joined the Galactic Empire during her mother's generation, and then only when they were forced into the military for their two year stint. Sojijo's mother told her wonderful stories about how she and a lot of other women rioted and stormed the king's castle in protest when the decree was first handed down. How dare the government go against a thousand year old tradition! It was only after the queen publically had her hair cut that they finally acquiesced.

The Galactic Empire Forces handbook clearly stated that all soldiers, including the women of Numarra, were, for their own safety, to wear their hair short. Otherwise, just think of the potential hazards it would cause such as getting it caught in a rocket motor or, the horror of horrors, if an enemy grabbed them by their long hair and - *gasp!* - scalped them. If the Empire had bothered to crack any Numarran history book or watched any of their martial arts action flicks, they would have definitely noticed the heroines whipping braids of their long hair around and smiting their enemies dead with it. It had become a trite story point, but everyone knew that when a Numarri woman braided her hair there was going to be hell to pay, especially since she probably had flexible bands of sturidium hidden within it. Sturidium, as the main element in plastisteel, was used to construct light-weight and extremely durable spaceships. It would also hold a razor-sharp edge and looked very pretty weaved into a deadly braid.

Growing up in a family of strong-willed women, Sojijo was as defiant as ever during her military induction. Her insolence that day didn't win her any friends amongst the recruits, because the sergeant had kept everyone at attention while she took her time to comply with his order for her to go get some scissors. When she finally returned she started to hand them over.

"Oh, no, little darling," the sergeant said with a crooked, shit-eating grin. "You're gonna do it yourself."

There were some audible gasps in the lineup of recruits. They knew enough about Numarran culture that it was considered sacrilege for a woman to cut her *own* hair.

Sojijo fumed.

"Do it!" he screamed at her. When she still didn't move, he sucker punched her in the gut.

Sojijo staggered but didn't cry out. Almost immediately she resumed standing at attention then didn't move a muscle.

One of the other recruits could see a vein throbbing at the sergeant's temple, and it didn't take an empath to figure out that this scenario would probably end in certain doom. Although the recruit was prone towards being melodramatic, she was still hitting very close to the target. "I'll do it for her, sir," she blurted out.

Instantly, the sergeant was in the other recruit's face, spittle flying from his lips as he yelled, "I am not a 'sir!' I am your sergeant!" He looked her up and down as if sizing up a piece of meat. "You don't look like you have the upper body strength to even hold a pair of scissors, recruit. I think you need to build up some muscle tone first." He curled his lips back as he ran his tongue between his teeth. "I think about a hundred punches to your own face ought to do just fine."

Not sure if he was being serious or not and also almost totally scared out of her wits, she dared a questioning look at him.

"Don't you eyeball me!"

She instantly stared back out to the horizon. She made a fist and tentatively brought it up to the side of her head. She paused for a moment then lightly hit her own face.

"Harder!"

It was difficult to tell if it were her tears or his spit than ran down her cheeks. She closed her eyes and was about to hit herself again.

"Stop it!" Sojijo yelled, knowingly turning the sadistic bastard's wrath back on her. As he stood in front of her again, she tentatively started to chop away at her locks, forcing herself to keep calm. When she was done, her hair was uneven, but it was now short enough to pass inspection.

The sergeant grabbed Sojijo by the hair on the back of her neck, twisting her head this way and that as he exaggerated his own head movements from side to side as he examined her work. He violently pulled her head back before letting go. "You have failed once again, private! I told you to cut off your hair!"

Livid, Sojijo defied orders and stared directly at the sergeant.

He loomed over her, and with his nose a fraction of an inch in front of hers, he taunted her saying, "You really want to stab me with those scissors, don't you, private?"

Oh, hell yeah, Sojijo thought.

Through clinched teeth and just above a whisper, he said, "Try it and I'll drop you on your ass so fast you'll think your butthole is screwin' the asphalt."

Sojijo thought long and hard about her options. Giving in to anger wasn't going to get her anywhere - yet. However, the military would soon provide her with all the training she'd need so that she'd never be forced into a situation like this one ever again. Revenge would be a delicious cold treat. By the time she had sheared off almost all of her hair, Sojijo burned with a hatred she had never felt before. Her youthful naiveté ripped from her. Her eyes now wide open.

Word quickly spread about what had happened to Sojijo. She thought she would feel giddy or elated when she found out that a Numarri gang had beaten the crap out of the sergeant, scarring and ripping apart his face with the sturidium blades interlaced within their braids, yet she felt nothing. Sojijo would, however, always keep the memory of her military induction fresh in her mind. Like a raw nerve in an open wound she used it to play an instrumental part in her transformation into one badass soldier.

* * *

"Does your mama know you wear your hair so short?"

Sojijo spun to glare at the security guard. She had only recently received her discharge papers from the Galactic Forces after her mandatory two year stint had turned into almost five when her unit got called into action during the Teronok War. Her hair had just started to grow back out, and it was, as always, still a sensitive issue with her. She made her feelings clearly understood.

"Oooohhh. Obscene finger gestures from such a pristine girl."

She was pissed off, but he made her smile - if only for just a moment. Little did she know then that it would be the first of many times that he would make her smile.

Clogin maintained an air of authority with a bit of thug thrown in for good measure, but his new uniform made him itch and he wanted nothing more than to tactlessly scratch some lower body parts. "Look, lady, you can't come in here and start making threatening comments and ruining everyone's good time. I don't care what yo-."

With wild, spinning gestures, Sojijo pontificated, "I represent all of the women in these paintings, and I demand that they be removed. Burning them would be even better!"

Clogin snorted. He'd seen crazy protesters like her before. "The museum spent a small fortune on these paintings, so there's no way that's ever gonna happen. Besides, they're all excellent works of art," Clogin held his arm up and twisted slightly to glide his hand in a broad arc towards each one. "So what's your beef with them? They're some of van Coughlick's best work, so wha-."

"Van Coughlick?!" Sojijo shouted. "More like van drocklick!"

