

The book you are holding, dear reader, is special. The critics are baffled, and divided in their opinions. Some regard it as a saga of the spaceways, detailing the exploits of a desperate trio bound together by love, and selfless in their efforts to save Mankind from a horrible fate. Other critics call it a pile of crap...

GAMBLING WITH GALAXIES



PAUL S. WESSON

 VANTAGEPress

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“Even without the sex, violence and deep philosophy,
it could be interesting”

(Jale of Acheron)

COUGHS AND SNEEZES SPREAD DISEASES

A ray of blue light found its way through the spaces between the planks that formed the ceiling of the mortuary, illuminating the intelligent features of Sherlock, master-detective of the Milky Way. The deerstalker hat was pulled down tightly over a furrowed forehead, housing a unique androidal brain, which had been described at various times as everything from superlative to stupid by his bosom friend Jale. The latter, clad in the mortician's black cape, was almost invisible in the gloom. But the scraping sound of the human's calf-length boots on the dusty floor caused the robot to turn with an admonishing stare, a metallic finger crossing silvery lips...

Jale shuffled irritably. A large man, he felt uncomfortably hot after the exertions of their forced entry to the morgue. In the present situation, however, *he* had the brawn while his companion represented the brains. As if to remind him, a drop of sweat ran out of his thatch of hair and found its way to the corner of his mouth, creating a taste of salt. The cool air around him was laced with the smells of other salts, some of which were familiar to him from his long career as undertaker to the stars. The crypt was, in fact, packed with numerous bodies in various states of preservation. Their toes, human and alien, were pointed towards him in a professional display of interstellar necroscopy. Jale knew that the corpses – indiscriminate of origin – were all victims of the new and particularly vicious gang that was ransacking the pharmacies of the Galaxy.

"Hsst!" Jale snapped his attention back to Sherlock. The android was wearing the impish grin of a child whose has just found

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a piece of hidden candy. Though in this case the prize was a strongbox of truly mammoth proportions. The light that filtered into the mortuary from the alien blue sun shone on a construction of mixed design: a massive but old iron box, bound with thick bars of brass – adorned with modern and intricate devices. Sherlock was already at work on the latter, and after a short period of intense fiddling turned to Jale with a thumb's up sign. But there was more to the matter than this. In the centre of the face of the safe there was a black slot which invited an old-fashioned key...

Jale's nervous eyes switched left. Had there had been movement among the corpses? Crouching, he fumbled at his belt and drew his blaster. Straining his vision, he tried to penetrate the shadows that lay heavily on the cadavers. But the only thing he could detect was the slight oscillation of a label attached to a reptilian toe. He forced himself to relax. This escapade was costing him dearly, both in terms of angst, and money. He had invested everything in this venture: all of the balance in his account with the First Bank of Trantor, all of his stock in the rival company Milky Way Morticians (it paid to be a share-holder so you knew what they were planning), and most of the rare mineral infinium he had hidden under the captain's bunk on the *Rigor Mortis*. The ship, *if* he failed, would be the only thing he would have left. The rest of his wealth had gone into a gamble to purchase a very small – but very special – key.

Click!

Jale's eyes switched back to Sherlock. The android had fitted the key into the lock of the strongbox, and was pulling open the massive door. His metallic cape shimmered in the poor light, obstructing a view of the safe's contents. But success was at hand... Jale felt his hunched shoulders relax. With a sigh, he started to move forward, and then –

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Hell broke out.

A black thing like a snake flashed from the safe's dark interior and curled around Sherlock's throat. The android turned to Jale, trying to form the word "Help". But the cry ended in a horrible gurgle.

Somewhere in the upper reaches of the building, a siren started to wail. Simultaneously, three of the planks that made up the mortuary's roof receded, and a dense white gas started to descend.

"Shit!" Jale exclaimed. And he meant it.

There was the sound of many running feet. Suddenly, one appeared in the gap overhead, clad in metal and shod with razor-sharp spurs. The owner of the trapped foot started to scream with pain, but the sound ended when a laser beam from another of the gang severed the appendage, which landed in front of Jale with a fountain of blood.

Coughing, Jale turned away from the fumes which were filling the room, and took a deep breath. Turning back, he ran to the writhing shape of his friend.

Sherlock was drawing his last breath: the snake thing had crushed his esophagus and was clenching tighter and tighter around his windpipe.

Jale raised his blaster and shot the main part of the thing to bits. Unfortunately, its upper body still lived, and with eel-like intensity was trying to finish its job. Jale dragged its writhing form away from his friend and shot it into even smaller bits.

The pieces of the creature lay for only a short time on the dusty floor, before they appeared to evaporate...

Jale noticed this only in passing. He was intent on dragging Sherlock to the jagged hole in the crypt, through which they had gained access and now provided the only hope of escape.

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He crashed into a corpse, which slid sedately from its rack and barred their path, its slack jaws taunting them with defeat.

"*Ha ha* to you also," muttered Jale, throwing Sherlock over the cadaver.

He gagged, feeling the bite of cyanide gas in his throat. But escape was near, and in a calculated act of bravado he dropped his friend and darted back to the strongbox.

The interior seemed empty to his scrabbling hand; but then his fingers closed on the neck of a small flask.

"So much for so little," he thought. And then on the broadcast channel, he ordered: "*Rigor*, arise!"

The space-hearse *Rigor Mortis* shed clods of brown earth from its improvised, shallow grave. As it raised itself out of the soil, slots clicked open to reveal fusion rifles. The ground began to vibrate as the mega-motors (noted on the invoice of the Acheron navy as "missing") began to build power.

Jale was pouring sweat. One of his hands grasped Sherlock's thin wrist, while the other was curled around the neck of the purloined bottle. The blaster, clamped between his teeth, vibrated annoyingly as he ran for the exit.

A flash of fusion crossed the entrance to the mortuary as he emerged onto a grass-covered hillside. One of the building's defenders rolled down the slope in a smouldering cartwheel, leaving a track of singed straw. The *Rigor* was doing its job.

The android was not heavy: whatever its origin, there was more content in its intelligence units than could ever be weighed. And the flask of transparent liquid was hardly a burden. Even so, Jale lost his footing on the dry grass and started to slide down the hill.

The blue sun was setting over distant mountains, but its disk was cut off by the bulk of the ship as he fetched up against it with

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a *clang*. "Open centre port!" he shouted.

A circle of welcoming yellow light appeared over his shoulder, and there was a faint outward breeze that carried the smell of beer. "Home sweet home," grunted Jale, heaving the unconscious Sherlock into the ship.

He was bending over, trying to locate the bottle of medicine in the shadowy grass, when a screaming, black shape like a giant running rat appeared around the side of the ship. A white rod of laser singed Jale's hair and buried itself in the plates of the *Rigor* with a bubbling sound. Even as the laser faded in the dusk, Jale's blaster was in his hand with the trigger depressed. There was a kick from the weapon, and his attacker went into pieces.

Watching the bits dissolve into nothing, Jale saw more figures up the hill, pouring over the ramparts of the building like lemming monks casting themselves from a rodent monastery. The fusion guns of the *Rigor* spat out four shots. Three of the attackers blew apart, while the last barrage hit the edge of a stone tower. Jale watched as the fortification started to collapse, revealing the stars of a strange sky behind and showering the hillside with bounding rocks.

The man scrambled into the open port of the ship and tripped over the inert android on the floor, just managing to cushion the precious flask of liquid against his chest before the ship leapt into the sky.

Under eyelids made heavy by the tremendous acceleration of his craft, Jale read the label on the flask: *The only known (and unknown) cure for the CLAG.*

*

The motors, at one-third power, thrummed reassuringly through the cabin.

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Sherlock, eyes closed, lay with his head against the rest which formed one end of the chaise longue. His feet, covered in the folds of his silvery cape, did not quite reach the couch's other end. He liked to tell people that he had acquired the piece of Victorian furniture at an emporium called *Thurston's*. This at the recommendation of Irene Adler (who was the most beautiful woman in the Galaxy), after dispatching with his own hands the Atomic Tiger (which had infested the empty house opposite 221B Baker Street). Whatever its true origin, the sofa was both comfy to experience and authentic to behold: the cushions were of red plush, heavily stuffed with artificial horse-hair, and bore the scars of numerous large if synthetic cigars. Sherlock had temporarily given up smoking, and his meerschaum pipe was wedged unignited between his metallic lips, which moved only occasionally to emit a low groan.

Jale, sitting in the big armchair, turned the stolen flask of medicine moodily between his large hands. He ignored his companion's plaintive bleats, as he did the medical plaster which adorned the android's high forehead but covered no discernable injury. The man also did not notice, out of long familiarity, the smudge of chalk which adorned the gap between the left thumb and index finger of the android. He tolerated this as just another of the idiosyncrasies of his friend, though history told that it was Doctor Watson who had sported the chalk mark after playing billiards at Thurston's, and not Sherlock Holmes. No, Jale was intent on the bottle and its colourless contents. What was this innocuous-looking fluid?

He had learned of the bottle of medicine during a game of polyhedral poker at the bar known as the *Sneering Snail*. The latter was a low-class place in one of the less salubrious sectors of Trantor, and as a student of Trantor U. the young Jale had fre-

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quented the place as a way of winning the money necessary to get an education. The fact he had been studying mathematics and number theory was something he never mentioned in the bar, but it had given him a natural advantage in playing the ultra-difficult game with the strange-shaped cards. Throughout his subsequent career as smuggler, undertaker and general rascal, Jale had dropped into the *Snail* at infrequent intervals. During one visit he had picked up a girlfriend who for a time shared his adventures, and the man was aware that his character contained a definite streak of nostalgia. It was because of this that, during a lull in business, he had sought out the old bar and the round table in the corner. There, with his back to the wall out of habit, he had learned of the existence of a miraculous medicine.

What this was supposed to cure was unclear. However, during Jale's travels, a new and deadly disease had appeared in the central regions of the Milky Way. The first batch of a potential serum had mysteriously vanished from its inventor's laboratory, along with the research data on which it was based. During a long evening of poker, Jale had learned various bits of information, but would not normally have thought much more about the matter. Were it not that his last opponent, a scabrous and scum-sucking alien, could not pay his dues. Hence, Jale had gotten up from the game not only much richer in money but also in possession of an old-fashioned key.

It was not often that an individual came into possession of special knowledge, had an interstellar ship, the cash to take it anywhere in the Galaxy *and* was struck with a sudden attack of boredom. This last was what really pushed Jale to pursue the search for the miracle medicine. The result of his quest now lay in his hands.

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Yet he felt vaguely dissatisfied. What *was* this stuff? He knew only that it was a cure of some kind for a deadly disease. *Where* had it come from? He was aware it had been stored for a while in the mountain keep, but not where it had been manufactured. And *why* was it so ridiculously labeled? He turned the flask and read yet again the peculiar inscription: *The only known (and unknown) cure for the CLAG*. Why not a more informative label with a detailed chemical or virological analysis? And why the childish reference to it being unknown as well as known? Irritated, Jale wondered if the whole affair might not be some kind of badly-posed joke. Then his hand wandered to the scar on his scalp, where the laser had bored through his thick hair and come within a finger's breadth of cooking his brains. No, this was not a joke. Too much trouble had gone into guarding this phial of mysterious medicine; and having nearly lost his life getting hold of it, he was determined to find out the properties of the potion. Gingerly, he felt the seal on top of the bottle: it was a featureless metal band, crimped around a plain black stopper. Carefully, he pushed a finger nail under the band...

"That may not be a good idea, Jale." The voice of the *Rigor Mortis* was rich, wise and distinctly feminine. It had been created by the man, an amalgam formed from recordings of his previous girlfriends. Sherlock found the choice of voice slightly perverse, since the women who had been aboard the ship had never stayed for any great time. But Jale knew himself well enough, and regarded the female voice as a kind of vocal balance to his male-dominated thoughts. Anyway, the *Rigor Mortis* never ordered Jale to do anything, but merely suggested...

Abruptly, there was a slight decrease in the throbbing note of the ship's motors. The bottle, which Jale had put on the table between his armchair and the opposite couch, slid slowly forwards.

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The craft seemed to hesitate slightly; then the sound of its engines came up, and the bottle slid backwards.

Jale's brow furrowed, as his mind ran through a range of possibilities.

"A vacuum wave", announced the *Rigor Mortis*. The contralto voice was factual but concerned. "I think another ship has entered our stratum."

Jale levered himself out of the easy chair and loped towards the control room. Sherlock, giving up the pretence of being mortally wounded, removed the x-shaped adhesive from his forehead and levitated towards the front of the ship.

A jealous admirer had once described the *Rigor Mortis* as "A couple of ginormous motors with a few attached cabins." The picture was true, at least to a first approximation. Forward of the lounge was a control room packed with instruments, into which Jale and Sherlock piled. The display, however, showed nothing particularly out of the ordinary: a few nearby stars – one a blazing red giant – and a speckle of remote spiral galaxies. The ship's motors worked by drawing energy from what an older school of physicists had called the vacuum. But it had been known for a long time that there was nothing that could accurately be called "nothing". The vacuum was actually an ocean of negative energy, above whose surface the material objects of the world flitted like gnats above a pond. Given the right technology, energy could be pumped out of the vacuum and fed into the objects of the real world. The one thing became more negative as the other became more positive, in exact balance. The technology to do this was named after the first person to realize the existence of the negative-energy sea that underlay the material world of everyday existence: the Dirac Extractor.

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The D.E. on the *Rigor Mortis* had 256 tunings. It was analogous to an antique radio that could be tuned to 256 stations, depending on the wavelength. The longest wavelength was equal to the size of the ship, and for this reason was known as the fundamental mode. The ship was presently cruising, extracting energy from the vacuum on a wavelength shorter than the fundamental mode by a factor of $2^3 = 8$. Shorter wavelengths corresponded to more energy, and only a handful of craft in the Milky Way possessed the capability to access energy at the $2^8 = 256$ mode. Jale therefore felt quite confident that the *Rigor* could outrun another ship that might be in pursuit.

The screen attached to the Dirac probe cleared, and Jale bent closer with Sherlock peering over his shoulder. The lower part of the screen was divided into 256 layers in various shades of blue, the deepest at the bottom. The upper part of the screen was an abstract picture in various shades of red, which changed even as they looked. The two parts were divided by the dark line that separated the vacuum from the world of matter.

“That’s us,” said Jale, pointing to a white spot that moved across the screen in the third blue layer. A faint V spread into the neighbouring strata, like the wake of a ship, where energy was being lost into the other modes. “And that’s them,” he added, stabbing with a broken finger nail at another white dot on the edge of the screen.

“They’re gaining,” pointed out Sherlock.

“Not for long,” grunted Jale. He slid into the pilot’s well-worn seat, his hands moving with familiarity over the complicated controls.

The motors of the *Rigor Mortis* changed from bass to baritone. Outside, the red giant star changed its hue to orange. Inside, the blip that represented their progress disappeared from the mid-

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dle of the screen and reappeared half way down the blue segment.

There was a jerk, which Sherlock countered by holding onto the back of Jale's seat.

"Damm!" Jale exclaimed. The pursuing ship had matched their change almost immediately and was still closing, though at a lower rate.

"Maybe," suggested Sherlock, who had a vast if theatrical knowledge of pursuits, "we should jettison something noxious in order to throw them off course?"

"Like what?" asked Jale, who was already coding in another change.

The master-detective considered. He knew that Joshua Slocum had repelled pirates from his yacht the *Spray* by strewing its decks with thumb-tacks. And Captain Nemo had surprised those who attacked his submarine the *Nautilus* by electrifying its hull. And, of course, James Bond had confounded the crooks who were following his supercharged Aston Martin by ejecting black, greasy oil from its exhausts. In the present situation, there could be only one solution: "Your laundry, Sir. Especially, the silk socks with the crocheted asteroids haven't been washed for eons and would..."

The rest of his words died as the ship jumped and he found his fingers hanging onto the back of the pilot's seat and his body in a horizontal position.

The motors of the *Rigor Mortis* changed again, from baritone to tenor. Yellow was now the colour of the giant star; and the spot that represented their position in the energy sea moved quickly along the bottom of the screen, in the indigo.

There was a period of silence, before the *Rigor's* calm voice said "They're still following, Jale. But I can hold them off."

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Any question about the other craft being benign was now gone. Sherlock, who was still in character, summed up matters by saying "We've got a honky on our tail."

*

The girl with the flouncy yellow hair and the angry blue eyes squirmed defiantly in her seat. The chair was a remarkable thing, which she liked. Every time she moved her well-rounded posterior, the wood gave off a minty, jungle-like aroma. But the scent, while it reminded her of good times past, was not strong enough to make her change her mind.

"I will not," she said categorically, "go again with that maniac Jale!"

She tossed her head and pushed herself back into the depths of the wooden seat, deliberately dragging her freckled arms over its ample rests. On one of these stood a frosted glass, half full of yellow juice out of which protruded a leafy vegetable. The drink's fruity smell competed with the camphoresque scent of the arm-rests, filling her twitching nose in a most satisfying way.

She was certainly being well treated; but then Rang Enterprises was a large and rich company that could afford to splurge.

The aged man seated on the other side of the executive desk looked at her with a mixture of annoyance and concern. He was sucking pensively on the bamboo handle of an ancient umbrella. His lips showed small lines, and his forehead was furrowed; but despite his obvious age he projected a spiritual sense of youthfulness: a younger mind in an older body.

"Jale's not exactly a maniac," said the man. "He's got a degree from Trantor University."

The girl knew this, and quoted one of the undertaker's previous girlfriends: "*A thug with a Ph.D.*"

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“Aha!” The old man’s eyes lit up with memory and mischievousness. “Your sister’s opinion, no doubt.”

The girl looked uncomfortable, and without anticipating the minty aroma from the chair, shifted her backside in a sign of unease.

“Yes,” continued the old man, answering the unasked question that lay in the scented air. “I know that you have two sisters.”

The girl’s light eyes seemed to cloud. There had not been any note of malice in her counterpart’s words – indeed, in the interview so far he had been truly gentlemanly. He had merely stated things, with no edge of coercion or blackmail. But he wanted her to do something to which she was opposed. However, she felt her opposition decreasing in the face of the information he was increasingly willing to divulge. There was, she reasoned, no harm in listening. She might even learn something.

“Three siblings,” the patriarch continued. “One of whom was rescued by Jale from a low-class bar called the *Purple Escargot*, where she had been performing as an exotic dancer under the name Vestal Virgin.”

The girl flinched, immediately regretting it. By compact, the three sisters had agreed to share – and at the same time bury – the memories of their youthful escapades. One for all, all for one. And secret.

“Do you mind if I call you Vestal?”

The girl considered this, as she played with her drink. The vegetable in it had the scent of celery, and she dipped this into the yellow pineapple-like juice with short jabs. There was an original Vestal, and two clones. To a casual observer the three appeared identical. But psychologically, they were as different as earth, wind and fire. With which did her interviewer think he was dealing?

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She bit off the top of the vegetable and agreed "You can call me Vestal." Her voice was careful and she added: "As long as you suspend judgment on the one-in-three thing."

"Agreed." The man smiled, and shoved his chair from behind the desk, keeping his eyes on the girl. He remained sitting, hanging onto the umbrella as if it was some kind of symbol of authority. Its grey furls were matched by a jacket of charcoal-coloured material that was crisscrossed with faint lines of dark blue. The pants were of the same stuff, whose old-fashioned cuffs stopped short of black socks. These seemed to be supported by straps made of some shiny substance. And over the burnished black shoes were peculiar, triangular-shaped flaps of purple suede.

"What are those?" Vestal asked.

The old man looked down at his lower limbs. "Gaiters. And spats. They were popular a long time ago, and I think they're useful and will make a come-back."

Vestal suddenly laughed. "They're silly." She herself wore sandals, without cloying socks; and beige-coloured shorts that ended beneath her tummy-button. Her shirt had been given to her by a friend who eked out a kind of living, drying and weaving clothes from seaweed. The creation she wore today was a test piece. It slanted across the upper part of her chest and ended short, to reveal the undersides of two bouncy breasts.

She realized then that her costume was a tip-off to the original Vestal, and frowned. To cover up this, she blurted: "Brounlee, I know that you're a Logical Buddhist."

If she had expected some kind of reaction, she got none. The old man sat quietly in his chair, sucking on the handle of his umbrella, and regarding her with a friendly but serious stare. "So what?"

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Vestal was thinking. She realized that she trusted Brounlee because he had a reputation as a preserver of life, rather than a destroyer of it. His ego was held firmly in check by a scientific credo that bordered on religion. In this, he was the opposite of his predecessor Rang, who by numerous accounts had been a bitter demagogue, one who by rhetoric and ready wares had turned the multitude who worked for the Enterprises into producers and purveyors of robots and other forms of artificial intelligence whose prime purpose was to wage war. The turnaround in the company's focus – to androids designed to help rather than hinder humans – had coincided with Brounlee's promotion to leadership under rather questionable circumstances.

The girl abruptly decided to test the character of her host by asking "What happened to Rang?"

"He met with an accident," was Brounlee's prompt response, almost as if he had anticipated the question.

Vestal shivered slightly. Her eyes moved to the end of Brounlee's umbrella: the shaft ended in an orifice which was strangely black inside compared to the yellow-brown of the outside. Her eyes moved again to the window behind Brounlee: was it her imagination, or was a segment of it of a slightly different tinge to the rest? Outside, the sun was setting, sending nearly horizontal rays through the gigantic R which adorned the top of what was literally a sky-scraper. In the high office from which the present director worked, the sun's late-afternoon illumination seemed suddenly cold.

"I'll help you preserve life," stated Vestal in quite, slow words. "But I won't take one to enhance others." She knew, as she stated this, that she had made the right decision. Emboldened, she added: "Jale is a good man. But he's reckless, and I won't ship out again just so you can keep tabs on him."

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Vestal arose lithely from the chair, signifying an end to the interview. "Thanks for the drink." She drained what remained in her glass, turned like a ballet dancer, and after a few steps the automatic door closed behind her.

Brounlee sat for a while in his chair, gnawing at the handle of his umbrella, a look of sadness on his face. The rays from the setting sun etched the lines in his forehead even deeper, making him look temporarily what he was: an old, lonely man whose far-flung family was too far away.

A peremptory knock on the trap-door under his desk startled the director of Rang Enterprises out of his reverie. "Yes."

The trap-door swung upwards, and a small gnome of an individual appeared who stepped into the room without hitting his head on the desk. "The data."

"Thanks, Igor." Absently, Brounlee took the sheaf of encoded documents, but did not look at them immediately. Instead, as for the first time, he examined with an expert eye the form of his helper: a ghoulish, gnarled head, neckless on a torso through which the muscles quivered under a too-thin covering, supported by malformed legs, with arms that trailed to the ground and ended in talon-like hands. All parts of the wretch's body appeared as if tattooed into swirling patterns, until closer inspection revealed that the embroidery was the result of skin that had boiled and flowed, until coalescing into grotesque hieroglyphs. Igor, thankfully, had no recollection of the pain which had followed the accident. He had been pouring rocket fuel into the cylinders of an antique ship which had recently returned from a test run, trying to restart the aged machinery, with the result that the mixture had ignited inside the engine, sending out a blast of incandescence that had truly fried the apprentice mechanic. Brounlee had saved the creature, but at what cost?

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“I can give you a new body,” pointed out the director of Rang Enterprises. Since the change in directorship, the company had made great investments not only in artificial brains, but in the synthetic bodies that housed them. The laboratories were now at the stage where the difference between a human and an android was largely one of semantics.

“No need,” replied Igor. He gave a twisted grin, and tugged at an imaginary forelock, acknowledging the gift of life.

At least, thought Brounlee, the creature had that most human of characteristics: a sense of humour. Ironically, by that standard, the previous head of Rang Enterprises could hardly be judged human. So what if Rang had been helped on his way, departing through the window of the director’s office, to fall the many stories downward – spewing blood and other nutrients from the tubes that had kept the decrepit body functioning – to end as a reddish stain on the ground? The latter had been quickly removed; and since that event the company under its new head had gone forward to save and create many lives.

“No luck with the girl?” Igor asked, his black coals of eyes intent on Brounlee’s face like a puppy scrutinizing the face of its master.

“Not really,” admitted the acting director of Rang Enterprises. Carelessly, he glanced at Vestal’s data: here was every psychological and physiological response to their recent conversation, as recorded by the sensors hidden in the special chair that the girl had occupied. “But she’s sympathetic. Maybe in future she’ll realize that she has more in common with Jale than she now thinks.”

“So,” inferred the dwarf-like figure, “we go to Plan B?”

Brounlee suddenly laughed, erasing the worry-lines from his forehead and making him appear younger again. “Yes,” he concurred. Beyond the windows of the stratospheric office from

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which he ran the affairs of the company, the sun was approaching the horizon. But there was enough of the day left to accommodate another meeting, which would hopefully yield a more positive outcome. "Go ahead with Plan B."

Igor swung around on his mangled excuses for hands and scuttled towards the trap-door. "Okay, Boss." The door snapped down, and Brounlee walked to the window, where he stood staring with an air of introspection while he awaited his second guest.

*

Aboard the *Rigor Mortis*, a signal flashed unregarded in the control room. But the ship, acting on its directives, changed course slightly and headed for the planet which showed only as a prick on the forward screen.

The ship's captain and his androidal mate were unaware of the small change in direction, crammed as they were into the most rearward space on the ship, fiddling with its mega-motors. The service area was small, the lighting dim, and to cloud matters there was a stream of smoke coming from the master-detective's meer-schaum pipe.

"Sherlock," said Jale wearily, "will you please lose the smoke?"

"Sure," acknowledged the master-detective of the Milky Way.

"But I do my best thinking with a few fumes; and anyway, there's so much dust here that I didn't think it would matter."

In this last regard the android was correct. Nobody had been in their present location since a team of freed political prisoners had "removed" two engines from a class omega destroyer of the Acheron navy, and joined them to the hull of a ship that had previously been the pride of a deposed colonial prince, resulting in the first super-light-speed interstellar hearse.

Jale wiped a hand across the bulkhead, dislodging a pile of dust and revealing an ancient injunction: *Beware. Only to be ser-*

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vised by a qualified technician with grade at or higher than ACH-1046-B14-DESTROYER-1768-ALPHA.

“Wow!” Sherlock exclaimed with admiration, “They don’t make numbers like *that* any more.”

Jale grunted. His wrench squeaked on the recalcitrant locks which sealed the plate, and finally the door fell to the deck with a clang. Inside the cavity thus revealed was a blinking array of many-coloured tubes, the humanly-visible part of a multi-dimensional vacuum relay.

“Pretty” remarked Sherlock, viewing the kaleidoscopic array of flashing tubes. “Now what do we do?”

“According to this,” said Jale, squinting at an old service manual, “if we interchange the level-256 relay with the level-8 relay, we’ll get a beat frequency that will throw off any following ship.”

“Ah, yes,” confirmed Sherlock. “Because 256 divided by 8 is 32, which is 2 times 4 squared. Right?”

“Of course,” replied Jale with a superior tone. In fact, he had no idea why this relatively simple tactic was supposed to baffle the enemy ship that was following them. All he knew was that they needed to out-fox their pursuers. With faith in the old manual, he grabbed a violet and a yellow tube from among the barrage of light in front of him, briefly looked at the shapes of the terminals, and then re-inserted the components in reversed positions.

Immediately, the *Rigor Mortis* responded: its engines went from a constant high-frequency drone to an alternating beat in which baritone and tenor notes switched back and forth like the theme of a reggae rock song. Sherlock started to jive to the music, but Jale pulled him out of the service room and they ran forward. Through the hold (which contained a display of completed coffins), past the workshop (wherein were the parts for two caskets of soon-to-be disappointed customers), around the table in the lounge

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(on which their recently-acquired flask of medicine rolled back and forth) and into the control room. There the ship's voice greeted them: "Well done, gentlemen. You have thwarted our followers, and as per the display you will see that we will arrive at Rang Enterprises with a bang."

Jale examined the display. Getting the message from Brounlee did not surprise Jale, given that they now had possession of the thing that the old man most ardently wanted. But the reference to a bang at arrival somewhat baffled him.

"You see," explained the ship, reading the captain's blank expression, "the alternating modes in the engine which you have engineered, have set up a resonance, which by my estimation will cause my poor plates to disintegrate at about the time we arrive."

Jale stared at the screen. The planet to which they were headed already showed a definite disk, surrounded by the faint haze of an atmosphere. "You can cut the main motors before we arrive," he instructed the ship. "And then we'll coast in, using the wings."

The ship's brain started to complain, but the man cut it off, sliding into the pilot's seat and saying "I'll take things from here." Sherlock, ever attendant, occupied the co-pilot's place, his shiny cape bunched up and his deerstalker hat pushed to the back of his head.

There was a bump, and a circle half in light and half in dark slipped by. "What was that?" Jale asked.

A sulky pause was followed by the ship's contralto voice: "Aster, moon of Acheron." There was another bad-tempered pause. "We probably just incurred a hefty fine for excessive speed and failure to register a flight plan."

Jale grunted. The ship was beginning to vibrate as it entered the upper reaches of the atmosphere of Acheron.

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“Jale!” The ship’s voice was strident. “Slow down!”

A craft with the vermilion stripes of traffic control whizzed past, its broadcast message of complaint registering in the control room of the *Rigor Mortis* as a Doppler-descending note of futility.

The atmosphere began to bite. “We need wings,” said Jale, and heaved forward to activate the control marked AERO.

Nothing happened, except for a stuttering sound from the unit’s loudspeaker.

“Nothing happened!” complained Jale, jabbing the control again. “Where are the wings?”

“I tried to tell you,” chided the ship. “We don’t have any wings. You sold them for scrap on Tralfamadore, to square a bet.”

“Oh.” Jale had only a vague recollection of the incident. “Then what’s this thing called AERO?” Irritated, he gave the unit a bang with his fist.

A piece of candy plopped into the receptacle below the display, which opined: “Enjoy. Milky chocolate around airy bubbles. Yum, yum!”

Sherlock laughed, and noting Jale’s look of disgust bent forward to pick up the confection. “Delicious,” he pronounced, taking a bite.

The *Rigor Mortis* was bucking with increasing vigor as it penetrated deeper into the atmosphere. Ahead, the scimitar which separated night and day was broken by a building of tremendous height: a rearing tusk with a flat top on which was mounted an enormous red R. Below, a vast city was coming into focus, its lights coming on spasmodically as dusk approached.

There was a stomach-lightening lurch as the ship passed through an air pocket. “We need lift!” Jale shouted. “Deploy the awnings!”

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“Aye aye” responded the *Rigor Mortis* without enthusiasm. It had never liked the black silky pieces of material that could be projected above the hull’s ports, feeling that while they might impress the hoi-poloï at a native funeral they lacked a certain classiness and marred the ship’s otherwise racy lines.

Wind filled the awnings with a tense rush of air. The clatter that had filled the cabin fell silent as the ship raced quietly down an invisible catenary that passed through the eye of the gigantic advertising R.

“Welcome to Rang Enterprises” chimed a musical voice. “Please park at the far end of the garden.”

Jale and Sherlock stared down in awe. There was indeed a garden beneath them: the roof of the skyscraper was marked out precisely with flower-beds, lawns and groves of miniature trees, separated by pleasantly curving paths in whose cusps were located statues and fountains. It was a world on top of a world.

Suddenly there was a cracking sound. Jale looked down and back to see that one of the awnings had ripped across. Even as he grabbed the controls, the quivering sheet thrashed itself into fragments and the *Rigor Mortis* slewed violently to the left.

Sherlock let out a girlish scream and gripped the sides of his seat. The chocolate bar he had been chewing flew sideways and splattered on the side of Jale’s head.

“Ow!” yelled the pilot. Slightly stunned, he felt his ear with his hand, which came away brown and sticky.

“Watch out for the tree!” warned the ship’s voice.

“What tree?!”

There was the crackling of broken branches and a cloud of yellow apples smeared themselves across the bow of the craft.

“*That* tree,” muttered the ship, depressed at the accumulating damage.

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There was a solid jolt. The ship scooped a divot of impressive proportions out of a moss lawn, leaving a track of dark-brown earth as it slid along the roof, turning slowly. By a small stroke of redeeming good fortune, it came to rest against a finely-carved totem pole, to which a sign was attached: PLEASE PARK PRETTY.

Even as he marveled at his own navigational expertise, Jale saw the sign swing drunkenly, before falling to the ground with a thud. Beyond the denuded totem pole, in the middle distance, a hunched figure sat on a rustic bench. It was holding some kind of cane, and its rigid posture implied disapproval.

“Got to go to a meeting” said Jale over his shoulder. As he walked quickly rearwards toward the main lock, he heard a chippy argument break out, between Sherlock and the ship’s intelligence unit, one defending and the other denigrating his skills as a pilot.

The entrance opened, and Jale jumped down onto soft grass. Smells! The air was packed with the fragrance of flowers and humming with the wings of pollinating insects. Taking a deep breath, Jale took a step forward. His foot hit something, and he bent down to pick up the half of a yellow apple that had survived his unorthodox arrival. He bit into it, feeling the intense tang of its tart juices inflame the nerves in his jaw.

Somebody was approaching out of the late-afternoon twilight. Not the stiff figure he had seen before; but a hip-swinging, perfectly-formed and half-naked woman.

Jale abruptly felt like an oaf. His boots were encrusted with clay; his black leotards were covered in dust; and his head was a mess: on one side he still showed the effects of the laser which had burnt away his hair to the scalp, and on the other side he had an ear which was plastered with recently congealed chocolate.

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The girl came to a halt in front of him, showing a white smile that was dazzling against her sunburnt lips. "Welcome, Jale."

Her voice was melodious, with a rich timbre that seemed to reflect the many qualities of the surrounding garden, from the high notes of the small flowers to the deep bass tones of the trunks of the trees. "I take care of the orchards." There was a pause, during which Jale made an ineffectual effort to hide his half-eaten apple behind him, like a schoolboy caught scrumping. "My name is Pippin."

"Ah," said Jale, finally finding his voice. He wondered briefly if he should confirm that he had brought with him the all-important flask of medicine. But the girl seemed so self-assured and knowledgeable that it appeared to be unnecessary.

There would be ample time later to discuss business with the stiff owner of the garden, who was still regarding them from a small copse of lilac bushes in the distance.

Jale, intrigued, moved a half step towards the woman. There was something about her which was special – beyond her poise, beauty and nakedness.

Pippin stood quietly, a small smile on her lips, as Jale peered into her eyes. They were light brown in colour. However, radiating from the black pupils were lines of pure gold which curved at their outer tips, making her orbs resemble fiery pinwheels.

Jale had been with many women on many planets in many galaxies. But he had never seen eyes like these. They were uncanny – almost alien. Ignoring a twinge of suspicion, he moved to follow as his companion headed into the dusk.

It was in this way that Jale, the space-hardened rebel, fell in love with Pippin, the girl with the golden eyes.

THE CLAG STRIKES

The executive had the self-assured indifference which is typical of those making a lot of money. His jaw was devoid of even a hint of hair, and his cheeks were pink and cherubic, giving off the faint aroma of post-depilatory lotion. The lips were thin, kept almost closed in a business-like manner over teeth which were remarkably regular and resembled the radiator of an antique automobile.

This young stallion in the stable of Space Securities was in fact worried about his teeth. Maybe they were too large? The *chin* was all right: strong and assertive, like the pictures he had seen in the last edition of *Man on the Move*. The hair was also acceptable: thick but cut short at the rear, with the rest swept back to emphasize the high and well-informed forehead. In an act of risky panache, he had even allowed the hair at his temples to slightly overlap the tops of his pulled-back ears.

However the teeth worried him. Maybe he should make another appointment with the orthodontist, and have another small measure removed? It would not cost much. Indeed, given that he hoped for promotion, the procedure could be considered an investment...

The executive swallowed, sending his Adam's apple into a vertical oscillation above the old-fashioned necktie. The latter was of ancient design, but a close examination would have revealed that the gold polka-dots consisted of the company's new signature: entwined S's, which were set off perfectly against a background of something referred to as racing-car green. He did not know why the colour was so called, assuming vaguely that green made things go faster – perhaps something to do with

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streamlines. But what he did know (and kept secret) was that riding in the vacuum elevator to his office on floor 1,023 of the S.S. building made him nervous.

The young man quieted his Adam's apple with the camouflage of adjusting his necktie, feeling self-conscious because there was nobody else in the elevator. This was one of the perks of Executive Class. The secretaries, for example, had to huddle half-a-dozen to a compartment in another of the numerous lifts which whizzed all day and night between ground zero and the rarified suite of the Chairman on floor 1,250. His own domicile on 1,023 showed, quite literally, how high he had risen in Space Securities. However, he was still nervous, and as he felt the first jolt of acceleration, looked down at his sagging knees. These were bare, with the fashionable appearance of newly-peeled potatoes. His pinstriped shorts, which matched perfectly his narrow-shouldered businessman's jacket, stopped at the appropriate distance above his hairless leg joints. Further down, his white calves were encircled by dark-brown straps. These supported black socks, which vanished into black shoes that were burnished to a metallic hue. To deter any dirt that might encroach on the pristine footwear, these were covered in dark-brown triangles of material that matched the sock-supporting straps above. Since Brounlee had become managing director of the all-powerful Rang Enterprises, gaiters and spats had become the height of boardroom fashion.

Elevators, even when powered by vacuum energy and moving in airless cavities, need time to accelerate, in deference to their human cargoes. Trying to ignore the small but increasing vibration of the lift, its occupant decided to use his time profitably. He would have done this anyway, even without the discreet but still significant camera that looked down on him from the ceiling of

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the compartment. And there was no other distraction. Space Securities believed in being spartan, the better to focus the minds of its employees. So the interior of the cage offered nothing to the eye save a bland, beige surface embossed with the intertwining S's which was the company's trademark. This was known throughout the Milky Way; and the young executive knew that he could wheel and deal anywhere within its sprawling spiral arms. The small, black box he extracted from the inside pocket of his pin-stripe jacket had this capability.

Pretending to enter data, he was instead listening to the ever-higher pitch of the elevator as it rushed upwards at an unknown but scary speed. There was also a slight but unmistakable swaying motion, that would in any case have made it impossible to concentrate on serious work. So as on numerous prior occasions, he salved the surreptitious eye of the overseeing camera by feigning a discussion.

"Yes," he said into the black box. Then after a phony pause, "But any final decision will have to wait until I have consulted with my superiors." This would show deference, he thought. But perhaps not initiative, he realized on further reflection. Taking a risk, he added: "Rang Enterprises are not to be taken lightly." After a bogus wait for a non-existent counter-argument, he finished his imaginary conversation by saying "All right. But *be careful*. Get in touch later – I expect to be working late today."

He turned off the box, returned it to the inside pocket of his jacket, and allowed a professional look of concern to wrinkle his brow.

Unfortunately, his concern was not all feigned. Whether it was the vibration of the elevator, his fear of its speed, or something else, he could not tell. But he felt distinctly unwell. His legs were weak; and his stomach had an unnatural, heavy feeling,

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as if its normal contents had been replaced by some molten metal like mercury.

Thinking that it would not do to vomit in the executive elevator, he ran a trembling hand through his hair, which had become moist with sweat. In confirmation of his growing sickness, a large drop of perspiration exited his hairline, ran down his forehead and nose, and dripped onto his necktie to form a noticeable stain.

“Ugh!” In disgust, he yanked at the Windsor knot he had so carefully tied that morning. But his febrile hand lacked strength, and he only succeeded in tightening the knot and leaving the necktie askew.

Something like desperation gripped the young man. The code of corporate correctness was strong in him, and he was appalled at the prospect of arriving at floor 1,023 with his costume in disarray. But then he was certainly sick – perhaps suffering from that scourge of the overworked business class – a heart attack. Feverishly, he undid his pinstripe jacket and thrust his right hand into his left armpit, as if he might locate some lurking aneurysm there. Curiously, the clammy skin felt coarse, like that of a reptile.

He made a small whining sound as panic froze his mind.

It was the last noise of any kind to emerge from between the too-regular teeth of the young executive.

A dark flush moved upward from under his collar. For a moment, the arteries in the neck resisted the disease, appearing as pulsing, white zigzags in the black skin. Then they also went dark.

The eyeballs remained white for some time, staring sightlessly while the black tide spread up the face. The hair also resisted, but eventually took on a desiccated, string-like appearance. Before starting to shed.

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The transformation of the body from a white, living being to a black corpse was over before the elevator reached its destination. The lift had been decelerating for some time; and in response, the dried-out cadaver moved upwards. The head hit the ceiling and shattered.

As the rest of the body disintegrated, a dark-grey mist formed in the upper part of the compartment. At its base, the gaiters and spats of the young executive plopped neatly onto the still-glossy shoes. The pinstripe shorts and jacket, along with various underclothes, collapsed into a non-executive heap.

The elevator in the Space Securities building slid to a halt at floor 1,023. The door snapped open. There stood one of the female vice-presidents of the company, preoccupied with a prospectus she was taking to the Chairman on floor 1,250. She stepped absently forward, but stopped on seeing the pile of clothing, which she assumed had been discarded by some tramp. Making an entry on her own black box to inform security, she failed to notice the dark-grey mist which oozed out from under the ceiling of the elevator.

Stepping delicately over the heap of clothes, she was startled as a necktie with the SS insignia detached itself from the ceiling of the compartment and fluttered to the floor.

*

The video stopped, and Jale said "Hmmm..."

Sherlock, hovering in the background under the shade of a fruit-laden tree, said "Aah..."

Pippin, whose sensibilities had hitherto been confined to scarred apples, said nothing but looked upset.

Brounlee, his head resting on the bamboo handle of his umbrella, looked at the two undertakers and said "Well?"

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Jale was thinking furiously, so it was Sherlock who filled the conversational gap. "It's what my predecessor would have called a *poser*. Without the benefit of the surveillance tape, the police would have been utterly dumbfounded: the victim done to death by disintegration, in an elevator with no means of ingress or egress by the malefactor. My records show only two cases that approximate it: the awful affair at Dresden, which started with a dirty napkin but ended in a call for the abdication of the King of Prussia; and the terrifying events that followed the discovery in the sewers of London of a species of hopping jellyfish, which as you will recall wreaked havoc on the ..."

"Sherlock", interposed Jale quietly but meaningfully. "Shut up."

Pippin took advantage of this hiatus in the discussion to rise from her cross-legged seat on the lawn and run away into the orchard. The bouncing of her buttocks elicited no lust in the three males, given the movie they had just reviewed. The girl's departure seemed to surprise the android, while the two men ignored it and leaned closer. Sunlight slanted across the horizon; and somewhere in the garden atop the monolithic offices of Rang Enterprises, a roosting bird began to sing.

"I think," said Jale to Brounlee, "that you should tell us about the CLAG."

The old man shifted slightly. He was seated on a stone bench, his cane planted in the brown soil of the garden. While he considered how much information to divulge, the sun disappeared. Brounlee's face became a pale disk in the dusk, its expression hard to read for the attentive Jale.

Finally, the geneticist started to talk. "CLAG is the ultimate disease. You'll recall from your history lessons that the human race has been prone to epidemics. For example, TB was at one

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time a major threat, exchanged between people in close contact, as in families or prisons. But it was cellular, and so relatively easy to kill using primitive drugs known as penicillins. Then came AIDS, which was started in the homosexual population but soon became general. It was harder to deal with, because it was a virus; but was eventually brought under control by a broad-based serum, though only after it had killed millions. By coincidence, during that era another disease was developing, which at the time they called BSE. It was actually a much greater threat, because it involved a basic defect in the proteins that make up most of a person, and in particular the brain. But due to the historical overlap, not enough attention was paid to controlling it, and by the time an effective treatment was found, it had killed billions.”

Jale coughed slightly, showing impatience. The acronyms for these historical illnesses were unknown to him, as were the social consequences which they had entailed, and he wanted Brounlee to get to the modern crux.

“I’m getting there,” explained the old man perceptively. You have to understand that many of the ills which beset the human race are its *own* fault.”

Jale did not find this hard to accept, though presumably many others regarded the concept as unpalatable. “You mean, on a simpler level, that if I choose to walk down an icy slope and fall – breaking my leg – then it’s my fault?”

Brounlee nodded, his head bobbing up and down above the handle of his umbrella like that of a marionette. “In the case of the CLAG, it’s clear that it’s related to our present lifestyle. The acronym, like the old ones, is not very accurate. But the C stands for carbon, the L for liquefaction, and ...”

“Then it should affect all carbon-based lifeforms,” interrupted Jale, sounding slightly skeptical. “But so far, all I’ve seen is a ...”

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Brounlee tapped the ferrule of his umbrella on the stone bench, commanding attention. "Look at this clip."

*

Two gables above yellow-lighted windows outlined the blurry image of a farmhouse. The roof was steeply-sloped, and a few missing shingles implied that the place was in need of repair. Also, the limestone blocks of which the building was constructed seemed to lack mortar in several places, though this was difficult to ascertain in the faint light of what was either dusk or dawn. However, the house was modern in at least one respect: a power line ran from the elevated viewpoint of the camera to the apex of the left-hand gable; and it had the distinctive wrapping of the insulation that indicated a vacuum generator in some location that was out-of-shot. The camera – whatever its nature and location – could clearly not pan; because as it cast its passive glance at the house, the front door opened and a dog emerged, running briefly out of view and then returning to the pathway which occupied most of the frame.

It was a large dog. With the exuberance of freedom, it bounded along the pathway between parallel rows of multi-coloured flowers. It had a thick pelt of brown and yellow hair; and as it ran, its red tongue lolled over white teeth, sucking in the breeze created by its own rush.

Suddenly the dog skidded to a halt with splayed forelegs. There was a toy in the path, which appeared to be a hedgehog made from the lower part of an old broom. With a carefree leap, the dog descended on the toy, its teeth open for a snatch ...

The dog exploded.

Pieces of body covered in fur sped into the air; the head with

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puzzled eyes shot into the sky; and the wagging tail dropped quivering to the sidewalk.

*

Jale grunted as the scene went blank. While he had witnessed the destruction of several of his human colleagues, the demise of the dog made him disturbed. Hunting through his own memories, he realized that the farmhouse in the recording resembled the home of one of his former girlfriends, who had owned a dog called Kazak – Hound of Space. That particular correlation was probably fortuitous. But delving further into his psyche, he recalled an incident as a child that was more relevant. It involved a television program concerning the extinction of animal species, which ended with the presenter pleading for support, and asking the rhetorical question: were not some animals *nicer* than some humans? The juvenile Jale had promptly blurted “Yes!” Only to be disciplined by a stinging blow to the ear from a self-centered and ignorant mother.

Jale the adult, hardened by many experiences that had made psychological mincemeat of other humans, said to Brounlee: “I’m sorry about the dog.”

The two men regarded each other for a while in the gloom of the orchard. Then there was a rustling sound and the glint of twilight from a silvery cape. An awed Sherlock asked the obvious question: “Is every creature based on the carbon atom susceptible to CLAG?”

“No.” Brounlee answered, temporarily relieving the mood of gloom which hung over the trio. But then the professional geneticist in him took over to temper the prognostication: “The disease is almost always lethal. Its morbidity is much higher than TB, BSE or AIDS, or any of the other ailments that have affected humankind. However, after realizing the emergence of CLAG, we

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installed monitoring stations at certain places in the Milky Way, and we found that a few people appear to be immune to it.”

Jale and Sherlock stared at the old doctor through the gathering gloom. Overhead, the stars were bright pinpricks. The intermittent flashing of the giant R of Rang Enterprises added a crimson tinge to the leaves of the orchard, but the roof-top garden was essentially in darkness. Jale wondered briefly what had become of the girl Pippin; but the fact that he had not thought about her for a while, showed how powerful was the subject that lay before them. For if only one percent of people were immune to CLAG, the race would somehow persevere...

“We have gathered data from a variety of locations in the Galaxy,” continued Brounlee in a lectural tone. “We have found only one case where infected people have survived.”

*

The hologram which materialized at Brounlee’s bidding was of higher quality than the previous recordings. Its three-dimensional cube of brightness pushed back the shadows of the trees; and as they watched, its fourth dimension ran through the evolution of a short drama. It was like watching a mini-play.

“Hey you’s!” Picky uppy dem toysies els I’s clomp you’s!”

Jale, struggling with the dialect, finally inferred that somebody was being threatened with being hit by a spade unless they picked up their toys. Who was doing the threatening – and who was being threatened – was unclear, because no people were visible. The scene showed a dilapidated house and an amazingly cluttered yard. There were pieces of rusty farm machinery, several lengths of pipe that might have come from an abandoned well, many discarded diapers, and the remains of several broken toys. The only sign of order was a pile of firewood, stacked neatly against the off-vertical wall of the house.

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A boy with blazing orange hair ran around the corner of the house. He was carrying a kid's bucket, from which water slopped as he slid to a halt amid the clutter of the yard. There were two remarkable things about him: the look of defiance on his face, and the orange tint of his naked body.

Jale thought: the *Orange Patch*.

This was spaceways jargon for a clump of stars at the end of the spiral arm of the Milky Way which pointed to the Large Magellanic Cloud. The latter, a small galaxy in its own right, had in some past era torn loose a group of worlds from the Galaxy, creating an isolated community which had been colonized by religious zealots. The commune, having failed in its financial aims due to internal politics, was now notorious for its in-bred population of orange-skinned hillbillies. The correct name for the star-cloud was Sointula, which in some lost language meant 'harmony'. Ironically, there was no sign of this in the scene which unfolded in the hologram.

A heavily-built woman staggered around the farmhouse's corner into the yard. She had tufts of orange hair on the top of her head, in her armpits and between her legs. The child's spade in her hand was a meagre weapon, and the boy stood his ground, ready for an attack.

"You's gonna get spanks on you's butts so'se God can see a parsec off!"

The boy set his feet into the dirt of the yard, hefting his bucket. His half-nourished body was wiry with muscle, and his half-developed mind made his face a mask of belligerence. "You's touches me un you's 'plode." The kid's stance caused the woman to pause, emboldening the youth to add: "Un t'aint no God, anyways – no i' this parsec or e'en i Drom!"

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Jale was intrigued by the boy's stunted knowledge, and guessed that he had been watching subspace broadcasts from the ultra-utilitarian administration in Andromeda. He leant over to Sherlock, and whispered "My money's on the kid."

Sherlock started to make a deprecating reply; but the attention of the android and the man was brought back to the hologram.

The woman took a swipe with the spade, and the boy swung back with his bucket. The spade hit the boy a glancing blow on his head, while the bucket hit the woman in the stomach. Both lost their footing in the sandy soil of the yard. What followed this mutual release of kinetic energy was somewhat surrealistic: bands of dark pigmentation raced between the top and bottom extremities of both contestants, the air around them crackling with sparks.

It was, thought Jale, like watching one of those ancient fluorescent lights that could not decide whether to turn on or off.

In this case, the fluctuating bands of energy eventually dissipated, leaving the woman moaning on the ground, and the boy crawling away in confusion towards the farmhouse.

The important thing, however, was that both people had not exploded, and were alive.

*

Blackness clamped on the three people beneath the apple tree as the white cube of the hologram disappeared. The stars overhead were pale spots to the eyes of Brounlee and Jale, but Sherlock boosted his pupils to bring back their effulgence. For the humans, the only source of light was the intermittent flashing of the giant rooftop R. Its light periodically changed the colour of the hanging granny-smiths from their natural green to an artificial red.

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All three knew that the time – like the overhead fruit – was ripe. There were questions to be answered; but they were many, and interconnected.

Jale felt abruptly tired, and ran a hand through his thick hair. “The CLAG is set off by a change of energy, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” confirmed Brounlee. “In the cases we have recorded, there was a local release of energy. It doesn’t matter what: an impact, a bite or a bang. The common feature is a release of positive kinetic energy, which appears to set off a reaction in some negative-energy field. This causes...”

“...the carbon atoms to become unstable,” finished Jale. He had never been good at chemistry, but remembered that the subject was basically divided into the organic and the inorganic, depending on whether carbon was present or not. He also recalled that the carbon atom was strange: whether in the form of diamonds, soot or the proteins of living creatures, the tiny atom represented a precarious balance of energy between its nucleus and its surrounding cloud of electrons. But, then, how did ..?

“The inner electrons spiral into the nucleus,” added Brounlee, anticipating the question. “Our laboratories have modelled the process. It involves an attempt to balance energies – positive and negative. But in the process, a lot of energy is released, resulting in an explosion.”

“Sounds like a supernova, in miniature,” added Sherlock.

Brounlee stared at the android over the top of his umbrella. Where had this remarkable creation come from? It was certainly *not* the product of one of the Rang laboratories. Unless, incredible as it seemed, the Sherlock Holmes master-detective was the result of ...

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“It’s unfortunate for us,” interrupted Jale and re-focusing their concerns, “that the kind of life we know is based on the carbon atom.”

Brounlee now stared at Jale. Obviously human, but with exceptional qualities, the old man thought. Was it conceivable that the undertaker was also the result of..?

“It’s unfortunate for carbon-based life,” said Sherlock. “But if the CLAG wipes out nearly all humans and most animals, the Milky Way will end up populated mainly by...”

“Androids,” finished Jale. Then after a long pause, during which the others sat in shocked silence: “It looks on the surface to be an artificial disease, designed to wipe humans out of existence and leave in control only the androids, which as we know are mainly manufactured by...”

“Rang Enterprises.” The last words were uttered by Brounlee, but in a disbelieving whisper. The old man opened his mouth to disavow the accusation, but only a gargling sound came out. How could anybody seriously claim that he – Brounlee – would pursue such a horrible plot? Was he not the founder and most prominent member of the movement that had come to be known as Logical Buddhism? The basic tenet of which was that no life shall be taken unless it ensures the survival of even more life – surely the most noble of principles?

But then: What *is* life?

Is it the crying, new-born child of human parents? Or is it the shiny, new android fresh from the massive factories of companies such as Rang Enterprises?

Brounlee’s mind raced through the implications of these alternatives. He realized gradually that his own pure altruism *could* be interpreted as the most base and nasty plot ever aimed at human-kind.

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“Damm the CLAG!” Brounlee grated, correctly identifying the disease as the factor which separated motives between the best and worst. With an uncharacteristic outburst of frustration and anger, he suddenly took his umbrella and swiped through the overhanging branches.

A couple of apples landed on the ground between the three people, followed by a cloud of leaves.

“Damm it double!” Brounlee exclaimed with an intensity of feeling he had thought purged long ago. “Even the apples will die.”

Jale and Sherlock exchanged glances. Either, the director of Rang Enterprises was genuinely and cathartically appalled, or else he was the best actor in the known universe.

After a pause, Jale smoothed matters by pointing out that there were other alternatives to Brounlee as culprit. “Rang Enterprises isn’t the only big producer of androids. Companies like Xmen and DivaDroid might also stand to profit from a disease like CLAG.”

Brounlee sniffed contemptuously, but then added as matters of fact: “DivaDroid uses human tissue to seed its artificial brains, so they’ll be wiped out too. While Xmen as an outfit is nowhere near as developed as us, and if it weren’t for the anti-monopoly laws we’d have bought them out ages ago.”

Jale, taking this as stated, thought for a bit; and then had an idea. To broach it gently, he asked: “Brounlee, how close do you watch the executives in your own company?”

Jale had never doubted that within Brounlee’s old and rigid body there lurked a young and athletic intellect. This was proven by the fact that the director of Rang Enterprises grasped the importance of the question in less time than it would take one of his apples to fall to the ground. “Pretty well,” was his answer. “But I don’t micro-manage. There are a couple of members of the board

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who think they're smarter than stars – Affaball and Fingal, to be specific. But I have my own ways of checking what they're up to. That is, in addition to the regular security stuff, which I leave to Ragalid.”

“And,” said Sherlock, following the logic of the conversation, “who watches Ragalid?”

There was a long silence under the grove of apple trees. However, Brounlee had an answer, when it finally came: “I'm not stupid, gentlemen. Contrary to what you may guess, I do have somebody who watches Ragalid. Somebody he'd never think to suspect ...”

The sentence ended, and was replaced by a new line of thought: “And in any case, you don't need to know that, do you? Because rumour has it that you have a cure for the CLAG!”

Jale and Sherlock again exchanged glances. The silvery cloak of the android detective stirred uneasily in the dim red light; but Jale did not move, and his voice took up the challenge smoothly: “And it's only a rumour, my dear Brounlee.” Then after a break, “Do you really think we'd prance in here with a neat package of pills, or a bottle of medicine labeled *The only known cure for the CLAG?*”

Jale laughed outright. Sherlock joined in with a nervous titter. But both were scrutinizing Brounlee through the gloom.

There was no response from the old man. Then, in a weary voice: “No, I don't suppose you would.”

Jale stood up, followed by Sherlock. It was clear that everything that could usefully be said at such a preliminary meeting had been said. Brounlee levered himself upright with the aid of his cane, and peered intensely through the darkness at Jale.

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Suddenly, the director of Rang Enterprises extended his right hand. “Jale, if that serum exists, I *need* it.” The voice had a renewed intensity which went far beyond mere commercial aims.

“I know,” replied Jale. He shook the bony hand, finding the returned grip surprisingly strong.

Jale and Sherlock wandered away through the orchard, their thoughts teeming. Somewhere ahead, an indistinct dark bulk marked the location of the *Rigor Mortis*. The flap of the branch of an apple tree in Jale’s face caused him to consider briefly what had become of the beautiful nymph, Pippin. Maybe she was resting on some bower of leaves in a dense copse... The door of the ship opened to his secret ident, throwing an oblong of white light into the orchard, and momentarily dazzling him. Scrambling inside the ship after Sherlock, his eye surveyed the comfortable if simple furnishings of their bachelor home.

Jale flopped down on the couch, avoiding the hard spot in the middle, and leaned against the tasseled cushion. He was tired. The interview with Brounlee had been trying, with implications he wished to temporarily discard. “I need a drink,” he muttered. The liquor cabinet – an ornate box of rosewood which he had accepted as payment for the internment of a bankrupt distiller on a distant world – was fixed to the bulkhead behind Sherlock’s chaise longue. The bolts which secured the cabinet ensured its contents against the periodic unplanned escapes to which the interstellar hearse was prone. Those contents consisted of spirits and liquors from many odd places, each in its own flask, a dozen of which fit into the cabinet so snugly that hardly a tinkle was to be heard when the ship was changing speed. In the front row of bottles was one that was filled and emptied with more regularity than the others. “Sherlock, will you get me a glass of Rigellian rye?”

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Puzzlingly, the response to this was the sound of the android pulling open and closing other drawers in the ship's scant furnishings. This noise increased in volume, accompanied by a growing mutter of unease that turned into a whine of distress.

The man opened his aching eyes. "It's in the front row ..."

"Jale!" Sherlock's figure erupted from behind the other sofa, his cape covered with dust and his narrow features distorted by anguish. "It's gone...!"

"What d'you mean? I filled it up just last..."

"I *mean*", wailed Sherlock, "that the CLAG cure has gone!"

Jale leaped to his feet. "Aha! The game is afoot!"

There was a glint in the eye of the undertaker that scared even his stalwart comrade.

STRANGE GOINGS-ON

High above Acheron, in a synchronous orbit, the *Rigor Mortis* sat quietly observing the mayhem that was brewing around the luminous red R of Rang Enterprises. Though it was midnight, the mighty tusk that housed the largest android-producing company in the Milky Way was ablaze with light. Apparently, the recent visit of the two interstellar undertakers had caused a furor of soul-searching. The ageing director of the company had been disturbed by the visit of Jale and Sherlock; and his suspicions about the integrity of his own staff moved downward from the penthouse office to the lower executive floors like a corrosive acid.

The stillness aboard the space-hearse was not only due to its isolation in a high orbit. Its two occupants sat glumly in the lounge, immersed in a tense silence.

Finally, Sherlock asked in a hurt voice “Why didn’t you *tell* me?”

Feeling guilty but justified, Jale replied “Because you’re too honest, my friend. We were under surveillance during that interview with Brownlee, and I’ll bet his security officer Ragalid was lapping up the data.”

The android super-sleuth was only partly mollified by this. He could appreciate that in discussing the nature and cause of the disease CLAG, and the implications for the company that stood most to lose or gain from it, they had probably been the subjects of a hidden survey. But he could not accept the trick that had been perpetrated on him by his partner. His thin, silvery lips were turned down in dejection, his usually lively eyes hooded and apparently ready to burst into synthetic tears, like a betrayed child.

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“Anyway,” added Jale, “the original Sherlock Holmes pulled a similar trick on Dr. Watson in *The Case of the Dying Detective*. Holmes feigned a deadly tropical disease, not telling Watson, and lay in his bed babbling about oysters. The trusty Watson went to get the expert but evil Culverton Smith. Returning home early, Watson was told to hide behind the sick-bed. From there, he heard the confession by Smith that he had attempted to murder Holmes by infecting him with the dread disease. The point is, the ruse would not have worked if Watson had been in the know, because he was just too honest.”

The space-age imitation of the original detective responded to this explanation with a sniff. But he looked slightly happier.

Encouraged, Jale continued. “You know I trust you more than anybody else in the cosmos. Remember, you got me out of the *Excelsior* hotel when the Black Hand Gang was on my trail?”

“Ah, yes,” confirmed the android. “I intend to write up that fracas one day as *The Weird Case of the Eels and Gin*.” In fact, the master-detective had attempted on numerous occasions to record his exploits with the human undertaker; but his efforts had been thwarted by the robotic equivalent of writer’s block, thus saving the Galaxy from what one reviewer of the fragmentary manuscripts had described as “The end of literature as we know it”. However, Sherlock was basically of a sunny disposition, and retained the belief that he would one day be hailed as a paragon of prose. Certainly, his life with Jale had been full of noteworthy events. As he ran through his recollection of near-death escapes, his mouth set in a silly grin. “And then,” he recounted, “there was the time when you went outside the ship in a blinding storm of radiation to save me, even though that stupid striptease girl you were having sex with thought I was a worthless hunk of metal.”

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Jale frowned, remembering Vestal. Sometimes, Sherlock's understanding of women resembled that of a twelve-year old schoolboy. But at least, the android's sulk appeared to be over.

"Where," asked Sherlock, "is the *real* cure for the CLAG?"

"In the liquor cabinet," replied Jale. "I figured they'd take the duplicate that I'd locked in the ship's strongbox."

"Clever," praised Sherlock, moving over to the rosewood box. "Like Poe's ploy with the purloined letter."

Jale, who had not heard of the story and was more interested in action than analysis, directed Sherlock to the back of the row of bottles in the cabinet.

"This?" queried the android, hefting a flask of colourless liquid. Without waiting for a reply, he peeled off a gaudy label that proclaimed *The Genuine Ass-Kicker*. Beside a picture depicting a horse-like creature imparting a blow to the buttocks of a bent-over cowboy, there was written *140 Proof*. Underneath this false label there was the original one, with its enigmatic message: *The only known (and unknown) cure for the CLAG*.

"And what did they really steal?" Sherlock asked.

"The *Ass-Kicker*, of course." Jale looked slightly smug. "Let's see what they're doing."

Moving forward to the control room of the *Rigor Mortis*, its captain instructed the ship: "Use the secret file of Rang employees. Get me the security chief, Ragalid."

Leaning over the monitor, Jale and Sherlock waited patiently as the ship's computer hacked through several layers of privacy filters. Suddenly, the screen cleared.

A man, intermediate in age between Jale and his boss Brounlee, turned with surprise to the viewer. He had swept-back, purple hair that was cut short just above the high collar of a jacket

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with the same hue. Despite the assumed colourfulness, his face was dull yellow, immobile around glittering grey eyes.

Ragalid started to open his mouth, then closed it again, recognizing his caller. Whatever he had intended to say would anyway have been inaudible, because there was a deafening din coming from somewhere – the sounds of what might have been an out-of-control party, above which sounded the occasional high-pitched laugh. As if to confirm this, a half-naked woman dashed across the room behind Ragalid, chased by a man with a rumpled shirt who was obviously drunk.

The director of security turned away and yelled something. While his back was to the receiver, a misshaped head atop scarred shoulders peaked over the desk, looking inquiringly into the screen. This deformed creature was abruptly pushed out of the way, as Ragalid turned back.

Jale was about to introduce himself when a spray of liquid doused his correspondent, leaving shiny droplets in his pouffed hair and flecking the screen.

Ragalid's face abruptly lost its composure, and an angry sneer distorted his mouth. But instead of saying anything, he moved his hand and the screen went blank.

"He doesn't like you," observed Sherlock unnecessarily.

Jale, leading the way back to the ship's lounge, muttered "A lot of people don't like me."

"Well, *I* do" exclaimed the android in a gush of loyalty.

"And I like *you*," rejoined the man. "And to show it, I'd like you to *hit* me."

Sherlock looked totally perplexed. If it were not that he knew his ears to be of superior fidelity, he would have thought he misheard. As it was, he repeated weakly "You want me to hit you?"

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“Yes,” confirmed Jale pleasantly. He reached up as he spoke, and took down from the wall a souvenir which resembled a carved paddle. Then, noticing Sherlock’s continued look of bafflement: “You remember those cases that Brounlee showed us? The executive in the elevator, the dog, and the couple in the yard? Well, they all fell victim to the CLAG by experiencing violence.”

“Aha!” Sherlock exclaimed, understanding dawning. “You want to confirm that we’re not infected?”

“Exactly. And since you’re not carbon-based, the only way to check is for you to hit me.” Jale swung the paddle-like device through the air, testing its weight. Made of some kind of wood, it consisted of a handle, a long shaft inlaid with carvings of serpent-like animals, and a flat oval end.

“What is it?” Sherlock asked, dubiously.

“A Betelgeuse Bottom Basher” was the nonchalant reply, as if the instrument could be found routinely at any local hardware store.

“I don’t like this,” complained the android. “What about the First Law of Robotics? *Thou shalt not bash thy boss’s bum?*”

“That’s not the First Law,” pointed out Jale, thrusting the paddle into Sherlock’s hands. “And in any case, whoever made *you* did not encumber you with the Laws, preferring to trust your own good judgment.”

The master-detective still looked doubtful. “It’s out of character, sir. Your *persona* is that of a basher, not a bashee.” He was thinking that, if he ever did write his memoirs, a reader might reasonably think that the present chapter was too concerned with things to do with buttocks. He would have preferred an episode to do with a giant gemstone that was owned by a countess but swallowed by a goose and ...

“Come on,” said Jale, disregarding the android’s concerns.

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The man had obligingly bent over. In the interest of science, the android gingerly tapped the inviting posterior with the paddle.

“Harder,” ordered Jale.

Sherlock swung the Bottom Basher through half a swing, making heavier contact.

“Harder!”

Getting into the spirit of the experiment, the android took a longer swing, which ended in a distinct *thwack*.

“Ow!” Jale said. “But it’s not hard enough to test for the CLAG.”

Without concern, he pulled down his pants and leaned over the back of the couch, his bum a bare target.

Sherlock put both hands on the Basher’s handle, wound up, and swung mightily.

“Yeow! Yeowee-yeow!” cried Jale, in genuine pain.

There was the sound of footsteps, and both men looked round. In the dim light of the ship’s hold could be seen several satin-lined coffins. And in the entrance stood a beautiful girl with bare breasts and an annoyed look.

“What’s all the noise?” Pippin demanded, rubbing her golden eyes. “Can’t I even get some sleep in a coffin?”

*

Sherlock sat shamefacedly on the sofa, averting his glance from the pretty girl who sat beside him. He had never felt so humiliated. The spanking scene had been altogether too puerile: not fit even for a teenager’s lifestyle magazine, let alone the hefty contents of his planned memoirs.

Jale stalked around the cabin, a glass of whiskey in his hand, looking serious. Reclothed, he was not concerned with the CLAG-immunity test, but instead preoccupied with the problem of the girl’s presence.

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"You can't stay," said the man finally. This was a victory of grey matter over gonads; but was made easier by the fact that he had been in this cliché before and resented it. Nevertheless, his statement was tinged with regret.

Pippin looked sad, but said nothing. Her left hand brushed the side of her eyes, removing an incipient teardrop.

This caused Jale to look again into her wonderful, golden-pinwheel orbs. A feeling of weakness washed over him.

Which Sherlock promptly banished by saying "F-20 corneas. Standard Rang issue."

Jale glared at his android companion; but the latter was lacking in mercy, and looking at the girl, said "We do *not* have apples aboard which require your attention."

Pippin started to cry for real. Two large droplets of moisture formed at the corners of her eyes, and hung there for a while reflecting the yellow of her hair, before sliding slowly down her cheeks. Her bare shoulder blades came together, making her slim body seem even thinner. Her hands sat, twitching, on her knees.

"Gor blimey!" Sherlock said, using a genuine but baffling Victorian phrase. He rose from the couch and headed aft, to check that the satin of the coffin in which the woman had slept had not been sullied by her unwelcome repose.

"I'm sorry," offered Jale. "But the people at Rang Enterprises have pulled this trick before. Brounlee sent you here, didn't he, to watch what I do?"

The girl looked confused, then responded in a squeaky voice "Yes, he did send me here. But he didn't tell me to do anything." There was a pause, while she wiped away her tears. "Except, to be nice to you."

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Jale, normally not a demonstrative man, threw up his hands and said "Aargh!" Then, crudely: "Are you saying that he *didn't* tell you to have sex with me?"

Pippin looked perplexed. "Why, no." A frown of what appeared to be genuine concern wrinkled her brow. "And in any event, I can't do that."

"*Can't* or *won't*?" Jale asked, his anger at Brounlee forcing him to make the distinction.

"Can't!" Pippin exclaimed, a flash of annoyance clouding her golden eyes. She cast a look over her shoulder to confirm that the prudish Sherlock was still absent, and then dropped her hands to the only garment she wore – a pair of shorts the colour and texture of autumn leaves. With a coquettish movement, she pushed down on the top of the shorts and wriggled so that they fell about her ankles.

Jale stared, feeling stupid: between her thighs, Pippin's body was smooth and featureless. The usual aperture was absent. And there was not even a hint of pubic hair.

*

Sherlock strained at writing his memoirs. Even though the words appeared automatically in response to his thoughts, he was finding the process of writing very difficult. He reviewed what he had so far composed:

'Culverton Smith, arriving in the metropolis after years spent in the pestilential tropics, had taken a large but partly derelict house in the East End, where the miasmatic mists of the evening rolled up from the river with their burden of fever, but hardly rivaled the disease which he himself had cultivated among the coolies and for which he alone had the cure.'

Pretty good, thought Sherlock. But perhaps too long for an opening sentence? An erudite editor on Trantor had once said to

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him that sentences should be as short as possible, consistent with starting with a capital letter, having a verb, and ending with a full stop. This, the sage had argued, was because the average reader was stupid. Unconvinced of this, the android could, however, discern that there was a lot of stuff packed between his capital letter and his full stop. There were also a lot of verbs, which made him feel temporarily happy – until he realized that he did not really know how to identify a verb. Of course, he knew that a verb was a *doing* word. This from his early schooling. But it was not clear to him how to separate the (doing) verb from the other words in the sentence. Surely they all had to be there in order for the piece to make sense? For example, suppose he wrote “Jale wishes to bonk Pippin.” The verb “to bonk” only really made sense given that Jale was the bonker and Pippin the bonkee. And this in turn only made sense – at least for the majority – if Jale was male and Pippin female. (Though, in principle it could work in the reverse sense...) But then, at a deeper level, this depended on the difference in genders, a concept which was ill-defined at best. It was presumably biogenetic, related to evolution. However, this was in itself a poorly-understood notion, having to do with the differentiation of cells in a primitive environment, guided by astrophysical circumstances, and involving a delicate interplay of quantum mechanics and cosmology...

Sherlock's daydream petered out. He noted that he had exceeded the computer's lapse-time, and that his words had been automatically deleted.

*

Jale and Pippin were at a standoff. The man, based on past experience, did not want a stranger with questionable loyalties on board a ship that was probably headed into danger; though he ad-

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mitted to himself that he would have driven that same ship across half the Galaxy to fulfill a date with the owner of the golden eyes.

The girl, intrigued by the first genetically pure male of reasonable age and appearance she had met, did not want to return to pruning fruit trees on the roof of a building she now regarded as a bee-hive full of nasty activity; though she admitted that she herself was a product of that same activity and that there was probably nowhere else in the Galaxy capable of her creation.

The standoff was interrupted by the *Rigor Mortis*. The ship's normally melodic voice had a note of stress. "Jale, you remember the ship that was following us after we, er., picked up our last cargo?"

"Huh?" The man shook his head in irritation. "Not now, *Rig.*"

There was a pause, while unbeknown to the arguing couple in the ship's lounge, a seldom-used screen flickered into life in its control room. "I am obliged by survival protocols to enact emergency maneuver T90."

"What?!" Jale exclaimed. He spun around as an alarm started to blare from the forward compartment. In the rear – all thought of literature gone – Sherlock grabbed hold of the table. The android's knowledge of the T90 exercise was rudimentary, but his metal fingers dented the surface of the table in consternation.

"Three, two..." enunciated the *Rigor Mortis*.

Jale, wondering what had happened to *five* and *four*, suddenly launched himself into the air. He landed on Pippin, knocking her flat on her back on the couch. The man's feet found a purchase under the overstuffed end of the sofa, while his hands clawed into its material under the girl's head. A big man, he felt the air go out of her lungs, to emerge from her mouth in a squeal that deafened his left ear. The girl's bare breasts were squashed against the

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man's chest as he forced their entwined bodies deep into the cushions.

"*One*," finished the ship.

"Jale!" Pippin gasped. "*Be gentle!*"

WHOOMPH

A rocket exploded with shattering force at the location of the *Rigor Mortis*, a split instant after it disappeared.

Jale was catapulted to the metal ceiling, his hands clutching tufts of cloth from the couch. He hit the roof with a horrible crunching sound, the back of his head cracking and shooting out a spurt of blood.

Pippin was half-stunned by the impact; but protected by the man's body, she fell limply back to the floor, moaning but still alive.

Jale lay crushed in a spreading red pool.

*

The emergency maneuver T90 is aptly named. For in turning through 90 degrees from spacetime, you leave our comfy world at right angles, and enter what is commonly called subspace. In exercising this drastic maneuver the *Rigor Mortis* had avoided extinction, while also doing what an ancient adage describes as 'jumping from the frying-pan into the fire.'

Due to its relevance, let us quote from *The Child's Encyclopedia of Subspace*:

'Now, kiddies, let's say we have a sandwich. There are two slices of bread, with a layer of yummy honey in between. Imagine that you're a hungry ant, crawling along the top of the bread. But

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you don't like *that* – what you want is the *honey*. So you dig a hole, and burrow down to the middle layer of the sandwich. The mommy ant, still on the top slice, thinks that you have suddenly disappeared. Whereas really, you're scoffing up the syrup of sub-space.

Of course, you might like a triple-decker sandwich. Like the ones your Daddy eats during his lunch-break at *Ronald's Rocket Repair*. [Press symbol for details of current deals.] It has three layers. But we could imagine that our sandwich has lots and lots of layers. In fact, so many that you could count them forever and still find more. [Parent: this is called a denumerably infinite set, and is treated in our more advanced texts.] Also, we could imagine that the slices of bread were longer than the ones you can hold in your hand. Indeed, they could be so big that you could not see the end of them, and they could stretch out so far that you never came to their edge. [Parent: this is called an unbounded manifold, but one should beware of assuming that the bread is flat and of infinite extent, because it is possible that it is curved – for example into a sphere – and contains a limited volume, a concept known as finite but unbounded, and discussed in our more advanced texts.] So, we see that our sandwich could be very thick and very large.

Remember our friend, the ant? Think what he'd experience if he burrowed down from the top layer of bread into our super-sandwich.

This is what it's like when a spaceship [in good shape because of *Ronald's Rocket Repair*] goes into subspace.'

We can compare the preceding description of subspace with that to be found in the preface to Luap Nossew's authoritative but turgid text, *Hypergeometry*:

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'In an N-dimensional Riemannian manifold whose 4D quasi-Euclidean part is identified with spacetime, the $N(N+1)/2$ independent components of the symmetric metric tensor are to be solved for using the Einstein field equations (or equivalently in vacuum the Ricci equations), after which the resulting potentials are inserted into the N-dimensional geodesic equation, to yield orbits of which the first four components relate to the energy and velocity of an object moving in time through ordinary space, while the fifth and higher components describe the object's passage through (N-4)D subspace.'

It may come as a surprise to the reader that the above pair of statements about subspace contain the same information. One can reasonably ask, however, why subspace is only understood by four-year old preschoolers and old professors with dusty PhDs. The answer is that nobody has produced an account which lies in the middle range occupied by the intellects of most people.

Therefore, please do not think too poorly of Sherlock and Pippin, who after the T90 maneuver had only a vague idea of what the heck had happened.

*

Sherlock staggered into the lounge and sat down on his chaise longue. His left arm hung uselessly at his side, broken above the elbow.

Pippin picked herself up from the floor and reeled over to the couch. She curled up on it, holding her head between her hands because it was beating like a drum.

"The T90 was successful," announced the voice of the *Rigor Mortis*, though with a slight crackle of static. "We have sustained only minor damage."

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“Speak for yourself” complained Sherlock and Pippin, almost in unison.

“But you must attend to Jale immediately if he is to survive,” continued the ship objectively. “He requires trepanation – boring through the skull and work on the brain.”

The two androids looked at each other in consternation. Sherlock had seen Jale get ‘banged up’ many times, but the man’s iron constitution had always carried him through. There had, in the android’s recollection, been only a few occasions when Jale’s reckless lifestyle had led to serious injury; and only once had it been necessary to carry out serious surgery on board. Now, as Sherlock regarded his dangling left arm, he felt frustration and doubt. Pippin, contrarily, still possessed her physical attributes; but the strange feeling of numbness in her head coupled with the sporadic surges of light in her eyes indicated that her neural networks were compromised. Confused and panicky, she strove to over-ride her tear ducts.

There was effectively a third intelligence pondering Jale’s plight. The *Rigor Mortis* was like a calm and experienced mother who had witnessed a serious accident to its first-born son. The ship scrutinized the two androids, assessing their allegiance and physical capabilities. About Sherlock, there were no doubts: the android was loyal to Jale in a way that surpassed mere human friendship. About Pippin, there were questions: the female android appeared to be ‘in love’ with the male human in the usual sense of the phrase; but given the creature’s origin, there were doubts about whether it should be permitted to operate on Jale’s brain.

The spy unit of the ship took focus on the female android. This was the same unit which, under instructions, had allowed the CLAG ‘cure’ to be removed by two shadowy figures, who had

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carelessly left unsecured the main lock, through which the stow-away had later gained entrance to the vessel. Now, the spy unit readied itself to take control of Pippin when needed.