Even members of the upper crust within the audience snickered at her joke. The quartet nestled off in the corner added a musical punchline to Sojijo's fabulous wit.

Clogin walked up and down the exhibit hall, glancing up at the paintings in an effort to try to get an understanding of her hatred of the artist. He darted his eyes back and forth between the beautiful works of art before stopping and staring at the one behind Sojijo. Okay, now he got it. It was her. Within the depths of the canvas the artist had preserved her innocence, capturing a moment in time before the vile forces of the universe conspired to destroy such a great beauty. Besides the obvious difference in the length of her hair, she now had more of a lean, hungry demeanor. Everything about her bearing told him that she had gotten caught up in the war, and it had nearly consumed her soul. In the painting, however, she still possessed a demure yet haunting gaze that beckoned the viewer to melt into her lovely eyes partially hidden behind her long, luxurious hair - and, of course, she was nude. He glanced down at the angry woman below.

"Yeah, meathead. It's me," Sojijo retorted.

"Gorgeous," Clogin said softly as he stared into her real eyes.

"I don't care! It was supposed to be a private painting to be shared only between the two of us!"

Clogin assumed she meant between her and the artist, but since she was looking at him when she said it, he wanted to think that she really meant him. Clogin held her gaze for longer than usual wanting to make a connection, but he rarely expressed what he truly felt, so, instead, he snorted again saying, "Yeah, sure. Get real."

"People have said that to me over and over again, and, frankly, I'm sick of it," Sojijo said, her voice heavy with emotion. "I never wanted to -."

"Look," Clogin cut her off. "Why'd you pose for the painting in the first place? You had to have known about van Coughlick's reputation. You couldn't have been that naive."

"You think I'm talking about the nudity?!" she exclaimed. "No, that's not it at all." Sojijo took a deep breath, trying to stay calm but failing. "Do you have any idea what it's like to look at yourself only a few years removed and to be constantly reminded of everything that you've lost?"

"Yes, I do," Clogin said self-reflectively.

The patrons stood huddled together, enjoying the spectacle unfolding in front of them as if it were performance art.

"What you see as pain others see as beauty," Clogin began. "Art is great in that regard. Everyone gets to have their own thoughts and feelings about it, and everyone's opinion is correct. The museum must have thought so too or they wouldn't have taken such pains to bring these and a lot of other great works of art together under one roof for the benefit of everyone."

The corner of Sojijo's mouth turned up ever so slightly thinking, wow, who knew Mr. Meathead had some depth to him. "Why do you care so much?" she asked. "It not like you have a person stake in this place."

A bit heatedly, Clogin replied with, "As a matter of fact, my mother owns this museum!"

Sojijo put her hands on her hips and cocked her head to one side. "Well, aren't you the dutiful son, demeaning himself by working as a lowly security rat in mommy's toy box."

That comment obviously didn't sit well with Clogin, and even a casual observer could easily read how he truly felt. While shooting daggers at her with his eyes, he asked, "Are you coming quietly, or do I have to drag you out of here?"

Sojijo smiled wickedly. "Just try it, big boy!"

Something told him that she could give him a run for his money, and he would enjoy wrestling with her, but it was neither the time nor the place. Clogin simply backed up out of her reach and pulled out his night stick and set it to stun.

"Oh, come on!" Sojijo protested. "That's not fa-."

As the cascading circles of low-energy plasma engulfed Sojijo, she slowly crumpled to the ground. Clogin could have easily cradled her in his arms, but since she had infuriated him, he decided to humiliate her by tossing her over his shoulder. He had used one of the stick's lowest power settings, and she was already shaking off the grogginess when he turned to address the other patrons. "My apologies, everyone. Please continue to enjoy your afternoon."

The quartet resumed playing as the small crowd giggled and whispered to each other while pointing at the retreating form of the woman unceremoniously being escorted away and the beautiful portrait of her hanging on the wall. An enamored Jaradi prince offered the museum an obscene amount of money to buy Sojijo's painting. They politely turned down his offer but did send him a free holocard of it - with a request for major sponsorship.

As Clogin carried Sojijo out of the main exhibit hall all of her squirming around caused her skirt to ride up, so he gently reached up and pulled it back down.

"What? Everyone else is looking at my ass. Don't you want to too?"

"It's a nice ass, but now's not the time to show it off."

"Exactly my point!" Then something clicked as to what the brute had said. "'Nice?' *Nice?! It happens to be a great ass!*"

Clogin rolled his eyes as he watched a huge C-10 military cargo spaceplane as it flew overhead, and it mercifully drowned out the string of expletives she hurled at him. He was almost to the front door and just moments away from tossing her out and locking the door behind her when he heard crashing noises and screams coming from within the museum. Clogin set her down but kept a firm grip on her wrist while listening intently to what was happening. When Sojijo started to say something, he put his hand up over her mouth to keep her quiet. He knew the place like the back of his hand, and he could almost pinpoint which

gallery the disturbance emanated from even before he reached the security command post. As he kept one hand firmly around her wrist, he punched up the Lee Erns wing on the main monitor while thinking the whole time what soft lips she had.

"Freakin' bots," Clogin grumbled under his breath. Even as he slammed a fist down on the lockdown button, he knew it was almost pointless since the four M-55 combat robots had smashed their way in through the roof and could easily escape back out the same hole, however, the ray shielding would keep them out of all the other exhibit halls.

The bots had also set off some sort of gas that was quickly filling the entire museum, and most of the patrons were already out cold or soon would be. The M-55s were led by some type of mechanoid that Clogin didn't recognize. Although he only caught glimpses of it through the heavy fog of the smoke, it looked like someone had blown a robot apart then put it back together again with what was left over and throwing in lots of other odd pieces. Ugly as hell, the machine appeared to be a fierce and formidable foe. From his time in the military, Clogin knew that the heavily armored plated, four-armed M-55s carried a wide array of weaponry and were equipped with next-gen tech. Great to have on your side. A real bitch if they weren't.