"I request permission to integrate your control circuits," announced the *Rigor Mortis*. "That way, we have Sherlock's clear brain and Pippin's good hands to carry out the operation on Jale." There was a short pause. And then, by way of protocol only (since the ship would have done it anyway), there was added: "Do you agree?"

"Yes," replied Sherlock immediately.

"Yes, I do." Pippin's response sounded as if she was agreeing to the vows at a marriage ceremony. She stared at her hands, which in spite of the dim turmoil of her brain were remarkably steady.

"Integration done," announced the *Rigor Mortis* without delay.

Sherlock found himself regarding a pair of feminine hands with long, capable fingers that ended in oval-shaped, very clean nails.

Pippin found herself thinking about the tortuous plan of blood vessels in the human brain and the thickness of the bone which protected it, though there was a distracting side-concern to do with the need for a smoke.

The *Rigor Mortis* gave out instructions: "Sherlock, use your good arm to get the surgical kit from the laboratory. Make sure you have a saw, chisel and a set of retractors. Pippin, get a clean bedsheet from the third drawer in the captain's cabin. Also, get the bottle of 140-proof alcohol he keeps hidden under his pillow."

The androids scurried off. The intelligence of the *Rigor Mortis* staved off the irritation of delay by checking the procedure for human trepanation.

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When the androids returned, there was a note of urgency in the ship's voice. "Let's go. There isn't much time."

*

Jale's battered brain was seething with dreams, invisible but nonetheless real. Driven by present pain, his mentality fled from the present into the refuge of childhood. Excerpts from three scenarios flashed across the backdrop of his troubled youth. But they all promised pain in one form or another...

His ear was still hurting after the blow he had received following his boyish remark about preferring animals to people. His mother's anger, however, was slow to subside; and irritated by his presence, she shouted "Why don't you show some respect for your mother, once in a while?" He had an answer for this, but kept silent. "Be useful," continued the woman. "Go down to the store and get me a bottle of gin." This, he knew, would make things worse, come the evening. But as he plodded in dejection along the seedy street to the corner store, he was delighted to see a rat. Its shiny eyes observed him with interest from a gap in the old brick wall. He approached it, his hand held out in greeting. But the rodent somehow managed to turn in its confined space, and disappeared with a flash of its skinny tail. He supposed it must live in one of the weed-clogged gardens, perhaps in a cozy hole under one of the planks that had fallen from the rotting house-fronts which lined the road. The store, when he arrived, was hardly in better repair: its display window was cracked, and the advertisements behind it were barely legible through the accumulated grime of the city. Inside, the paltry contents of the sagging shelves made little attempt to conceal that the place's main purpose was the sale of alcohol, as evidenced by the long rows of brightly-labelled bottles behind the counter. The guardian of these flasks was an overweight, middle-aged woman with a

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double chin that sported several large warts. These were ringed by white hairs of an unusual length, which the boy regarded with fascination and disgust. The proprietor recognized him, but her fish eyes gave no hint of it. Instead she announced, without preamble, "We ain't got no gin." She turned and took down a bottle that was new to him. It was rotund, sealed with a metal band, and bore the single word CLAG. "Tell your Mom to try this." The fat woman's colourless lips quirked into a small but sinister smile. Preoccupied with the possible meaning of this, the boy forgot to look for the rat on the way home. It was only after he deposited the bottle on the edge of the rickety kitchen table that he remembered the animal, and asked "Can I go out to play, now?" His mother, who was already reaching to the shelf to get a glass, answered over her shoulder "Yeah, clear out." He turned and walked along the dimly-lit corridor which led to the front door. From the kitchen came the sound of the bottle being opened; and shortly after, the gurgling as a good portion of its contents were poured into the glass. Reassured that he had his key in his pocket, the boy stepped over the threshold. Whether it was his own pent-up resentment, or an errant gust of wind, he did not know; but the door swung shut with a startling bang. The old house vibrated with the shock, and from inside came the crash of breaking glass. He turned, only to be blown onto his backside by a powerful explosion. The door flew open again, exhaling a cloud of old rags. The boy sat on the stoop, stunned, as his mother's clothes drifted to the ground around him. He did not cry.

His foot tapped against the bricks of the old wall with the pointless energy of youth, dislodging bits of mortar which fell into the slug-ridden garden. His neighbour ignored him, intent on

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spading mounds of dark-brown earth around the bases of the tomato plants. The boy was tolerated, because he was not among those who occasionally raided the garden to steal the fruit. When that happened, the owner of the plot usually emerged, yelling and wielding the shovel like a sword, sending the boys fleeing through the weeds to escape to the dubious safety of their own homes. Recently, there had not been any such raids, because it had been raining for days. As a result, the vegetation was drenched and the slugs were out in numbers. One of them was crawling in its own patient way across a stone between the boy and the man. The latter, taking a break from his digging, rose slowly, his hand massaging his lower back. He half turned, his weight resting on the spade, and caught sight of the slug. With no thought, he raised the instrument and brought it down with a glancing blow on the rock.

The slug splattered into black pieces that showered the weeds. The boy winced. One of the pieces of the creature landed beneath him, wet and still moving. "You shouldn't do that," he admonished. The old gardener, surprised at the kid's precocity, sneered. With an angry gesture of the shovel, he pointed to the tomato plants, many of which showed holes where the slugs had eaten their way through the leaves. "Why not?" The boy had no convincing answer about the rights of the slugs versus the integrity of the plants, but said lamely "I just think it's wrong." The old man regarded the boy with a patronizing look wherein the superiority of age was combined with a lifetime of ignorance. He dismissed the criticism by saying "Poh!" This the boy did not register, because he was anxiously watching another slug – a yellow one this time – creeping along the ground behind the old man. Following the kid's gaze, the gardener turned. His look of contempt included not only the slugs but also their young defender. The spade was raised against a cloud-filled sky. It described a steady

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arc against the red tomatoes and the green vegetation. The impact on the yellow slug was direct and full of energy. It was followed immediately by a deafening detonation. The old man was thrown through the air and hit the wall, at whose base he laid, moaning and gasping. His struggling lungs breathed in the faint, yellowish smoke that spread from the site of the explosion. He looked for help, his torn hands scrabbling among the weeds. But the boy had gone.

His small fingers tugged at the edge of the manhole cover, which would not budge. The circle of metal was heavy enough to deter any casual attempt at entry. It was made of iron that was impressively thick, even though it had been scoured and polished by the feet of many generations so that the name of its manufacturer was an obscure cuneiform. Its surface was, however, broken by a deep wedge. Into this, on a regular basis, the coalman would insert a chisel-ended tool. Levering back the manhole, he would lay it with a clang on the flagstones. Then that stocky, sooty-faced individual would pour into the opening ten bags of coal. These black nuggets descended a chute, to pile up in the cellar beneath in a neat pyramid. This was commonly flattened after a few days by the boy, who liked to use the cellar route to leave and enter his house undetected. Getting *out* was relatively easy: it was just a matter of shoulders pushing upward to dislodge the manhole cover. Getting *in* was more difficult, and usually required the help of a friend. One of these – Zek – now came running at the sound of the secret whistle. Not given to unnecessary speech, Zek understood the situation immediately and knelt down by the manhole. The combined straining of the boys' fingers finally managed to loosen its cover, which they shoved aside so that

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it still overhung the aperture. "Put it back after," said the first boy. "Okay," confirmed Zek. But after disappearing into the entrance, the first boy's head popped up again. With theatrically narrowed eyes, he surveyed the dusty but deserted street for imagined enemies. "And don't forget the password," he said. Zek, however, looked blank. "It's *newts*", hissed the first boy, and disappeared into the darkness. The gloom was not complete, though: between his legs he could perceive a faint light. And sliding down the chute, he arrived with blackened knees in a chamber that was quite well illuminated. The boy stood unsteadily on the pile of coal, looking baffled: this was not *his* cellar! For one thing, the walls were clean and covered with posters showing the intricate designs for some kind of machine. Also, there was a bench against the far wall, whose surface was strewn with the parts of what appeared to be a body, but which glittered in the dim light as if they were made of metal. Finally, there was a man working at the bench, dressed in a white smock which was remarkable for showing no sooty stains. The man turned at the sound of the boy's feet crunching coal, and said "Aha. A visitor." The voice was neutral and precise. Like the neatly-pressed pants which emerged from under the smock, and which ended above brightly-polished black shoes whose fronts were covered by triangular flaps of some purplish material. The boy, who was not scared, said "Err..." And then, in a rush of intuition: "Are you making a robot?" This caused the man to smile. "Not exactly," he replied. "An android." A look of confusion crossed the boy's face, so the man added: "A synthetic person, made of biological things."

He glanced disparagingly at the pile of coal on which the boy stood. "Not carbon-based, like *that* stuff." The boy took some time to consider this. He was an intelligent kid, but it required a few moments for him to formulate his next question. "What," he

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asked, "is wrong with humans?" The man casually tossed back onto the bench a metal skull whose eye-socket had been his previous concern, wondering how to justify his clandestine laboratory to an adolescent boy. "Well," he replied finally. "Humans are not very *nice*, are they?"

*

Jale awoke with a screaming headache. Gingerly, he felt his scalp. His once-thick hair had been replaced by an unfamiliar stubble. Probing further, his fingers encountered a ragged-edged suture which was new to him. *If this is reality*, he thought, *I prefer the dreams*.

The man opened his eyes. Focusing was not difficult; but when he tried to turn his head to see more than the wall straight ahead, he found that he was immobile. Warily, he let his eyelids close. Only to open them again in response to the sound of liquid being poured into a glass.

Jale saw two figures. The first was a metallic imitation of Sherlock Holmes, complete with houndstooth cape, deerstalker hat and meerschaum pipe. The second was a pretty girl wearing only trim shorts, though her bare breasts were less captivating than her golden eyes.

He closed his eyes again, muttering "Another dream..."

"Wake up, sir!" Sherlock said, offering the man a glass of some mahogany-coloured liquid whose aroma was suspiciously like that of whiskey.

Pippin moved forward, pushing aside the drink with a disapproving look and leaning over the patient. She planted a big kiss on his cheek.

The girl's eyes, at such closeness, sent a current of virility through the man. But before anything else could happen, the an-

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droid moved in and dabbed the site of the kiss with a cloth that smelled of antiseptic. "Germs," he explained.

Jale looked right and left, straining his peripheral vision. He was wedged into a too-narrow coffin. Looking again at his attendants, he said "You two." Memories flooded back, jostling each other like steers in a stampede. "Where are we?"

"Lost, I'm afraid," said Sherlock. "The ship is intact, and so is the bottle with the cure for the CLAG. But we're stuck somewhere in subspace, and the *Rigor Mortis* says you're the only one who can free us."

"Hmm...," mused Jale. Then with a return of energy, he levered himself out of the coffin and sat up.

He noted that he was naked: bare legs covered in dark hair; a torso that was also hirsute, though with a few gray strands; and a penis that emerged from the thatch between his thighs with an ill-timed erection.

"Sorry," Jale said to Pippin, trying to will his male organ to subside.

The girl, however, did not seem to be embarrassed. She smiled, looking into the man's blue eyes. The smile showed relief that she had performed the brain operation successfully, and the feelings of a young female who was experiencing love for the first time.

Jale, uncomfortable under the look, threw a leg over the side of the coffin and clambered unsteadily to the deck.

"Welcome back to the living." The voice of the *Rigor* was warm but with a business-like undertone. A viewscreen on the wall brightened as the ship fed in a view of their surroundings.

The screen showed a backdrop of a very peculiar shade of indigo that strained Jale's eyes as he sought to find detail in it. But

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there *was* detail: dark, grayish things that floated eerily in the void. “What *are* they?”

“Derelict spaceships,” answered the ship. “We seem to have strayed into some kind of Galactic graveyard.”

Jale shrugged. As an undertaker, he was used to graveyards; and this was just a large version of one. Also, they had work to do: on board was the only known (and unknown) cure for the CLAG; and they could not afford to hang around among a collection of obsolete vessels when there was a very pressing issue. “When the going gets tough, the tough get going” he opined. “We’ve got to go and save humanity!”

“Bravo” responded the *Rigor Mortis* in a bleak voice. During its captain’s convalescence, the ship had carried out several analyses of the vessels which now hung lifeless in this obscure layer of subspace. While it was great that Jale was back, he and his colleagues would have to face up to a somewhat scary scenario.

“Those craft out there,” explained the *Rigor*, “are eons old.”

Jale, Sherlock and Pippin exchanged nervous glances. Neither the man nor the androids knew what to make of this partial statement, but all three braced themselves for something unfunny.

“It appears that whatever *comes* here *stays* here. Forever.”

MATTERS OF BALANCE

The *Rigor Mortis* ploughed through a sea of vacuum energy, closing in on the collection of derelict starships. Already, more than a hundred of them were in view, implying that the chances of escape were less than one percent.

In the language of *The Child's Encyclopedia of Subspace*, they were trapped between two slices of cosmic bread that were so tough that even Daddy's teeth could not pierce them. In the language of Nossew's *Hypergeometry*, they were on a geodesic constrained to lie between two singular hypersurfaces where the energy-momentum tensor was formally divergent.

Or as Pippin put it: "We're stuck."

"Like the *Nautilus* when it was trapped under the ice," added Sherlock, who had an immense if inaccurate knowledge of Victorian literature.

Jale sat on the sofa, a drink within reach, brooding. "But Captain Nemo managed to get out."

Pippin and Sherlock looked at Jale with hope. The master-detective was aware that the man had once been described by one of his detractors as "A flawed genius." If there was any way out of their current impasse, Jale was the one to find it.

"Professor Challenger said that there is no problem which cannot be solved given sufficient thought," stated the captain, getting up. "Sherlock, may I borrow your pipe for a while?"

"Of course," agreed the android, puzzled. "Do you want tobacco as well?"

"Yes. This is at least a four-pipe problem."

Sherlock handed the meerschaum to Jale, along with a pouch full of black leaves whose odour was distinctive.

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“You aren’t going to smoke that in *here*, are you?” The voice of the *Rigor Mortis* had the offended tone well-known to smokers through the ages.

Jale avoided a direct reply, saying “I’ll be in my cabin.” Then added theatrically: “I may be gone some time.”

Walking rearwards, he passed the mirror above the liquor cabinet and stopped in surprise to look at the reflection of a bald person. Leaning closer, he recognized the unique blue-green colour of his own eyes. Examining his face closely, he noted that his hair was growing back but with a gray streak above the still-visible suture of the operation. Also, there were silvery hairs in the incipient beard which covered his chin, which itself was slacker than he remembered. “Getting old,” he muttered, and left.

Pippin watched him go with a look in her own golden eyes of affection and respect. But then she directed her look downwards, regarding her smooth and featureless crotch. “Incomplete,” she murmured with bitterness. Why had not Brounlee – the father of android design – given her the organs she needed to satisfy a man like Jale? Her face flushed hot with resentment. Talk about a dead-end job! In anger, she strode out of the cabin, saying to Sherlock “I’m going to do something I *can* do. Survey the ships in this hell-hole.”

Sherlock shrugged. He had never understood the female/Jale interface. There had been some women who were amazingly beautiful and clearly infatuated, but whom the man had (politely) ignored. And there had been others who were plain and prickly but whom he adored. There was no logic in it. However, Sherlock mused, maybe that was the way of romance. He was himself preoccupied with Irene Adler, a figure from history, to which he was unalterably attached by the bond of theoretical love.

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An inane grin crept into the android's face as he sat daydreaming about Jale. This gradually dissipated as he felt the returning urge of the muse. His memoirs had been too long neglected. A furrow of concentration formed on his forehead as he began to compose:

'Baker Street was like an oven. As I peeked around the blind, I saw that a strangely-dressed individual was making his erratic way along the sidewalk, peering first at one address, then with a gesture of irritation continuing to the next. His progress was marked by a curious hopping motion.

"I do believe he's coming here", I remarked to my companion.

Dr. Watson looked up from the scantily-dressed girl who occupied the centerfold of his magazine, and said tiredly "Not another case so soon? Only yesterday I discovered the location of the Countess of Moorcar's blue carbuncle – turned out to be stuck to her foot all the time."

"I know," I replied with sympathy. "I have cross-listed the case under G for gem, C for chiropody and S for stupid."

Suddenly there was the peal of a bell from the front door. This was followed by the sound of an excited conversation between the visitor and our trusty landlady, Mrs. Hudson. Unfortunately, it was conducted in Hindi, so Dr. Watson and I did not understand a word of it.

There was the sound of knuckles on the door of our sitting room, and I called "Come in within."

The door opened to reveal a dark-skinned gentleman. Noticing the pin-up on my colleague's lap, the visitor's eyes started from their sockets, had a look, and then returned. He was dressed in a singular manner: cleated soccer boots, cricket pads, a pair of

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basketball shorts and a frockcoat, the whole topped off with a swimcap.

“Aha,” I hazarded. “A sportsman.”

“Yes indeed, sirrah.” He stared about the room, noting the Persian slipper filled with tobacco, the acid-stained bench used for chemical experiments, and the magazine which was now discreetly placed to cover the bulge in Dr. Watson’s pants. “I have come to show you a substance which will make you more energetic, faster and *lighter*.” He extracted from the folds of his frockcoat a phial of liquid which shone eerily in the shuttered room...’

Sherlock stopped dictating, dissatisfied with the document. His left arm – broken in the flight from Acheron – had been repaired; but it ached wearily, without even the benefit of the excuse that it had been pierced by a Jezail bullet. He also had the nagging feeling that he had mixed up the protagonists in his account. In addition, he could not understand why his brain had conjured up the idea of a substance that would make things lighter – it must be due to some stress-related factor in reality. His mind struggled to recall a name he associated with old physics classes. Was it not...

“Exoticum!” Jale shouted, bursting into the cabin in triumph. A wisp of smoke from the meerschaum confirmed the beneficial effects of smoking on human concentration. Jale tossed the pipe back to its owner before continuing “We’ll load the *Rigor Mortis* with the kind of exotic matter they use to prop open black holes – exoticum. That will make us seem to weigh next to nothing. And then we can tunnel out of subspace and back to normality.”

Sherlock looked at Jale with respect mixed with reservation. “Where,” asked the android, “are we going to get the exoticum?”

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“From those.” Jale waved a hand at the screen, which showed the drifting cloud of once mighty but now defunct spaceships.

*

The seldom-read treatise *Hypergeometry* defines exoticum thus: A generic name for forms of exotic matter which share the property that the trace of the energy-momentum tensor is negative, in distinction to ordinary matter where it is positive. Isolated bits of exoticum were left over from the Big Bang, which it caused. Trapped by advanced but unreliable technologies, these pieces of exoticum were once used in experiments. The latter were of two main types. (1) Small pieces of exoticum were added to large objects such as cars. This reduced their mass, making them appear to be lighter so that their dynamics were governed by the laws of quantum mechanics rather than those of classical physics. Light particles, unlike heavy ones, can pass through the potential barriers associated with ordinary matter. This process is called tunneling (see Chapter 23). On the macroscopic scale, the object disappears from one region of space and reappears in another. While at one time it was believed that tunneling would provide an effective way to deal with traffic jams, the mechanism was found to be inherently unreliable. For example, a bus full of scientists on their way to a meeting of the Royal Society disappeared on Earth and reappeared on Pluto, where they promptly froze to death. (2) Large pieces of exoticum were used to prop open the throats of Schwarzschild black holes, converting them to worm holes. These – in providing shortcuts between different regions of space – were expected to revolutionize interstellar travel. But as before, the experiment proved tragic. The exotic material caused a leakage of energy from subspace into normal space, resulting in some otherwise normal stars going supernova, with the annihilation of several advanced civilizations. The preceding two examples show

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why the possession of exoticum for the purposes of trafficking is now illegal.

The *Child's Encyclopedia* is more compact and upbeat: We are all exotic in our own way. Think about Mary and Misako. The first has round, blue eyes and blonde hair. The second has narrow, brown eyes and black hair. But they each see the other as a little bit odd, or exotic. It is like this also in the world of physics. The only thing to remember is that most objects around you are made of ordinary matter, while exotic matter or exoticum has the annoying habit of blowing up.

*

The first starship they decided to enter was the *Moby Dick*. Gigantic, it wallowed in the sea of subspace energy like the whale after whom it was named.

Jale, in the confines of his cabin, sealed the thermosuit which covered his body from ankles to neck. Readings had shown that the *Moby Dick's* interior was still pressurized but very cold. As an extra security, however, he took down his helmet and clamped it over his head. The android Sherlock, he knew, could tolerate the environment aboard the space hulk; and he assumed that Pippin also had this capability. But the man, after all, was only human – and if there was an unforeseen loss of pressure the erstwhile undertaker had no desire to become a subject for his own trade. As a last precaution, he removed two blasters from under his pillow, adjusted them carefully, and stuck them into his belt.

There was a lot of banging coming from the hold of the *Rigor Mortis*. There, Sherlock and Pippin were working on one of the smaller airlocks of the *Moby Dick*. Slightly irritated by the noise, Jale walked the length of his own ship and arrived in the cargo bay to find it littered with equipment.

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“What’s all this?” he asked, indicating with a sweep of his hand an unlikely collection of paraphernalia which included ice axes and crampons. “Anybody would think we’re going to scale the North Face!”

Sherlock and Pippin looked at the equipment, slightly shame-faced. The master detective lowered the laser cutter with which he had been attacking the portal that led into the other ship. The girl was dressed in a too-large anorak which covered her usually bare breasts and ended above her knees. She looked nervous.

Jale stepped forward and entered a code on the control for the *Moby Dick*’s airlock. He felt like a scoutmaster with a couple of junior charges. Apparently, only he was aware that under the Ships In Distress protocol there was a universal over-ride code to cover situations like this. The pock-marked grey door of the other ship began to slide aside with the grating sound characteristic of meteoritic dust. There was a hiss of air and a flurry of gritty particles left the bigger ship and wafted into the smaller. The *Rigor Mortis* edged itself closer to the derelict, preventing any escape of atmosphere to space.

As the airlock of the *Moby Dick* ground aside, Jale picked up a vacuum cell from the equipment at his feet. He attached this to his belt, removing one of the blasters to make room for it. He handed the weapon to Pippin. “Here, keep this – but don’t use it unless there’s no alternative.”

The girl looked flustered, but accepted the weapon. Sherlock cast a doubtful glance at Jale, but the man was already stepping over the threshold into the other ship.

Ice.

Everywhere.

Long stalactites reached down from the ceiling, striving to unite with shorter stalagmites that grew from the floor at random

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intervals. The deck itself was encrusted with ice, which crackled underfoot as the three explorers moved forwards.

At the back of the chamber they found two mechanized space-suits. One of these stood like a statue – arms by the side and feet stuck to the floor – its servomechanisms frozen into uselessness. The other suit appeared to have stopped in mid-stride, one of its legs upraised, as if were trying to march towards the airlock.

“Light,” ordered Jale.

A beam of illumination emanated from Sherlock. It refracted from the ice which enshrouded the ancient suit, making it difficult to decipher details.

Jale took a step forward. And found himself looking into a pair of ice-covered eyes.

Pippin whimpered but did not scream.

“Let’s go,” said Jale perfunctorily. They were here to find the substance exoticum, not to ruminate over a dead man’s final throes.

In the next chamber they had a lucky break: there were three motorized buggies, and after trying two of them, the last came to life when Jale inserted the vacuum cell into its power-line. The motor itself made no noise; but under their combined weight, it moved over the deck with an ear-splitting racket of shattered ice. The noise, like the light which Sherlock directed, bounced off the frozen walls of the ship as they moved deeper into its interior.

The *Moby Dick* proved to be a labyrinth. They traveled through a skein of chambers whose contents showed that they had been used as workshops, storage rooms and laboratories; but none showed a trace of the exotic matter they were seeking, and it seemed as if they were only skirting the ship’s focus.

Until they came upon a colossal door.

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The portal dwarfed them, a zigzag of gantries to its side showing how the crew had ascended to the control panel at its top. Jale and his companions slogged their way up the staircase, the man sweating among the icicles that festooned the railings. Eventually, they found themselves in an observation chamber whose transparent front looked out into a vast cavern.

It was half-full of what appeared to be brownish-green sludge. But as their eyes adjusted to the gloom of the immense space, it could be seen that the surface was uneven, with upraised portions that bespoke biological forms.

Pippin, shivering, said "It looks like an uncovered burial ground."

Sherlock was tinkering with the complicated control panel, unfazed by the carnage on the other side of the door. After several failed attempts, he found a switch which still functioned. There was the sound of something moving, and then silence as the unit's last energy was exhausted, leaving the door half open.

A strange smell crept into their nostrils. Faint at first, it grew in strength, becoming sickly with the stench of death. Jale took a step forward, leaving the others vacillating on the threshold.

The man's eyes were moving, trying to pierce the gloom. Above, in the roof of the cavern, he could vaguely discern the teeth of a massive mechanical claw. Below, he could just make out what looked to be an arm, upraised from the surface of the sludge as if its unseen owner were drowning.

Jale muttered, "Trawler."

But anything else he might have said was cut off by the unique sound of a blaster's safety catch being clicked off. Pippin ordered: "Jale, stay still."

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Disregarding this admonition, the man slowly turned. To find himself looking at his own blaster in the shaking hands of the female android.

Jale opened his mouth to speak – when an oily tentacle descended from the dark recesses of the roof, and curled around his neck.

Abruptly, the man grabbed the tentacle and yanked. A greenish sack-like body covered in yellow spots flopped to the deck. Sherlock was slightly ahead of Jale, but they landed on the creature almost simultaneously. The flaccid body squelched under their combined weight, sending jets of some oozy stuff across the floor. Two saucer-sized eyes stared at them, but gradually faded as the animal died.

Pippin dropped the blaster, which discharged with the “Phut” typical of a blank charge. She collapsed to the deck, crying.

Jale and Sherlock stared at each other, with the indescribable look of another shared but survived crisis.

The man took the other blaster from his belt and handed it to the male android. “This one *is* loaded,” he warned. “Watch out.”

With Jale supporting Pippin, they all started down the zigzag ladder that led back to where they had left the buggy. However, the only thing that followed them was the smell of dying...

*

“They’re disgusting,” stated Jale. In the comfy confines of his own ship, he was referring to subspace trawlers. “They were originally invented to mine valuable minerals from the other dimensions. But after a while, they began to bring up living organisms too, which they termed *bycatch*. They were eventually outlawed, but not until whole planets had been plundered, in some cases along with their intelligent species.”

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Pippin shuddered, but not in fright. Since the incident aboard the *Moby Dick*, she had gained an edge of emotional strength. Her creator, Brounlee, had certainly made Logical Buddhism the dominant trait of her personality; but he had wisely left room for psychological evolution. She had also developed a practical side, which went far beyond her previous abilities as a guardian of apples. Since the *Moby Dick*, Sherlock and Jale had searched four more derelicts, without success. Pippin, remaining aboard the *Rigor Mortis*, had invented a program to detect exotic matter. The interstellar hearse now cruised on the edge of the graveyard, its instruments probing for exoticum, without which they could not hope to escape the stratum of subspace in which they found themselves.

Jale pushed aside the thought of possible failure. This was not difficult to do: a half-empty glass of whiskey stood on the table in front of him, and Pippin sat tantalizingly close beside him.

She still smelled of apples, and as he looked into her golden eyes he found his memory bringing up images of Rang's roof-top garden at dusk. The girl put her hand on the man's shorn head, running her fingers through the bristle. Not knowing it was a cliché, she said "I like the grey." They leaned together, and ...

Sherlock stormed into the cabin and stopped, taking in the scene. A look of pseudo-nausea built in his features. "Barf-bags on standby." And then more practically: "Sorry to interrupt the B-movie, but we have a positive trace."

Jale bounced up from the sofa, took a swig of whiskey, and ran towards the front of the ship. Pippin remained sitting, her beautiful eyes full of chagrin.

Sherlock, following Jale into the control room, explained "It's a small research vessel, called the *Darwin*. Our sensors show a stash of exoticum stored somewhere on the rear cargo deck."

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Jale scrutinized the image of the craft. Unlike the others they had boarded, this one was prickly, with masts and booms studded with instruments that made the ship resemble a sea urchin. The main airlock was on the bow, under a semicircle of viewing ports which were dark and lifeless. "I'll need a full suit," said Jale. "Come on, we'll float over."

The *Rigor Mortis* took up station at a safe distance from the thorny *Darwin*. Pippin, watching from the control room, saw two figures emerge from their own ship and drift towards the other: Sherlock's silvery cape was easy to discern; and Jale's spacesuit was enveloped in a glowing envelope where it interacted with the blue sea of subspace energy, creating a ghostly phosphorescence. The two shapes arrived at the airlock. After a pause, the latter irised open to make a black circle, into which the men disappeared.

The female android felt nervous. She began pacing the deck of the control room, her legs unaccountably active. Finding that area too small, she marched back to the main cabin, where the glass containing the remains of Jale's drink still stood on the table.

She smelled it, crinkling her nose in distaste. Even if she was an android, maybe there was something else that would calm her?

Pippin wondered if alcohol would unbalance her brain functions. In a way, she hoped it dammed well *would*. Her alarm instincts were running high because of the danger of the present situation, and her anger index was still elevated because of Brounlee's oversight in not giving her a vagina. Luckily, he *had* installed the other hole and a digestive system close to that of a real person. However, this only made the neglect of sex organs more puzzling. Why had the old scientist gone so far towards replicating a human – and in some regards actually improving on the original – only to neglect a vital part? What was even more baff-

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fling was that her love circuit was definitely engaged. Not excessively, of course. She was too logical for that. But what she felt towards Jale was definitely measurable. And it felt nice.

Irritated at not understanding her own responses, the girl yanked open the door of the liquor cabinet. If somebody had told her at that moment that she was acting like an adolescent, both by raiding the booze supply and by falling in love, she would have denied it. Unbeknownst to her, this was one of a thousand safeguards that protected her sanity and her body. For Brounlee was not only a Logical Buddhist with the morals that implied, but also an old man who regarded his creations as his children. This, the latest of his brood, was built full of charm and intelligence, underneath which was a whipcord of toughness that she had so far never had to access. The possibility that she might get drunk hardly registered against the stubbornness that glinted in her eyes.

The liquor cabinet showed a variety of bottles, most full of garishly-coloured fluids which implied strong tastes. Exploring at the back, she found a flask of colourless liquid which looked benign. The bottle was rotund, full, and sealed with a metal band. Perhaps this would smooth her mood until the explorers returned...

The explorers, however, had their own sources of worry. In the control-room of the *Darwin*, they had discovered a stasis-box. It contained the figure of a middle-aged man, whose insignia implied that he was the captain of this ill-fated vessel.

Sherlock wiped condensation from the outside of the box, in an effort to assess how long the person within had been in suspension. "He's in pretty good shape," was his pronouncement. Indeed, the man's crisp khaki uniform, smooth skin and neatly-combed dark-brown hair gave the impression that he could arise at any moment and take back control of his ship. "He hasn't been in stasis very long."

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But any hope of reviving the frozen voyager was belied by the instrument panel on the stasis unit: the energy source was dead, leaving its occupant equally so.

Jale was occupied with a different worry. The control room of the *Darwin* was remarkably tidy: the floor was clean, the console showed none of the usual grubby finger-marks, and nearly all the instruments had been switched through their holding positions to total *Off*. It was as if the captain had prepared his own entombment in the stasis-box after lengthy consideration. The only instrument which still blinked with activity was the ship's log.

Jale activated the record, and without surprise found that the last entry was headed *Summary*. Fascinated, he read:

It is clear that something evil has gotten aboard. The third mate, Valdez, simply disappeared, and all we found were the parts of his uniform scattered about his cabin. At first I suspected murder, because Valdez had not been much liked; but there were no data to back this up. The second mate, also the science officer, was Sally Field. She was known as Carrot Top, because of her orange hair, and was well liked. She was involved in an accident in the laboratory – nothing serious, but when Lee and I got to her, she was suffering some kind of dermal infection which caused dark bands to move up and down her body, and she died shortly after of convulsions. We incinerated the corpse, as a precaution. Lee, the first mate – what can I say? He simply exploded in front of me. Just that. I incinerated the remains as per Protocol. Also as per P., I deactivated and stored the rest of the crew. (24 mechnoids, 4 groups of 6 with brain functions from levels A-11 through A-14, where the last group has self-motivation and which I accordingly distrusted, though there is no evidence they were involved in the deaths of the humans.) I have no explanation for

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what has happened aboard this ship. However, if resuscitated, I am of course willing to testify at a court of inquiry.

Jale looked over his shoulder, to find that Sherlock had also been reading the account. The two looked at each other, both thinking.

“It doesn’t alter things much,” said Jale eventually. “We still have to find the exoticum.”

“Agreed.”

The two left the control room. Their passage rearwards through the corridors of the *Darwin* was hurried, as if they were pursued by ghosts.

Certainly, Jale felt weighing on him the fate of the *Darwin*’s captain (whose name he still did not know). The undertaker respected the actions taken by that unknown officer, but had no intention of sharing the same end. And in entering its hold, the dead ship seemed to offer up a hope of survival. For against the far wall, surrounded by cartons of other supplies and looking innocuously like an ordinary refrigerator, was a box of exoticum.

Sherlock, bending down, looked through the transparent door of the container. Inside, arranged neatly on shelves, were slugs of what resembled oily, yellow metal.

“They look like turds,” commented the master detective.

Jale, who was anxious to get back to his own ship, pointed impatiently to the box’s label: EXTREME LEVITATION HAZARD. EXOTIC MATERIAL. ONLY TO BE OPENED BY QUALIFIED PERSONNEL. “Come on!” he ordered, getting a grip under the bottom edge of the container. He strained, but the box hardly budged.

Sherlock, stepping forward, tapped a code into the control panel. The unit immediately levitated, and would have risen to the ceiling had not the android grabbed it and held it down.

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Jale, looking miffed because he had not thought of activating the exoticum, gave the container an experimental shove. It floated effortlessly. Peering at the controls, he found that they were logarithmic and that the levitation capacity of the exotic matter was only activated at the level of one in a billion. Impressed, he put his shoulder to the container and they moved off, Sherlock directing the way while perched on its top.

*

The *Rigor Mortis*, lightened by the addition of a freight of exotic matter which weighed less than zero, tore through the sea of subspace.

In more exact language, and according to the laws of physics, the ship now had a mass less than that of an atom. Accordingly, there was a good chance it could tunnel out of the subspace wherein it had been trapped and re-enter the normal world.

But tunneling is a quantum-mechanical process dependent on probabilities, as Jale had found out.

Battered, he leaned against the instruments, urging the ship to speeds it had never before attained. What was this, his tenth try? Or was it the eleventh? His bruised brain could not remember. And neither did he care. His eyes flicked between the gauges which blared warnings in red, and the debris ahead which was velocity-shifted from grey to violet.

The *Rigor Mortis* forged on, shoving aside the wreckage of the other craft stuck in this mortuary of metal. Ahead – unseen but tangible – was the potential barrier which separated subspace and normal space. The ship quivered with mechanical exertion just as its captain shook with the determination to be free.

Suddenly there was shrieking noise and the ship staggered in its course as if it had run into thick jelly. Jale did a somersault

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over the instrument panel, hit one of the screens and slid back to the deck.

Groggy, he raised himself on one knee. He forced his stomach to stay down, and explored the back of his head with a shaking hand. The newly-healed rift in his skull was still intact. Good.

He staggered back to the controls and restarted the motors. Jale was basically a gambler, his life a series of calculated risks. Like most gamblers, he did not want to know the odds; but he did know that to escape, it was now or never. "C'mon, my beauties," he urged. The two engines, which had once powered an Acheron battleship, roared until the hull shook. He engaged them, and the ship leapt forward.

Pieces of an ancient freighter smashed into their bow wave, disintegrated, and flashed into the Doppler-darkened sky astern. In front, the sky brightened as the ship approached the velocity of light. Other flotsam became so speed-brightened that the images hurt the pilot's squinting eyes. Perhaps this was why he did not notice the lights warning of engine overload on the display panel. Hanging over the instruments, his clawed hand shoved the power control until it would go no further.

The sky exploded.

The ship floated for an instant, as if balanced on the top of an invisible wall.

And then it was falling...

Jale was falling also. He hit the deck for the second time, and lay there partly conscious, his stinging eyes tightly closed.

When he opened them, it was to the friendly, yellow light of a normal sun.

*

Pippin was blowing lightly on Jale's sunburnt face, hoping that her alcohol-laden breaths would act as an anaesthetic, when a

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frown appeared on the man's forehead.

"That's enough," he grunted. Healing liquid was dripping from a cloth that covered his eyes. They were still smarting from the intense light that had come from the debris in front of the *Rigor Mortis* when it rushed the wall of their prison at near lightspeed. The medicinal fluid seeped from the bandage, ran down his cheeks, and dripped from his jaw. Pippin's bare thigh was wet where the man's head rested.

Sherlock hovered jealously nearby. He had himself nursed Jale back to vigour on several occasions in their crisis-laden life. Indeed, they had joined forces during a deadly fracas at the *Excelsior* hotel, when Jale in trying to carry out a funeral had run afoul of the Black Hand Gang. That Galactic mob had nearly succeeded in eliminating Jale and his competitive smuggling business; but Sherlock succeeded somehow in extricating the blasted man, and instinctively abandoned his dismal career as cook at the wrecked hotel in favour of a more rewarding life with the somewhat reckless Jale. The duo's revenge on the Black Hand Gang had come in due course, when the mob mistakenly tried to intimidate Colonel Ash of the *Victoriana Club*. The pitched battle in the stately rooms of the famous billiard and snooker club had entered the annals of both the police and the game of pool. Now, much later, the memories of many shared perils and escapes came back to Sherlock, who believed that he was uniquely qualified to nurse the newly-damaged Jale.

Thinking of the *Victoriana*, Sherlock could not help drawing a catty comparison with another icon of the era. "Florence Nightingale," he observed, "died of venereal disease."

Pippin, far from being insulted by this clumsy comparison, merely laughed.

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Jale smiled at the master-detective's naive loyalty, but winced at the pain from his radiation-cracked lips. The frown on his forehead deepened. "Please stop rocking me."

Pippin was puzzled. "I'm not."

Jale's horizontal body stiffened where it lay on the couch. Then: "Can't you feel it?"

Sherlock answered for both himself and the girl. "You must be dizzy."

"No," grunted Jale, his voice serious. He lay still for a while longer, then his hand snatched away the cloth from his face, revealing a pair of bloodshot and worried blue eyes. "*Rig?*" he inquired. "Forward and rear scanners."

Screens came to life in the cabin, and all three of the ship's crew stared at them.

The rear monitor showed a barren landscape of jumbled, black boulders. Streaks of ochre dust marked where material from beneath the surface had been ejected during the crash-landing of the *Rigor Mortis*. It looked as if they had come to rest in some kind of volcanic desert.

The forward monitor showed a disconcerting nothingness: the screen was just grey.

"How can that be?" Pippin asked. "Did we only come out of the vacuum half way into the real world?"

"Hmm," muttered Jale. This was something new to his experience.

It was quiet in the cabin, the only sound being the rasping of air into and out of Jale's lungs. Suddenly, this was joined by a low scratching sound. Three pairs of eyes focussed on the low table by the side of the couch: the round stopper from the medicine bottle was rolling across the smooth surface.

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Fascinated, the crew watched as it came to rest, momentarily paused, and began rolling back. Somehow, the motion was deeply eerie.

“The ship’s moving,” said Jale. “I felt it before.”

Numbers appeared on the forward screen, superimposed on the featureless grey background. “Yes,” confirmed Sherlock. “We’re swinging up and down, like a seesaw.” More numbers ran across the screen. “But it’s slow, and the angle is pretty low.”

Pippin, who had been staring not at the numbers but at the grey mass behind them, said “There’s movement. Could be clouds.”

Jale squinted through watery eyes at the monitor, but could initially see nothing distinctive. Then a mass of darker grey moved into view, slowly wheeling across the field of view. “Looks like a hurricane.”

“The wind’s increasing,” announced the ship. In confirmation, the rear-pointing screen showed that the ochre dust from their landing was starting to move across the barren landscape. As the crew watched, the outliers of the more distant boulders became blurred, while the nearer ones acquired tails of dust as the atmosphere moved around them. “The air’s just about breathable.”

The implication of the ship’s words were clear. But their predicament was still baffling, and nobody moved towards the airlock.

Finally, Jale swung his legs off the couch, raised his head from Pippin’s lap, and lurched to his feet. “I’ll go.”

“No, *I’ll* go!” Pippin protested. Impetuously, she grabbed a jacket and started to head towards the rear of the ship.

“No!” Sherlock shouted, with real anger. “*I’m* going!”

Jale groaned. He loved his companions. The master-detective for his whimsical good humour and the comradeship that had been

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forged through numerous tough encounters. The ex-orchardist for her guts and cleverness, not to mention the prettiness quotient. But now was not the time for a squabble, and his already aching head rebelled at the sounds of their argument.

“Shut up!”

Pippin slowly closed her mouth, and pouted at the deck. Sherlock also fell silent, but with an eager expression which indicated that he expected to be given the assignment.

“*I’m going,*” said Jale distinctly, “because it’s *my* decision.”

Sherlock started to object, but a glare from Jale’s bloodshot eyes stopped that. Pippin started to draw invisible patterns on the floor with a sullen toe.

“Sherlock can come to the hold and help me suit-up,” ordered the man. “Pippin, please go to the control room and power-up the motors, just in case.”

“Aye-aye, sir,” reluctantly.

“All right,” resentfully.

Overlooking the mood of his companions, Jale turned and marched aft. The android followed, his silvery cape adjusting to the increasing tilt of the deck as the vessel shifted under them. Once in the hold, the master-detective started a complaining chatter again, outlining anew the drawbacks of having a neophyte, female crew member. Jale ignored the talk, until he was ensconced in his thermal suit and had his finger on the exit control.

“Sherlock,” said Jale quietly but firmly. “She’s here, and she’s *staying.*”

The two friends locked eyes. For the first time in their shared history, they had a basic difference of opinion.

The android fully understood that kind of affection and trust which develops between soldiers in battle. But despite his profession of love for the legendary Irene Adler, he had only an aca-

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demic and immature appreciation of the kind of affection that exists between male and female. He was too close to androgynous to properly fathom the biological bond.

The man, by contrast, reacted automatically and deeply to certain women. He was proud of being an unaltered simian, and his career had been bent out of the line of logic on numerous occasions by falling in love. His memory was littered with recollections of past sweethearts. Many of these had left only small impressions, while some – like the three sisters called the Vestal Virgins – had left deep dents in his psyche. It was true that most of these liaisons had ended in fiasco. But he was a human being, with the instincts of that race, and as some ancient poet had said, hope sprang eternal in his hormones.

In the door of the *Rigor Mortis*, there was an almost visible churning of memories between the two friends as they regarded each other. Both knew what the other was thinking, but neither was the kind to put such things into words. The subject of their disagreement, long held submerged in the river of their lives, had for some strange reason chosen this time to surface. It was a tipping point or node in their mutual history, and both knew it.

Finally, Jale held out his hand.

The body-suit he was wearing ended at the wrist, and his hand was criss-crossed with old scars. A spray of dust entered the hold as the door cycled open. A puff of alien wind pushed aside the ship's air, bearing a peculiar, liquorice-like smell.

Sherlock took the proffered hand and shook it.

"Cook me a cake," said Jale in an effort to lighten the mood. "I'll be back by tea-time."

Jumping to the ground, the man's boots sent up twin spouts of fine sand which scurried downwind.

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After a quick look around, he followed the direction of the wind. It blew steadily, setting up a low, moaning sound as it veered between the larger boulders. Some of these were taller than a man, with a black and blasted appearance. Most were hand-sized, however; angular and with sharp edges. What geologists called pyroclastic. But there was no sign of a volcano anywhere near. There was also no distinct horizon: the dust-laden sky was vaguely yellow, as expected from the alien sun which lay behind; but ahead there was only a featureless haze.

Jale picked his way between the rocks for some time, following the wind but with a slight curve in his path. His footsteps trailed behind, and he was careful to note that they were only slowly being filled in by the dust, so it would be straightforward to follow the route back. He detoured around a house-sized block of stone, and came to an abrupt halt.

There was no more ground.

The rocky plain over which he had been walking ended in a sharp, almost knife-like edge. Beyond this, there appeared to be nothing.

Jale dropped to his knees and gingerly crawled forward. At the edge, he stopped and peeked over. And gasped.

There was no ground to see below. Just a vast abyss. Far below, clouds boiled like soup in a pot. But whether or not this gigantic pot had a bottom, he could not tell.

Not usually subject to vertigo, the colossal depth made his head swim. Retreating slightly, he turned and swept his gaze along the edge of the cliff. It meandered away in a chipped line until it was lost in the haze.

Not far away, the *Rigor Mortis* was balanced on the edge of the precipice.

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As the pilot watched in horror, the nose of his ship started to dip down. The massive vessel tilted more and more, until it seemed that it must slide and fall into the chasm below. But then it slowed, and stopped. By excruciatingly small degrees, it began to tilt upward. The ship was see-sawing on the edge of oblivion.

“Photon!” Jale exclaimed, letting out the breath he had been holding. “What a place to land.”

It looked like a miracle.

Yet already his racing brain was starting to analyse the apparent unlikelihood of the ship’s perch. When tunneling through the vacuum to escape the graveyard of the derelicts, there would have been no up or down or sideways. No preferred direction or place.

Perfect neutrality. However, on emerging from the vacuum into the real world, the ship would naturally respond to even the smallest force. Like the gravitational one associated with this enormous cliff. The geological accident of this rift valley had directed their path. In a way, the vessel had been obliged to end up where it now rested.

Jale was satisfied with this logic. Though a gambler, he was not the kind to believe in miracles. To his way of thinking, too much bad luck must lead to his demise; so the fact he was alive and that his ship survived merely meant that his luck was in.

But would his luck continue to hold? A take-off from the brink of a bottomless chasm was not something he had ever tried. It would be tricky under the best of circumstances. And as he crouched near the cliff edge, considering the maneuver, there was a change in the direction of the wind. Formerly it had been blowing out over the drop, but after falling momentarily still, it proceeded to blow inward. As he watched, a dense cloud snaked up the rock face and coiled around the ship. Through dust-etched

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eyes, he saw that a massive grey vortex was rising from the depths.

“Damn weather!” Jale muttered, and began walking quickly back to the ship. A column of thick cloud temporarily blocked his view, and the sound of the wind became a note higher. He began to run.

“Sherlock?”

“Yes.” The response was immediate. The android must have been watching his movements.

“Get out the exoticum.” A blast of wind slapped Jale’s body, causing him to stagger and dragging the words from his mouth.

“What?”

“I said,” repeated the man between panting breaths, “get the exoticum, and move it to the front of the ship!”

“Roger,” responded Sherlock with unnecessary formality.

Suddenly there was a rushing, roaring sound. Jale started to turn, but a battering ram of near-solid air smote him between the shoulder blades. Then he was sailing and turning – to land on a big boulder in a gasping mess. The voice of Sherlock, bleating anxiously in his ear, was cut off, replaced by the shrieking of the storm.

On hands and knees, Jale clung to the boulder while the wind alternately pushed and sucked at his body. The atmosphere had turned to liquid sand, scouring his battered form. His lungs worked spasmodically like a tortured bellows.

Through the billowing clouds, he slowly became aware of a looming black shape. He started to crawl, a blind and deafened rat of a man burrowing through a howling hell.

Bang! His head hit something solid. Normally, this would have been painful; but now his body was in such clamouring distress that he hardly noticed.

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His groping hand felt a surface. It was smooth!

A silvery blob materialized above, and he was grabbed rudely by the scruff of his suit.

Another bang. He felt the hard plates of the deck beneath him. They were vibrating, and an ominous grinding noise was coming through them.

Jale opened his mouth. Dust poured out. “Up.” His voice was a mere croak. “Up!”

For the second time that day, he found his head cradled in somebody’s lap. But on this occasion it was different. Metallic fingers probed swiftly but surely into his mouth, scooping out the refuse of the storm.

Jale wretched. He threw off the helping hand, rolled away from the comforting lap, and started crawling towards the control room. “Got to take off...”

Sherlock’s hand caught his leg, and a mask was pressed over his face. A flood of cool, invigorating oxygen poured into his battered lungs. “Relax. Pippin’s got it.”

The deck lurched. There was a nausea-causing moment while things held in balance, and then a dizzying slew to the side – which was stopped by a steady hand. Then the hull of the *Rigor Mortis* quivered as full power was fed to its motors. Their roar drowned the noise outside and the ship punched its way into the sky.

BOARDROOM BATTLES

On the penultimate floor of the colossal building which housed Rang Enterprises was located the largest boardroom in the Milky Way. How large was it? So large that during the annual general meeting the chairman had to use a telescope to identify the shareholders at the back. This problem was exacerbated by the mist which formed along the perimeter of the room, a result of the building's unparalleled height. Even though the upper floors were pressurized, the tendency to cumulus had on several occasions given lightly-clothed minor shareholders unfair influence because they resembled angels. However, a long-term solution to the building's climatological drawbacks was offered by a geophysical one, namely that it was sinking into the ground under its own titanic weight. Isostasy would eventually halt this process, leaving the building floating in the magma of the planet with about half its starting height; but in the meantime, its boardroom was the epicentre of seismic disagreements whose consequences affected the most remote parts of the Galaxy.

Brounlee, the embattled head of the Rang organization, looked around the table and shivered slightly with agoraphobia. For the board table was shrunk to its minimum size so as to accommodate only five people, leaving the rest of the room a vast expanse of emptiness. Overhead, the ceiling was occupied to its full extent by an image of the Milky Way, which while it served to locate the far-flung operations of the corporation only seemed to emphasise the smallness of its controlling clique.

Acheron may spin relatively quickly on its axis, but the passage of the 20 days since Jale had disappeared in his space-hearse *Rigor Mortis* seemed a lifetime to Brounlee. The old man's face

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still looked calm, but the forehead was more deeply etched and the mouth was tighter. The general dryness of his appearance was only belied by the faint sheen of saliva on the handle of his umbrella, which he chewed nervously and over which he surveyed his codirectors with a mixture of dislike and hope.

Affaball, Director of Personnel, was known to most of the employees simply as "The Ball". Certainly, he was rotund – something which could be altered easily in one of the company's laboratories; but something which the person in question valued, claiming that, historically, fat people had been viewed as more approachable. And he was a friendly-looking person: his tummy-line was matched by his jowls, which supported grandfatherly grey hair; while his thick lips moved naturally into a smile, surrounding a greeting which always included the name of the employee, even though there were thousands of them in headquarters alone. This ability might, on consideration, tip off the interviewee that behind the affable mask was a meticulous and calculating brain. Brounlee was under no misconception about his director of people: Affaball was a shrewd conniver whose face could switch from friendly to ferocious in an instant. Most of the employees had (thankfully) not witnessed this, and since he showed no resentment of his nickname, The Ball was regarded among the lower echelons of the corporation as the most kindly of its directors. The man could, indeed, afford to be content and relaxed, at least outwardly: he had become rich as the Enterprises had flourished, and he lived a bachelor existence in a sumptuous apartment, located somewhat paradoxically in one of the city's poorer quarters. This was actually explained by the fact that Affaball was in the habit of taking in young poor boys from the local streets. In middle age, his wealth would have been larger were it not for the bribes and fines he paid out regularly to avoid publicity

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about stories of such depravity that one social worker had been physically sick on emerging from the fat man's apartment. During convalescence at an expensive sanatorium (paid for by Affaball), she had mysteriously walked out of its doors, never to be heard from again.

Dullea knew more about money, but possessed less of it, than anyone else on the governing board of Rang Enterprises. A life-long spinster, her lack of riches was matched by her apparent lack of persona. However, this was so extreme that in a way it conferred noticeability on her. As Brounlee had once put it, she was so dull that she stood out. He was glad to have her as Director of Finance, because she was incorruptible. Many companies paid their treasurers big salaries in order to take the edge off any tendency they might have to fraud; but in Dullea's case this was not necessary, and the woman had confirmed her natural frugality by passing up several offers to buy stock in the company at a rebate. Some of the associates who occupied the floors of the Rang building below the boardroom assumed that it was Dullea's lack of wealth which explained why she wore only cheap, ready-made clothes of the simplest design. Those richly-attired aspirants to co-directorships followed the usual unstated rule – that more money spent on attire and appearance would one day translate into more money in the form of salary and stock options. They regarded the Director of Finance as a glorified accountant, meeting her blunt and unsmiling requests for information on monetary matters with resentment and disdain. They could not understand why the Head of the company, Brounlee, did not send Dullea for a gratis visit to one of their clinics. There, the short-cropped, lifeless hair could be replaced; the long, bumpy nose could be modified; and the small, uninspiring breasts could be augmented. But Brounlee cared as little about those things as his treasurer. Also,

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she was the only one of the inner circle who would not, metaphorically speaking, stab him in the back at the first good opportunity.

Brounlee stopped sucking the handle of his umbrella as he noted Dullea's disapproving look. Deliberately, he sent her a smile. The woman's pale lips bent downwards slightly, and the sound system built into the board table brought to him the unmistakable sound of her little sniff. Brounlee countered by broadening his smile to an uncharacteristic but ironic grin.

This prompted Dullea to say "Can we start soon?" Her voice, like everything else about her, was remarkably monotonous. "I thought there was a crisis going on. Or am I mistaken?"

"No," replied Brounlee, putting his umbrella on top of the table to signify the beginning of the meeting. "We are very much in the middle of a mess."

"A mess?" Fingal asked. "It's more like a meltdown! My unit's the only one that's working right. My shops are still producing droids, but I may be wasting my time if what I hear about this CLAG thing is right."

The man's voice was high and strained. As Director of Research, Fingal had a point, and Brounlee made a gesture with his hand to acknowledge this. The fact that Fingal was upset underscored the seriousness of the situation. Normally a reserved man who seemed to think about every sentence before it was uttered, Fingal now fidgeted in his seat with concern, muttering something which the table's microphones could not clarify but which sounded ominous. His hands, which flapped on the surface of the table like wounded crabs, were over-large: the fingers had been artificially lengthened by adding a segment, so they consisted of four sections rather than the usual three. This had been done long ago, when Brounlee was in charge of android development and

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Fingal was his assistant. The latter had justified the change by arguing that it would help his work, which at that time was akin to that of a surgeon. Now, promoted to the circle of directors, his hands were more familiar with documents than droids. The enlargement caused the lower executives to refer to him as “Doctor Digit,” an appellation he detested. However, he was respected; and his lanky body with its narrow, intent face was still to be seen stalking through the laboratories, especially during periods of difficulty, when his experience and insight could make the difference between a new android becoming a piece of junk or a marvel of science. Fingal was a worthy successor to Brounlee, and the two would have gotten along if it were not for one thing: Brounlee was better.

The old man surveyed his fellow directors, reflecting that one advantage of age was that a certain immobility of the features masked the inner emotions. Since becoming a Logical Buddhist, he had been content with his own morals and actions. But he was worried that the present crisis in the affairs of the company would scour away his colleagues’ surface civility, revealing ugly features of their characters. He secretly detested Affaball, whose sexual preferences were in his opinion grotesque, indicating an inherently self-centred and even sadistic personality. Dullea, by contrast, he respected. The woman had apparently been in love at one time; but a spaceship crash had eliminated her mate and her feelings, leaving a nice but frustrated soul to find solace only in work, at which she was meticulous to the point sometimes of exasperation.

The other director, Fingal, was a bit of a contradiction. Basically an academic who should have stuck to research, he had pretensions to power, which were unlikely to come to anything because he lacked an interest in people, and spent too much energy fussing over his own shortcomings. *What a crew!* Brounlee thought.

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"I hear," continued Fingal, "that this new disease called CLAG is different and more dangerous than others. Is it true that it works on the carbon atom to destabilize it, producing liquefaction?"

Brounlee nodded, then added: "It spoils the carbon, releasing what is effectively an antigen, causing the rest of the body to undergo glycolization."

Dullea frowned. She knew about money, and could tell you on the spot what something produced in the Milky Way would sell for in Andromeda, but her knowledge of chemistry and physics was minimal. "Isn't glycol some form of alcohol? Are you saying that a person's body infected with the CLAG just turns into a cloud of booze?"

"It's a bit like that," conceded Brounlee. "But more complicated. Even the diatomic alcohol-like molecules are unstable, so after one person is killed the resulting gas drifts off to infect somebody else."

"Neat," said Fingal. "Almost as if it had been engineered."

There was an awkward silence around the table. Here was one of the central issues: Was the CLAG a natural disease, or had it been manufactured?

"It *wasn't* made *here*." This from the last member of the codirector quartet. Ragalid, Director of Security, stared at the others around the table, his glittering grey eyes emphasising his statement. Brounlee, observing the other man, reflected (not for the first time) that eyes of such coldness were a give-away to the rather inhuman character which lay beneath. But then, did the eyes make the man or did the man make the eyes? The only thing the security chief needed to complete the cliché of his job was a pair of sunglasses. But then Ragalid was notoriously arrogant and self-centered, and would have despised such a ruse. Perhaps, though, the purple pouffed hair and the inevitable jacket of the

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same colour were the man's attempt at drawing attention away from his icy stare? However, the mauve motif could be the result of plain vanity. Whatever its origin, the artificial colouring was at odds with the dull, yellow hue of the skin. Brounlee, recollecting his young years when he had dabbled in art, realized that he would never have put puce and ochre side-by-side on a canvas. The combination was for some reason unappealing – even jarring. As for the painting, so for the man: nobody liked Ragalid, and Ragalid liked nobody – especially Brounlee.

“And it couldn't have been made by our competitors Xmen or DivaDroid,” added Ragalid after a pause. “My spies are quite sure about that.” The fact that this comment was followed by silence, with no attempt at query, showed that while the Director of Security was disliked he was also known to be competent.

Dr. Digit's extended index finger on his right hand rose to scratch the left side of his lean jaw. “Maybe it was made in Andromeda.”

The Ball rested his hands on his paunch. “That makes sense.”

“Up to a point,” agreed Ragalid. “Though I have to report that my few operatives in our neighbouring galaxy have found no evidence to that effect. Of course, I could do a more thorough check, *if* I had the funds.” He looked meaningfully at the Director of Finance.

Dullea, however, declined to be drawn. There were larger matters at stake than budget items. “There's still a lot of bad feeling between us and them,” she said. “In my view, the War ended in something like an armistice rather than a victory for us, and Andromeda is still talking about expanding their empire.”

Fingal shook his head. “I'd say that we *did* effectively win the War, due in notable part to the soldiers manufactured by Rang Enterprises. After our company invented the suicide android with

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its vacuum bomb, the conflict was really unwinnable from their side.”

The people around the board table reflected in silence for a few moments on the war between the Milky Way and Andromeda galaxies, which they were old enough to remember in all its ghastly aspects. That conflict had been particularly hateful to the buddhistic Brounlee, who after its completion had managed in the post-war euphoria to alter the company’s direction, away from soldiers towards more positive things. Nowadays, every colonized planet in the Galaxy had a contingent of android physicians; and there was no settlement, however humble, that did not have at least one android nurse. These millions of helpful minions were all stamped with the R of their origin, making Rang Enterprises more influential than many governments.

“We aren’t here to discuss past politics,” reminded Brounlee. “We’re here to discuss *that*.”

He gestured with his umbrella to the ceiling above. There, the vast model of the Milky Way was dappled with red spots: sites where the CLAG had been reported.

The four directors looked upwards, but their chief Brounlee preferred to observe *them* rather than gaze again at the depressing map over his head. Affaball’s eyes swept over the ceiling map and its red disease points with apparent unconcern, his hands interlaced across his fat stomach. Dullea looked up and then almost immediately down, a guilty expression on her plain face which might have been due to the realization that money was not as important as people. Fingal’s stare remained fixed on the starry map and its red splotches, but with a querying expression, as if he was trying to devise some new kind of creation which he could deploy to stop the spread of the disease. Ragalid only glanced up briefly,

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though his yellowish skin was drawn tight around his thin lips, giving him an angry look.

Shortly, the meeting resumed. Each of the four directors gave a report and was cross-examined by the others. After a while, there was a veritable mass of data under discussion which covered every aspect of the company's doings as they related to its people, money, inventions and safety. But nothing in the nature of a breakthrough idea about the CLAG came, and eventually a note of weariness crept into the directors' voices.

"Colleagues," said Brounlee finally, when the discussion started to deteriorate into bickering, "let us take a break and refresh ourselves."

Responding to the cue, Igor the dwarf entered the boardroom, directing a levitray that was loaded with drinks and snacks. He first served Brounlee a cup of tea; but by some miscalculation his long arms missed the precise location in front of the Director, so he gave the cup an extra push, sloshing part of the contents into the saucer. Brounlee pretended to cuff the gnome, who cringed. On the opposite side of the table, the other members of the committee were already in the process of standing, turning to one another in that traditional manner people do when they are temporarily released from duty and can indulge in chatter. The table's audio circuit, surreptitiously turned up by Brounlee in rising, overheard and relayed the following bits of conversation:

Fingal: "I hate to see that dwarf. It should come down to the laboratories and get fixed."

Ragalid: "Yes. It's ugly, and always hanging around, even in my section."

Dullea: "The old man doesn't like it either. He just smacked it for spilling his tea."

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Affaball: "Even Brounlee can't get rid of it. There are laws obliging us to hire a certain quota of handicapped. The rules are complicated, but basically..."

Brounlee, listening and watching from the opposite side of the table, noted that Igor did not make any more 'errors' of etiquette. Despite his malformed limbs and slouching gait, he served the four directors perfectly with their preferred choices of drink and food. It could not have been done better in a first-class restaurant. And yet, these well-paid and pampered people despised the midget. Sadly, Brounlee's gaze went beyond the huddle of executives and sought the far reaches of the room. Clouds were starting to form along the walls of that tremendous space, telling that the day outside was going. His attention distracted by the curling, airy forms, Brounlee's thoughts drifted to space, and so to Jale. Where was that dammed fool?

*

That "dammed fool" was lying on the sofa in the lounge of the *Rigor Mortis*, one hand covering his eyes and the other grasping a tumbler full of Rigellian whiskey, trying via the combination to banish the worst headache ever known to the Galaxy.

Opposite, on his own couch of peculiar design, the android Sherlock – master detective of the Milky Way – groaned as he tried to achieve any combination of settings which would quieten the clamouring of his artificial circuits. "At least," he whispered, "we're alive."

"Speak for yourself," muttered Jale.

*

In the boardroom, Brounlee's attention was drawn from his empty teacup by Fingal, who was re-seating himself and saying:

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“There is a rumour that, horrible as the CLAG may be, there is a potential cure.”

Brounlee cursed silently, and exchanged glances with Ragalid. They were unlikely co-accused, but it looked as if each would have to divulge some data.

“A possible cure *has* been discussed,” admitted Brounlee carefully. “But it has not been verified, and it is in any case beyond our grasp.”

Affaball, who was alert to verbal nuances, drove to the heart of the matter by asking “*Where* is it? *Who* has it?”

Brounlee looked his Director of Personnel straight in the eye. “I don’t know *where* it is,” he admitted. “When last heard of – about 20 days ago – it was in the company of Jale.”

At the mention of this name, each member of the group reacted differently: Fingal’s thin face seemed to lock up, but his voice croaked “Oh no. Not again!” Ragalid’s yellow face became sullen with dislike, but he said nothing. Affaball’s fleshy face quivered with disbelief, and he stuttered “But..! But he’s supposed to be dead!” Dullea’s boring face showed confusion and suspicion (this would not be the first time Brounlee had put somebody on the payroll without telling her) and she asked: “Who is this Jale person?”

The men regarded the woman in near disbelief. Then, seeing that she was genuinely ignorant, Brounlee explained: “He is – or was – an undertaker. And he has a Ph.D. in tensor calculus from the University of Trantor.”

Dullea continued to stare at Brounlee. It was a while before the latter realized that his Director of Finance wished more data. (As if the two pieces just imparted were not sufficiently bizarre, especially taken together.) “He also earns a part of his living as a smuggler, aided by an android version of Sherlock Holmes.”

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The female treasurer was still looking intently at Brounlee, who was vaguely surprised that the woman was showing no reaction to these surrealistic facts. The Head added in desperation: "I arranged a meeting with Jale, hoping to gain control of the antidote to the CLAG disease. But..," his voice faltered, "he disappeared in his interstellar hearse the *Rigor Mortis*."

Brounlee looked for help to Ragalid, given the challenge of Dullea's continued silence. The Director of Security scowled. Reluctantly, he explained: "I sent two of my best men to get the CLAG cure from Jale's ship. But he out-smarted us. My operatives got raving drunk, and Jale has vanished into subspace, taking with him Brounlee's prettiest gardener."

Dullea suddenly let out a peal of screeching laughter. So unexpected was this that the four men jumped out of their seats and stood staring at her. Not only had their dour Director of Finance never been known to show much emotion, but her first laugh in history more resembled a witch's cackle. And when it stopped, the woman looked more resentful than amused.

"Do you expect me to believe this nonsense?" she demanded. "I suppose this story is designed to get Finance to agree to fund some stupid space jaunt." As she said this, she swept Brounlee and Ragalid with a look of contempt. "But I'm not taken in. You should have stopped at the bit about the interstellar hearse. The ending where Jale elopes with the beautiful gardener is just *too* trite."

Dullea turned around and marched angrily off. The four men watched speechlessly as her stiff figure diminished into the distance of the vast room, finally to disappear among its peripheral clouds.

*

Jale shifted slightly on his divan, negating the shadow cast by

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the *Rigor Mortis* as the sun shifted, and allowing its healing rays to invigorate his battered body.

One of the ship's awnings cast a discreet, triangular shadow over his genitals; but otherwise Jale's hirsute body was naked, sucking up the sunlight like the desert sucks up water. In fact, the desert started just beyond the parking lot; and as the sun climbed to increasing heights in the amber sky, the air became hotter and hotter. Jale, however, was relatively cool. This because of the regular motion and the associated intermittent breeze of a large, palm-like leaf born by Sherlock. Its regular up-and-down motion was soporific, but affected the android more than the human. The frequency of its cooling beat eventually decreased to the point where Jale, turning over to allow his rear the benefit of the radiation, muttered "A bit faster."

"Sorry, Sir," responded Sherlock, immediately increasing his effort. And then, hoping to deflect further criticism, said "The local dendrites *are* a bit deficient."

Jale ignored this feeble comment. Instead, his arm gradually extended itself from his body, and his hand opened. Pippin, who had been watching from the port of the ship, hurried over. She proffered a tray, on which was a large mound of ice surrounding a big bottle of beer. Jale's fingers instinctively clasped the neck of the bottle. There was a prolonged sound of gulping from the man, whose body was turned away from his helpers. Then the bottle reappeared, empty. Pippin took it and ran back to the ship, in case another should be required.

Hickory Heights was hot. Like most pioneer towns whose names were chosen by far-off bureaucrats, there was a disconnect between the appellation and the reality. There were no hickory trees, and the only form of native vegetation was an aphyllous bush whose wiry twigs held selfishly to every drop of water that

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could be extracted from the seared ground. The 'Heights' were a pair of rounded hills which rose reluctantly from the flat terrain. Between these ran a kind of horizontal gantry, where the shuttles from the enormous star cruisers landed to disgorge their cargoes of immigrants. The town had only two roads: one ran down from the landing site; and the other ran at right angles to it, stretching out in both directions into the desert and extending itself bilaterally in response to the growing population. The latter had now searched the dizzying level of 3,432 souls, not counting Jale and his companions.

They had arrived at Hickory Heights when the *Rigor Mortis* had found itself obliged to pick a destination while its crew recovered from the effects of tunneling out of subspace. The protocol it had followed was logical: find a place which: (a) possessed medical facilities (in case they were needed); (b) possessed ship-repair facilities (these *were* needed); (c) did *not* possess anybody who harboured a grudge against the interstellar undertakers (this narrowed the field considerably); and (d) preferably did possess at least one inhabitant with whom they had dealt before and was friendly (this opened the field again, since the far-travelled Jale was basically a fair man). The ship had sifted through hundreds of possibilities, and discarded most, when it came upon this entry in its data banks: HICKORY. GROWING RIM WORLD, CAPITAL HICKORY HEIGHTS. MOST FACILITIES, INCLUDING ONE PUBLIC LAVATORY ON MAIN STREET WITH SAND FLUSH. RECENT IMMIGRANT, SPYLE, WITH WHOM JALE HAD DEALINGS IN THE AFFAIR OF THE VICTORIANA SNOOKER CLUB (POSITIVE OUTCOME). This sparse but sufficient entry had caused the ship to land on the isolated planet. The populace, originally bewildered by the unexpected arrival of an interstellar hearse, had rallied and offered

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typical small-town hospitality. The *Rigor Mortis* now filled four of the town's dozen parking spots, which were located behind the businesses that occupied the central portion of Main Street. The buildings provided welcome protection from the hot winds which blew most of the time across the barren wastes of the surrounding desert. The *Rigor's* location was particularly convenient, in that its main airlock faced the back entrance to the town's best restaurant. This was run by Mr. and Mrs. Spyle, and was fittingly called the *Burnt Chip*.

Jale, lying on the divan he had loaned from Mrs. Spyle, twitched his nostrils as the smell of fried potatoes drifted out the back door of the restaurant. He did not know where the potatoes came from, but there was a brisk import/export trade driven by some metal that was mined in the desert surrounding the town. Indeed, this small colony on the rim of the Milky Way was remarkably prosperous, and its people were impressively energetic. Under other circumstances, he would have liked to stay – perhaps try his hand at prospecting. But there were other concerns. Weighty ones. Like the CLAG, which while it was yet unknown on Hickory was by all accounts decimating the more advanced systems in the Galaxy.

Sighing, Jale prepared to turn over. He vaguely hoped that the strong sun would bleach some of the hairs on his chest, so disguising those which had in recent times gone grey of their own accord. This convalescence on a remote planet had done him good, both physically and mentally. Though – he had to admit – doing nothing was strange to him. But, had he not earned a rest? Surely so, as the only person ever to have escaped from subspace. And his two companions seemed to agree, since they were so attentive (even slave-like) in their care for him.

In this regard, however, Jale was soon to be re-educated. Un-

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beknownst to the man, his android friends were in a rebellious mood. Sherlock had discarded his soothing palm branch, and Pippin had abandoned the beer run. They now stood regarding the sybaritic Jale with jaded expressions, sharing the thought that they had given him more than enough attention.

By agreement, the androids turned their vocal units to maximum, coordinated them, and directed a blast of sound at the snoozing man: "Wakey wakey!"

Jale rocketed off the divan, his face ready for a fight and his hand reaching for his absent blaster.

Sherlock and Pippin grinned at him with the juvenile pleasure of a well-planned prank. But they were not finished. In unison, their voices chanted:

What's the time?

Why, half-past-nine!

Grab your knickers off the line!

Jale's bear-like expression gradually faded. Reluctantly, he grabbed his shorts from the clothesline where they had been hanging. The ever-helpful Mrs. Spyle had done the crew's accumulated laundry, and drawn by the noise she now appeared at the open door of the restaurant. A buxom and uninhibited woman, she watched with interest as Jale pulled up his tight underwear, noting how the testicles and then the penis were stashed into their confining space. She exchanged a confidential wink with Pippin, and disappeared inside.

Unaware that he was putting on a minor show, Jale grabbed a shirt and pulled it over his heavily-muscled shoulders. "Okay," he grunted. "I get the message. The vacation is over, and we have work to do."

The man cast a critical look at the *Rigor Mortis*. The local repair shop had banged out all the dents in the hull, and repainted

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it with something that could only be illogically described as multi-coloured black. Depending on the angle at which the sun's rays hit the hull, the human eye perceived different kinds of blackness. The old ship looked like a newly-mined piece of anthracite.

"Good," acknowledged Jale. Then to Sherlock: "Is everything else fixed?"

"Affirmative. Even the awning we lost on the approach to the Rang building."

Inside the *Rigor Mortis*, its intelligence unit did the cybernetic equivalent of a disgusted roll of the eyes. The ship had been hoping to lose the tasteless awnings completely; and even retracted as they were now, they were a distracting responsibility.

"Okay," announced Jale. "We can blast off at any time."

Pippin sidled up to the man, intent on reminding him of something. "Jale?"

"Yes?" The tone was short and business-like. The captain of the best space-hearse in the Milky Way was thinking about the ship's newly-painted hull and the particle fluxes it would encounter on lifting from Hickory...

Pippin was miffed. "Can't you say something nicer, like 'Yes, dear'?"

"No, dear," replied Jale. He was still looking at the hull's new paint-job. It was the best ever. But out here, at the edge of the Milky Way, there were lots of antiprotons produced by supernova explosions in other galaxies; and concentrated by Hickory's magnetic field, those particles might tear through the ship's fresh covering like a dose of whiskey through a monk ...

Pippin, annoyed, saw that the only way to communicate was by being blunt. "Jale, we've been sponging off the Spyles since we got here. We *owe* them. So instead of them making us dinner

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this evening, I want you to spring for dinner for *them*.” There was a pause. “We’ll delay leaving until tomorrow morning.”

The female android walked off, swinging her hips as if defying the man to contradict her. Jale, however, was a person who was very much aware of the duties of friendship; and in addition, he was very logical. He therefore called “Fine. Dinner on me this evening. But, their’s is the only good restaurant in town.”

It was thus that five people found themselves crammed at sundown into the lounge of the *Rigor Mortis*, for a dinner that had been prepared by Jale in the kitchen of the *Burnt Chip*. Not wishing to “sponge” more off the owners of that fine establishment, the captain had ransacked the ship to come up with an eclectic bunch of ingredients. These, however, had defeated the ship’s galley; and he had spent considerable time in the well-equipped kitchen of the restaurant, in order to produce a meal that would pass as edible. Now, the restaurateurs and the ship’s crew were seated and expectant. The nubile Mrs. Spyle sat beside Jale on the latter’s beer-stained couch. Spyle himself – who had retained his spotty complexion into middle age – sat by the side of Pippin on the plush of the chaise longue which had been acquired long ago by Sherlock. The last levitated back and forth, bearing in the various parts of a meal which proceeded by incongruous installments.

The first of these was something which looked like strawberry shortcake, but was actually made from rum-fed yeast extract, plus some red berries which a customs officer had overlooked at a previous port of call. Spyle, whose long neck worked overtime as he gobbled up the treat, said between bites in a curiously clipped accent “I like a bit o’ tart.” He cast a loving glance at his wife, who giggled coquettishly. Jale, who did not care much for sweets, let

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Spyle consume most of the introductory course, while wondering why his wife kept rubbing her thigh against that of her host.

The second course of the meal was seaweed soup. The seaweed in question was not common kelp, but a delicately-flavoured variety whose aroma brought back to Jale memories of a previous girlfriend and a hidden lagoon. It was served by Sherlock piping hot, which was good because after sundown the temperature around Hickory Heights plummeted, as those in the desert know well. Mrs. Spyle, spooning the soup between her well-formed lips, said "I like things 'ot." She looked across the crowded table to her husband. "In't that right, Spyley?"

The man, between gulps, muttered agreement. As if the soup's thermal inertia was not enough, the intelligence of the *Rigor Mortis* decided at this stage to turn up the heat in the cabin. It had left the ship's main port open, so that if anything should happen in the restaurant there would be no delay in informing its owners. In the eatery, the eldest of the six Spyle children was supervising the younger ones, running occasionally to the front of the store to handle the evening's take-out trade. The teenage girl, besides being the eldest of the closely-aged Spyle clan, had the easy approachability of her mother. This resulted in a steady stream of business from the town's male youth, and Mrs. Spyle expected to become a young grandmother before long.

The third and main course of the dinner was, truth be told, broiled space weevil. However, the male Spyle mistook it for lobster, and was awed. He stared at the crustacean for some time, before saying "To think that I, the 'umble owner of a dinery, should ever get mi' choppers round a such."

He seemed almost unable to tackle the fabled food. Until his wife urged "Go on, Spyle. You need all the vitamin E yer can get."

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Jale looked at Pippin. Their eyes met with the mutual understanding of the host and hostess who realize – too late – that their good intentions are going down the chute of banality. Even Sherlock, who had been fetching and removing dishes and had been absent for half of the small-talk, saw that the soiree was degenerating into a guzzling fest accompanied by low-class sexual innuendo. As an attempt at wrenching the conversation back into more conventional lines, the android asked “How did you two meet?”

This oft-used sentence proved at this special juncture to be a massive mistake.

Spyle the male stopped the motion of his acne-ridden jaws momentarily. Pieces of the carapace of space weevil were jutting from his greasy lips, but this did not prevent him from mouthing some indistinct words. “It were lust at first sight, weren’t it love?”

Spyle the female looked down at her plate of gnawed chitin with false modesty. “Oh Spyle!” she simpered with a pavlovian teenage response. “Just to think! If it ‘adn’t been for the Unemployment Exchange, we might never have met...”

Jale, growling, said “I wish *I’d* never met ...”

Pippin snapped “Jale, be quiet.” There was a pause, while she surreptitiously checked the clock, and decided (wrongly) that their guests might be easier to get rid of if they were allowed to speak first. Also, she reasoned (again wrongly), allowing them to vocalize their latent lust might stop the male member of the pair from constantly looking at her bare breasts. With an assumed air of graciousness, Pippin said “I think it would be nice to hear how our guests got together.”

The courtship of the couple now known as Mr. and Mrs.

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Spyle was among the shortest on record. Spyle, as a youth with a pimple-laden jaw under a mouth that was perpetually open, had tried the retail business without much success. For a while, he had worked at a store which sold the paraphernalia of snooker (or as it was known on the more industrial worlds, pool). He had once sold a set of top-quality snooker balls and a couple of fine cues to Jale and Sherlock. But they, like most people, did not purchase one of the beautifully made but expensive tables on which the game was played. Since the job paid largely on commission, the lack of sales translated into a lack of income, and the youth had moved to Spree. On that world, which was basically one big shopping mall, he had gained employment at a store which sold statues. The big-selling items were busts of Napoleon, Churchill and Wackus; but even these historic generals were in only modest demand. Spyle spent most of his time staring at the roof of the shop, ruminating on the futility of war. One day, a short-sighted collector had visited the store, and attempted to purchase the day-dreaming youth. This led to his dismissal; and he had eventually found himself on the administrative planet Acheron, sitting in a room which was occupied by what seemed to him to be an infinite number of job-seekers.

Actually, he had a ticket which bore the finite number 1,637,342. But it seemed unlikely to Spyle that a system designed to process such large numbers of the unemployed would be able to provide the in-depth advice he needed to procure the kind of upper-level career in sales which he desired. For he regarded himself as above the mere vending of burgers; and was convinced that he did in fact possess the intelligence and dedication needed to sell such things as snooker tables and statues. The absence of a mass market for these items he considered to be one of the big mysteries of life. Musing on this and other puzzles, he noticed

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that the girl seated next to him had a ticket bearing the number 1,637,343. Acting on a whim of ironic generosity, he had said "You can trade numbers with me, if you want."