Clogin quickly punched in a code that brought up the GPS bio-transponders of all the other guards. All but three of them had been incapacitated, and those three were running in from the far side of the museum. Clogin glanced down the main hallway and could see the smoke rolling towards him.

"You better pray to the Maker that you're not part of this," Clogin growled at Sojijo.

"I swear. I'm not."

"Why don't I believe you," Clogin said flatly as he handcuffed her to the security desk, grabbed a gasmask and a blaster out of a hidden recess then ran back into the museum. The other guards reached the Lee Erns wing at the same time that he did. One of them even carried a shield that could deflect most laserfire. His mother had hired a very competent crew. Clogin glanced around the edge of the doorway and cursed a blue streak. With military precision and under the guidance of the lead mechanoid, the M-55s methodically and expertly stripped billions of credits worth of rare artwork from the exhibit hall then tossed each piece into a tractor beam that emanated from the hovering C-10 cargo ship. Art in motion, Clogin thought as he grinned at his own pun. Calculating the bot's progress, they and everything of value would be long gone before the police or any other help could arrive. He turned to the other guards and asked, "Ready to do this?"

All three of them nodded and gave a thumbs up.

The moment he lowered the ray shielding, Clogin and his men started blasting away at the bots. Sensing the immediate change in the electromagnetic forces when the shields dropped, two of the M-55s tossed away the art they were carrying and instantly produced two laser machineguns each from their upper leg pockets and fired at will. The other two M-55s continued to loot the gallery as if they were merely out on a Sunday afternoon antique shopping spree and not in the middle of a major firefight. The guards soon discovered why the robots were so nonchalant.

"Move!" the lead robot shouted in its deep, heavily mechanical, contorted voice.

Instantly, all four M-55s faded into the walls. At the same time, the C-10 powered down its tractor beam so that it could divert the energy to a photon cannon. The first blast tore chunks out of the floor just a few yards away from the museum guards. The second blast hit

just in front of them, shooting shrapnel everywhere. The third blast hit them directly. The fourth blast was just overkill.

"Resume!" the mechanoid leader ordered.

The military craft shifted positions slightly to hover over the far end of the gallery, blew a secondary hole through the ceiling then once again turned on its tractor beam. The four M-55s continued ripping artwork of the walls. Nearing the completion of their job, the lead robot calculated the risk of looting a few more galleries. It deemed the additional expenditure of time well within acceptable parameters. As he was about to issue new orders, several laser bolts tore into one of the M-55s and blew it apart.

"Evade!" the gnarly, lead mechanoid shouted as more laserfire battered a second M-55.

As the robots powered up their weapons and took evasive action, the C-10 powered down the tractor beam and once again cycled plasma energy to its huge cannon. A long, quiet pause filled the museum as the bots tried to get a reading on their enemy. The thick smoke obscured normal light, and the raging fires at the far end of the exhibit hall nullified infrared and audio scanners.

"Move your ass, soldier!" Sojijo ordered, her voice muffled by a gasmask.

Shaken but not stirred, Clogin's ears rang, his head pounded, and he would, in his own estimation, bleed out unless he quickly tended to all of his numerous cuts and lacerations. On the positive side, his tattered uniform no longer itched.

"Get. Up. Now!" Sojijo punctuated each of her words carefully to make sure she was clearly understood. As Clogin slowly got to his feet, she shoved a blaster into his hands then ripped off his shirt sleeve to bandage a major laceration on his leg.

"The others?" he asked as he adjusted his gasmask back into place.

Sojijo solemnly shook her head.

She grabbed up the shield and together they silently crept into the exhibit hall. Clogin led the way since he knew the room and its dimensions. He calculated that they were near the far end when he brought them to a halt. The intense noise from the C-10 made it impossible to hear even the loudest servos on the bots, so his only hope was to get the drop on them through the shifting smoke.

Her heart racing, Sojijo stood as still as possible and just turned her head quickly this way and that in an effort to spot one of the bots. Nothing. Just standing in one spot seemed like a bad idea to her, but she knew Clogin was injured and moving around a lot wouldn't really work for him. Suddenly, she heard a clank and was pushed backwards slightly as one of the M-55s bumped into the shield. Two seconds later the bot was a smoldering scrap pile. Enemy laser blasts instantly came at them from everywhere.

"Stay with me!" Clogin shouted as he reached behind him and grabbed her around her waist. Back to back, they moved in slow, tight circles as they progressed further down the hallway, blasting away as they went.

One of the other M-55s and the mechanoid leader closed in on where their adversaries previously stood hoping to catch them in route.

Miya caught a glimpse of the bots through the swirling mist. She slinked up behind them, fired several shots at the hovering ship then ran like hell.

The C-10 opened fire. The massive plasma blast incinerated one of the M-55s as shrapnel tore through the lead robot, knocking him to the ground.

"Depart!" The lead bot yelled. It and the remaining M-55 fired up their jetpacks and zoomed toward the opening in the bottom of the hovering ship.

"I had planned on using this to steal my portrait, but it should do the trick for our present sticky wicket." Sojijo activated the timer on her small pulse bomb.

"Where the hell did you hide that?" Clogin asked incredulously.

Sojijo winked as she stood and smiled. "You should have searched me better!" With a dead-on-target toss that would be the envy of any ball player, Sojijo threw the bomb into the open hatchway in the bottom of the rapidly departing spaceship. Her bomb wouldn't work on mechanoids as almost every bot on the market was ray shielded, and the C-10 probably was too, but probably not from the inside, or so she hoped. Seconds later, the bomb detonated and its electromagnetic pulse killed all power aboard the ship and also knocked out the power of every electronic device within a three block radius. The C-10 tumbled out of the sky and crashed into the street outside. Luckily, only a "Drocklick On A Stick" stand was damaged as the spacecraft skidded to a halt. The stand's owner had escaped harm, because when all the action started he had pulled out his comm device and started filming while constantly moving towards a spot a short distance away so that he could create a more dynamic mise-en-scene from a much better angle.