He had been met with a smile of such warmth that the myriad of other job-hunters in the room seemed to become a blur. The girl's deep eyes – the blue of five-point snooker balls – looked at him calmly for a while, before she shrugged and said with resignation "There's not much point, is there?"

Spyle had said nothing, and a long silence ensued, during which the girl had several times fidgeted with impatience. Finally, she had said in a chagrined tone: "It's stupid. Why, if we were married and were willing to move to one of the new worlds at the Rim, they'd find us jobs and pay our way!"

"Really?" Spyle responded with interest. Then, "What do you do?"

"I'm a cook," was the answer. "And you?"

"Retail," responded Spyle. But thinking this sounded pretentious, added "Sales clerk."

There had followed one of those lacunae which are called in old-fashioned literature "pregnant silences." It actually lasted much longer than Spyle realized, and on refocusing his attention, he found himself with a half-formed dream still stuck in his head. He suddenly rose to his feet. The girl likewise stood up, and for a while they stared at each other. All around them, stretching to the dim distances of the massive hall, were spread the dejected masses of the unemployed. Spyle noticed that the girl wore a flowered frock under which lurked pneumatic breasts. She in turn noted that Spyle's jumpsuit was dingy and that his pasty chin needed a shave. Abruptly, as if they had been dolls under the command of some good god, they turned and marched hand-in-hand out of the room.

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By nightfall they had a limited but trustingly-long marriage contract. At dawn two days later, they arrived breathless at one of the massive colony ships; and having no baggage of significance, were rushed inside by an overworked robot and were soon on their way to the Rim.

Jale jerked awake as his hand slid from beneath his chin. Unfortunately, he returned to consciousness to find that the worst dinner party in the history of the Milky Way was still in progress.

True, there was a dismembered pie on the table, showing that the last course of the meal had been served. But Spyle and his wife were still yacking. Their conversation had, in the interim of his nap, sunk to the level of discussing various mistaken entries into the identical bunks of the many immigrants packed aboard the colony cruiser that had brought them to Hickory. Apparently, the trip had involved several 'accidental' liaisons in the dark, many twitching limbs, and an almost unlimited amount of 'fun'. But looking at Pippin and Sherlock, Jale saw that his companions were not having fun. Pippin's face was taut with barely-suppressed distaste, and though she still tried to interject an occasional remark, the conversation had become a dialogue between the Spyles about their ribald early days together. Sherlock's face was just a mask: his eyes were apparently seized in their sockets, and his mouth hung maladjustedly ajar. He looked as if he had been switched off.

Jale surged to his feet amid the chatter and the wreckage of dinner. "Going to the boys' room."

This was a lie. He walked aft through the ship, entered his own cabin while ordering the door to close, and flopped down on his bed. "*Rig?*"

"Yes, Jale." The ship's voice was sympathetic.

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“Can you arrange it so that one of our distress flares goes off in the parking lot between us and the restaurant – closer to them than us – so they might clear off?”

There was a pause. “Yes,” replied the ship’s motherly voice. “It’s in progress.” It added: “Anyway, it’s a valid use of a flare, since you’re obviously in distress.”

There came the sound of stampeding feet, exiting the ship, accompanied by wails of unfounded concern for Hickory’s best restaurant. Then, after a pause, the voice of the *Rigor Mortis* sounded again in the darkness of the cabin.

“Do you want me to wake you in case of a bad dream, as usual?”

Jale frowned. The question sounded childish. But the man was occasionally bothered by nightmares, which if left unchecked caused him to awake feeling depressed; so the ship had gotten into the habit of interrupting his nocturnal troubles. Tonight, however, the idea irritated him for some reason.

“No,” he replied. “Pippin will wake me if things get bad.”

“But,” objected the familiar motherly voice, “she doesn’t know all the...”

“Please be quiet,” Jale snapped with uncharacteristic harshness. Then: “Sorry. I’ve got bigger things to think about.”

The captain’s cabin on the ship was a practical affair: a well-sized bunk, two lockers, and a mass of display units tuned to every aspect of the vessel’s functions. In the gloom, Jale’s eyes stared at the instruments; and then – reassured – his eyes became unfocussed. “There are big decisions to be made, *Rig*.”

The ship’s intelligence remained silent. It knew, better than anyone else aboard, that the man in the bunk had reached a threshold; not only in terms of the mechanical options for the present mission, but also in regard to his own future. It was a pity (or was

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it fate?) that both sides were coming together simultaneously. The ship's brain had been the man's constant companion for longer than the android master-detective, and much longer than the displaced android gardener. It was a sign of its fidelity that at the present crisis it chose merely to emit a throat-clearing sound, inviting confidences.

Somewhere aft, a heavy clunk indicated that the craft's main port had been closed against the planet's cold night.

"There's a lot to be done," said Jale to the darkness of the cabin. "I need to get the CLAG cure analysed. Is it effective? Well, *I* don't know. And assuming it *can* stop the disease, what do I do with it? Do I give it to Brounlee, or sell it to one of his competitors?"

The *Rigor Mortis* noted the difference between "give" and "sell", but remained silent.

Jale, in that peculiar state where the brain is active but the body is weary, sat up and punched his pillow. He stripped off his clothes and threw them into the corner of the cabin. Naked, the cold wind of the desert outside seemed to sneak into the cabin, and he pulled the bunk's covers over his exposed body. As he did so, he noticed by the light of the overhead instruments that the hairs on his broad chest were about half grey. "Getting *old*," he repeated with a strange combination of regret and satisfaction.

The indentation he had made in the pillow proved too inviting. He laid his head down; and as if it were a physical liquid, the energy drained out of him.

Silence descended.

Until a tentative knock sounded on the door of Jale's cabin. The *Rigor Mortis* released the lock. Pippin entered. Her golden eyes regarded the sleeping man with logic and longing. Quietly, the female android removed her pants and threw them onto the

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pile of Jale's discarded clothes. "There's more than one way to do things."

She crept carefully under Jale's covers. Already, the heat from his body had created a micro-environment of warmth and sweat. Gently, the girl ran her hand through the hair on the man's chest. Getting no response, she slowly moved her delicate hand down to the space between his legs...

Jale, pleasantly aroused, turned over to face Pippin. But physiology has its own strong rules. The man opened his eyes just long enough to identify his visitor and then closed them again. The sound of his snoring closed the day.

*

Brounlee, in his office on the top of the Rang building, stopped snoring and opened his eyes. There had been a knock on the trapdoor beneath his desk.

"Yes."

Igor levered himself out of the hole on his large, misshapen hands and stood watching Brounlee with questioning eyes.

The director of Rang Enterprises laid his umbrella on the desk, at which sign the gnome shuffled forward and swung himself up onto its horizontal surface. There he sat for a moment, staring at the old man's face. Tonight, the worry lines were deep, and unfortunately the servant would soon be obliged to etch them even deeper.

"Don't bother about me," said Brounlee. He stretched out a manicured hand and ran it gently over the abstract patterns of his helper's skin, tracing the lines where flesh had flowed and frozen.

The disfigured creature smiled. Gently, it took the white hand in its own dark one, and transferred the caress to its cheek. The

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black eyes peered into the light ones with pity, and after a while tears appeared on either side of the malformed nose.

“I didn’t know you could still do that,” observed Brounlee. “I suppose there’s bad news?”

“Yes, Boss,” confirmed Igor. “Affaball and Fingal are uniting against you. They intend to unseat you as Head, and are already spreading rumours that the company has not reacted properly to the CLAG.”

Brounlee laughed sarcastically. Ever since the CLAG had been identified, the director of personnel had been hiring extra staff and the director of research had been developing new equipment. In fact, Rang Enterprises was spending more on countering the CLAG than their rivals Xmen and DivaDroid put together. It was ironic that The Ball in the hand of Dr. Digit should be blaming Brounlee for their lack of progress, given that it was he who had persuaded the director of finance Dullea to increase expenditures aimed at fighting the disease.

“And Ragalid?”

Igor’s deformed mouth bent into an even greater scowl. “I haven’t been able to find out as much about him as about the others. But he’s taken some of his security people and formed a special unit, which takes orders only from him. You know what that means.”

Brounlee did indeed. Enemies to the left, and enemies to the right. Sighing, he got up and walked away from his desk, thinking. Igor followed, shifting his weight from his feet to his hands in a curious, oscillating motion which was well known in the building. It was amusing in a way that while thousands of Rang employees were familiar with the cripple and looked on him with pity, only the company’s head regarded him as a valid person and knew his real worth.

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At the window, Brounlee stood for a long while in contemplation. Far below, the city which surrounded the Rang tower showed as a subdued haze of illumination. It was the middle of the night. In most households, the lights were off and the inhabitants were asleep, preparing for another day of life...

Unless the CLAG casually wiped them out of existence...

By Brounlee's side, Igor finally broke the prolonged silence with a small cough. "Boss, you need help." Gaining courage, he added: "You need Jale."

6
INTO THE VOID

Jale awoke feeling fresh. The peregrinations of his unconscious mind seemed to have solved some of the problems with which he had gone to sleep, and he felt as if he had passed some kind of mental watershed. History was to prove that in this he was partly right and partly wrong.

Gently pushing Pippin aside, so that she could continue in the android equivalent of slumber, Jale swung his legs out of the bunk and planted his feet, business-like, on the plates of the cabin. They were cold, infused with the temperature of the pre-dawn desert. He pulled the bed cover over the naked form of the girl, pausing briefly to marvel at the perfection of her body. However, it was not only the girl's physical attributes that appealed to the man. In a relatively short period, she had changed from a naive caretaker of apples to a tough, professional agent. The evolution had been almost uncanny in its speed and thoroughness. Jale shivered slightly as the cool edge of cynicism joined the coldness of his feet. This creature, he reminded himself, had been *made* by Brounlee. How and why, were not yet clear; but Jale experienced a brief insight through the emotions which crowded his thoughts: if the old man wanted to keep an eye on the mission, the best way was to get his daughter emotionally hitched to its leader.

Jale picked up his clothes and donned them as he padded over the cool floor to the lounge. There, Sherlock was cleaning up the remnants of the dinner of the previous evening. In the corner, a screen showed a picture of a gesticulating politician, the audio channel turned down to the barely audible.

"Good morning, Sir," greeted the master detective. "I trust you had a satisfactory night?"

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Jale grunted. Not normally an early riser, the man realized that many of the chores which were necessary for the smooth operation of the *Rigor Mortis* were carried out by Sherlock in the spell when its captain was asleep in his bunk. Glancing at the android's face for signs of censure concerning the fact that he had spent the night with Pippin, Jale found none. Also, the intelligence of the ship now boosted the volume of the news broadcast without being asked, so that human ears could follow the reportage.

Affairs aboard the space-hearse appeared remarkably harmonious.

Not so, the morning newscast. The arm-waving dignitary who was its subject was Androyoos II, the son of the Androyoos who had been largely responsible for the war between Andromeda and the Milky Way. The successor was dressed in an orange turban of obscure significance, and a flowing cloak of white, whose folds (due to the wearer's antics) became occasionally hung up on an unseen pot-belly.

"Why doesn't he get a corset?" Jale asked, sipping at a cup of hot coffee.

"Sir?" Sherlock inquired, showing a gap in his knowledge of Victorian things.

Jale waved the question aside, more interested in waking up than in garments of a past age. The coffee was very hot, and *good*. (An errant thought: If everything was going so well in the morning, maybe he should be on guard for a disaster before night-fall?) The commentary that accompanied the newscast's picture now seeped into his awareness:

"...and we of Andromeda therefore see the misfortunes of our fellow humans in the Milky Way, under the ravages of the CLAG,

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as a sign that they should change their hedonistic ways, and embrace the spirit of the...”

SPLUDGE.

A red stain suddenly obscured a portion of the screen. From it, drips began propagating downward, with a viscosity implying blood. In the background, the pieces of the exploding Androyoos took various trajectories. The head followed the almost exact parabola dictated by the laws of gravity. It went up, paused, and fell down – to bounce and come to rest on the lectern from which its owner had been speaking. The mouth still open, with a leering tongue, the head sat there staring from dead eyes at a bemused audience.

After a pause – during which those who had newly tuned into the news had only to look at a severed head and to hear a sound of wailing – the screen went blank and organ music began to play. A message appeared at the bottom of the screen: ANDROYOOS II HAS BLOWN UP. NORMAL PROGRAMMING WILL RESUME AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

Jale, spluttering over the last of his coffee, began to laugh. Sherlock, looking shocked and serious, only seemed to make his master’s mirth that much more intense. “Ha, bloody ha!” Jale exclaimed. Had he been able, he would have explained to the dumbfounded Sherlock that the death of the war-mongering Androyoos II struck him as supremely apt. Better that the end had come to the pontifical, egotistical head of Andromeda than to one of the hard-working, honest prospectors from the deserts of Hickory.

Pippin wandered into the lounge at this moment. Sleep-fuddled, she looked at the blank screen with its droning accompaniment of organ music. Not unreasonably, she drew the conclusion that Jale and Sherlock were reliving their days as undertakers, and were replaying one of their business anthems. Un-

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impressed, she shook her tousled hair and said: "Can't you get anything lighter, like *Housewives' Choice*?"

Jale, cramped with laughter, left the two baffled androids and went aft. In the storeroom, he spent his mirth by opening and closing several drawers. Muttering about Fate, the man carried out a search of the many icons which the *Rigor Mortis* had accumulated during its travels, and finally located what he sought.

It was a pool cue. But this was not just any stick designed to knock balls around a cloth-covered table for sport. No, this was the cue which had been used to play snooker at the *Victoriana Club* by its leader, Colonel Ash. It had been presented to Jale in recognition of his help in defeating an attack on the club by that nasty group of interstellar thugs known as the Black Hand Gang. Whatever had happened to that lot? Jale reminisced over the battle at the *Victoriana* as he ran his hands over the cue. It was a beautiful thing: made of some kind of hard and highly polished wood, its narrow end was missing the usual tip of soft leather, while its broad end was inlaid with disks of glittering mother-of-pearl. One of these disks had a slight indentation, which Jale carefully avoided touching. The stick was perfectly balanced, but heavy – its butt concealed a vacuum pack and twenty rounds of ammunition. The pool cue was the perfect weapon for a gentleman.

Jale hesitated, comparing the qualities of Colonel Ash and Spyle, past salesman at a store which had grandly called itself the *Emporium of Pool*. Then he shrugged: he had no use for the cue, and he *did* owe the restaurateur a favour, which yesterday's dinner had only partly acknowledged. Also, it would be kind of neat to give the pool stick to Spyle, something like completing a loop in history.

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Outside in the parking lot, Jale found Sherlock and Pippin chatting with Mr. and Mrs. Spyle. The former's spotty chin looked more pasty than usual in the early-morning light, while the latter clutched a dressing gown around her breasts to protect them from the chill desert air. The wife was exchanging with Pippin the usual farewell invitations and promises, to come again when perhaps Hickory Heights would have developed more amenities (there were apparently great plans underway to build a bingo hall). The male Spyle was silent, looking grumpy at the earliness of the occasion and clearly wanting to return to bed.

This, however, changed when Jale handed him the pool cue. "For you."

"Oh," muttered Spyle, his sleepy eyes opening in wonder as he expertly appraised the gift. And then, surprised that such a work of art should be so marred, he noticed the missing tip, and complained undiplomatically "But the end's gone!" Puzzled, he looked down the hollow end of the pool cue, noting the smoke stains. With growing understanding, he then examined the butt end of the stick, and found the special mother-of-pearl stud.

Comprehension crept into Spyle's face, and he looked from the cue to Jale, who suggested "Don't leave it where the kids can play with it."

The *Rigor Mortis* lifted carefully from the parking lot behind the Spyle restaurant a short time later. Headed for the centre of the Milky Way, its departure was marked only by a cloud of sand.

Two Hickory days later, another cloud of sand heralded the arrival at the Heights of a shuttle which carried a horde of new immigrants plus a few other individuals. One of these was a black-garbed mechanoid, who was about to play a significant part in what Jale had thought of as a loop in history.

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It happened in the following way. The enormous colony ships which plied the Galaxy made stops at various Rim worlds, depositing their human cargoes via the smaller shuttles, which not only dropped off new people but also picked up those disaffected ones who wished to try their luck at another place. The pressure of time was such that a typical shuttle would only have a lay-over of one or two days. This also enabled the minority of the passengers who were not immigrants, but travelling on business, to complete their work and depart to the next port-of-call. The arrival of a shuttle therefore meant a hectic period of activity on a Rim world such as Hickory. For those involved in trade or politics, deals had to be made and plans set forth in a hustle dictated by the rigid schedules of the giant interstellar ships. The result was that, every now and again, Main Street in Hickory Heights was populated by new people in a rush.

Spyle was not therefore surprised when, in the morning after the arrival of the latest off-world ship, a figure dressed in dark clothes marched into his restaurant and curtly ordered the No. 1 Special Breakfast. This was a sparse meal, on which Spyle made little profit, so as usual he asked "Anything to go with it?"

The stranger replied "Yes. Information about your visitor, Jale."

Spyle, drying his hands on a threadbare towel, looked more closely at his client. And did not like what he saw. The visitor had seated himself on one of the round stools in front of the counter, implying that he wanted prompt service. But the individual's legs were strangely long and mechanical-looking, so that the knees were on a level with the serving area. Also, the body seemed to be made from an old barrel. The face, likewise, was more robot than android. Part of it was covered by the hood of the cape-like main garment, which was reasonable given the chill

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breeze off the desert. But the part of the face which was visible was distinctly unhuman; the jaw in particular was a poor use of technology, with abrupt movements which probably accounted for the clipped mode of speech.

Thinking about what his client had said, Spyle finally made the uninspired reply "Jale who?"

This caused the client to make a mechanical but ominous-sounding snigger.

Spyle, worried but annoyed, went to fetch the No. 1 Special Breakfast. Under the guise of picking up the toast which it included, he reached for Colonel Ash's pool cue under the counter and placed it ready.

The No. 1 Breakfast did not appear to appeal to the visitor. For on placing it on the counter, it was ignored. In fact, the client did not even look at it, but instead produced a blaster which he pointedly laid by the side of the plate.

Spyle gulped. Trouble like this was rare in Hickory Heights. Apart from the odd fight in the bar at the end of Main Street, which only occurred late in the evening when the Spyles were in bed, violence was almost unknown. To be threatened in your own home restaurant in the early morning was exceptional, and objectionable. Spyle began to feel angry. He scanned the restaurant from under lowered eyes; but it was still too early for the morning rush, and the only other patron was Old Joe in the far corner, who sat reading a news release, oblivious of the drama at the counter.

"You will tell me where Jale has gone." The staccato words were not an invitation but an order, and to underline them the stranger picked up his weapon.

"More toast?" Spyle asked weakly. Fumbling under the counter, his hand closed on the special pool cue.

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It was because the stick was too long, and hit the underside of the counter, that Spyle was still bent over when the blast from the stranger sizzled past him.

The toast-making machine disintegrated.

Spyle's fingers found the special mother-of-pearl trigger. BANG. The cue recoiled into his stomach. The stranger's mechanical face exploded into many metal fragments.

Dazed, Spyle replaced the pool cue under the counter, and began collecting pieces of toast from the floor.

*

Aboard the *Rigor Mortis*, things were still harmonious.

Pippin was tidying the lounge, paying particular attention to the liquor cabinet. That antique piece of furniture contained many bottles. Some of these were also antique, but most of them contained only the remnants of their original contents. (Liquor cabinets have a habit of getting this way.) She decided in the interests of space and order to decant the dregs of half-a-dozen bottles into one flask, which she proposed to label *Pippin's Punch*. This would be an appropriate name, since most of the stuff she was dealing with was 40% proof or higher. At the back of the cabinet, she came across a squat bottle with a black stopper. It bore a label with a picture of a horse ready to batter the backside of a cowboy, and the appellation *The Genuine Ass-Kicker*. The bottle was about half full, and she remembered vaguely that she had tried the drink soon after her arrival, with little effect. Reasoning that it would dilute the rest of the mixture, she dumped what remained of the contents into *Pippin's Punch*.

Jale, meanwhile, was bent over the navigation desk. With the aid of the ship's brain, he was plotting a course to the centre of the Milky Way. On awakening that morning, it had become clear to

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him that defeating the CLAG disease would be much helped if he consulted Selipon, the alien super-computer which orbited the singularity at the centre of the Galaxy. However, the plan was easier to formulate than carry out. Even in subspace, it was a major trip.

They would be passing by half of the million million stars which made up the flattened disk of their home galaxy. And many of these stars had gravitational wells which overlapped their projected course and could cause deviations from it. Jale knew that the trick here was to circumvent the disturbing gravitational wells by effectively going around them in a higher-dimensional space, something which could be worked out using the calculus of infinities. The young Jale had scraped through the Ph.D. exam in general tensor calculus of Trantor University. Unfortunately, he had been drunk the night he had planned to revise the calculus of infinities, and now could remember infinitely little about it. This was why, as he strained at the navigation desk, he felt the need for the glass which graced its surface and which contained a stiff shot of Rigellian whiskey.

Sherlock was engaged with his memoirs while his crewmates were attending to the ship. The android master-detective was convinced that some account of the voyages of the *Rigor Mortis* would one day be acclaimed by the burgeoning if largely home-based population of the Milky Way. For example, the present trip from the rim to the centre of the Galaxy was something that the average person would hardly attempt, and was therefore worth recording. True, Jale's reasons for wishing to confer physically with the super-computer Selipon had left the android somewhat confused. But it was not his place to question Jale. The man's previous plans had proved themselves sound. At least, some had. Well, maybe a *few*. Feeling the bite of insecurity, Sherlock decided to record an episode which had reached a posi-

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tive outcome and at the time had been much reported by the media. A problem with this case, though, was that it involved several famous people who were still living, and who might resent the enormous publicity which he felt his memoirs would entail. But, he reasoned, he could avoid this problem by changing names and places, and generally disguising the issue. Feeling confident in this ruse, he began to compose:

‘I first met Carruthers in the Turkish bath, which was odd because I could not speak a word of the language. With his flaccid thighs and pendulous paunch, he reminded me of the noble who had arranged the meeting, Sir Dickeydangle. We had the baths to ourselves that evening, did Carruthers and I, because the City was being terrorized by a baboon with a bronze bum. However, I myself considered this to be an improvement over the usual biology of the animal; and so must my companion, since he rose heavily from the marble bench and showed me a posterior of improbable proportions.

“A cleft in thine saves nine,” I intoned, using the agreed secret phrase.

At this, Carruthers raised a finger to his lips to admonish quiet. I felt embarrassed by my gaffe. He was of course correct to insist on silence, since otherwise our plans might have come to the ears of the marauding baboon.

Carruthers, who must have foreseen a difficulty in communication, fished out from under his voluminous towel a pen and a strip of white cardboard. He ripped a piece from this latter, scribbled something on it, and flicked it in my direction. I should mention at this juncture that I was not overly surprised at Carruthers’ mode of messaging. The aforementioned Sir D. directed the government’s foreign office, and I knew that certain naval documents

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had been removed therefrom, concealed in an earthenware urn. Assuming that the naval papers were still in the urn, it was reasonable to assume that the large bulge between Carruthers' legs was the item in question. Also, it was plausible that C. would be interested in selling them back to his own government, given that he had not been able to get them out of the country due to the lack of a sufficiently muscular carrier pigeon. Further (and to get back to the point which I had almost forgotten), Carruthers would not part with the urn without getting a signed receipt, so he must have come to our meeting equipped with writing materials. Satisfied with my watertight reasoning, I bent down to pick up the bit of cardboard on which I assumed that C. had written his demands. In doing this, I was careful (as I had been since entering the baths) to keep my towel tight around my torso, to prevent the steam from causing rust. With trembling fingers, I opened the piece of pasteboard. How many gold florins did the devil want, and would his blackmail break the treasury?

The message was short: *Don't be shy.*

Baffled but undismayed, I stared at my adversary through the swirling mists. I am no stranger to epigrams, but I must admit that his coded message conveyed little intelligence to my overheated brain. I decided to be blunt. I would simply ask him how much he wanted for the return of the naval documents. However, we could not communicate by speech; and I had not had the foresight to come prepared with pen and paper (like my adversary). Luckily, I have a rudimentary knowledge of semaphore. This method of communication, traditionally carried out with flags, can actually be accomplished using the arms. I therefore employed my limbs to message: *How much?*

Carruthers watched my movements with obvious interest. At one point, my towel slipped and revealed a portion of my upper

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thigh. It seemed to me that the bulge between my companion's legs grew more prominent at this. Indeed, he seemed to become quite excited, and the clouds of white steam were augmented by invisible but cloying gusts of flatulence. I concluded my slick semaphore performance with the very-complicated, between-the-legs signal for money. Carruthers, now clearly out of control, dropped his towel to reveal a penis of amazing size. Released from the confines of the heavy garment, this member sprang upwards with a resounding *boing* sound. I covered my head to ward off its thrashing, and ran for the exit. As I left, the gigantic penis crashed into the ceiling. Tons of marble rained down, burying the site of our rancid rendezvous in a pile of righteous rubble.'

Sherlock relaxed, proud of his account and especially the closing alliteration. He believed, also, that he had successfully disguised the protagonists and their doings in such a way that nobody would be injured. But then, maybe the narrative was too well disguised? And perhaps, too exaggerated? He began to feel dissatisfied. After all, the original incident had involved the loss in the mail of a large, brown envelope which contained the plans for a prefabricated rowing boat. As he considered the matter, it became clear that he had been guilty of too much artistic licence. This he attributed to an Editor he had once known, who told him that to have general appeal, a story should contain sex and violence. These he had dutifully incorporated via the reference to his thigh and the penis-induced collapse of masonry. However, it seemed to him on reflection that these elements had caused the veracity of the case to suffer. Reluctantly but virtuously, he expunged the account.

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Arriving in the lounge, Sherlock found Pippin sitting cross-legged in front of a pile of discarded bottles. The only one with content was a demijohn, three-quarters full of brown liquid and bearing the handmade label *Pippin's Punch*. In answer to his inquiring look, the girl suggested "You look like you could use a drink. Try it!"

Sherlock removed the bung from the oversized flask, and dubiously sniffed its contents. A symphony of a dozen different kinds of alcohol molecules perked his olfactory nerves, plus the smell of something else he could not identify. "Is it safe?"

Pippin laughed. The brain of the female android had evolved remarkably from its naive status as Brounlee's gardener. She had developed, among other things, a noticeable sense of humour. "It won't kill you." Her eyes danced with mischief. "But it might bend your pipe."

Sherlock removed the meerschaum from his lips and stowed it in his cape. He also replaced the stopper on the bottle. He was not in the mood for levity. Did not this girl with the bouncing breasts realize that they were involved in a *saga*, whose details would one day be the talk of the whole Galaxy (hopefully via his stalled memoirs)? Frowning, Sherlock was relieved when Jale entered, looking tired but determined.

"I've got the trip down to about a hundred legs," he announced. This terse statement summarized a tiring set of calculations with the dynamics of wormholes, designed to make the briefest possible passage from the rim to the centre of the Milky Way. "I figure that we can each take a watch, each person accompanied by *Rig* – so that every step has effectively two controllers."

His weary eyes looked at Sherlock and Pippin by turn. The former was already serious, and the latter rapidly became so. Jale was one of those single-minded people, who work out something

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and expect everybody else to understand it. As if the whole scheme of his reasoning were close to obvious, he ran a hand over the stubble on his jaw before continuing to outline his plan. “We need to talk to Selipon. Its files will help us in the quickest way to identify the nature of the CLAG cure. And it will also tell us how we can distribute it – through Brounlee – in the most effective way.”

Sherlock and Pippin exchanged looks. The girl had no experience of the alien super-brain which orbited the singularity at the centre of their galaxy, so it was she who voiced a concern. “How do we know that Selipon will even talk to us?”

“We have a long history of contact”, replied Jale, “even though we’ve never really met.” The man thought briefly, and waved towards Sherlock as a confirming authority. “I’m pretty sure that a face-to-face meeting will give us the data we need, in the quickest way. After all, we can’t just sit around while the CLAG runs wild.” He turned towards the control room, a grim look around his jaw. “I’ll take the first watch.”

Pippin reluctantly took her large flask of Punch and stowed it beneath the ship’s liquor cabinet. Sherlock retrieved his meerschaum pipe and clamped it between his lips. “The game,” he said theatrically, “is *really* afoot.”

*

Mrs. Spyle was furious.

Her shouted comments blasted Mr. Spyle where he sat behind the register of their family restaurant, hammering him further into his seat.

“How *could* you?” Mrs. Spyle demanded for the fourth time. Referring to Jale, she reminded: “He was a *friend!*”

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"I didn't *know*", replied Mr. Spyle, also for the fourth time. Referring to another recent visitor, he explained: "The guy looked respectable."

"Soup-shit!"

"He was," insisted Spyle, recalling the appearance of the second visitor who had inquired at the *Burnt Chip* after Jale. "He wasn't like that ugly mechanoid. This guy was upper-class and dressed nice. You know that I notice things like that. This guy had a suit, and on the lapel there was a purple badge with a red R on it."

"You *fool*," Mrs. Spyle spat. "That was just one of the stooges from Rang. It's a pity you didn't have the guts to blast him, like you did the first one."

Mr. Spyle, recalling his life's moment of glory, gained some courage and rejoined with sarcasm. "Oh, *yeah*. So I end up having to eat prison food?" His wife's blank expression showed a momentary fault, which he exploited. "Shooting the mechanoid was one thing. It was self-defence, and its bits were easy to dump into Old Joe's haul, with him none the wiser. Hopefully, that thing was on its own and Jale doesn't have anything else to worry about that way." In this opinion, the future was to show that Spyle was gravely in error; but for now he rattled on, intent to deflect his wife's wrath. "The second guy was completely different. He must have traveled business class on the last ship. And if anything had happened to him, the Rang corporation would have come down on us like a ton of lasagna."

Mrs. Spyle, who had been pacing up and down in the deserted restaurant, sat down on one of the vacant stools in front of the counter. She had to admit that Spyle had a point. But she still felt that her (wimpy) husband had let down the (handsome) Jale. "Are

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you *sure* you didn't blab anything that would tell where the *Rigor Mortis* was headed?"

"Yok!" Spyle exclaimed, using his own expression of contempt. "I don't think even Jale was sure of his plans." There was a pause. "Though, he *did* mention the computer, Selipon."

Mrs. Spyle fixed her mate with a stare like something that might have come from the rifled barrel of Colonel Ash's pool cue. "And you didn't repeat that, did you?"

"*Me?*" Spyle rejoined in disbelief. "Why, I..!"

Gradually, the look of righteous offence which had suffused the restauranteur's face began to disappear, like brown gravy soaking into white bread. And akin to the wreckage produced by the latter process, Spyle's expression became a pool of distress. "Err..."

Mrs. Spyle's anger seemed to abruptly disappear, as if it had gone up the flue with the other kitchen smells. She put her head in her hands, glumly regarding her mate. "I hope," she said, "that they're all right."

*

Jale *was* all right, though exhausted.

The course he had plotted from Hickory on the rim ran through the plane of the flattened disk that formed the Galaxy, headed for its centre in what used to be called the constellation of Sagittarius. He had briefly considered following a hoop-shaped path that would have taken them out of the plate-like conglomeration of stars, gas and dust which made up the Milky Way. This would have enabled the crew to view the turning-armed monster which was their own galaxy from an outside viewpoint. But the appeal of this seldom-seen sight had to be weighed against the practicalities of speed and energy. The *Rigor Mortis*, like most

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ships, got its energy from the vacuum. Or more correctly, it gained positive energy from the negative energy of apparently empty space. The latter was in fact an ergotic ocean, full of the gravitational and other fields generated by matter, principally stars. And these were more tightly packed in the plane of the disk than outside it. So Jale had given up scenery for speed. The course he had painstakingly calculated was a series of legs, each between star systems with intense gravitational fields. In the old nomenclature, it started in the constellation Argo (the Boat), and headed for the bright stars of Gemini (the Twins). There was then a sparsely-inhabited region of space centred on the star Polaris, before the path entered the cluttered constellation of Draco (the Dragon). Then they would pass between Cygnus (the Swan) and Hercules. Jale was ignorant about the name of this latter star system, as he was about the next one, Aquila. But assuming that they made it so far, there would only be left the passage of the star Eta in the constellation of Serpens (the Snake). This system was notorious along the spaceways. It was the location of numerous brothels and the home to many bands of pirates. Jale, in his younger years, would have liked to taste the delights of the first and take his chances with the second. But in middle age and with a serious goal in view, he had arranged that the last leg of their voyage would detour the place. He expected to arrive, unscathed, at the centre of the Milky Way.

Sherlock, looking over the captain's shoulder at the travel plan, said nothing. However, in his androidal brain, he thought: *It's a hell of a long way.*

"Please take over," said Jale. Arising from the pilot's seat, he wobbled slightly with fatigue. Annoyed at this, he grabbed the half-full tumbler of whiskey from the top of the console, and downed it in a gulp.

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Sherlock slid into the vacated seat and studied the screens. His knowledge of the *Rigor Mortis* and travel in the different strata of subspace was second only to that of Jale. "Select level five."

"Roger, level five," confirmed the ship's computer.

Sherlock manipulated the controls. The engines came up to power immediately, though only in neutral. They sent a faint and steady hum through the hull. The reconditioning at Hickory Heights had been thorough: if any ship could carry out the plan envisaged by its captain, this one could.

"Enter subspace."

There was a tiny moment of no-weight, lasting less than a heartbeat. The main screen came to life, showing the ship's location in the fifth level of the manifold.

"Engage power."

The blip which represented their small world began moving through the multidimensional universe. Sherlock, feeling comfortable and in control, allowed a small smile to appear beneath his meerschaum pipe. This could be fun...

Jale, who had paused in the entrance to the cabin, disappeared. Over his shoulder he called "Remember to turn right at Sirius."

A SEANCE WITH SELIPON

The *Rigor Mortis* surfaced in spacetime. A buoy released from the depths of subspace, it reappeared in the normal world and floated there, yawing.

Pippin, bleary-eyed at the end of a long watch, shut down the mega-motors. Apart from a hot-spot on transducer number 11, the engines that had once powered an Acheron battleship had performed perfectly. But as the sound of the engines died, the female android noted that there was a strange noise in the control cabin.

It was that of wind. A cold, desolate, scary wind that seemed to freeze her bones. She checked the internal temperature: it was nominal. So, the puckering of her bare breasts must be psychological in origin. She ordered the main screen to open.

“Opening main screen *half* way,” offered the ship’s brain. “There’s bad weather out there.”

A long, rectangular strip began to expand around the front of the *Rigor Mortis*. As it slowly grew, the window drew the girl, who was eager to see their goal.

However, the first sight repelled her: it was the most bleak and inhospitable place imaginable. Her previous domicile had been one of nurtured gardens and well-tended orchards, and she was sure that *this* place was too severe to tempt even the crudest soul.

In the distance was a hazy spot with an intense blaze at its core – the singularity at the centre of the Milky Way. Emerging from this was a sleet of particles whose tracks, slightly slowed by their climb out of the gravitational well, showed as a blizzard of blue and white. The background was dark grey, as if the snow-storm of particles was trapped in a dense cloud formed of some-

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thing else. There were only two things that were remotely normal in this bizarre landscape. The first was a twinkling, angular object which appeared to be plowing its way through the galactic storm on a circular orbit, and which she therefore presumed to be the super-computer Selipon. The second was an enormous rock, battered and pock-marked, which seemed to be following a similar orbit, even though the storm constantly threatened to push it off course and send it hurtling into the outer regions.

Pippin did not possess the learning in celestial mechanics of Jale. But she was knowledgeable. She knew that there was a special solution of the gravitational equations which described a kind of giant triangle turning in space around one vertex. The latter, in the present case, was the Galactic centre. The other two points of the triangle were called Lagrange points after their ancient discoverer. Objects located at these points were stable – able to maintain their relative positions in the dominant gravitational field even though perturbed by other influences. You did not have to be Einstein to figure out that Selipon and the giant rock were at the Lagrange points.

The location of the *Rigor Mortis*, by comparison, was not stable. The auxiliary engines were cutting in and out, trying to keep the ship steady, like a boat fighting the current of a fast-flowing stream. Also, the monitors showed an alarming flux of high-energy particles: neutrinos and antiprotons were pouring out of the central singularity; and if nothing were done they would soon strip the ship's paintwork, besides slowly frying its occupants.

Pippin re-engaged the main motors. The ship turned partly sideways from the flow of the stuff from the singularity, and moved crabwise towards the enormous rock which loomed in the forward screen.

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She took a sip from the glass which stood on top of the console. The mouthful of *Pippin's Punch* seemed to focus her attention. She thought: "I wonder how many other bad habits I'll learn from Jale?"

There was no time, however, for side issues. The mass at the Lagrange point loomed large in the ship's viewscreen. Closer, she saw that its surface was covered by deep holes, half in light and half in shadow – evidence of some past violence. As she edged the ship into the lee of the boulder, she was happy to see that the flux of antiprotons dropped sharply. The neutrinos, of course, were not affected by the mass of rock. They passed through it, almost as if it had not existed; but the level was tolerable. Here, in the shadow cast by the boulder, they were safe for a while.

Feeling she had done well, Pippin left the control room and headed rearwards. She passed Sherlock, coddled in his collapsed cape and offlined, in the androidal equivalent of sleep. His had been the long watch immediately preceding her own. The master detective's pipe lay discarded on the plush covering of the chaise longue; his mouth was open as if he were snoring. Entering Jale's cabin, she found him in that half-asleep and half-awake state so characteristic (and yet so irritating) of unchanged humans. She planted a juicy kiss on his forehead.

Jale scowled. He had a short beard – half dark and half grey – the result of not shaving since the start of the journey. He swung his legs out of the bunk, and grimaced as his joints began to work, after what he referred to as a "dead-log" sleep. For he had taken control over more than a third of the hundred legs needed to get from the edge to the centre of the Milky Way. Now, he staggered out of bed and peered into the mirror. "Photon! I look like an old asteroid."

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"Nonsense," replied Pippin, in a lighthearted voice. "You're young, fit and ... *virile*."

Jale focused his eyes beyond the surface of the mirror, noting Pippin's sparkling eyes.

The girl with the golden eyes! How had this relationship gotten so far, anyway? But then: who cared for reasons?

Groggily, he reached for his boots. As he did so, he noticed that the plates of the cabin floor were swaying slightly. He looked up questioningly.

"Yes," confirmed Pippin. "We're there."

"What's it like?"

"Grim," replied the woman, replacing her playful pose with a realistic mood. "*Very* grim."

*

The situation was not quite so grim at a point about five parsecs from the star Polaris. There, a ship which appeared to be a nondescript interstellar freighter briefly surfaced in spacetime. The crew – three mechanoids – replaced the number 11 subspace transducer, which had burnt out. The job was rushed, as the threesome knew that they would be junked if they failed in their mission.

After the repair, the three mechanical creatures scrambled back to their positions and squeezed into their places behind their instruments. There was not much room, because the bulk of the ship was taken up with weapons.

For the Black Hand Gang was not dead. True, it had been decimated some time ago by Jale and his friends, who had thwarted the Gang's plans to use genetics to gain control of the Milky Way. And true, the same Jale had recently stolen the only

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known (and unknown) cure for the CLAG, which would destroy humankind and leave the mechanoids in control of the Galaxy.