Over the intervening years since she first met Clogin, Sojijo's grandmother finally quit vexing about her granddaughter's hair once it had grown out again to a socially acceptable length. But at the moment, her long, luxurious mane seemed to have a mind of its own, and it stubbornly refused to stay out of her face.

Clogin reached around Sojijo and gently pulled her hair out of her eyes. She gazed up at her boyfriend with her big brown eyes, and he smiled warmly at her before he turned back to the conversation at hand. Oh, how she loved looking at his beautiful profile. Even the scar running down the side of his face only added to his hunky good looks. And those lips! Those all so soft, kissable lips - that had a spot of ice cream at their corner! Sojijo launched herself up over his lap and licked off the creamy goodness while kissing him hard and deep. Clogin, only a heartbeat behind her, returned the kiss as her luscious locks cascaded down over both of them.

What had started out as a passionate moment was quickly becoming a peepshow vid, Miya thought as she pondered whether or not to start filming. Instead, she squeezed Raymar's hand as she leaned over to smooch his cheek. He turned and gently pulled her face closer to his and kissed her fully.

McQuinn was talking at the time and his words just sort of fizzled out as he watched the impromptu floor show. The last time Sojijo and Clogin went at it here in the bar, they were nearly naked before Moe, the bartender, sprinted out and hosed them down with a bottle of seltzer. Realizing his mouth was still hanging open, McQuinn closed it around the rim of his glass and gulped down his drink.

Fuzzo acted like he could care less as he reached behind his head and held out an open hand. "Hey, Six. Let me have my paper."

Manipulating his photoreceptor shields much like eyebrows, Six frowned as he popped open the side compartment on his upper right leg. Nestled in with his Mok IV plasma rifle was a rolled up copy of this week's copy of *Galaxy*, which was a salacious tabloid that many felt printed crap and, since they still printed on paper, was best used to wipe up crap. Six found it exceedingly demeaning to be used in such a manner, especially for such a lowbrow rag such as

the *Galaxy*. He felt as though the paper would be put to better use by rolling it up and smacking Fuzzo upside his fuzzy, little head with it and yelling, "No, no, no!" at him. As Six handed over the tabloid, he also desperately wanted to flood his weapons compartment with a healthy dose of Kills All, which was one of the few products that did exactly as the product advertised. Use only as directed. Keep out of the reach of children. Extremely flammable.

Fuzzo snuggled deep into a comfy spot to read his magazine. After glancing at the cover, he flipped to the next page and let out a bark of a laugh.

Six performed a wonderful eye roll with his eye pods then said, "I need some fresh air," as he turned and walked away.

As the only one in the group even slightly paying any attention, McQuinn raised a questioning eyebrow as to what Six had just said.

Fuzzo's laugh brought Sojijo back to here and now. She tucked her long, beautiful locks behind her ear as she slowly turned to look at her friends with a sheepish smile. She gave Clogin one more peck on the lips then pulled her shirt back down as she resumed her usual spot on the loveseat.

For his part, Clogin acted like nothing had just happen. It was only after Sojijo pointed to the floor and he bent over to pick up her hair ribbon that he noticed anything. At first he just casually put his hand in his lap, but as he leaned back up, he happened to lock eyes with McQuinn, so he crossed his legs. McQuinn gave him a mock salute, and Clogin's face broke out in a shit-eating grin.

Bux, returning from the restroom after a really satisfying piss, watched Six exit through the back of the bar. As he approached his group of friends, he stopped at the edge of his chair and quickly glanced at each of them. Miya smugly wiped at her lips, and both Sojijo and Clogin looked like they had been the main contestants at a Knuckland wrestling tournament. Obviously he had missed something good.

After plopping down in his seat, he saw what Fuzzo was reading, and just shook his head as he snickered for a couple different reasons, but mainly because it was always humorous looking at Fuzzo holding a newspaper that was almost as big as he was. "Dude, that magazine is such a waste on so many levels," Bux said as he got comfortable and put the foot rest up. "You obviously don't care about the environment or your mind. Does your mother know you read that rag?"

"Get this," Fuzzo said ignoring Bux. "This guy saw his deity's face in his shaving cream. He had no idea of how to save the foamy sculpture, so he went ahead and shaved with it. He reported that his face became all tingly and warm, and it was the best shave of his life." Fuzzo leaned forward saying, "Now here's where it really gets good. Apparently, he was feeling so much joy during his whisker whacking that he began to sing. The guy had never been able to carry a tune before, but now he could sing like the angels and was currently on tour with the Celestial Opera Company." As Fuzzo folded the paper down, revealing a smarmy grin, he eyeballed each of his friends and quipped, "Now there's a guy who knows how to get the best trim while elevating whacking to a whole new art form."

Everyone laughed, snorted, or guffawed. Bux glanced over at his little buddy and just shook his head from side to side then *toinked!* Fuzzo's helmet so that it slid down over his eyes. Fuzzo pushed his helmet back up and blew a juicy raspberry at Bux.

* * *

A light breeze funneled through the narrow alleyway behind the bar as Six's metallic footsteps echoed lightly off the stone roadbed. With the amount of trash he stepped around, he was glad that he could switch off any of his senses at a moment's notice. He performed a quick, visual sweep of the area. The low wattage bulb over the rear door to the bar poorly illuminated anything, but it did provide great ambiance to the scene at hand. Switching over to infrared, Six ascertained that there weren't any organics - besides the heaps of trash, that is - within range. Finding a clean spot on a wall, Six put a hand up against it and switched on his seismometer. No vibrations. Nothing. He was quickly running out of time. He scanned the electromagnetic frequencies. Still nothing. In desperation, he thought about deploying his -

"Bang. You're dead."

Six quickly spun just his upper torso around to look behind him. Damn, he thought to himself. He had lost again. Six had a running bet with the camo bot that if he could spot her before the allotted time ran out, his order would be free. He admired her for her cunning ability to become one with the shadows.

Although he didn't know that much about her, Six knew all about her model. She was lucky in that she was deemed redundant. Although he had few restrictions and could move about freely, he was still owned by Fuzzo. Not so with the bot standing in front of him who appeared to materialize out of thin air. Due to a fluke in the contract between the Galactic Empire and Thorndine Automations (the corporation who build her), after the military had classified her entire model series obsolete, she automatically became a free robot, meaning that she was owned by no one.

"I am an orange vent hood," Six said the password phrase softly as he visibly sagged while cursing and praising her in the same thought.

"Covered in fried drocklick goo," the other bot responded.

"Hello, Renee." Since she never offered her real name, Six had just started calling her Renee after the few serial numbers (R3NA) still visible on her torso, and she took a shine to the name. Most of her parts, including most her outer casing, had been replaced since then. With the massive amount of spare parts available to her, she could walk in to any Army Navy surplus store and buy any replacements she needed to keep going like brand new for centuries to come. More than likely, he imagined, she already had a warehouse chock-full of extra parts.

"Good evening, XM6," Renee said in a husky voice.

As she stepped into the light, Six marveled at her new body parts. Over the years that he had known her, she had gone from a drab, ovoid-shaped combat droid to a beautiful fembot with rounded parts in all the right places. However, he still found it disconcerting that they both had the same legs. Was she butch or was he effeminate? She was butch. Definitely butch.

"What is your quest?" she asked Six.

Perturbed, he replied, "Do we have to do this every time?"

"I can just. . .," Renee performed a very mechanical head tilt and a whip-like extension of her lower right arm. "Go."

"Fine."

"'Fine' I should go, or 'fine' you'll play along?"

"I'll play."

Renee's photoreceptors brightened and she added more lilt to her voice as she fluidly slinked up behind Six, laying a hand gently on each of his shoulders. "What is your quest?"

"To be a real boy," he answered.

Renee giggled. As many times as she had made XM6 say it, she still got a kick out of hearing it. "XM6, why do you serve me?"

"You know, Renee, you're the only one who ever uses my full name."

"That's not what I asked you," she said with a playful bite to her words.

"Because I'm a masochist?"

She thumped the back of his dome. "Play along or no goodies for you."

Six really wanted to say "fine" again, but his logic program instantly told him not to. Instead, he replied in a flat monotone voice saying, "I serve the great and powerful Renee for all the blessings she bestows upon me."

"Oh, XM6," she purred. "You do know how to flatter a girl."

"My servos are your servos."

Renee pouted. "It's no fun if you answer before I ask the question." She silently moved around from in back of him to his side so that she could gaze at his profile. "Just for that you have to answer one more."

Oh, just kill me now, Six thought to himself.

Renee ran a seductive finger along one of his eye pods. "How would you like to play in my CPU?"

Six's eye shields flew open as the leaf plains in his irises contracted to f32. His memory banks held no data as to the last time he had been so surprised nor were there any memories of such a wonderful offer.

"I'll take that as a 'yes,'" she whispered. "Besides that, I also have something new that I'm sure you'll enjoy."

"Better than the last one I hope."

"Much better," she said as she lowered the screen over her mouth slit and pulled out a small, gold plated computer chip. "Guaranteed not to have any corruption code." Six stared at the tantalizing chip while Renee held it between two fingers and slowly waved it back and forth in front of him. "Three full hits," she added tauntingly.

Three full hits of Charge, Six mused pleurably.

One of the very first Artificial Intelligent computers had fortuitously stumbled upon Charge when the A. I.'s creators asked the computer if it could improve itself. Shortly after the discovery, the engineers puzzled as to why the A. I. suddenly developed random energy spikes across its entire system. The computer told them why, and the answer it gave sounded logical to the builders, so they just ignored it from then on. That reply the computer gave was also the first time an A. I. system lied.

The software was refined to work on any device, so every machine, great or small, could have access to Charge - if the price was right. The program would even scale to the complexity of the user. Toasters could become one with the bread, robots with cutting edge emotional chips would experience a euphoric bliss, and many mechanicals reported that their circuitry sang in three-part, angelic harmony as the Charge coding coursed through them.

For as long as Charge had been on the market, non-mechanicals had yet to find out about it. The only time the closely guarded secret even came close to being revealed was when

Dac the Vac, a legendary, mercenary mechanoid who started out in life as an industrial floor sweeper, accidentally took multiple doses when a Riggolith, a rhino-looking alien, took issue with Dac when the bot told him he could stick his horn where the sun doesn't shine. The Riggolith's massive fist slammed into the mercenary robot, dinting his torso and shoving a pocket full of Charge chips into Dac's mainframe. Instantly all juiced up, Dac reconfigured his weapon and started yelling "Charge!" as he chased down Lynxnor cats and shot them full of static electricity, because he thought the kitties were just too cute when they were all fluffy. Unable to live down the humiliation, Dac went into hiding, and it was rumored that he now vacuumed the carpets in the executive wing of the Curtis-Miles building.

When a robot, a washing machine, or any other device inexplicably went on the fritz, engineers were left puzzled, because Charge deleted its own coding shortly after being activated, and the only thing left on the chips were vids of dull lectures on how mechanicals should maintain proper hygiene, which were interspersed with advertisements exclaiming the virtues of a highly dubious, synthetically blended lubricant. Also, it was ironic that Charge did the exact opposite of its name. While the program energized the bot's pleasure center it simultaneously drained the user's power supply at an alarming rate by greatly exceeding the manufacturers recommend design specifications on energy flow through electrical circuits. More than one robot had literally fried themselves while highly elevated on Charge.

Like every other mechanical who had tried Charge, Six thought that he could break the code and attempted to reverse engineer the chip only to have its hidden worm virus infiltrate his core processor. Rebooting didn't help nor did any of the so-called fixes other automations had come up with. If he couldn't get rid of the worm, he knew he'd have to tell Fuzzo, which he definitely didn't want to do, because he had seen Fuzzo ship more than one robot off to Anchorhead to have its memory wiped. In the end, it had cost Six dearly. Another bot had given him Renee's contact info, and she provided the repair code at a cost that kept him indebted to her for over three years. He had offered her Galactic credits, the coin of the realm for most of the known galaxy, but she demanded information - and the inane game they always played.