Driven by ego and retribution, the trio drove their repaired ship deep into subspace. It would follow the energy wake of the *Rigor Mortis* as relentlessly as a bloodhound follows the scent of a person. Jale was the Gang's nemesis, and he would pay...

*

Just beyond the old constellation called Gemini, several parsecs from the bright star Capella, another ship was having trouble. This was a relatively large craft, which had started its career as a container vessel, designed to carry android health-workers to the far-flung human colonies in the Galaxy. Now, its holds were empty, their large volumes echoing to the activities of half-a-dozen chosen mercenaries. These people knew that they would be well paid, provided they accomplished their mission. They were headed by an unlikely-looking individual, whose pouffed hair and neat attire were both tinged with a soft colour of purple. But any idea of softness on the part of this leader was negated by his eyes, which were of glittering grey.

Ragalid stalked the reverberating chambers of the ship. On the hull outside, the R of Rang could be vaguely discerned. For while it had been painted over at departure, the strong radiation from Capella had caused it to reappear at this stage, about one third of the way to their destination. The Director of Security at Rang Enterprises was worried by this, since he was acting without the authorization of the governing board. More importantly, however, he was annoyed by the delay, which had something to do with the eleventh unit of the system by which the ship traveled through subspace.

Eventually, one of his men appeared and breathlessly announced that the problem with the engines had been fixed.

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Ragalid growled an acknowledgement. Impatiently, he waved the order to proceed. He desperately wanted the CLAG cure. And if Jale got in the way, then so much the worse for him...

*

Pippin, Sherlock and Jale stood in the cabin of the *Rigor Mortis*, surveying the outside scene. In the lee of the mighty rock located at Lagrange point 5, the ship had seen fit to retract the viewing screen completely, so now there was a full, hemispherical view.

The boulder at L5 was impressive in itself. Its bulk occupied a good part of the righthand side of the viewport, cutting roughly vertically like a slice from some huge, rotten fruit. Its edge was brightly illuminated by the hazy point which marked the Galaxy's centre. Illumination from that source spilled across a tumultuous surface, before fading to blackness.

Between, the terrain was a mess of mountains, canyons and craters. No atmosphere could exist there, so the topography stood out in unnaturally sharp shapes. L5 seemed so close that a person could reach out and touch its scarred skin.

As if to confirm its proximity, a chunk of material detached itself from L5's limb under the pounding of the particles on its bright side. The piece of debris floated lazily away from the rock, tumbling slowly end over end. But its speed was deceptive; and a short while later it encountered the protective field of the *Rigor Mortis* and disintegrated into hot, orange fragments.

Pippin flinched from the silent shrapnel. "Wow," she said quietly.

In addition to the orange detritus from the L5 boulder, the whole scene was flooded with blue-white particles from the Gal-

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axy's hub. They were witnessing the progress of cosmic evolution.

Jale grunted. Now was not the time for a lecture, but he knew that objects from interstellar space were constantly spiraling in towards the centre of the Milky Way under the influence of the singularity. There everything was smashed to bits, some of which fell in and some of which were blown out. The *Rigor Mortis* was in the middle of a cosmic tug-of-war. The only reason it floated in relative calm was because it was located at one of the two stable Lagrange points.

The other was occupied by Selipon. This showed as a twinkling star in the upper, left-hand corner of the viewport. As he watched it, Jale noted a sudden incandescence which momentarily enveloped the artifact. Whatever object had caused the flare must have been vapourized, for prongs of flame drifted off towards the darkness of the outer regions, slowly fading like expended fireworks. The computer must have very robust screens, to have survived this harsh environment so long.

For this alien construction had been in existence for as long as humans could recall. When discovered in the early era of interstellar travel, it was inactive. It was also utterly baffling in design, and despite many analyses its purpose had remained a mystery. Until history took one of those twists which, over long stretches of time and space, are rare but inevitable. A passing colonization ship, with a captain of some imagination and a population of bored children, decided to take a break in their monotonous journey. During the guided tour of the ancient artifact, a girl lost her handkerchief and went looking for it. She discovered instead a simple device which, while it had defied the inquiries of highly-trained minds, seemed to her unfettered intelligence to resemble a switch. This she had pressed. Immediately, the vast machine had

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come to life, flooding the Milky Way with valuable – if only partially understandable – information.

Even much later, however, a lot remained unknown about Selipon (as it called itself). By its own account, it had been built by a race of superior intelligence called the Krell. But who they were, or when they lived, remained obscure. Also, while Selipon appeared to have a benign attitude towards humankind, its mode of interaction was frequently baffling. Thus, questions posed to it sometimes elicited a rich response, sometimes a gruff silence, and sometimes (and most irritatingly) a cryptic half-answer. Further, Selipon appeared to enjoy talking to some people and not others. It would, for example, chat for ages with simple-minded labourers, but totally ignore devious politicians. Even when the latter used intermediaries, Selipon would detect what it called a “bent” argument, and refuse to acknowledge it. When pressed for an explanation of its choosy manner, it had made a reference to an ancient mathematician and philosopher called Laplace, and said: “Lies have an infinite number of bent paths, but there is a unique straight truth.” This saying was never repeated by Selipon, who thereafter declined to discuss moral issues. It became a retailer of data. Even as a dealer in facts, however, Selipon preferred some people over others. The person who had most success with the alien super-computer was a software scientist from the twin planets of Acheron and Aster, named Zek. This individual, while a whiz at computers, had a rather lowly upbringing, which he shared with Jale. They managed, with the help of others, to defeat the Black Hand Gang. Afterwards, and for reasons best known to himself, Zek went into stasis. This state of suspended non-existence, despite many attempts to break it by friends and foe, had been carefully preserved by Selipon. After Zek’s disappear-

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ance, the mantle of preferred correspondent had fallen on his friend, Jale.

This is why that man now stood staring at the alien intelligence at the centre of their galaxy with mixed feelings. Abruptly dismissing history from his mind, he turned his back on the viewport. "I need a drink."

In the lounge of the *Rigor Mortis*, the female android proudly produced the bottle labeled *Pippin's Punch*, and plonked it on the table. Jale noticed the new concoction, but was thinking about something else: his couch, traditionally stained with the spilled drinks of a thousand worlds, looked unnaturally clean. And the chaise longue opposite, which was flat at one end but had a curled headrest at the other, seemed to display a new plush covering.

"You've been cleaning," he accused.

Sherlock, who had finished discarding useless data from his memory files, entered the cabin and looked suspiciously at his personal piece of furniture. A look of distress appeared on his aquiline features. "You've removed the cigar burn!" The master-detective bent over to inspect his renovated settee. "That burn was special. I dropped my cigar when I learned that Irene Adler had eloped with the king of Bohemia!" Inadvertently making up for this, several ashes descended from his meerschaum pipe and embedded themselves in the thick material, smouldering.

Pippin was unfazed. "Come on, guys! Stop moaning about little things." Her tone was that of a mother talking to sulky boys. "Or had you forgotten that we're here to stop the CLAG and save mankind?" She fetched three glasses and proceeded to fill them with *Punch*.

Jale, thinking that the shots of liquor were tiny considering the enormity of their task, took up his glass. An accommodating smile momentarily relieved his serious look. He had long ago

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given up arguing against Sherlock's physiologically pointless consumption of tobacco; and was not about to point out the biological uselessness of Pippin's consumption of alcohol. These were not ordinary androids – they were in some ways more than human, and needed their psychological comforts. He took a mouthful of the *Punch*. As a veteran imbibor, he could tell the source of many drinks from one side of the Milky Way to the other. He was therefore surprised when his palate detected something new and original. "Where did you get this?"

"It's just a mixture of your old stuff," replied Pippin. She had taken a sip of her own drink, and thought it quite good. "I put together the leftovers in your half-empty bottles."

The warning bell which had begun ringing in the back of Jale's brain temporarily subsided. The flask originally labelled *The Only Known (and Unknown) Cure for the CLAG*, which had been relabelled *The Genuine Ass-Kicker*, had on his last inspection been indubitably full.

Sherlock, however, wore an ominous expression. His mouthful of *Punch* was undergoing internal analysis; and while he did not possess the equipment of a proper laboratory, the results were showing the presence of something not normally found in booze. "Jale," he said mournfully, "I very much regret that what we are drinking is claggish."

The alarm bell in the captain's brain was now clanging insistently. He looked at the girl. "Pippin, you didn't..?"

"You couldn't have!" Sherlock picked up. "Did you?"

"After all the trouble we had to get it!" Jale exclaimed.

"Oh!" Sherlock finished. "You *did*!"

Pippin, the subject of this Kafka-like commentary, looked angry, guilty and puzzled. "Is it too strong?"

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Jale ran his fingers through his grey-shot hair. His disappointed gaze turned downwards to the newly-cleaned upholstery of the couch on which he sat, as if seeking solace in its pattern. Sherlock quietly put aside his pipe; and in imitation of his buddy, started a mournful examination of the plush covering of his chaise longue.

Pippin's anger suddenly took precedence. "I didn't come all this way to attend a furniture-staring convention! What's wrong?"

Wearily, Jale explained that he had disguised the bottle of CLAG cure by covering its label with one from a flask of whiskey. The latter had been stolen by Ragalid's men on the evening when Pippin had stowed away on the space hearse. The real medicine had gone back into the liquor cabinet, unopened but with its false label.

"If you mean a fat bottle with a black stopper, I took a swig of it," admitted Pippin. "It looked colourless and harmless." Jale and Sherlock regarded the girl with even deeper disbelief. She concluded: "I dumped the rest into my *Punch*."

Three pairs of eyes fastened themselves on the demijohn which sat innocently on the table in the middle of the room. For a while, there was silence, except for the whining note of the storm outside. The thoughts of the three people were about to bubble into speech, when there was an abrupt sound of knocking.

"Somebody's knocking," said Sherlock inanely. "It's bad out there – I'd better let them in." This was a remarkably fatuous comment, given that they were not merely experiencing a snow-storm in a mountain cabin, but were being pummeled by antiparticles near the centre of the Milky Way.

The master-detective levitated out of the lounge towards the rear of the ship, closely followed by its captain and his girlfriend.

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At the main airlock, Sherlock manipulated the controls. There was the sound of moving bulkheads, followed by the swish of air. A green light came on.

The android moved to open the inner door, but was forestalled by Jale. "Hold it. We don't know if it's a friend or an enemy."

The man turned and ran back the way they had come. So did the girl. Shortly, they both returned. Jale took up position opposite the hatch, his blaster trained on whatever might come through it. Pippin pressed herself against the inside wall, her bottle of *Punch* raised above her head, ready.

The doorway opened.

To admit a yellow balloon with a smiley face.

"Hello," greeted the visitor in a childish voice. "I'm Krompel."

*

Sunlight bounced into the boardroom on the penultimate floor of the Rang building, illuminating the white teapot which stood by the side of Brounlee. Here, there was no place for homemade bottles of questionable alcoholic content. Rather each director had his or her own white pot, containing their favourite leafy brew. And each attendee had a white plate at their other elbow, just big enough to accommodate three, triangular-cut sandwiches made of white bread with a filling of thinly-sliced cucumber. It looked extremely civilized.

But it was not.

Brounlee's lunch meeting was degenerating into a nasty political argument. To his right, Affaball, Director of Personnel, was arguing that the company's employees were losing morale due to the lack of a credible response to the CLAG epidemic. On his left, this was both countered and augmented by Fingal, Director of Research, who proclaimed that the company's androids should be

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redesigned so as to more aggressively deal with the dread disease.

Both men were short on data. It was apparent that both were airing political platforms, prior to some attempt at taking over the headship of the company. Between them sat the dour-faced woman Dullea, Director of Finance. She had so far in the meeting negated most of the proposals from her two codirectors, on the ground that they were too expensive. However, her position was one taken out of professionalism, not one aimed at shoring up the status of the beleaguered Brounlee.

Wearying of the stereophonic criticism, the Head tapped his umbrella on the top of the board table. He looked first at The Ball, and then at Dr. Digit, before affixing a patently false smile to his lips. "If Ragalid were here," he said quietly, "I cannot help thinking he might believe you both guilty of sedition."

The room went deadly still.

Good, thought Brounlee the Logical Buddhist. *They are still too weak. No need for violence.* It was actually better that the company's Director of Security was absent, "dealing with matters in the field." That harsh individual might have tipped the strategic situation in some unfortunate direction. As it was, the committee appeared to be at a deadlock about future action in regard to the CLAG. (Ragalid's representative had been declined standing at the meeting, the only unanimous opinion of the day.) To give people time to contemplate the foolishness of any ill-conceived plan, Brounlee picked up his cup and took a sip of tea. The little finger of his right hand was outstretched, in what his enemies Af-fabal and Fingal took to be affectation.

Igor, the gnome, stopped serving cucumber sandwiches as his black eyes noted the signal from his boss. Withdrawing inconspicuously from the boardroom, he closed the door; and then ran down the corridor on his shrunken legs and too-long arms. In the

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washroom, he entered the last cubicle and locked the door. At his coded touch, the lavatory slid back. The cripple swung his body with surprising agility into the black cavity beneath the floor. A flashlight, placed ready, showed the dusty confines of a space which suited his dwarfish stature. This was a gap between the lower floors and the two top ones of the gigantic Rang building, designed to preserve the decision-making part of the corporation in case of some natural calamity which affected the rest. The gap was littered with the gnome's discarded personal belongings, including a lumpy mattress and a broken video player. Hopping over these, he was just in time to push his ear against the ceiling, as the sound of departing footsteps came down from the boardroom above.

"... with the old fool," came the end of a sentence. It was Affaball's voice.

"I wouldn't be too sure," rejoined the voice of Fingal to some unheard question. "We don't have enough support yet to force a takeover."

There was the sound of a door opening, while the two men apparently stood for a moment, hatching their conspiracy.

"You realize," said Affaball, "that we are only strong enough to stand against him if we stick together."

"I know, I know!" Fingal responded testily. "And then there's the question of what Ragalid intends to do."

"Yes," agreed Affaball, sounding unusually subdued. "That guy scares me..."

The door clicked shut, and the two voices dwindled as their owners walked away in worried conversation.

Igor scrambled back over the rubbish in the space between floors to the entrance at the toilet. A few moments later, he was obsequiously clearing away the crockery from the board table.

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Dullea was still there, standing with Brounlee as the two looked down on the city which their corporation had spawned. "It's only a question of time before we get hit," said the man. He indicated with a backward jerk of his head the map of the Milky Way which covered the ceiling of the boardroom. It was now a spray of red spots, showing where the CLAG had struck. There were far fewer vacant patches than at the last meeting of directors. One of these clear spots was centred – thankfully but inexplicably – on Acheron.

"We'll suffer a massive capital loss if the CLAG strikes here," opined the woman treasurer, looking dispassionately at the crowded homes far below.

"And," corrected Brounlee, "a massive loss of life."

Dullea turned away from the window and made for the door. "You're too soft-hearted, Brounlee. And it will be your downfall." Her tone was not critical, but merely matter-of-fact. "People are happier the bigger their paychecks. The Rands proved that. You can no more change people's attachment to money than you can change the law of gravity."

The woman exited, leaving the man at the window. Acheron's sun was still shining, but its strength was diminishing as the day wore on, and a few clouds obscured its energy. In the gigantic, high-hovering boardroom, wisps of cloud were taking form inside also. Brounlee, walking unconcerned through the mist, might have been a minor god who had indeed tamed gravity. Unfortunately, even demigods suffer crises.

*

Jale laughed.

Krompel, as the ambassador for the super-computer Selipon, was witty, knowledgeable and diplomatic. It had just completed an account of the incident at the *Purple Escargot*. There, Jale had

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nearly lost his head (quite literally) and acquired a girlfriend. At the time, the fracas had not been funny at all; but as retold by the garrulous Krompel, it seemed positively comedic. Pippin, chuckling, took advantage of the lull in conversation to head for the kitchen.

“What happened,” asked Jale in the absence of his present girl, “to the Vestals?”

“They live all three,” responded Krompel, “and prosper.”

Jale felt a twinge of guilt. The original Vestal (with the add-on Virgin) had been an exotic dancer at the crummy but popular bar with the sign of the gastropod. It used to be frequented by the lower classes of what passed for civilization on the otherwise sterile world of Trantor. A slight driving error on the part of a young and inebriated Jale had melted its icon, so that the place was thereafter known as the *Sneering Snail*. Later, Brounlee had cloned Vestal. But her two sisters had proven to be problem-plagued. It was, however, some comfort to learn that all three survived and flourished.

So many memories... So many things he would have done differently, given the opportunity to relive events... He despised people who claimed they would not alter things given the chance to try again, regarding them as either stupid or egotistical. No truly sane human can be satisfied with *everything* they have done...

Jale awoke from his reverie as Pippin returned from the ship's galley. She bore a tray covered with pastries, small tarts, and fruits. Puzzled, it occurred to the man that the female did not understand the nature of Krompel.

For this creature could not be biological, no matter how natural it acted. Firstly, it floated in the air with no obvious means of support, implying a levitation mechanism similar to that possessed by Sherlock. Secondly, it had a body that was too adaptable to its

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surroundings, something like a water-filled balloon that squashed itself when it met an obstruction. Thirdly, its orange colour and the wide smiley-mouth were clearly designed to aid in communication. It was something like a clown designed to gain the trust of children. The fact that it spoke in an immature flutey voice – lacking the deeper notes – confirmed this.

No, they were not really having a tete-a-tete with a friendly but alien creature. They were talking with a disguised Selipon.

Puzzingly, the floating creature extended two spindly but highly functional arms, and grabbed a cake and piece of apple.

Jale felt slightly irritated at the patronizing tone of the conversation. Both he and Selipon knew that there were major issues that needed to be discussed. The man guessed that the preceding chat had been mainly aimed at establishing his identity for the super-computer. (At previous interactions, the process had been more formal.) But Krompel was loquacious, so Jale waited until the creature's mouth was full of cake. Then he asked quietly: "Selipon, are you going to help us stop the CLAG?"

Krompel spluttered, sending bits of pastry showering around the cabin.

The answer – when it eventually came – was not in the previous childish tone, but in the bass voice which Jale remembered from previous encounters. "Maybe."

Sherlock, who had been silent for much of the preceding conversation, turned towards Krompel. For the first time ever, the master-detective's features took on a sneer of disdain.

The creature which called itself Krompel – but was really Selipon – sank onto the table and rested there like a half-deflated ball. "Let me explain..."

"You don't have to," interrupted Pippin. Her face did not have the censoring look of Sherlock, but her voice was brittle with sub-

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dued emotion. “People are dying from the CLAG all over the Milky Way. We thought we had a cure, but...” Her voice caught. Then she picked up the thread of the argument: “We have the data, and ...”

“You *don't* have the data!”

The voice of Krompel/Selipon was chiding, with the kind of note used to educate misdirected juveniles. “Let me show you some data!”

A fan of light emerged from Krompel, throwing a 3D map of the Milky Way into the middle of the cabin. Prosaically, a half-eaten cake on the table poked through the image at about the location of Trantor. The rest of the hologram was speckled with red points, marking the location of outbreaks of the CLAG.

There was a pause, while Krompel accessed some file on the Selipon structure, which was still visible through the viewport of the *Rigor Mortis*, whirling around the centre of the Galaxy.

A set of blue points appeared on the map in the ship's cabin. You did not need to be brilliant to see that the blue points were correlated with the red points.

Jale, who had been thinking intensely, was the first to make the connection between the two sets of data.

But he was forestalled by Krompel/Selipon. “The red locations are CLAG outbreaks, as you all know.” There was a pause, then in a sad voice. “The blue sites are the locations of your power plants. That is, they are the places where energy is being extracted from the vacuum.”

The silence in the cabin of the *Rigor Mortis* was long and deep.

It is rare that a race realizes that its technology has dug its own grave.

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And humankind's grave would not be the only one. Jale's quick but increasingly sad memory ran through an inventory of other living but doomed creatures, pausing momentarily on the newts with which he had played as a child. The man accepted the message of the data; it was simple once you saw it. Then his mind moved on to another, reluctant realization...

"*You* also get energy from the vacuum," he pointed out in a flat voice. "You're going to die as well."

The being known as Krompel sagged where it sat on the table.

Jale stood up, and began walking backwards and forwards within the confines of the cabin. His pacing served the traditional human purpose of jostling the workings of his mind into new directions. For even after ages of development, computers still lacked something to which humans could revert in cases of dire need: the capacity for original and even illogical thought. In Jale, this capacity had been honed over an adventurous career into an almost miraculous knack for finding bizarre ways to survive. He had the irrational conviction that any problem that was thinkable was also solvable.

His wandering gaze finally fixed on the bottle labelled *Pippin's Punch*. A vague plan began forming in his brain. "Cheer up, everybody!" If this was to be a funeral, he would make it into a wake. "We might be able to survive, given some help."

Krompel raised one half-hearted eyebrow. "You'll certainly need it." The voice now was a mixture of the optimistic child and the pessimistic elder. And it was talking about something new. "Two ships have surfaced from subspace. They don't look nice."

Jale, Sherlock and Pippin ran to the front viewport. Krompel followed, and hovered over them, looking.

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The two ships were very different. One was universally black, the other had purple highlights. The only thing they had in common was guns.

ATTACK MODE ARCHIMEDES

Blam! A fist of green fire smote the *Rigor Mortis*, sending it and its crew reeling.

Jale managed to hold onto the control console, and boosted the ship's protective screens to maximum. However, a black froth seen through the front viewport showed where the paint was peeling from the hull of the space-hearse under the continued barrage from one of the enemy craft.

Sherlock retrieved his deerstalker hat and jammed it over the metallic tendrils of his hair, leaving just enough space for his gimlet eyes to reflect the flames that enveloped the ship.

Pippin, who had landed on the globe-shaped Krompel, tried to scramble up; but then fell back, squashing the highest intelligence in the Milky Way like a kid riding a balloon.

"Attack mode, *Archimedes*" Jale ordered. His voice was deep and grim with the knowledge that – if it survived – his vessel would require a new paint-job.

"Roger, *Archimedes*," Sherlock repeated. There was no technical reason at all for this confirmation. However – if they lived – this incident would figure centrally in his memoirs, and therefore required dialogue.

Pippin slid along the deck as the ship heaved, and grabbed onto Jale's legs. Leaving Krompel whining in the corner, the girl hauled herself up her boyfriend's legs to stand beside his swaying form.

"Oh, *gosh*."

This was something of an understatement. The *Rigor Mortis* was being mauled by a ball of green fire. The vessel staggered under the onslaught, its hull emitting a grinding note of protest.

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The ball of energy was being flailed by a long, incandescent tube, whose course was demarked by places where it passed through the snowstorm of particles that drove from the Galaxy's centre. The crew saw that the snakey leash of energy started at the ship with the smudged R of Rang.

"What will we do?" Pippin asked. Her voice had the squeaky sound of fear kept under control. Before there was time for a reply, she added "Oh no! *Look!*"

Around the edge of the enormous boulder they had dubbed L5, their other enemy appeared. From the dark ship there came a blip of power, and a small black object began racing towards them.

"Antimatter torpedo" Krompel informed. The orange blob of material which made up the local version of the super-computer Selipon seemed sure in its diagnosis. Turning, Jale looked at the creature floating over his shoulder. Its words had been spoken in a serious tone, and its previous smiley mouth was now a straight line. The intelligence which had for ages played with the wishes of humankind seemed to have discovered humility.

Suddenly, a warning came from the control panel: the protective screen of the *Rigor Mortis* was nearing critical overload. Almost immediately, a second warning came: deep in the bowels of the ship, operation *Archimedes* had stalled.

Jale glanced outside and did a quick survey. The green fire from the Rang ship was eating its way inwards, and the torpedo from the Gang ship was closing in. He made a couple of decisions.

"Pippin," he said, "I need you to go down to the lowest deck, at bulkhead N. There's an old display panel there. Something's wrong with *Archimedes*. Fix it."

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The girl turned, and was set to run when Jale caught her elbow. He planted a brief kiss on her mouth, received a small but defiant smile, and then she was away. "And, *hold on!*" Jale yelled after, as she bounced from one side of the corridor to the other before disappearing into the elevator.

Jale turned briefly towards Krompel. "And you," he said in dismissive tone, "hold onto whatever you have for guts."

The man checked that the girl was safe in the elevator, before giving a nod to Sherlock. The latter, knowing that there was only one way out of the present situation, banged the necessary control.

The *Rigor Mortis* did a somersault.

It left behind, in ordinary space, a gravitational image of itself. Like the after-image on a retina which has been exposed to a bright light, the after-image in gravity was true enough to the original to make the deception a success.

The green inferno, after a pause, stayed with the image. The antimatter torpedo, with even less maneuverability, streaked into the quasi-ship and exploded into a boiling ball of energy.

Jale and Sherlock turned away simultaneously from the conflagration. Krompel was less quick, and whined as it closed smarting eyes. Also, a noticeable green colour – not related to the fireball outside – had appeared beneath its spindly arms after the ship's head-over-heals trick. The creature withdrew, moaning, into a dark corner beneath the control panel.

Jale and Sherlock did not notice. Their attentions were glued to the scene outside. There, the explosion of the torpedo had caused a bloating of the green chord of power. An aneurysm of energy moved along the tube towards its source – like a dead rat moving along the body of a snake towards its stomach.

The crew aboard the Rang ship realized – just a moment too late – that they had gone from being the aggressor to the victim.

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A gigantic blob of antimatter rolled and sizzled down the energy beam – and engulfed the ship in a silent explosion.

Pieces of the Rang craft were flung in all directions. Some of these bent in slow arcs, to disappear into the shadowy form of the central singularity. Others followed straighter courses, destined for the distant regions of the Milky Way.

One of these pieces, shaped like a barrel and apparently intact, sped away from the site of the catastrophe at a rate so high that it was impossible to track.

Another piece – a giant beam from the ship’s infrastructure – clipped the L5 boulder, spraying rocks into the space around the *Rigor Mortis* and rattling its protective shield. But as this debris cleared, the crew of the space-hearse could see that the ship of the Black Hand Gang was still there. And, indeed, closing for attack.

A light blinked on the control panel and the cabin filled with a static-ridden voice. “Jale? It’s me.” There was the sound of hard breathing. “I got the bulkhead door open, but this *thing* down here seems to be stuck!”

Pippin, in the gloom of the ship’s lowest section, looked about apprehensively. A few lights had come on automatically when she opened the door; but these only outlined the monstrous piece of machinery which occupied the belly of the craft. It looked like a giant harpoon.

In fact, she reasoned, it *was* a giant harpoon: it had a long, rusty shaft that was powered by some servomechanism; and a serrated front part, which ended in a pointed tip. This massive blade – the length of her body – was marred by dark stains of what looked to be old blood.

Pippin shivered. The space was cold and cave-like. It was clear that nobody had been here in ages. The axe and crowbar that were fixed to the bulkhead beside the door were covered in brown

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oxide. Every time she moved a foot on the dirt-covered deck-plates, the sound echoed only once before being absorbed by the dust-covered walls of the chamber.

And above her hung that gigantic arrow of death...

She jumped as Jale's voice sounded in her ear. "Look at the front." There was the rustle of an inaudible discussion in which she caught the tone of Sherlock's voice. Then again from Jale: "Are the six plates that guard the tip open or closed?"

Pippin moved forward several steps and stared up. She discerned a thin, broken crescent of light. Moving a step further, she saw that this was the edge of an hexagonal, jointed flange which protected the prong. "Closed," she replied.

"Damm!" Jale exclaimed, his voice fading as he turned away to consult Sherlock and the ship's computer.

Pippin wandered forward. She was on a gantry that ran beside the arrow suspended above. The latter was mounted on a rail-like device intended to extend the spear far into space. Straining her eyes into the furthest reaches of the chamber, she thought she could dimly make out the curved bow of the ship. There seemed to be some kind of circular doorway there, its edge marked by tiny, winking lights.

Abruptly, the lights stopped winking. Was this some trick of her sight? No, because shortly after, a booming noise reached her ears. These popped as the pressure started to drop. The circular hatch at the front of the ship was opening..!

Already, she could see the bright specks of the storm outside. A wind started to blow against her back. The doorway opened wider, revealing the half-lit bulk of the L5 boulder.

Now wind was rushing past, buffeting her body as she turned back towards the exit...

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“...Pippin!” Jale’s voice cut in half-way through some message, his tone loaded with danger. “Run for it! Run!”

She ran.

The air was shrieking as it strove to escape the ship. But that noise was drowned by a cacophonous roar. The six plates which had been guarding the prong dropped away, and the thing itself began moving slowly but surely along its track. The grating sound of its progress died in the thinning air, but still found its way to her stomach through the ship’s infrastructure. She reached the hatch in the bulkhead, and held on to it, gulping for air and fighting nausea.

She pushed against the hatch, and only faintly did it register in her battered brain that it was closed...

Of *course* it was closed, her mind eventually reasoned. It had to be so, to keep the atmosphere in the rest of the ship from rushing into space.

Weak, she fumbled with her android controls, trying to shut down her failing lungs. The ancient Brounlee had been careful in his design. There was always a back-up; if only she could find it...

Darkness was closing on her mind and fumbling fingers, when a shaft of light intruded. A foot appeared, followed by a crowbar which rudely propped open the hatch, even as air poured through the gap.

A large hand grabbed her upper arm, sending pain through her body. The hand pulled, and managed to overcome the force of the rushing atmosphere. She was dropped like a doll onto some hard surface, while her rescuer returned to seal the hatch. There was the sound of returning feet, in quietness. “Come on,” said Jale’s voice. “We can’t hang around here.” There followed a lurching trip in the arms of the man along an ill-lit corridor; then

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the surge of an elevator; and another lurching trip, before she was dumped by the side of Krompel, in a corner of the control room.

Jale strode back to the instruments as if eager to return to an interrupted game of chess. His eyes swept over the display; and satisfied, he ordered: "Enter subspace, *one under*."

The view on the monitor changed. Now, it looked like a topographical map, hung upside down.

"There's L5," Sherlock said, pointing to a large dark shape that projected downwards from a wavy surface.

"And that's *them*," Jale added. The screen showed a small but fast-moving depression. It rushed to the last location of the *Rigor Mortis* in spacetime, and then started to nose around like a disappointed hound.

"Ha, ha," laughed Sherlock. "Those guys just don't have imagination!"

"Be quiet!" admonished the voice of the *Rigor Mortis*. "You two are making too much noise. Remember: run silent, run geep!"

"Geep?" Sherlock asked, puzzled. "What the heck is ..."

"Shut up!" ordered the ship definitively, concealing its vocabularial error.

Jale and Sherlock turned towards each other, each willing to humour the ship's wish to play the part of submarine. Both had vertical forefingers which crossed horizontal lips in the ancient mannerism.

"Hisst!" Jale whispered.

"Husst!" Sherlock responded. Then, unable to contain his childish exuberance, added the melodious and colloquial phrase which was one day destined to be extracted from his memoirs and used as a cockroach-extermination slogan: "Squash 'em in the

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morning, squash ‘em in the evening, squash ‘em in summer time!”

Jale looked sideways at his friend, the one doubtful about the other's sanity. But any discussion was precluded by a sharp burst of acceleration ordered by the ship's computer. A branching discharge of quarks lit up the scene behind the ship with blue light, reminding the crew of the *Rigor Mortis* that subspace was home not only to the shadowy bulges of large masses but also to the bright pinstripes of tiny particles. The paths of the latter zipped like bolts of lightning between the ceiling of spacetime and the floor of subspace, obscuring the distant threatening funnel which was the singularity at the centre of the Milky Way.

Keeping in the middle of the N-dimensional sandwich, Jale urged the *Rigor Mortis* forward, its harpoon extended and ready.

For *Archimedes* was the simple amalgamation of two routines. The first, *Nemo*, Jale had used once before in ordinary three-dimensional space. The second routine, *Yellow Submarine*, he had never used in any version of existence. It was probably this lack of experience on the part of Jale, coupled with too much exuberance on the part of Sherlock, which was to turn a straightforward interstellar engagement into a galactic fiasco.

“Ahead both,” Jale ordered.

Sherlock extended his arm, whirled his hand, and gave a smart salute. “Roger.”

Jale frowned. Literally above and ahead, he could see the enemy ship as a black smudge on spacetime. It had moved in towards the centre of the Galaxy in an effort to locate the *Rigor Mortis*, not realizing that the latter had gone into subspace. But the crew would figure it out sometime, and Jale was eager to get the encounter done.

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All around, particles were zooming down, producing more of their own kind as they went deeper, making it hard to see the target. Jale moved the *Rigor Mortis* up, to improve visibility prior to a strike.

He was just about to issue the order to attack when he noticed a thin, vee-shaped wake bearing down on them. The object, whatever it was, held to a nearly circular orbit about the Galaxy's centre. The thing had a peculiarly small amount of turbulence, and cut through subspace with none of the turmoil that attended normal craft.

Jale stared for several moments, before he realized two things. First, that the interloper was the artificial home of the super-computer Selipon. Second, that it was on a collision course with the Gang ship...

"Up!" Jale yelled, coming to a rapid decision. "Up. *Up!*"

Sherlock's hands flew over the controls so fast that they were blurs.

Jale hunched over the instruments, ready. There was only one reasonable course of action: Take out the Gang ship before the Selipon structure got there.

The re-appearance of the *Rigor Mortis* in spacetime was the kind of revelation that frightens hardened alcoholics into sobriety: it seemed to materialize from nowhere, a massive black portent sporting a glinting harpoon and travelling fast.

Too fast.

Before he appreciated it, Jale was on top of the enemy. The scene appeared to evolve in staccato slow motion: Figures running around in consternation in the enemy control room; the Gang ship trying to turn; the ram of the *Rig* sliding into the other ship; a juddering that rattled objects in their own control room; an escaping puff of vapour from the hole in the enemy ship, turning white as it

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froze into crystals in the ultra-cold of space; *Rig* stopping and reversing, trying to detach itself from the ruined hulk that had been the enemy; a screeching sound as the ram came free; and bodies in lifeless, crucified forms floating out of the enemy ship and falling towards the Galaxy's centre...

Sherlock's cloak – metallic cloth impressed with the intersecting pattern of Victorian houndstooth – seemed abruptly too big for its occupant. The master-detective appeared to shrink, his eyes turning downward. His previous exuberance was gone, replaced by the remorse of the soldier who only after the fact realizes what has happened.

Jale's eyes became stony. He was opening his mouth to issue an order when there was a terrific explosion.

What remained of the ship of the Black Hand Gang disintegrated into atoms. The detonation was so intense, and the destruction so complete, that it could only have been planned that way. The self-destruction was a mini-big-bang, which seared the man's vision and promptly blasted away the rest of the paint from the hull of his ship.

A cusp of piled-up light spread rapidly away from the site. Behind this, a spherical shock-wave of lethal material was propagating outwards...

"Down!" Jale yelled, reversing his previous order. "Down. Down!"

Sherlock's hands flew over the controls as fast as before.

But everything has inertia.

Even Selipon's home could not stop or sidestep or duck. The strange structure was engulfed – its speed in its orbit around the centre of the Milky Way adding to the velocity of the Gang's explosion to compound the process of annihilation.

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“Aaa..!” Krompel exclaimed over Jale’s shoulder, as the creature watched the destruction of its ages-old home. The tone was not the fluty, childlike one it had used recently; nor the bass, assured one it had used historically. Rather, the word the creature had uttered had come out like a pain-ridden, quiet sigh. Jale, busy with the dive, glanced back. Two giant tears emerged from Krompel’s dark eyes, to run down its balloon-like form and drop to the deck.

“Sorry,” said Jale, inadequately.

The screen changed colour to ocean blue, and the *Rigor Mortis* came to rest, a submarine wallowing in subspace. All around, pieces of Selipon were raining down like the remnants of a smashed jewel. Above, the shock-wave caused by the explosion of the ship of the Black Hand Gang was a deep furrow in the manifold. It swept over them, causing the hull to pitch, and then it was retreating into the distance.

“That was close,” Jale muttered. He now realized, as he relaxed, that his body was drenched in sweat. His hands, which had been rock-steady before, began to shake. Irritated by this bodily reaction, he turned his back on the control panel and waved to Sherlock to take over. “I’ll be in the lounge,” he announced, “getting drunk.”

Striding along the corridor which connected the control room to the lounge, the pilot caught a glimpse of himself in one of the ship’s monitors: a gaunt face that was paler than he remembered; blazing eyes that now seemed even brighter because the sockets were darker; and a mop of thick hair whose natural darkness was streaked with stress-induced grey.

Jale flopped down on the big couch and his eyelids closed. He heard light footsteps, the sound of the liquor cabinet opening,

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and the gurgle of pouring spirits. A cool, heavily-loaded glass was thrust into his open hand.

He waited. A kiss was planted carefully but definitely on his taut lips. These relaxed, and then quirked into a smile.

He took a gulp that half-emptied the tumbler. Such a shot of super-proof whiskey would have caused alcohol poisoning in many people; but in Jale's hardened frame it merely induced a nice feeling of relaxation. His facial muscles lost their tension, and his breathing became steadier and deeper.

"Jale," said Pippin softly, "don't go to sleep."

"Why not?"

"Because," responded the girl, "I have an idea."

Jale grunted. He was in what he liked to think of paradoxically as *Anticlimax High*. Namely, the euphoria which accompanies the realization that you are not yet dead.

But Pippin was insistent. By brushing the man's eyelids with her lips, she managed to get him to look at her. And once he locked into the girl's golden gaze, he had to listen.

"I think we can bring back Selipon," said Pippin. And then, in response to the questioning look on Jale's face, there came a rush of sentences which showed that the girl had been analyzing the situation far more deeply than the man. "Krompel is not Selipon. That smiley-faced thing is not really the intelligence that's been helping mankind with its problems for the last few eons. Krompel is just an ambassador, something like the sales representative that meets you when you enter a big store. By contrast, Selipon is the store – I mean, all the neat things in it."

"So?" Jale asked. His male human brain was having difficulty identifying the point being made by the pretty female android. There was some kind of understanding gap, small but significant. By comparison, there had always been a massive understanding

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gap between Selipon and humankind; and as a representative of the latter, Jale was not sure he *wished* to resurrect the super-computer, even if it were technologically feasible.

"Selipon is in bits out there," continued Pippin, with a vague gesture towards the layer of subspace which enclosed the ship. "But if we can locate the cortex files, we can rebuild the whole thing. At least, in principle."

"You mean," said Jale, "we could put together a new version if we can find the plans?"

"Yeah!"

The girl's eyes were bright with hope, but the man's were hooded in caution.

Jale was rebellious and self-sufficient to the point of obsession, and it took his tired brain some time to identify the real reason why he was reluctant to resurrect the alien super-computer: he distrusted its potential for control.

But then, there was another question: Would humankind have evolved differently if the Krell-built machine had never existed? He doubted it. Humans had a habit of doing their own thing, come hell or high subspace. But then, if he believed *that*, he should not have anything to fear from Selipon.

"All right," he announced, coming to a quick decision. "Collect what data you can, but not any hardware."

Pippin scampered away, while Jale fell abruptly asleep.

Sherlock, still in the control room, was anything but sleepy. Indeed, he was feeling somewhat frustrated. This because Krompel seemed unable to grasp the significance of memoirs *qua* memoirs.

"How do you know anybody will bother to read them?" Krompel had asked.

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Appalled at the thought of anybody actually declining to read his memoirs – given the fact of their eventual existence – Sherlock had finally lost patience with the ill-bred orange blob. As a demonstration of the meaning and application of memoirs, he was now occupied in a new approach to them: using the current scene to aid in their compilation.