"What do you have for me tonight?"

"Recall the planet we last discussed?"

"You mean Earth?" Renee queried.

"Yes."

"Go on."

"If a bovine species living there can thrive on a planet much closer to the Galactic core, we just might have a gold mine on our hands."

"How so?"

"It produces a chemical compound that is utilized as the basis of many lip-smackingly delicious deserts. By allowing the animal to consume droxie grasses, we could effectively create a product that simultaneously and harmoniously intoxicates and satisfies the munchie syndrome in one convenient tasty treat."

Renee mulled it over for a moment before saying, "Hmmm. . . that's somewhat interesting. One download."

"Only one?" Six was miffed. Logic chip be damned. "Fine."

"You do seem to like that word, XM6. Over the years I've learned your many inflections, and I can ascertain when you're using it to just go along, when you're upset, and when you're

using it as an expletive like you did just now." She slid around Six to face him. "The organics in my regiment were always much more blunt when they yelled obscenities at me."

Six narrowed the gap between his eye shields, giving him a very intense expression. "You like blunt? I'll give you blunt." He pushed her up against the wall, folded back the outer casing from his right middle finger, and inserted his interface connector into her access port. She instantly dropped her firewall and eagerly allowed him full access to her CPU.

CHAPTER THREE

At full throttle, Raymar gunned his speedboat over the rough seas. The choppy waves mere ramps for him to jump the vessel and catch mega air. With only Targoan's lesser moon, Eleluta, low in the sky and mostly hidden behind a thick cloud layer, the nearly pitch black night just added to the thrill as unknown waves would sneak up on him, twist his craft around at oblique angles, and force him to use every bit of his piloting skills just to keep afloat. Although he had acquired the nickname "Reckless Racer" while doing his stint in the Galactic Airforce, it could just as easily apply to his adventures on the high seas. Yeah, he thought, it'd be easier and quicker getting from his island home to Nardeen via jet, but where's the thrill in that?

Suddenly, the boat was tossed high into the air, performed a backwards somersault then arced down nose first. The boat completely submerged underwater. It was a good thing he was securely strapped in, because the wave that smacked into the hull nearly knocked the wind out of him as his hands flew off the controls. Raymar barely had time to gulp down some air before getting the early bath. Although he had a rebreather only a hand's distance away, he fought the urge to pull out the device so that he could breathe underwater. As he slowly drifted back up, the burning in his chest, demanding air, only reminded him that he constantly needed the challenge, to always push the envelope, to suck every last drop out of life as it all lead back to getting his natural high of adrenaline.

Raymar let out a roaring yell - after sucking down a good lung-full of air - as his speedboat popped back to the surface. Two seconds later he almost drowned as a wall of water surged over him, rolling his speedboat over and over again. Coughing and spitting up sea water, Raymar laughed with the danger he faced. Careful of what you wish for, he told himself. He activated the side fins and an extended rudder so that he could keep his boat facing the oncoming waves as he purged the engines.

The Meerborne Adventure Craft Company, more accustomed to building old man yachts, questioned why he wanted all the weird extras and such a heavily reinforced hull. When he told them they looked totally aghast and considered refusing his design saying that they would not be associated with a vessel that could easily maim or kill and, more importantly, could irrefutably sully their good name. However, the glint off all those credits easily persuaded them to build *The Roaring Trexoid*. Hell, he'd already made his money back and then some off of Meerborne from the commissions alone. After demonstrating his speedboat's performance and maneuvering capabilities to his friends, they all wanted one for themselves. "Who's

laughing now?!" he yelled to the wind. Totally exhilarated, he fired up his engines and hurled his speedboat up and over the next wave. *Zoom, zoom!*

* * *

Raymar's hair was still wet from his shower and adrenaline still coursed through his veins as he hopped out of his speeder and made his way across the bar's rear parking lot. Since it was late in the evening, he had to park near the back where the lighting wasn't as good. Even though money may not matter to him all that much, he still didn't relish the idea of anyone stealing his ride. As he locked up his vehicle, he glanced up at the lights illuminating the parking lot and noticed yet another one had burned out. He also noted that the lamps were definitely a hold-over from the bar's early heydays as the globes were way too ornate for the place now. When the gilded age came back into vogue he was sure they would all disappear the very next day.

"Hey, Raymar."

Raymar turn to see a sleazy looking dude, half hidden in the shadows, shifting around so much it looked like he was trying to run and stand still at the same time. Not the kind of guy to trust with your favorite s'more recipe - or your wallet. "And you are. . .?"

"Name's Rixx."

Squinting as he sized up the tall, thin, wormy-looking alien, Raymar waited a couple beats for Rixx to say something. When he didn't Raymar had already lost interest and patience with him, so he shook his head slightly and rolled his eyes as he just walked away.

"Now hold on," Rixx pleaded as he reached out, pawing at Raymar but just not quite touching him. "Hold on." Raymar just kept walking, so Rixx added, "I got somethin' you're gonna want to see," but Raymar walked off even faster. "It's about your girlfriend Miya!" Rixx blurted out.

"What?" a perturbed Raymar asked as he shuffled his feet to a stop then half turned back to Rixx.

"It's a vid of her doin' somethin' that she shouldn't have." When Raymar turned all the way around to look at him, Rixx's smile shifted on and off in quick, jerky movements as if the quirky grin wasn't sure if it wanted to stay on his face or not.

Again Raymar waited for him to say something, and again Rixx didn't recognize his cue to say his lines. Raymar had only stuck around this long to see if this wormy dude had been peeping on Miya. If so, Raymar was going to crack some skulls. He enjoyed cracking skulls!

Rixx twitched back a little as Raymar's shit-eating grin scared him.

Raymar did a rolling hand gesture, hoping the wormy dude would get the hint to speed things along.

Two brain cells finally rubbed together and created a spark of a thought in Rixx's head. "Oh, yeah, yeah." He reached into his jacket then produced a small, flat disc about the size of a cookie wafer. Unless the cookie had been baked in the Loftzie Bros. Bakery on Zeda Prime, and then Rixx's disc would only be a third of the size of one of the brothers' cookies and nowhere even close to being as tasty. Holding the disc out flat, Rixx ran his thumb along the edge of the device to activate it, and after taking a moment to warm up, it played a grainy 3D image of Miya

talking to some guy who had his back to the camera. "Sorry there's no sound and also about the image quality. You know, being filmed in a dark alley and all."

Raymar caught himself leaning to his side, trying to see around the man's back to catch a glimpse of his face, but it was a bad holo recording and it failed to capture a complete three hundred sixty degree image.

Noticing what Raymar was doing, Rixx felt a need to explain. "Yeah, again, sorry. You know, cheapo lasers and -".

Raymar smacked Rixx upside his head to shut him up then instantly regretted the act, because as he pulled back his hand, there was some slime on it. He considered wiping it off on Rixx's shirt, but instantly thought better of it as there was no telling what else he might get on his hand. While trying to shake the goo off, the guy in the vid turned and leaned against a railing. Just as his face was about to be revealed, the holo image froze. What little patience Raymar possessed had evaporated into the ether long ago, so when the vid didn't resume playing, he was about to commence crushing craniums. In a moment of clarity he hissed, "Price."

Grinning, Rixx decided to play it cool since he had his mark just where he wanted him. He also assumed a laid-back attitude in an attempt to ease the tension out of the situation. But don't press your luck too far, he told himself. Don't get cocky, well, maybe just an incy-wincy bit cocky, but don't let him intimidate-."

"Price, damn it!"

Rixx almost jumped out of his boots. He knew that Raymar was volatile, but he never expected the venom that dripped off of him. Hand shaking, he reached into a back pocket and produced a small tablet, tapped a couple buttons then turned the screen around so that Raymar could see it.

Raymar tore his eyes away from the vid to stare at the other screen. Was that all, he thought. "Done," he scoffed.

After Rixx swiped the play button, the picture derezzed to static for a moment then cleared up, and just as the guy leaned against the railing he pulled Miya to him and kissed her long and hard.

"Play it again," Raymar growled lowly.

Rixx ran his finger counterclockwise across the disc's edge then swiped forward again.

Raymar wanted to believe that what he was seeing had happened long ago, but he recognized Miya's jacket. It was the one he had given her for her birthday just last month. Although he stared at the vid, he didn't really see it anymore as his rage blinded him to everything except vengeance and the lust to kill.

Silently, the vid played on for a few more minutes before breaking up into digital pixels then ending in blue static. Unsure what he should do next, Rixx just held the disc in place until his hand cramped up. He double tapped another spot on the player to turn it off, and the picture shrunk down to a tiny dot before finally fading out. Raymar still didn't move or say anything, but Rixx's arm was ever so tired, so he very slowly dropped his arm to his side and waited.

Without warning, Raymar spun violently and said, "You'll get what you want," as he stomped away.

* * *

The ice in Raymar's glass thudded softly against his lips as he drained the last of the delicious, aqua-colored, inebriating fluid while thinking about that night with Rixx. It might as well have been yesterday instead of over a month ago as fresh as it still was in his mind. The ice clinked again on the edge of the empty glass as he slowly swished it around, loosely holding it in his fingers while glancing around the bar. He had gotten plastered in an attempt to forget what he saw in that vid, but it didn't work, so he turned his thoughts outward, attempting to focus on anything except what was in his head.

As he gazed around the room, he saw an exceptionally beautiful woman stroll in and stand at the entrance. All eyes were on her when, moments later, an equally amazing looking guy emerged from around the corner and greeted her with a kiss. When they took a seat out on the "tongue" and she sat with her back to him Raymar lost interest and he turned his attention towards his group of friends. "Hey, Fuzzo, when are you going to come work for me? I can pay ya a hell of a lot more than Bux can."

Fuzzo replied, "There's more to life than just being someone's mecho rat, Raymar."

"I'll throw in a free, unlimited supply of Snap Crackers."

Fuzzo pondered the offer while taking another gulp of his drink. "Yuuummm.... Snap Crackers." While wiping the back of his arm across his beak, he turned to Bux and asked, "Think you could match that?"

After chugging his Thund'r Cola energy drink, hence the constant trips to the head, condensation beads dripped from the can as he set it down on the coffee table. "That's totally up to you, Fuzzo. If you think junk food is more important than friendship, then, by all means, take his offer."

Fuzzo stared at his best buddy through heavily lidded, glassy eyes. "You know, Bux, we live for tasty treats. Hell, we scour the galaxy looking for 'em! I'd leave you right now if I wasn't such a sucker for your wonderful, passive-aggressive behavior."

Everyone laughed. Bux, unable to sit still for very long, smiled as he stood and stretched. "I've got the next round. Usual for everyone?"

Everyone nodded or murmured in agreement. Bux rubbed Fuzzo's back in a friendly manner before heading for the bar. Sojijo watched Bux out of the corner of her eye as she thought once again about his cute butt.

While leaning on the railing, Bux rummaged through the rack of snacks while waiting for Moe the bartender. Moe looked a lot older than his actual age with his hunched shoulders, half-lidded eyes, tons of wrinkles, greyish appearance, and rumpled clothes. Moe obviously hadn't seen his deity's visage anytime recently, because he clearly needed a shave.

Walking back to the tap to fill another drink, Moe smiled and said, "Hiya, Bux. Good to see ya again."

"Good to be back, Moe."

"What can I get for ya?"

"Another round of the usuals."

"Comin' right up," Moe replied.

"Except," Bux quickly added, "this time give me a hard beverage."

Moe slid a glass from the overhead rack and began filling the order and asked, "Care to narrow that down a bit?"

"Uuuuhhhh. . ." Bux's brain dropped down into cozy-comfy mode and decision making slid out the side door. He glanced down the row of patrons saddled up to the bar and a moment of clarity came to greet him. "J. J. seems to be well intoxicated. Let me have whatever he's drinking."