The master-detective's eyes scanned the world revealed through the forward viewport of the *Rigor Mortis*. His fingers directed the composition in old-fashioned mode, on one of the ship's instruments:

'The singularity at the centre of the Milky Way brooded in the background, even as we whirled around it in a dance of death. It reminded me of the Reichenbach Falls, where I had been obliged to reverse my boots in order to escape the assassin's bullet.'

"Hey, that's *good!*" Krompel exclaimed.

Sherlock, irritated at being interrupted but flattered by the comment, lowered one eyebrow and raised the other, before returning to his composition:

'Our existence was sandwiched between slices of supple sub-space. Above, reality flitted like the froth on a debutante's cup of espresso coffee. Below, the manifold rejected the impact of our boots as if it were an overcooked slice of bacon. The gap between the ceiling and the floor was occupied by a rain of antimatter particles, whose tracks resembled the sprinkly paths of unwanted condiments.'

Krompel coughed, a look of embarrassment and disapproval clearly discernable on his spherical, orange face. "If this is just

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the beginning,” he said, “I hate to think what else is coming. Is the main course going to be the *Big-Bang Burger?*”

Sherlock paused, a look of outrage on his aquiline face gradually transforming to one of acquiescence. Maybe he *had* jumped too readily into the culinary mode; and perhaps the uninformed reader might be better served by a more direct account. He stared at the scene outside; and then – loaded with facts and feeling – turned back to his manuscript:

‘The outlook is desolate. Picture a wintry, bluish kind of world, whose only sound is the sighing of annihilating particles. It is a lonely world. It is lonely because it is strange. It is strange because it is strangely strange...

Occasionally, an energetic event above becomes a cascade of microscopic happenings below. An acorn grows into an oak tree, upside down. The almost-silent, initial *ping* grows to a roaring torrent of sound which flows around the ship, causing it to sway and wallow.

But this foredrop of small things happens against a backdrop of big ones. In the distance, the shadows of enormous objects move, controlled slowly by the pull of the central singularity. Dimly seen, whole stars trundle inwards and are split, their pieces collapsing towards the sucking mouth at the middle of the Milky Way.

It is difficult for a quiet person to look on this world of big violence. Every vista seems clogged with monstrous calamity. Maybe – to preserve sanity – it is best to be myopic...’

Sherlock stopped, and looked at Krompel. The android master-detective did not know what kind of reaction was to be expected from the orange smiley-faced balloon which in the form of

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Selipon had long occupied the space near the Galaxy's centre. But he expected *some* kind of response...

Instead, he was met by a silent stare from a disfigured face. The creature's mouth moved, but gave forth no sound; while its visage was pulled from the spherical into a pear shape.

Could it be that his colleague had been discommoded by a sudden attack of toothache? This hypothesis, while it accounted for the data, was disfavoured by the fact that Krompel did not possess teeth.

However, some physiological effect was certainly at play; because now Pippin entered the control room, sporting strangely puffy cheeks. Her smile died as she looked at the disfigured Krompel. She also seemed to detect a similar distortion in the face of Sherlock.

Had their faces, all together, been simultaneously afflicted by some bizarre trick of perspective?

"Warning," *Rigor Mortis* announced. "Warning about geometry!"

Sherlock, Pippin and Krompel stared at each other by turns. Their previously nice (if unspectacular) good looks were a thing of the past. Now, if one of them rotated, their face inflated and deflated, depending on where they were pointing. It was instant plastic surgery, done by merely turning around.

Jale burst into the control room, rubbing sleepy eyes. His normally manly jaw was now even more so – a veritable prow of stubbornness, pointing in the direction towards the Galactic centre. However, on turning to look at Sherlock, his mandible shrank to insignificance; while his ears seemed to flourish, doubling the size of his head in the direction towards the centre of the Milky Way.

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Sherlock, in his detective mode, finally interpreted the direction-dependent shapes of his friends' faces. He announced: "There's something funny going on!"

The intelligence of the *Rigor Mortis*, while it had been preoccupied with salvaging the memoirs of Selipon, now found time to concentrate on the current problem. It reached a factual conclusion: "Light cones are tipping!"

Jale, who was the only one on board the ship who understood this last statement, barked out a question: "How long before we cross the horizon?"

"Not long enough," replied *Rig* laconically. After all, the craft was well versed in the singularity theorems, and what was possible or impossible in a given state. It did not need to refer to Luap Nossew's tome *Hypergeometry* to realize that they had missed the geometrical bus.

If you waited until light was being dragged by the gravitational field to its doom, then anything made of matter *had* to follow.

Jale pushed a hand through his sweaty hair, and slumped into the pilot's seat. But not one of the myriad of controls in front of him offered a way out of their predicament. It did not help that the ship's motors were among the most powerful known: paradoxically, more energy meant more mass, which meant that they would fall even faster...

Pippin sidled up to Jale, and deliberately sought his hand. She looked worried. "What..?"

"It means," said Jale in a straightforward voice, "that we're falling into the singularity."

There was a silence in the cockpit, as its four occupants analysed this doom-laden statement.

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After all, there are times when it is best to say nothing; and times when there is nothing to be said anyway.

The present situation filled both bills. Feeling bitter but resigned, Jale finally muttered "Shit!"

He had somehow always believed that his demise would be one of action and glory: maybe he would be drilled by an enemy laser; or beheaded by a fusion blast as he struggled with the controls of his ship; or torn limb-from-limb by some N-dimensional beast, even as he attempted to save the dozen mythical maidens who ruled the Magellanic Clouds from a fate worse than death...

By contrast, being slowly crushed to pulp was a boring way to die...

It would also be messy. And painful.

Jale put his arm around Pippin, pulling her small form tight into his large one. Her perfect body was wedged between his tumescent thighs, the golden eyes locked onto the blue ones. The girl stared with unabashed love at the man, and only eventually said in a whisper. "We didn't have much time together."

Jale smiled. It was the only occasion he could recall when the laws of N-dimensional physics appeared humourous. For as the pair of lovers fell towards the singularity at the centre of the Milky Way, not only would their bodies be slowly squashed together as space contracted, they would also be more able to appreciate it as time expanded. They had, quite truly, all the time in the world...

PSYCHOANALYSIS ULTIMA

Jale's bare buttocks softly scraped the metal plates of his self-imposed prison.

At least, his sense of touch was intact; though by the accounts of the gurus, he expected to eventually lose even that most crude of senses.

By contrast, he could see absolutely nothing. The metal box in which he had voluntarily locked himself was light-proof. Apparently, there had once been a great scientist, who realized that even in darkness it was possible to generate a kind of light by pressing a finger to the inside corner of the eye. (*Let Newton be/ And all was light.*) But even this minor distraction had disappeared, a victim of neurological over-stimulation, leaving his eyes as useless orbs.

He breathed steadily if shallowly, the workings of his lungs a metronome of his living. It was easy to hear the alternating inward and outward movements of air. They drowned the sound of the oxygen which logic told him must seep regularly into the chamber. But somehow, the sound you generated yourself was not real sound...

Smell and taste were long gone. They were, in any case, just poor cousins of each other. With a body purged of liquid and solid wastes, the initial phase of faint flatulence from empty bowels was only a memory. And you cannot taste when the only thing in your mouth is your own tongue.

Jale moved his weight to his left side and returned to his self-appointed task: *How to escape from a singularity?*

*

In the lounge of the *Rigor Mortis*, the couches were occupied

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by an ill-assorted group of beings.

Pippin sulked in a corner of the large sofa, like a cat protecting a special place. She was lonely in the absence of her lover; and resentful of the creature Krompel, who she blamed for their predicament.

The latter sat, ellipsoidal in shape under the strengthening gravitational pull of the singularity, wondering how long it would be before his skin burst, deluging the lounge of the ship with his innards... He felt sick, and the attractive but bitchy woman was not helping matters.

Sherlock lay stretched on his chaise longue, where he pulled rhythmically but pointlessly on his empty meerschaum pipe. That it contained no combustible materials mattered little. The fact of having the pipe between his lips was a comfort. And if his boss could discover a way to avoid the singularity, he was sure that his future life would be redolent with *shag* – that black, pungent variety of Victorian tobacco of which he often dreamed.

“You *could* try and help,” suggested the *Rigor Mortis*. “You three are supposed to be the top-end products of your own lines. But as far as I can see, the only thing you are all good at is being *lazy!*”

Pippin’s golden eyes opened wide in hurt, and she began to cry.

“Shut up!” Krompel snapped. “At least, you’re *pretty*. You don’t have an orange blob for a body!”

“No, I don’t,” Pippin agreed, sucking in her breath. “But if you don’t already know, I’m missing the most beautiful bit.” She went into a fuming silence, her anger mounting, revisiting for the umpteenth time the question of why Brounlee had made her perfect in

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every way but had omitted to give her a vagina. Finding yet again no answer to this, she added: "Also, I'm not the *cleverest* thing in the universe!"

Sherlock, warding off a verbal attack from the quivering Krompel, said: "Pippin has managed to do something special – she's become a wife to Jale."

The girl managed a small smile, and snuggled deeper into the cushions of the couch. Krompel, however, was still in critical mode. "You two are just pieces of a kind of psychological jigsaw puzzle. One of you fits well with Jale physically, while the other fits well with him mentally."

Sherlock carefully laid aside his pipe, preparing to rebuff this simplistic analysis. However, the alien intelligence which had formerly been known as Selipon plunged on: "But *I* don't fit." There was a self-important silence. "You see, *I* wasn't made *here*." The fat creature flung out a spindly arm, indicating the Milky Way. "According to legend, *I* was made by a super-race called the Krell. Nothing in your piddly little galaxy fits with my earliest thoughts." The fat form of Krompel seemed to take a breath and grow slightly with pride. "I was made by a civilization which hollowed out a whole planet – endless corridors, up, down and around – all to produce energy. And the best product of their labours was me."

Sherlock clapped his metallic hands together, briefly and ironically. "Bravo." The android detective picked up his pipe again, giving it a drag that produced a hollow, sucking sound. "And where are your masters now?" He paused, knowing there would be no answer. "Because if they don't turn up lickety-split with a miracle, you're going to go *phut* with the rest of us."

Gloom descended on the three beings in the lounge of the *Rigor Mortis*. "So much for psychoanalysis," muttered the ship's

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brain. It adjusted the orientation of the hull, to reduce the building stresses which threatened to tear it to pieces. Outside, the storm of particles which had surrounded the singularity had become a torrent: everything was now moving in one direction, the ship included...

*

Jale moved his weight to his right side, though he was only vaguely aware of the physical pressure which caused him to do this. For now, his body was a mere adjunct of his mind, and his mind was growing...

He had already forgotten where – in a physical sense – he was located. He had no recollection of locking himself into the chamber. But the lock was foolproof: if he failed, the mechanism would not open, he would die, and the ship which he had captained would be ground to bits – to become but another myth of the spaceways.

The logic of his plight was masterful: threaten the physical being into insignificance, so that the mental being might grow...

*

Pippin stretched her legs, noting the combination of form and dimension that made them beautiful. But she was not vain. Her legs were attractive because they had been designed so; in the same way that the apples in the orchard on top of the Rang building were the best that could be engineered. Brounlee, creator of both bodies and fruit, was a perfectionist. She was glad about this – grateful for his skill and wisdom. But then there came a disturbing thought. What if Brounlee's efforts had produced not a girl who was pretty, but one who was ugly? What would he have done? Pippin's brow furrowed, and she tilted her right thigh, looking for any defect: there was none. Likewise, no blemish on

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the left. She had perfect legs. But logic told her that perfection was not routine... So what had Brownlee done with his less-than-perfect models? She knew that he was a so-called Logical Buddhist, meaning that he could not take a life, except to protect or promote other life. So, what had he done with his failures?

Sherlock sucked desultorily on his empty pipe. It made an irregular, gurgling sound. In times past, this had not bothered either Jale or Pippin. So maybe Krompel's crude analysis was correct – namely, that the three of them formed some kind of psychological triangle, whose tolerances were loose enough to absorb their irritating habits. It was curious that it had taken the arrival of the alien Krompel/Selipon to cause Sherlock to realize just how much he had in common with the girl and the man. At least, he was certain he was *from* this galaxy. However, he would be the first to admit that his early memories were strangely vague. In fact, his first really clear memory was of discussing with him whether Jale should have a second carafe of gin with his dinner of jellied eels at the hotel *Excelsior*. This prior to the deadly episode of the disintegrating door, which had sealed their comradeship in a shared rush for survival... Of course, with regard to his actual creation, Sherlock had no recollection. In this, he was not fundamentally different from many androids of his era. But what was different about him was the absence of any marks of craftsmanship on his body, whose intricacies caused wonder in today's less-skilled artisans. Even the great Brownlee – whose knowledge of androids was profound – admitted himself baffled as to Sherlock's origin. Maybe (though the master-detective), if they got out of their present fix, he should search out his roots?

Krompel scowled where he sat on top of the liquor cabinet, an orange ovoid of discontent. From there, he looked down on the female and male androids as they ruminated on the trivial details

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of their existence. They were clever creatures – physically and mentally – but limited in both regards. They were, apparently, the best that the Milky Way galaxy could produce. By contrast, Krompel as its present embodiment knew that Selipon came from some other galaxy. *Where* that might be, or *when* it had been, he could not say. But he *knew* he was different from Sherlock or Pippin – different in the same manner as a cat knows it is different from a dog. Knowing this, however, did not explain *why* he found himself in this particular spiral-shaped agglomeration of stars and dust (rather than some other, nicer place). Indeed, the information which echoed down the tubes of time was very meagre. He had been made by the Krell; but apart from a smattering of their advanced knowledge, he was ignorant. And lonely. It is not easy being the most intelligent being in a world populated by morons. However, he had come across a few exceptional creatures who had broken the monotony of his isolated intellectual existence. For example, that simian Jale...

*

The simian sat in its locked cell, trying to conjure up a saving idea. The bare bum sat on metal plates; the body curved over and relaxed, with the forearms resting on updrawn knees. The eyes were closed, looking inwards. But while the eyes could be closed, the ears could not. So, to remove the distraction, the noise of breathing stopped.

However, the brain still functioned: oxygen poured through the skin into the inert body, as the chamber changed to hyperbaric mode. In fact, the brain was now in optimum condition for thinking. The body was silent, a mere appendix to support the neurological activity of the cortex. And within the flashing display of pure thought, a tiny idea began to form...

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Like a starting flame, the idea winked into being. Logic fed it. The flame grew into a possibility...

And then, stunted by the harshness of the physical world, it abruptly shrank.

But it did not die completely. From the embers of the old idea, a new one sprang. Fuelled by more accurate physics, it grew into a steady flame...

There was, at least in principle, a way out.

*

The intelligence of the *Rigor Mortis* surveyed the ship's lounge and clucked silently to itself in disapproval. For all their designed cleverness, the trio of Sherlock, Pippin and Krompel were relying on the brain of an ape for inspiration. A signal from the prison deep in the ship showed that its captain was still alive. Indeed, he had just gone into the state of hyper-concentration which necessitated oxygen to be fed directly through his skin into his blood, and so into his brain. A quick check showed that there was enough pure oxygen to keep up the man's supply for some time. The limit to the experiment in which he was involved would not be set by the ship's supplies, but by the strains to which the hull was being subjected as it fell into the singularity.

The ship's brain switched to the front viewscreen – and did the electronic equivalent of a shudder.

The *Rigor Mortis* was part of a monumental cascade of interstellar rubbish. In the distance, a red-giant star was being torn apart by the forces of the singularity. Its crimson outer layers peeled off, a skein of burning matter. The layers underneath, multicoloured with the darker hues of the heavier elements, spilled out like the innards of some massive animal in a shambles. Nearer, the scene was criss-crossed by the tracks of pulverized planets, firework trails across a burning backdrop. Just outside, the for-

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ward screen was being battered by the pieces of some spaceship, whose fate had been sealed long before its remnants turned up in this last barrage. Among the spars and struts of this destroyed craft, there appeared momentarily a human arm, still clad in a piece of spacesuit. The heavy, articulated glove waved satirically before being sucked into the vortex...

The ship shut out the scene. No wonder that the three crew members in the cabin were lying around like dead fish who had accepted their fate.

But there was work to be done, even to the last instant. The *Rigor Mortis* was still intact. True, it swayed like an old galleon in a gale; but for now, its hull held. And as the stresses from the singularity increased and changed direction, so did the ship's brain counter every change, optimizing the hull's performance.

The noise, however, reminded the crew that they could not stave off forever the laws of mechanics. In the bass register, there was a droning hum which rose and fell, a measure of the storm of detritus through which the ship plunged. In the medium range, there was a creaking, intermittent sound: the complaint of the ship's members to the tidal forces associated with the hole in spacetime. In the falsetto, the occasional ping attested to the failure of yet another of the bonds in the hull ...

*

Deep in the interior of the space hearse, the sounds caused by the decay of its outer parts did not penetrate. And even if they had, Jale would not have been aware of them. For he had now reached a state of total concentration. None of his bodily senses affected his mind, which was focussed on feeding fuel to the growing flame of an idea. However, like a fire, it needed nurture: the kindling of a dream was followed by the sticks of hypotheses

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and (when bearable) the logs of facts. For a moment, it seemed that the bonfire of his hopes would collapse into a smouldering ruin. But then he added an extra breath of imagination. And suddenly the thing burst into flaming life.

“Eureka,” thought Jale.

Snick. The lock on his self-chosen prison slid back.

“Now,” the man thought, “if only there’s enough energy left..”

*

The coffin which contained the remains of Androyoos II, late director of the Andromeda galaxy, was drawn by a dozen androidal dragons.

These were designed to intimidate the human populace, both by appearance and weaponry. A typical dragon had a reptilian face, with flared nostrils, hooded coals for eyes, and a mouth heavy with teeth – through whose gaps there gushed intermittently tongues of burning hydrogen. The body was long and sinuous, but reticulated so it could twist like a gaffed eel. Six short legs supported the body, each ending in a foot with six, razor-sharp claws. The tail twisted freely at the end, its tip a mace of poisoned spikes.

Not the kind of creature that could be called cuddly. And those few brave souls of Andromeda who had attempted to get near to a dragon and challenge its authority had learned that it did not pay. For in addition to its fusion breath and poisonous tail, each creature had concealed beneath its body plates a system of electro-convulsive nodes: these would reduce a human attacker to a quivering, spasmodic wreck chomping on his own protest-ridden tongue, an easy prey for the searing mouth or the smashing tail.

The route of the funeral was thus marked by blackened, dusty patches on the sidewalk – epitaphs to those who objected to the tyranny of the Androyoos clan.

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To an historian of civilization, or even an objective sociologist (if such could be found), the oppressive nature of rule in the Andromeda galaxy would not be seen as unusual. History was replete with examples of colonial regimes who meted out injustice to their own people, using the excuse that they were promoting a system better than that of their old masters. The situation between Andromeda and the Milky Way was just another case of this, though on a gigantic scale. For Andromeda had once been a colony of the Milky Way. In fact, it had been seeded by the finest and most hardy of voyagers from the host galaxy. Unfortunately, the independence of these adventurers had met with a negative opinion from the soft bureaucrats of the parent system. The result, as per the traditional fault of humankind, had been a bitter family rift. This grew and festered. There had been many ingredients in the bubbling intergalactic brew: problems with trade, differences in culture, and above all the galaxies' disagreement about androids.

The Milky Way was, by the outbreak of war between it and Andromeda, an android-dominated system. According to *Jayne's History of Machines*, at the time of the rift, the ratio of androids to humans in the home galaxy was approximately 130:1. In passing, it is worth noting that this datum shows how it could be that a few motivated humans, such as Brounlee and Jale, were able to exert the tremendous influence with which they became credited.

Incidentally, the abundance of androids was also the reason why Brounlee was able to attach a female watcher to Jale, repeating a ploy used in a previous case by Rang: factory-produced near-human creatures were not only common, but more proficient than older forms of surveillance. The androids were everywhere, an army of obedient butlers.

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Thus, the human inhabitants of the Milky Way enjoyed a kind of lifestyle that had never been seen before. Androids did everything that humans did not wish to do. As a corollary, mechanoids (which lacked upper-brain functions) did everything that androids did not wish to do. This development was accompanied by an increasingly diffuse division between humans, androids and mechanoids. It was a new kind of sociologically-based democracy. With the raw resources of a whole galaxy on which to draw, and a willing hierarchy of workers who were all happy with their jobs, society in the Milky Way settled into a unique phase. By old standards, this new phase appeared to lack many of the traditional rules. If a given group was dissatisfied with its laws of operation, it simply formed a subgroup with new rules. There was seldom any friction in this process, because the growing population of androids (and mechanoids) ensured that every member of society had what they needed for a fulfilling existence. After many generations, this approach resulted in a society where rules were at a minimum but satisfaction was at a maximum. This culture was dubbed *Panocracy*. (However, as the expert Youripadese ironically commented, the name implied more structure than the thing itself possessed.) It will be obvious to the astute that the establishment of Panocracy in the Milky Way was synonymous with the availability of androids. And it is in this that the single, major fault of the system would prove to lie.

For while there were enough androids to run the loose society of the Milky Way, there were not enough to enable the same societal transition in Andromeda, which remained centralized and belligerent. And while humans led an easy life in their home galaxy, they worked like slaves in the colonial one. In the Milky Way with its androids, there was no appetite for war, and not much ability to fight one. In Andromeda, trade conflicts around an-

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droids were steadily fanned by a clique of militaristic rulers into a dangerous standoff. The people, harbouring the resentments of a displaced race, obliged to do menial tasks and pummeled with propaganda, slowly came to the state in which they were prepared to go to war. And when the call came, they responded with an effectiveness which was initially surprising. What was really a peasant army took the Magellanic Clouds – satellite galaxies of the Milky Way – before a bemused Galaxy managed to stop the assault. But stop it they did, by using their only logical response: millions of android soldiers, produced by the factories of Rang, Divadroid and Xmen. Both in numbers and sophistication, their production was overwhelming: androids made androids who made androids ..., in a flood that cast the Andromedan armies back into their galaxy with grievous losses. The war was effectively won.

The Milky Way, however, did not rejoice. Neither did it occupy Andromeda, or insist on reparations from it. After all, what would be the point of either thing? The people had what they wanted, and were content to fall back into Panocracy.

Andromeda, predictably, did not openly admit defeat. This, and the tolerance shown by the Milky Way, led some in the latter system to talk of the outcome of the war as armistice rather than victory. However, a tally of the destruction involved showed a clear advantage to the Galaxy. The use of vacuum bombs in the closing stages of the war was especially harmful to the rebels. For while it was *they* who had first used the bombs, their understanding of the technology was inferior. In fact, most of the Andromedan losses due to vacuum bombs came from the malfunction of their own, rather than the results of those few dropped by the Milky Way. Thus, notwithstanding propaganda to the contrary, a reasonable estimate showed that about three billion Andro-

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medeans lost their lives to their own folly: sucked into the nothingness of the vacuum, the equivalent of shooting themselves in the foot.

At the end of the war, Jale was by virtue of his exploits a kind of unofficial general; and Rang by virtue of his factories was one of the most influential people in the Galaxy. However, Rang was deposed by Brounlee, who took the company in a more humane direction. There were also changes in Andromeda: Androyoos I and his militarist crew were ousted in a coup, which unfortunately only replaced one narrow-minded government with another under the head of a bastard son who took the title Androyoos II. It was he whose career had been cut short by the CLAG. That incident, unbeknown to the majority of the inhabitants in the Milky Way, was being blamed on them. Indeed, the man who would shortly be acclaimed the third of the Androyoos line (though with no blood tie) was already exciting anti-Galaxy feeling, even as the body of his predecessor was traipsed along the spiral arms of Andromeda.

Pomp was important in the Andromedean system. Not only as a means of showing power, but also as a means of enforcing it. Along the funeral route of Androyoos II, the blackened patches that marked the sites of his detractors also reminded the rest of the population of their fealty.

The body of the late dictator lay in a golden casket, surrounded by a stasis field which preserved it. The cadaver was clad in silver robes, which covered the damage it had sustained during its claggish explosion. Miraculously, enough had survived to be put back together in a semblance of the man. His head, severed during his last public discourse, had been reattached. It rested in the crimson satin which lined the interior of the coffin. The latter jerked periodically, under the uneven pull of its dozen androidal

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dragons. At such times, the head would wobble, eliciting a long drawn out "Oooh..." from the gathered onlookers.

One person who was not impressed with the pomp and pageantry of the funeral procession was Zeegan, who was in charge of it. A technical android, he had been associated with the rulers of Andromeda long enough to know them for what they were: a bunch of shallow-minded brutes of men whose only positive attribute was longevity. Zeegan served his masters for two reasons. First, it brought him into contact with more androids than he would meet in other trades. Second, it allowed him to control the twelve dragons, whose depredations he strove to limit as far as he was able. He was under no illusions about either thing: if his predilection for androids or his mercy towards humans became known to his masters, he would instantly become the victim of his own dragons. As it was, he barked and roamed his way across the Andromeda galaxy, perpetuating a sham which would finish when the cortege reached its goal.

This was the *Anvil*.

Named after a rock which resembled the tool, it had become over the eons a place imbued with whatever passed for holiness in Andromeda, and where its higher dignitaries found a finish. Zeegan had been there several times, though this was his first experience with a top ruler. An inquisitive creature, he had observed the place closely on previous occasions, and come to the conclusion that the Anvil owed its reputation not so much to history as to its peculiar physical characteristics.

For the Anvil was an impressively massive slab of obsidian, a chip from some ancient galactic cataclysm. Its bulk was topped by a flat surface which ended in a sharp point, as if designed for sacrifices. It was followed in its orbit by an elongated boulder of the same material, which was inevitably called the Hammer. To

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the latter, hardly anybody went. Whereas the gigantic flat plain of the Anvil was thronged with thousands of people for each state ceremony, their number depending on the status of the deceased. Both the Hammer and the Anvil were naturally dark in colour, which lent them a funereal aspect. However, the darkness of the Anvil was emphasized by the fact that it pointed towards the white-hot cauldron which was the centre of the Andromeda galaxy.

Zeegan's interest in the Anvil and its location had been only partially slaked by the two references he had consulted. Nossew's book *Hypergeometry* noted that the Hammer and Anvil were at the stable Lagrange points of a system dominated by the mass at the galaxy's centre, which it referred to unhelpfully as a *singularity antipode*. The *Children's Guide to Space* was simplistic to the stage of banality, referring to the centre of Andromeda as "a bubbling pot of porridge." Now, as he drew near to the place again, he ordered the procession to take a pause, while he surveyed the scene under a sheltering hand.

For the light streaming upwards from Andromeda's centre was white and intense. The triangle of the Anvil was totally black by comparison; though as his eyes adapted to the scene, he could see that the plateau which formed the top of the rock was covered in people. Millions of them.

Why they were there in such numbers puzzled Zeegan. Sure, some were government functionaries whose presence was mandated by their jobs. And some of them were sycophants, who hoped by their presence to garner attention from their higher-ups. But that still left the majority who must be there for no other reason than crude entertainment – like the onlookers at a public hanging. Zeegan, looking behind, made sure that the body of Androyoos II in its see-through coffin was in order. It was; but

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somehow, the natural geology dominated the man-made casket, making it tawdry by comparison. Resigned, he ordered his dozen dinosaurs back into action, adding for his own satisfaction "Giddy up!"

The crowds began to cluster, drawn towards the cortege as it headed across the black surface of the Anvil. From beneath it, white light streamed out of the centre of Andromeda. The combination made for a strange kind of contrast, and Zeegan suddenly had an insight: this must be like it was in the primitive times of mankind, when a body in a cave was illumined by a fire. As if in confirmation of this primeval feeling, the chattering crowd grew quieter and quieter as the body neared the Anvil's edge.

Zeegan drew down his visor. In the protective gloom, his pupils dilated, giving him better vision. His quick eyes noted a rough-clad person one row back in the crowd, turning away as the coffin passed, to spit in disgust.

Womp!

The second dragon in the left-hand phalanx landed the poisoned spiked end of its tail on the head of the malefactor. He collapsed to the ground, bleeding. Immediately, a vacant circle formed around the victim. The crowd was quick to shun the fallen man, even if many among it shared his sentiment. Zeegan, under cover of the mask which covered much of his face, winced and sighed. And carried on.

At the tip of the Anvil, the procession halted. Zeegan, who had been chosen for his job partly because of his unusual height, extended his lower legs even further, so that he towered over the cowering crowd. As he waited, the onlookers gradually subsided like falling dominoes. Most ended in a dog-like posture: crouched on all-fours, but with their heads raised to watch the cremation.

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For the central fire of Andromeda would be the final home of Androyoos II. And as the flaming heart of the galaxy had received his predecessors, so would it now absorb the latest of those who had sought to rule it.

Zeegan activated a control, and an old-fashioned scroll of parchment deployed before him. This bore the words of the Eulogy. Written by the self-serving Androyoos III, it was a document which Zeegan considered to be lacking in pith. It was full of platitudes, and ended with the predictable call for the public to have faith in their new ruler. As he held the scroll in front of his eyes, however, something wandered into his field of vision...

It began as a dark point, limned against the searing white light pouring from Andromeda's core.

It grew bigger, and took on structure. The resemblance was to a spacecraft. But not of a type ever seen before.

It had a hull which appeared to be of multiple shades of black (if that were possible). However, it could not be part of the official funeral service, because the paint had been burnt off its bow. The result was an irregular pattern of silver and black, resembling a set of teeth...

Zeegan blinked in disbelief behind his visor. "What the hell?"

One of his androidal dragons, reacting to the blasphemy, coughed out a warning shot of burning hydrogen. At which, its irritated master turned off the whole dozen, so they stood there frozen like figures from a carousel.

The strange craft was now crossing the edge of the Anvil, and seemed to be coming in for a landing. Its speed dropped, and a series of black awnings deployed from its sides. Catching the thin air atop the plateau, they went taut, drafting the ship to a soft standstill.

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The awed sound of a million open mouths went up. Nervously, Zeegan flicked his eyes to right and left behind his visor. The crowd's attention was no longer on the coffin of Androyoos II, but on the vision of the alien ship.

A hatch opened in the apparition. A figure jumped down, and without a pause began walking towards the cavalcade. It was clad in calf-length black boots, a black leotard that covered a muscular body, and a flowing cape that was black on the outside but blood red on the inside. The head was bare, but topped by a thick mass of dark hair highlighted with bands of grey. Despite this sign of maturity, the person's stride was energetic and determined. The crowd shuffled away from him as if he were radioactive, opening a way to the beleaguered coffin.

The visitor stopped, facing the leader of the funeral. The latter, out of respect, raised his visor. To find himself looking into a pair of blue eyes as steady and flinty as the rock underfoot.

"I'm Jale."

"I am Zeegan," replied the master of ceremonies, thinking that the conversation lacked spirit, but at the same time at a loss for anything else to say.

The two stared at each other. Even with the advantage of his extended legs, Zeegan found himself slightly below Jale's level. The android functionary, for the first time in his existence, wished for orders from a human superior. Looking past the head of his visitor, he noted that a second figure had descended from the alien ship. It also was bizarre: slightly built, it was covered from the neck downwards in a metallic cloak, above which was a sharp-featured face that sported a kind of tube which seemed to be emitting smoke.

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“My colleague,” introduced Jale with a jerk of his thumb over his shoulder as the second figure arrived. “Sherlock, master detective.”

“Oh,” replied Zeegan. And then, noting that the new arrival was an android of exceptional intricacy: “I’m very pleased to meet you.”

The leader of the funeral, at this point, ran out of conversation. While from all around, millions of eyes were focused on the trio, waiting for some development in what was proving to be the most unique ceremony in the history of Andromeda. Feeling slightly desperate, Zeegan dragged his gaze away from the somber Jale and the scintillating Sherlock. At the edge of the Anvil, the ship that had brought these bravados stood in powerful silence, as if waiting. It was a weird craft, dominated by a pair of gigantic engines, which reminded Zeegan of ones he had seen in *Jayne’s* – though in that volume they had been attributed to the navy of Acheron in the Milky Way. Along the sides of this alien craft, the black awnings over the portholes waved in the meagre atmosphere, sending a breeze to the frozen procession.

“What’s this?” Jale asked, pointing to the scroll which hung, fluttering, in Zeegan’s grasp. “Your laundry list?”

“No!” Zeegan exclaimed, now annoyed. “It’s the Eulogy for Androyoos II.” Nevertheless, he quickly allowed the document to roll itself up into a cylinder, with which he pointed to the casket.

Jale’s eyes narrowed as he surveyed the coffin. Walking over to it, he clasped his hands behind his back and took on an officious aspect. Abruptly, he reached out and switched off the stasis field. An odour of rotting flesh was the result.

The crowd began moaning as the stench drifted over their assembled millions. Jale was himself taken aback. “What a whiff!” he exclaimed.

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Zeegan was shocked. But even as he searched for words to express his outrage, Sherlock sidled up and offered advice: "Take it easy. Don't offend the boss. As it is, you're only looking at *two* offences: causing an unlawful gathering of about three million" (here the master detective scanned the throng to gain an accurate estimate), "and carrying out a funeral without the correct licence from the Undertakers Guild of the Milky Way."

Sherlock was just about to add that he and Jale were, in fact, bona fide members of the Undertakers Guild of the Milky Way, when the exasperated Zeegan burst out: "But this is *Andromeda!*"

Jale, if he was surprised to learn about the local geography, reacted with nonchalance. Turning from his examination of the corpse, he said in a reasonable tone: "Yes. But you still need a licence."

As if confiscating a piece of evidence, Jale turned back to the body of Androyoos II and plucked off the head.

At this, Zeegan finally lost patience. He turned to his controls, meaning to activate not only the dozen android dinosaurs but also the contents of the two units that followed the casket. One of these contained robocops adept at crowd control, and the other contained sham dignitaries designed to impress onlookers. He was within a breath of activating both when a raspy voice cut into his consciousness.

"Don't do it."

Zeegan turned, to find an orange balloon with a mouth wrinkled into disapproval; backed by a pretty girl with golden eyes, bare breasts and a large gun.

Jale, meanwhile, had climbed onto the coffin, and stood there bearing the head of Androyoos II. It was, perhaps, in all of history, *the* occasion for a speech of monumental length and import. Instead of which, the man chose to say but two words.

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“Be...”

The amplified utterance spread out like an earthquake from its epicentre. Faces in the crowd of millions looked up as it swept over them, aware that more was to come. Expertly, Jale waited until the sound wave in the rarefied medium of the Anvil reached its periphery. Then he spoke the second word:

“Free!”

At first, this simple message seemed to confuse the assembled mass of humanity. But then, a few individuals stood up, and raised their hands above their heads. Others started to shout. More rose from the stony surface of the Anvil, their eyes peering at the constellations of promising stars that beckoned overhead. In a short while, the whole mob was on its feet, yelling.

Jale, pleased at the response, thought it rather resembled the outburst of feeling at the end of a hard-fought football game. Accordingly, he held up the head of Androyoos II by its scanty hair, and waited for the noise to subside.

There came a temporary quiet. Three million pairs of eyes were focused on the man in the black cape who held the dictator's dangling head.

Jale gave it a prodigious kick.

The crowd began screaming. Its more sober members, and the steady Zeegan, realized that they were witnessing a tipping point in history.

The head, after speeding from Jale's foot, sailed upwards in the weak gravity of the Anvil. And then it began to fall, taking with it the memory of what it had stood for. With a flash of fire, it disappeared into the white hole that was the centre of Andromeda.

BIZARRE EVENTS AFFECTING THE BOTTOM LINE

Starlight showed the course of the river as the *Rigor Mortis* sneaked in to a landing. Somewhere an early rooster crowed, its cry echoing in the reed-filled marshes that lined the waterway. Abandoned, the rotting structures of old quays sprinkled the river's path, remnants of forgotten commerce. Turning a corner, the ship's memory identified the remains of an ancient slipway, and alerted the crew.

"We're here." Jale's voice in the dark of the ship's control room was flat and factual. In the copilot's seat, the quivering light of his metallic cape showed that Sherlock was awake, his gimlet eyes reacquainting themselves with a half-remembered scene. Behind the two, her arm resting lightly across the captain's shoulders, Pippin stared intently ahead. There was yet some time to sunrise, and the temperature inside was the same as outside, so that the craft would not betray itself by a thermal image.

Floating magically in the air by Jale's right hand was a mug of steaming coffee. It was supported by a single grain of the negative-mass substance exoticum. The rest of that marvelous material was now back in storage, having done its job in making the ship weightless and allowing it to traverse the singularity between Andromeda and the Milky Way. Jale reached out and took a swig from the floating cup. He noticed that in the coolness of the cabin, Pippin's bare breasts showed puckered nipples.

The girl, however, seemed oblivious of her surroundings, her golden eyes transfixed by the new world outside. "What is this place?"

"Aster," replied Jale. And then, noting that his spouse showed no response: "Moon of Acheron." Even this piece of data did not

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alter his sweetheart's expression, so he went into what was (to him) information overload: "Acheron, where there are the last bits of government, and still some important people. Also, where I was born." There was a notable gap; but Pippin still kept quiet, trying to draw out her laconic companion. Falling for the silence, Jale reluctantly added: "Acheron is built-up and a bit boring. The moon, Aster, is more rural and more interesting."

The girl – who was after all a gardener by vocation – leant forward, trying to peer into the heart of this new world. The river below was a brightening silver thread as the sun rose, a broad meandering path through tree-laden hills. A faint dusting of snow still hung on the higher points, and she suddenly said "It's beautiful!"

Jale, half turning from his instruments, looked at Pippin, searching for irony. He found none. Instead, the girl said "Maybe we could stay here..."

"Not yet." Jale's words were grim with the import of a mission still to be completed.

Miffed, Pippin turned to Krompel, who huddled in the corner of the control room, an orange sphere with a downturned mouth. "Don't look at me," the creature said with a plaintive tone. "I have all the accumulated knowledge of what you lot call civilization." The balloon blew itself up slightly, and then deflated. "But nobody asks me about things."

"Maybe we'd ask," chimed in Sherlock, "if you didn't keep whining."

Krompel's eyebrows climbed halfway to the top of his bald skull at this comment; but then slowly dropped, disdaining a reply.

The river bank took on more detail as the *Rigor Mortis* and its crew descended. There was an inlet, choked with flat-floating

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water lilies and rearing brown-topped bulrushes. The latter waved around the settling ship, as if in greeting.

A slight crunch, followed by the squeaking sound of displaced mud, and the craft came to rest. The rear port opened, and the smell of rotting vegetation drifted into the ship, displacing its anti-septic atmosphere with something more natural.

Jale pulled on his boots. "Sherlock," he said, "you're in charge while we're gone." He looked at Pippin, but anticipating the invitation, she had already donned a pair of galoshes that were several sizes too big. At the man's insistent stare, she also grabbed a thick sweater to cover her upper body.

The man jumped down into the dark water. His feet sank into mud, and then found a basis. The turbulence of his descent was carried away by the flow of the river, which sidled along the half-submerged ship and disappeared around a bend into the hinterland.

It was very quiet. The chuckle of water around the end of the ship – where it stuck out into the mainstream with a churning eddy – was the only noise. The man put a finger to his lips, turned, and presented his back to the woman. She clambered onto his shoulders, and together they waded towards shore.

A simple house stood on a small rise. The rusting rails of a derelict launching ramp led out of the water onto an ill-kept, frost-covered lawn. The man slogged up the rise, and on reaching firm ground, slid the woman off his back. Her boots crunched into rime.