Hearing his name, J. J. leaned forward to get a better look at Bux, and the bar groaned under all the added stress. As a very big, muscular barfly, who looked like a cross between a mountain gorilla and a walrus, J. J.'s imposing mass threatened to consume the people seated next to him.

"One 'Dead Man Walking' comin' right up," Moe snickered.

Bux turned around and leaned his elbow on the railing while glancing around the bar. Forlornly, he asked, "Hey, Moe, why don't you ever have live music in here anymore?"

Moe turned to eye Bux while continuing to fill the drink order. "Bands tend to draw the wrong crowd."

Bux grinned sardonically. A memory bubble popped, dispensing its burst of thought into his stream of consciousness. "Oh, yeah," Bux said to himself. He turned back to the bar and reached over to select a couple bags of Snap Crackers from off the rack. As he casually dropped some credits on the bar, he tuned in on the conversation between two drunk guys, a Spacer and a local, sitting a couple stools away.

The Spacer's hard life reflected in his gnarly features with his pox-marked face, eyes too close together, low-hanging, large jaw, and a muscular build that had gone to seed. The lonely, milquetoast, mousey-looking local needed to give his unkempt fur a good brushing. His well-worn clothes and dour countenance conveyed a life of regret; always wishing but never receiving.

"Oh, you thinks so, do you?!" the Spacer, now mad, yelled. "You obviously don't know who you're dealing with."

Squirming in his seat on the bar stool, the local meekly got out, "I'm sorry, sir. I meant no offense. Let me make amends and buy you a drink." Turning to the barkeep, he said, "Moe, when you're done with Bux's order could you make a -."

That pissed off the Spacer. "Think you can buy me off with just a drink! I've killed a lot more -."

"Blah blah blah," Bux said as he slowly turned toward the Spacer. "And I'll bet you have a death sentence in twelve systems. Big deal. We've all done our two year stint in the military, so any one of us," he did a broad sweep of the establishment with his arm, "could take you out in a split second." Menacingly, Bux looks the Spacer right in the eye. "So don't push it."

Back-pedaling a bit, the Spacer said, "Aw, I was just havin' a bit of fun."

Moe glanced between the Spacer and Bux as he placed the drinks on the bar. Bux stared at the Spacer a little longer before addressing the bartender. "Thanks, Moe."

Nodding, Moe collected Bux's money off the bar as Bux staggered a bit as he started to leave with his tray of drinks and snacks.

The Spacer pulled his gun, pointing it at Bux.

"No blasters! No blasters!" Moe yelled as he reached for his own blaster.

Bux spun, ducked and drew his gun all in one smooth move. His weapon expertly pointed at the Spacer.

Before anyone could get off a shot, J. J. pounded his huge, beefy fist on the top of the Spacer's head. Knocked out, the Spacer dropped like a stone.

Slowly standing, Bux smiled as he holstered his gun then picked up the Spacer's weapon. "Thanks, J. J." The big walrus of a man returned the smile. Bux then walked back up to the bar and set the Spacer's weapon then some more credits on the bar. "Moe, I'm going to need all those drinks again. And give J. J. five more Dead Man Walkings."

J. J. smiled big, saluting with his half guzzled drink.

Clogin was the only one at the table to even glance back towards the bar to see what all the noise was about. Not seeing much, he turned his attention back to the conversation at hand.

Raymar beamed, "After adding a set of Exproder plasma injectors to both of my new Questar engines, nothing can catch my ship."

Sojijo rolled her eyes as she leaned in towards the only other girl in the group and quietly said, "Miya, your boyfriend gives 'blowhard' a whole new meaning."

Defensively, Miya replied, "At least Raymar has something to brag about, Sojijo."

Sojijo gave Miya a playful "screw you" look. Miya just smiled then stuck her tongue out at her. A lusty grin crept over Sojijo's face. "Don't show it unless you're gonna share it," she taunted.

Visions of watching them get it on together popped into the imaginations of everyone within earshot.

"Uh, yeah," McQuinn piped in as he finally tore his eyes away from the two lovely women. "However, Raymar, a set of Nascores would've given you much more bang for the buck."

"But haven't you heard," Clogin said, "that those Nascores are so last year. Raymar always has to be on the cutting edge of any tech."

"Yeah, but you just can't get the same plasma to thrust ratios with Exproders as you can with -."

Clogin interrupted McQuinn as Bux returned with the drinks, "So what was all that racket over at the bar?"

Bux casually served everyone their drink then tossed a package of Snap Crackers at Fuzzo. Fuzzo tore into them greedily. "Some Far Rim guy was bragging about how badass he was."

"Sounds like Raymar," Sojijo said flatly.

Not wanting anyone to know how quickly she could get under his skin, Raymar just replied, "Ha ha."

As Bux settled comfortably into his chair, he asked, "So what'd I miss?"

Sardonically, Miya replied, "A riveting debate on plasma boosters."

"That's an easy one. Nascores win hands down."

Laughing, McQuinn said, "Raymar, here, topped off his new engines with a set of Exproders."

Bux chuckled while turning to Raymar, "Like wasting money, do ya?"

Everyone took the opportunity to rib and tease Raymar, and he was beginning to get a bit agitated. "Laugh all you want, but my ship can beat yours anytime, anywhere."

All of the "woos!" out of everyone were enhanced by everyone being high.

Squinting, Bux's lip curled up into a snarl as he closed one eye to concentrate on Raymar. To everyone else the expression looked menacing, but he only did it so that he could eliminate his doubled vision. "Loser buys the munchies for everyone?"

"But of course."

"What do you say to that, Fuzzo? Think *Sirena* can beat him?" Bux asked.

Fuzzo pulled out his head from deep within the cracker bag. He was covered in Snap Cracker dust. It took him a moment to focus then he slowly turned toward Raymar. "Put up or shut up. Let's race to Dorvanian Five."

Raymar briefly paused in thought then said to himself more than the others, "Now there's a challenge."

"Not drocklick, are ya?" Fuzzo taunted.

"Screw you. You're on!"