Jale looked around attentively. The only sign of life was the track of a squirrel, crossing the snow-blown grass to disappear into a nearby clump of trees. He looked at Pippin. Her eyes were dancing: she loved this off-beat place.

"Where *are* we?"

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"I already *told* you," Jale whispered back. "On Aster." And then: "At the home of my old best friend, Zek."

Puzzled, the girl followed as the man walked up the hill towards the house, his eyes searching the surrounding woods.

Jale stopped in front of the door. It was a massive thing, looking to be made of wood. But a close observer would have noted that the whole exterior of the building was strangely untouched by age: no cracks in the cement of the threshold, no moss in the chinks of the brickwork, and mullioned windows of unusual transparency.

The man cleared his throat, and enunciated one word: "Newts."

Immediately, the portal opened, swinging silently with none of the groan of ancient hinges that might be expected. Shivering, Pippin followed Jale inside. She saw that the door, while made of hands-breadth oak, was backed by a finger-thick layer of something that was definitely not wood.

The door closed quietly behind them, and Jale seemed to relax. He threw off his cape, and marched with familiarity through a rustic sitting-room, skirting a scarred farmer's table that was littered with tools. On the other side of this, wedged into a corner of the room, was a subether unit of monumental proportions. It clucked with anticipation.

Jale dragged over one of the high-backed chairs from the table and sat down, studying this icon of galaxy-wide communication. Pippin wandered about the room, and then went to explore the contents of the bachelor kitchen.

The man was still fiddling with the controls of the machine when the girl returned. Her eyes were troubled. It was obvious that this place – which had at first seemed so idyllic – was not merely a boatyard that had found itself in hard financial straights.

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She was opening her mouth to phrase a question when Jale impatiently waved her to silence.

The image of a man had appeared on the screen of the subether unit. He was a bit younger than Jale, with sandy hair and a portly build. His eyes, surrounded by premature lines, radiated knowledge.

“Hello, Jale,” said the image. The voice was measured but heavy with concern, like that a physician might use who has discovered that his patient has only a few days to live. “If you are listening to this, you have probably figured out most of the problem.”

Jale fidgeted in his chair, his gaze locked on the screen.

“I’ll be brief,” said Zek. “Acheron and Aster are relatively safe. They get most of their energy from the tides between them, and their populations are low. But the only other safe place is Trantor, because while it’s jam-packed with people, they get most of their energy from the planet’s hot core. As for the rest of the systems in the Milky Way..,” the figure gave a shrug, “they nearly all depend on vacuum engines. And when the vacuum becomes unstable, they’ll blow.”

Jale sat silent. Zek had just confirmed his worst expectations. Had he been able to ask a question, he would have. But this was a one-way lecture. Attentive, he listened as his friend spoke again.

“I haven’t been able to work out exactly how it will happen. But once it begins, space will pop at more and more places, spreading through the Galaxy. Something like a disease.”

“I know,” muttered Jale.

“Your best bet,” Zek continued, “is to join up with one of the big multinationals, like Rang. No government will have the reach

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or power to stop it once it gets started. The only other way out is to ask for help from Selipon.”

“Aargh!” Jale exclaimed. For all his brilliance, clearly Zek had not foreseen that even the alien super-computer had proven vulnerable to the scourge known as the CLAG.

Jale blinked. The message to which he had been listening was so tremendous that his eyes had remained open for its duration. Now tears welled up to clear the dust from his eyeballs.

Pippin appeared silently by his side, and put an arm around the man’s bulky form. Together, they listened to the end of the communication.

“Sorry, Jale. A lot’s happened since we looked for frogs and newts together. The world’s just become too dammed complicated...”

The picture disappeared.

Jale stared at the blank screen for ages, before finally standing up. He looked, for one of the rare times in his life, depressed.

Nervous, Pippin eventually got the courage to ask “Is Zek dead?”

Jale, looking up, realized that the girl did not understand the situation.

“In a manner of speaking,” replied the man. “But not really. He decided some time before to go into random stasis.”

Pippin’s golden eyes clouded. “Isn’t that like suicide?”

Jale gave a bark of a laugh. This was not the occasion to describe the technical process wherein certain people – usually very clever ones who were tired or bored with life – chose to disappear, leaving it to pure chance to decide the time of their reincarnation. “Zek will come back at some point in the future. The question is, to *what* will he come back?”

The man picked up his cape, and held out his hand to Pippin.

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Outside, dawn was brightening the sky over the trees. In the new light, it was possible to see that green buds were poking through the snow which lay on the bare branches. These rattled slightly, under the influence of a breeze that blew up the river. The latter, seen only dimly in the night, now revealed itself to be a healthy rush of dark water between frost-whitened banks. An otter, at the end of its nocturnal hunt, swam diagonally against the current from the far bank to the near one, a silvery fish between its jaws. But catching the scent of newcomers, it stopped and stared, before plunging out of sight.

“Oh,” said Pippin, slightly disappointed. The wary animal, and its primitive surroundings, were quite different from the pampered ecosystem to which she had been accustomed. After the otter failed to resurface, she turned to Jale. “What,” she asked, “are we going to do?”

“Two things,” replied Jale promptly. His tone was determined. The message from his vanished friend had confirmed the serious nature of the threat they faced; but if Jale’s character had stumbled, it had not fallen. Now, the man was back to his usual stubborn self. “We’ll have to go to see Brounlee on Acheron.” Here he looked carefully at Pippin, wondering if she had any objections to returning to the Rang building. Seeing no reaction, he continued: “But before that, I’m going to take you to dinner.”

Pippin looked confused. They were – literally – in a backwater. The river swirled around the back end of the *Rigor Mortis*, where it lay half-submerged on the rusted ways of the decrepit boatyard. On the edge of the ship’s rear lock, Sherlock sat, his silvery houndstooth coat bunched around his form. Seeing Pippin looking in his direction, he removed his meerschaum pipe from his mouth and waved a remote greeting. Behind the detective, the orange form of Krompel with his downturned mouth hovered in

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dudgeon. Unbeknown to the former super-computer, he was about to be asked to help with some necessary alterations to the *Rigor Mortis*, along with the ever-willing Sherlock and a few locals. And while this work was in progress, Jale would be carrying out a duty somewhere else.

“Where,” asked Pippin, “are we going to have dinner?”

“Trantor,” replied Jale.

*

The shuttle clicked down between parking orbits towards the surface of Trantor, like an electron cascading to lower levels in a hydrogen atom. Jale, who had not been able to find any food at his friend’s place, was hungry. The growling of his empty stomach distracted him from the most sophisticated planet in the Milky Way. In addition, the tiny screen in front of his worried eyes was showing a game of bicket, the ballgame formed by the fusion of the ancient sports of baseball and cricket. The rest of the Galaxy might be disintegrating as it was eaten from within by the decay of space itself; but here on self-centred Trantor, the population was still enthralled by the games which filled its too-abundant leisure time. Feeling guilty, Jale was nevertheless appreciative of the distraction which the fast-paced game offered from his other concerns.

Pippin, by contrast, was fascinated by her first sight of Trantor: Gigantic buildings, linked by aerial walkways, and separated by broad squares of shining metal. Of the last, she asked “What are those?”

“Parks,” replied Jale.

Pippin laughed. “Don’t be silly. There’s no grass, or trees.”

“That’s right,” agreed the man. “Trantor is completely covered by man-made stuff.”

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The girl stared at him, only to find that he was being serious. Of all the things she had experienced since leaving the roof-top orchard of Rang Enterprises, this was the most surprising. And disturbing.

Noting her expression, Jale added facetiously, "Look on the good side of it: no hay fever to worry about."

"That's *not* funny."

"No," agreed Jale after contemplation. "Maybe it's not."

The shuttle, in its lowest orbit, swung inbetween the planet's skyscrapers with a motion that tilted its passengers in their seats this way and that, like puppets on a merry-go-round. As it descended, the enormous engineering project that was Trantor became even more impressive by a simple comparison: there were millions of dots, each one a person.

"Oh." This was all that Pippin said during the last stage, before the shuttle burrowed into its berth at the I.A. Spaceport. Realizing that the girl was suffering impression overload, Jale took her hand and led her through the hurrying people to the building's exit.

A limousine of reassuringly human dimensions drew up promptly. It was guided by a mechanoid with a false smile. "Hello, boss. Where to?"

Jale, ushering Pippin into the luxuriously upholstered back compartment of the vehicle, replied "The *Victoriana Club*." Then noting the local time on the taxi's dashboard, added "And step on it."

"Step on what, captain?"

Jale, frustrated at using an antique phrase, said "Go fast. Use *energy*."

The limousine took off with a jolt that sent the heads of Jale and Pippin snapping back. The crowd outside became a blur. Af-

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ter a while, the car ceased accelerating and settled at a speed that – while cruising – was still prodigious.

“Lot’s of energy,” said the driver complacently. “From the inside of the planet, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” Jale replied. Then, to confirm the situation: “No vacuum engines here? No cases of CLAG?”

The driver’s head rotated in a full circle and then reversed slightly, its eyes focusing on the passenger in the back seat. “None of either,” it confirmed, though with an expression which signified that it saw no connection between the two things.

“Good.” Jale settled back into the cushions, his hand resting on Pippin’s bare knee.

“No sex in back seat, please.”

Jale’s eyes took fire. He was beginning to reach out for the scrawny neck of their mechanoid driver when Pippin grabbed her boyfriend’s wrist. Unexpectedly, she started to giggle. Then, with a hidden reference to her own asexual biology, said: “We don’t need to have sex. We *like* each other.”

“Ha, ha!” exclaimed their chauffeur, without humour. “Next, you’ll be telling me that you have the cure for the CLAG.”

“Well, actually...” Pippin began.

“Impossible.” The driver’s voice had become pedantic and superior. “Only Trantor is safe, and maybe a couple of other systems.”

Jale, who had taken a dislike to the righteous tone of the cab driver, suspected that a distrust of visitors was common on the planet at this particular point in its history. But their chauffeur merely summed up the view by saying “You people from off-world always have silly ideas.”

The taxi drew to a flesh-pummeling halt. “*Victoriana Club!*”

“Thanks,” said Jale. “I think.”

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He just managed to extricate Pippin, before the taxi sped off. The rush of its departure would on most worlds have been accompanied by a swirl of dust; but here, the sidewalk was shiny and spotless. However, the tiny gale did blow Jale's cloak and raise Pippin's blouse, revealing pert breasts.

This sight elicited a wolf whistle from an elderly man, standing waiting for the pair in front of an impressive piece of architecture. Despite his obvious age, his stature was vertical, as if on parade. His wiry figure was clad in a pair of chequered pants with braid down the sides, a richly-embroidered waistcoat, and a red bowtie. Above this was a close-shaven, bullet-shaped head. With a sincere smile.

"Welcome, my dear," he said to Pippin. "Sorry about the whistle, but we don't see many pretty girls at the *Victoriana*." His voice was assured and clipped, but with a genuine note of greeting. Pippin immediately liked him. "I'm Colonel Ash."

As if recollecting something, the Colonel spun on his heel and extended his hand to Jale. "Glad to see you back, young fellah."

The two men shook hands, and the group moved inside, following the sound of pool balls ricocheting from each other. For this was the Galaxy's premier meeting place for those who wished to play billiards or snooker. It was also the place where – long ago – the Black Hand Gang had met its defeat. Now, there were no signs left of that battle: the club's smooth tables were all in use by well-dressed people enjoying a soothing game of pool prior to a civilized dinner.

The aroma of cooking wafted from a concealed kitchen, mixed with the hoppy smell of beer. The bar was long, made of deep-hued wood polished to an almost mirror-like brilliance. As they passed by, Jale could not help searching the buffed surface of the bar for signs of old bullet holes. His mind cast up a splinter of

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memory: Colonel Ash, complaining with surprise that he had been shot, and even as he tried to staunch the flow of blood with one hand, using the other to pass Jale his weapon... Those had been significant times.

“Are you with us, lad?”

Jale jerked himself out of his reverie. The three squeezed into a cozy booth, Pippin choosing to sit by the side of Ash. “Sorry,” said Jale, looking across the table at his old comrade. “It seems a bit unfair to turn up with a new load of trouble.”

“Later,” said the Colonel. He reached for a dusty bottle (already open), and filled three glasses of cut crystal. The dark red wine gleamed in the subdued light; but even if it was a rare vintage, Ash finished his own glass in two gulps, and reached for a refill.

Jale, likewise, filled his mouth with the juice, swallowed, and announced “I’m starving.”

Pippin smiled, feeling secure and comfortable. Though, in some ways, it was like being with a couple of boys.

“Standard rations,” informed Colonel Ash. “Meat and potatoes.”

A large man appeared, bearing numerous dishes. Meat and potatoes it might be, but in every conceivable variety. The table was soon covered with steaming pots and containers with different types of gravy. “Thanks, Tapp.”

Jale looked up at the massively muscled if ageing waiter, whose physique was only matched by his shyness. Another flashback: Tapp holding two assassins, one in each of his gigantic hands, before flinging them over the Number One pool table, and incidentally saving Jale’s life. “Glad to have you back, Sir.”

“Thanks, Tapp.” Jale felt slightly awkward. And as he began to eat, his face took on a serious look.

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“What’s up?” Colonel Ash asked, spearing a large sausage. The latter was brown-braised and succulent, dripping with its own hot juices.

“I need your help,” Jale stated plainly. “In trying to save the Milky Way.”

The Colonel paused, looking at his sausage. Then he asked, “Is *that* all?!”

Suddenly, all three were laughing, though none knew exactly why. The Colonel rotated his sausage on the end of his fork, regarding it with deep eyes, as if it could foretell the future. “I like a good banger.” And with a snap of sharp teeth, the old soldier bit off as much as he could chew.

*

By the side of the river on Aster, Sherlock stood, surveying the *Rigor Mortis*. After three days’ work, the android had just paid off the local labourers. He had made it clear that the generosity of their wages would have to be matched by a certain forgetfulness about the nature of the job.

Sherlock was happy with the appearance of the ship. It sat on the rails of the old boatyard, black and sleek. He had been concerned, originally, that the extra material that had been added around the airlocks and the engine supports might detract from the craft’s lines. But that material was necessary, in order to make the hull completely watertight. What with the exoticum aboard – by means of which they had slipped between two galaxies – the craft was now capable of negotiating any medium.

As if carrying out its own appraisal, the otter which frequented this part of the river hopped out of the water, and sat for a while looking at the spacecraft. Finally realizing that it was not a

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threat or a source of food, the animal lolloped over the snowy lawn towards the house.

Sherlock followed, leaving no mark as he levitated along the otter's tracks. By the entrance to the house, Krompel sat, still looking sour. Maybe the creature was pining for its previous home? Certainly, there was a disconnect between a technological marvel orbiting a singularity and a cabin in the woods. But there was also something obtuse about the ingrained pessimism of the former super-computer, which was at variance with the oscillating optimism of the master-detective. Sherlock, passing by the orange balloon with the downturned mouth, said: "Cheer up. It's not the end of the world today."

The depressed Krompel raised a black eyebrow on its bald forehead, and let it drop again. "Don't tell me," it muttered. "The end of the world is tomorrow."

Sherlock shrugged. Some people just could not be helped. Stopping in front of the cabin door, he announced himself with his new variation on the old password. "Axolotl."

The door swung silently open, letting out the persistent buzz of the subether unit. Sherlock had been awaiting a call from Jale for days, and this must be it.

The stored message was recent, delivered by a Jale who looked tired and stressed. However, his voice was steady and decided, and in line with the Churchillian code they had set up. The message consisted of just three fateful words: "Sink the Bismark."

Sherlock stared at the blank screen for a while, until distracted by Krompel. Ignoring the latter, however, the android hurried outside.

Shortly, the calm of the abandoned boatyard was riven by the sound of new metal squealing against old. The *Rigor Mortis* was moving down the ways.

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Sherlock and Krompel looked on as the ship glided into the river. It was dusk, and the water looked black. The dark bulk of the vessel accepted the camouflage, and it disappeared remarkably fast.

A last eddy – illuminated by the evening's first stars – marked the resting place of the *Rigor Mortis*.

*

Atop the Rang skyscraper, an apple tree heavy with blossom hung over Jale as he planted a deliberate kiss on the mouth of Pippin.

The girl's yellow eyes stared into the man's blue ones, promising reunion.

Theirs was a strange and unlikely liaison. If they had known about it, they might have recognized something of the legend of the beauty and the beast. But they did not know, and would not have cared anyway. The naive girl who had abandoned her apples for an adventure was in some way still out among the stars. The person who had returned to the orchard was a mature woman, confident in herself and happy to be in love. The man who had come back was also different. Gone was the world-weary manner, accumulated after numerous relationships in all of the spiral arms of the Galaxy. There was a streak of gray in the hair, but the eyes flashed with a fresh charge of youthful energy. Somewhere in the machinery of their overlapping psyches, the emotional gears had meshed. A temporary separation could not cause any psychological slippage.

And then Pippin was gone – running into the trees.

Jale turned, reluctantly. There was work to be done if the Milky Way was to be saved, and not much time.

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On the second-down floor of the gigantic building, something unusual seemed to be happening. Of the thousands of people who worked there, a disproportionate fraction were in the corridors. And instead of proceeding to and from their offices in pursuit of their normal tasks, many were merely milling around. The noise level was strangely high with chatter.

Jale, pushing his way through the crowds in pursuit of the boardroom and the company's chief, found himself stuck at the back of a knot of people. They were staring at a television monitor, mounted high up in an angle between two corridors. The drone of the news commentary was almost drowned by the local hubbub. Jale turned to the person by his side, a short nondescript woman, and asked "What's happened?"

The woman scanned the man, slightly surprised at his ignorance. But then, he was clearly not an employee, since his attire was distinctly raffish: a short cloak lined with blue silk which covered a body-hugging leotard that vanished into calf-length boots. His smouldering eyes were the same colour as the lining of his cloak, set deep under a high forehead topped by a grey-streaked bunch of hair that was too long. "You must be Jale."

"Yes," he confirmed. "I'm here to meet Brounlee."

"I know," she said, looking at him with interest. It was as if she was confirming the existence of something which she had previously doubted. Like a zoologist presented with the living proof of a legendary animal. However, she appeared satisfied, both as to his existence and character. "I'm Dullea, Director of Finance." Then after a pause: "Affaball, our head of personnel, has been killed by the CLAG."

"What?!" Jale was genuinely surprised.

"Yes," insisted Dullea. "Listen."

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The crowd had thinned somewhat, as people began resuming their normal affairs. The two moved forward, to where the screen showed the body of a paunchy man, lying on short green grass. The disfigured head was separated from the torso by a splash of reddish-brown blood. A golf club, bent by some blast, lay nearby. The commentary was matter-of-fact: *The body was discovered early this morning at the Acheron Golf Club, where the deceased had a membership and frequently took visitors to Rang Enterprises, as part of his duties as Director of Personnel. This latest loss comes at a difficult time for the company, which is still investigating the disappearance of its Director of Security. But it also represents a grave development in the spread of the CLAG. There seems little doubt that the death is typical of the energy release associated with that disease. However, this tragedy is especially disturbing, as it is the first outbreak of the CLAG in the Acheron-Aster system.*

Jale grunted in disagreement. He knew better than anyone, that the CLAG was not a biological disease but a mechanical one, connected to the widespread practice of 'mining' energy from the depths of apparently empty space. But while they were common in other parts of the Milky Way, there were no vacuum engines in the Acheron-Aster system, and so no route for the appearance of the disease.

Dullea, as if on a similar track of thought, said "It's funny. Affaball often took others to the golf club, but he didn't like playing on his own."

The man and woman moved away from the corner where they had been standing, Dullea leading towards the boardroom. She forged a way through the dispersing crowd, whose members showed a range of expressions. Some were shocked and sad; many puzzled; and a few smug, perhaps in the expectation of a

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corporate shuffle and possible promotion. Jale felt uneasy, partly because of the press of people and partly because of the smell of competition which hung around the place.

“Who,” asked Jale, “would wish Affaball dead?”

Dullea’s answer was surprisingly off-hand. “Lots of people. For example, Brounlee.”

Jale shook his head. “He’s a Logical Buddhist. He wouldn’t kill anybody unless it was to save a lot more.”

“Okay. Then one of the other Directors.” The woman, who was one of them herself and controlled their expenditures, seemed little concerned. “Affaball has made a lot of enemies in the company, because of the way he votes, based on the block of stock he owns.”

Jale, confirmed in the opinion that the corporate world was as murderous as any group of smugglers in the Galaxy, kept quiet. Dullea, apparently dismissing the subject, added “I’d have blamed Ragalid, our Directory of Security, except that he isn’t around.”

The man was wondering whether to say something about the mayhem at the Galaxy’s centre, when the woman suddenly stopped in front of a pair of very ornate doors. There was the clicking of various security gadgets, and the doors dissolved. Jale let Dullea step into the room first. The doors reformed into solidity behind them.

There was an argument in progress. As Jale and Dullea walked across the boardroom’s vast space towards the circular table and its occupants, the sound of strident voices grew in volume. “Welcome,” said Dullea with sarcasm, “to a typical meeting of the board.”

The disagreement involved Brounlee, Head of the company, and Fingal, its Director of Research. Between these, perched on

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the edge of his chair with his misshapen head barely clearing the edge of the table, was the dwarf Igor.

Puzzled, Dullea took her usual place. Jale lowered himself into the seat by her side, which sank slightly under the unaccustomed weight and then recovered.

“Ah, Jale!” Brounlee said, clearly relieved. “And Dullea.” The embattled chief of the largest corporation in the Milky Way was dressed as usual with impeccable fashion. A perfectly knotted tie nestled between the sharp lapels of a sober grey jacket whose colour matched his neat hair. His inseparable cane was laid across pinstripe pants, which ended above antique mauve spats that were not really needed to protect his highly-polished shoes.

Fingal, the Director of Research, was by comparison somewhat dishevelled. A casual dresser at the best of times, recent events had cast him into confusion and caused him to forget a change of clothes. His crumpled jacket and creased trousers looked to be fit for the garbage. And his angry eyes implied that he would like to see the gnome Igor go to the same place.

“Perhaps,” asked Brounlee, “Dullea can clear up a point of disagreement about who can and cannot vote around here?”

Dullea, suspicious, asked “How?”

Brounlee responded, very carefully: “By taking the word *Igor*, connecting it to the word *Rang*, and transponding the result to an eight-digit number of a company that holds our stock.”

Dullea’s eyes narrowed. But she called up the financial records of the company on the console embedded in the table, carrying out the instructions she had been given.

“How much stock does Igor hold?”

“Wait a bit,” said Dullea, and then gasped as the answer came up. Her face, showing near disbelief, turned first to Igor and then to Brounlee. She grated “Seventeen percent.”

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“Which,” said Brounlee, “added to my one-third, gives slightly over fifty percent.”

Dullea’s face became stony and hostile. Fingal, who had been standing, collapsed into his seat, his extra-long fingers going lifeless in his lap. Igor’s black eyes twinkled, but he said nothing.

Jale, who had sat quietly during this battle of the boardroom, now gave a diplomatic cough. He admired Brounlee, for his morals and his brains. But, it was obvious that while the old man had won this particular engagement, he had done so at the expense of a serious rift in the board which controlled Rang Enterprises. In the absence of the two previous directors, Ragalid of Security and Affaball of Personnel, the company’s decision-making capacity was stuck. Every decision the mighty organization might wish to make would be a 50:50 fight, with Fingal and Dullea on one side versus Brounlee and Igor on the other side. Jale was a novice in corporate affairs, but a life on the spaceways had given him a great knowledge of people. “This,” he intoned, “is not a happy crew.”

There was a long silence. Nobody seemed to wish to break it by saying something they might regret. Jale, the least involved, waited with patience. He had come with a much more important item to put on the agenda of Rang. Namely, the strategy to defeat the CLAG. He knew how to do it; but it would involve a massive reorganization in the workings of the Milky Way. An abandonment of its basic source of energy; and a shift to something else. Such a shift could only be accomplished through a Galaxy-wide entity, such as Rang Enterprises. And now, close to putting his plan forward, he found that things had been hijacked by a squabble over money. He sighed, and settled back into his seat, with no option but to wait. However, something hard dug into his side;

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and fishing under his cloak, he produced from his pocket the bottle of *Pippin's Punch*.

Jale plonked the half-full bottle in the middle of the board table.

The reactions of those present were widely different. Fingal did not even look at the flask, his gaze focussed inwardly on his own humiliation. Dullea glanced at it, but was clearly preoccupied with the discovery that a malformed creature whom she had previously despised was in fact a major stock-holder in the company. Igor himself, his bent legs swinging clear of the floor, extended one of his unnaturally long arms, and grabbed the neck of the bottle with a talon hand. He levered off the cap with a horny nail, and passed the orifice under his large, hooked nose. Then he smiled. Brounlee, who had been watching the other people, was the only one who knew Jale. And therefore, the only one who guessed that this bottle was the preamble to some significant scheme. However, that would have to wait. For now, the old man just asked "What is it?"

"The only known – and unknown – cure for the CLAG."

Jale's reply was met with silence by Fingal and a disbelieving sniff by Dullea. Neither was interested, right now, in the CLAG or its cure. On Acheron, both were relatively safe from the disease; but not – apparently – safe from the collapse of their careers and their financial dreams.

Dullea was the first to break the thrall. "I feel," she said carefully, "that I have no choice but to resign."

Brounlee, who had been expecting something like this, said slowly: "I'm sorry that I kept the status of Igor secret. You had a right – as treasurer – to know. But for various reasons, I couldn't tell you." The Head of Rang Enterprises was picking his words with care. He knew the value of a hard-working, honest financial

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officer. And anticipating that big changes in the company were imminent, he desired the assistance of this woman. "If you would reconsider, I'm willing to..."

"No," said Dullea, though without anger. "It's not only your secrecy about Igor and his stock. There's something else which has been worrying me for a while, but that I haven't brought up because I knew you wouldn't tell me."

Brounlee looked uncomfortable. But Dullea was not about to let him off. She asked bluntly: "What is Level 13?"

Fingal, the Director of Research looked up. Here was a new factor.

Brounlee, who had been thinking about other semi-legal ploys which he had authorized (including the underwriting of Jale's voyages) looked blank. How had Dullea found out about Level 13? With genuine regret, he finally said: "I cannot tell you."

The female treasurer metaphorically closed her books. Rising, she looked at Brounlee and then at Jale. "I don't know where you two are going to take the company." She paused. "But please don't wreck it."

Before she got to the door, the clouds which had a habit of forming in this sky-high boardroom had already swallowed her form.

Looking totally lost, the remaining director, Fingal, staggered to his feet. He did not need to say the formal sentence containing the word "resignation". He turned, stumbled, and walked into the cumulus.

The remaining three people – Brounlee, Igor and Jale – looked at each other in perplexity.

They suddenly found themselves in command of the largest corporation in the Milky Way. The first two had a controlling

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interest in its stock, and the last had a vision for how its influence could be used to defeat the CLAG.

“What now?” Igor asked. This was the first thing he had said during the tumultuous meeting.

“We have a drink,” Jale replied. He reached for the bottle of *Pippin’s Punch*.

“Shouldn’t we postpone that?” Brounlee asked. “Aren’t we supposed to be talking about how to cure the CLAG?”

“Curing the CLAG,” replied Jale, “involves two steps.”

“A and B?” Igor suggested. He had somewhere found three glasses, which Jale proceeded to fill with shots of the fabled liquor.

“Yes,” confirmed Jale. He took a swig of the brew. “Part A is simple but essential: We get drunk, so preparing ourselves for Part B.”

“Which is?” Brounlee asked. He hesitantly took a swallow of the liquor, noting as he did so that the sun was again setting outside the Rang building – making their party acceptable by company rules.

Jale did not reply immediately. He was thinking about all the things and people who had affected his recent wandering adventure from the Milky Way to Andromeda and back. And about the wife with the golden eyes whom he had acquired along the way.

A person may wander. But a civilization can also wander. For example, into a technology to which it is not suited. A technology which at first appears to offer benefits, but later causes lethal problems. The CLAG, originally thought to be a biological disease, turned out to be the side-effect of mining the vacuum for energy. As such, it was nature’s indignant response to mankind’s wish for a ‘free lunch’ of power. An example of hubris on an intergalactic scale. Mankind’s meddling with the universe had re-

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sulted in a slap on the wrist that threatened to exterminate the race...

Now, however, the prime concern was to find a new direction: get rid of the vacuum engines which had become the plague spots of their culture, and replace them with something more pure and healthy.

"Part B of our plan," said Jale, returning after a while to Brounlee's question, "is a total reinvention of Rang Enterprises." He was a bit surprised that he was able to enunciate this sentence, given that the liquor was starting to numb his mouth. Also influenced, Brounlee's eyes had become slightly glazed. And Igor's small frame had become noticeably limp.

"A toast," announced Jale, suspecting that he was on the verge (if not already in the middle) of making history. "To a new industrial revolution, with Rang."

The three men tipped their glasses in the direction of this noble goal.

At the same moment, the most ignoble incident in the history of the Milky Way started.

The doors to the boardroom opened, under a valid code known only to the top employees of the company. There was the sound of a scuffle as surprised security men tried to stop the interloper, but the noise was cut off as the doors closed.

A man strode through the clouds which had accumulated around the periphery of the stratospheric boardroom. He had a torn purple tunic with the R of Rang on the shoulder, and straggly hair of the same colour which flew behind his crazed face.

He held a blaster.

Coming upon the trio at the table, he leveled the weapon. It was wobbling, undecided as to a victim.

Brounlee picked up his cane, his eyes going suddenly sober.

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But the gun was aimed at Jale, who half-turned in his chair. There was a blast of energy. Jale's head disappeared in a gory mess.

Brounlee let off a shot, a split-instant too late. The bullet from the so-called walking stick hit the attacker right between the eyes.

Ragalid dropped, dead.

Jale was already on the floor, also dead.

A pool of crimson formed on the carpet, as the fluids of the attacker and the victim reluctantly coalesced. On the ceiling above, the red-splotched map which marked the outbreaks of CLAG in the Milky Way was like a reflection.

But this scene was reality: the brains of a bad man and a good man were mixed in tragic truth.

11
EPIPROLOG

In the secret laboratory at the minus 13 level of the gigantic building which housed Rang Enterprises, its chief Brounlee – the Logical Buddhist – strove to reincarnate Jale, his potential son-in-law and recent interstellar undertaker.

The intense white light of the laboratory highlighted the old man's surgical smock and the livid body of the young rebel, which was luckily intact though the assassin had smashed the head.

Laser light from Brounlee's scalpel reflected off the glittering black eyes of the deformed gnome Igor, who scurried about in an attempt to assist his boss and repay him for the miracle of re-creation which he also had enjoyed.

In the subterranean chamber, the two men worked intensively, unaware that night was falling over the planet Acheron and that events were beginning which were destined to mold the future of the Milky Way.

There was a low booming sound, felt rather in the gut than the ear, and the tiled floor of the laboratory dropped slightly. Brounlee paused in the surgery on Jale's neck.

Igor's anxious eyes swept the shelves of apparatus, alert for any falling objects. "What was that, boss?"

"Isostatic adjustment," answered Brounlee. The explanation was accurate; but for his companion, too compact. "When we opened up this laboratory on Level 13, we activated the geo-sensors. This place hasn't been used in ages. The Rang building is too heavy for the geology of Acheron, so periodically it sinks."

This calm account only partially assuaged the dwarf's concerns. "How low will it sink?"

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“Only a couple of floors,” replied Brounlee. “It’s happened before, but I’m the only one old enough to remember. Right now, what was level two is being redesigned as the entrance. Don’t worry – the computers will take care of it. Along with Platoon 13.”

Igor, who had often been given unlikely tasks by Brounlee, was willing to accept this statement of the structure’s changes as accurate; but he still had the natural fear which most people experience in the cellars of a building undergoing an earthquake. It was reassuring that help was available. “What’s Platoon 13?”

Brounlee switched off his laser scalpel, laid it down by the side of the decapitated Jale, and looked at Igor. “Platoon 13 is the group of men and women who are dedicated to the preservation of Rang Enterprises, because of having lost family members in its operations.” The old man ran a gloved hand over his tired face. His eyes, however, were rock-steady. This by virtue of a complete commitment to the job in progress, plus a generous dose of drugs. “They’re probably already here, and will secure the building. They’ll also secure us against interruption.” Brounlee picked up his scalpel, ready to begin work again. He did not see it necessary to add that the members of Platoon 13 were also *very* well rewarded, something which his ex-treasurer Dullea had never discovered, because their pay came from his own pocket.

Jale’s strong body was at the same time a delight and a frustration to work on. A delight because it was in excellent physical condition, and a frustration because its sinews were tougher than average to cut and reconnect. However, the body was by far the easier part of the problem to resolve. The man’s brain presented much more of a challenge, as it had been fragmented by the blast from that expert in death, Ragalid. (The body of the latter had been atomized, and now floated in the atmosphere of Acheron,

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whose unaware inhabitants took in a few particles of the assassin with every breath.) A piece of Jale's brain – hopefully uncontaminated by the blood of his killer – was growing in a large jar of nutrient on the big bench of the laboratory.

Igor peered into this jar, as its fluid bubbled merrily in an attempt to make the suspended piece of grey matter grow back into a viable brain. So far, the fragment had grown satisfactorily; but the gnome, with his own traumatic history, was worried about something more psychological than biological. "Boss, what about his memories?"

Brounlee sighed, and again laid aside his scalpel. It was, however, a valid question. The old man was the Galaxy's authority on designing androids. And fixing the wrecked parts of a human body was also well within his expertise. But what of the convoluted permutations of a man's *mind*? The physical structure of the human brain provided a kind of house for the operations of the mind. But how could he set Jale's mind to functioning in the 'right' direction? Or, insofar as memories are the anchor of the mind, how was he to give Jale a foundation of recollection?

At this point, something strange happened: Brounlee was struck by a very strong feeling of *deja vu*. It was so pronounced that he fell back onto his stool, shaking his head.

"You all right, boss?"

"Yes," Brounlee eventually answered. His gaze was fixed on the cadaver on the bench in front of him, as if querying the dead man as to whether the present situation had occurred previously. "Igor," he asked to make sure, "we haven't done this *before*, have we?"

Igor looked perplexed. "No," he answered slowly. "Not that I know of." He wondered if the director of Rang Enterprises was

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finally cracking under the intense mental strain associated with recent events.

Brounlee shrugged, and picked up the laser scalpel. He severed the rugged end of one of the tendons in the body's neck, so it could be cleanly joined to the corresponding chord of the new head. The latter was under construction in the far corner of the laboratory, by a special medical computer which was using the data in the man's personnel file at Rang as a template. The job was almost complete.

Brounlee, after fixing several arteries and the vertebrae of the neck, recalled that he had not properly answered Igor's question about Jale's memories. Clearly the new Jale would require a good, solid inventory of previous experience with which to start his new life. One good source for such were the archives (or what some disenchanted people called the "spy files") that Rang Enterprises kept on all of its employees. There must be a rich file on Jale from the time when Brounlee had employed him to defeat the Black Hand Gang. A more critical question was: Where would they start off the new Jale?

"Do you remember Jale talking about a place called the *Excelsior*?"

Igor, watching the rapidly growing brain of their subject in the throbbing currents of its confining jar, tried to recollect an overheard conversation from long past. "Wasn't that some hotel?"

"Yes," confirmed Brounlee, dredging up what few facts he could retrieve. "A place on a third-rate world, where the occupants often got drunk and forgetful." He carefully considered the option. "It might be a reasonable place from where Jale could start."

Igor looked doubtful. "Wouldn't it be better," he inquired timidly, "to start him off after a spell in stasis, or a long voyage in

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subspace? That way, it would be natural that he couldn't remember much."

Brounlee looked at his companion with new respect. "You're right, Igor" he conceded. "*This* is what we'll implant in Jale's new brain: He wakes up after a long trip in subspace, and then he seeks out the *Excelsior* hotel. The rest will be up to him."

Suddenly, the floor jolted downwards with another adjustment. The louvres which fed the underground laboratory belched a burst of hot air. Brounlee was reminded that when Jale returned, he would have a new and monumental task. Finding an alternative source of energy, resurrecting a decimated population, and mapping a fresh route to prosperity for the Milky Way.

In the rebirth of the Galaxy, the new Jale would have help. Colonel Ash was rousing the population of Trantor, putting backbone into its effete members and telling them that they had the responsibility of leading a new society. Pippin was educating the survivors of the CLAG, teaching them to subsist on what nature offered until a new technology could be established. Krompel was downloading his immense knowledge of the alien Krell into the hungry banks of the computers at Rang Enterprises, ensuring that Acheron would be the technological focus of the new civilization, even as Trantor would be its political centre. Sherlock, shocked and disconsolate at having lost Jale, had chosen to be reborn with his buddy. After reconstructing Jale, Brounlee would remake the android detective. But this time, the knowledge of the Krell would be used, to create a person which would be a marvelous if puzzling icon of sleuthdom.

Right now, however, there were more immediate tasks to be achieved on Level 13: putting Jale's new brain into his head, and fixing the latter to his body.

"Is the brain complete?" Brounlee asked.

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“Yes, boss,” Igor replied, using a pair of tongs to probe the jar which contained the grey mass.

The old man took a rest, supervising carefully as the dwarf inserted the new brain into the new head.

Brounlee, watching his faithful companion, felt a pang of regret. For Igor had not had the opportunity – in the modern version of things – to participate in the old, theatrical traditions. He had not had the chance to go to the roof in a blinding storm to try and fix Frankenstein’s lightning generator; and he had not had the option of using his claw-like hands to try and stop the descent into the ground of the House of Usher. But, perhaps these things could be arranged in a future reality...

Brounlee, flexing his hands to receive the new Jale head, was momentarily disconcerted by another bout of *deja vu*.

The old Buddhist shook his head vigourously, bringing the laboratory on Level 13 back into focus. His companion was holding the new head. The surgeon asked “Are we ready?”

Jale would be reborn. Again.

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Wow! Some story, but I wonder what happens next?

*(Winston S. Churchill, who by reading the book sitting on
the toilet enjoyed a double blast)*

For the Back Cover:

Zounds!

“If you want a swashbuckling story of the spaceways, with romance and humour, this is it.

Jale is the charismatic captain of the space hearse *Rigor Mortis*, ably assisted by his first mate who is an android version of Sherlock Holmes. This surrealistic pair have, however, a very practical job: find who is decimating the Milky Way with the dread disease CLAG. This kills by simply exploding its victims. The plot curdles when our two heroes discover a pretty stowaway, Pippin, who forsakes her beloved garden to go careening across the Galaxy with Jale.

This reviewer likes to be entertained, and the book certainly does that. The storyline is fast-paced and funny, but occasionally the characters cast psychological shadows on it from their troubled pasts. Nevertheless, it is hard not to identify with Jale, Sherlock and Pippin as they struggle against massive odds to protect the people of the Milky Way from the ravages of the CLAG disease. Do they succeed? Well, that would be telling too much. Better is that you get a drink and ride along in the *Rigor Mortis* as it gambles and gambols among the galaxies...”

Isaac Asinine (*Times of Trantor*)

PROFESSOR PAUL S. WESSON lives a double life. As a Cambridge-educated astronomer, he writes articles and books on cosmology which are loaded with boring equations. As a normal person and non-geek, he writes science-fiction books in the manner of Marx (Groucho not Karl). Told that he would only be famous after his death, he has issued a fatwa against himself, and is never sure when the assassin’s bullet will strike.