

SPACEPATROL

A collection of warped parodies

in a future we'd like to see

By Stefan Gagne / Twoflower

Dedications

To Jerry Hinn, who helped me develop the characters and spackle up some plot holes, and provided many Pizza House scripts to inspire and encourage

To Mrs. Hubbard's Advanced Composition class, where I wrote chapter one and onward

To Pearl Jam, whose album Ten I listened to over and over while writing.

Maybe I'll write a new epic when the next album's out.

To the various copyrighted things I'm parodying in good humor. Please don't sue.

To Zeke Thunderclutch, Twerp, Jane, and Bruiser, all of whom were a great help in writing this story for me. All I had to do was transcribe.

And MOST IMPORTANTLY, to all the readers of A Future We'd Like To See that egged me on to release this previously unreleased epic... big kudos to all fans! Mwah!

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Space Patrol Part -1 -

Author's Introduction

You've just spent a lot of time FTPing this story, or downloading, or printing, or whatever. Now you're wondering : what have I gotten myself into?

Here's quick explanation.

The story you are about to read is the collective work of a year and a half of writing. Some of it was done for a writing class, some just for fun. It is the basis for my A Future We'd Like to See series, introducing many elements of the 'universe' I work and play in. In otherwords, it's a prequel to FWLS.

It's a bit more compact than the original draft, a few stories which, quite frankly, sucked, removed. The quality level of the writing goes from Okay/Good to Great/Nifty!, since I started the series at the beginning of the class and wrapped it up a year or so later. If it's looking lousy at first, read on. You'll get to like it. It gets REALLY weird and twisted near the end, even though it looks like basic pulp scifi in the beginning.

There are a few spelling and grammar errors, but since the works aren't finely polished realy-for-publication material (much like any

fiction you can find in the public domain), ya can't expect perfection.

Just a fun read, something to kill time, and maybe a provoking thought or six about what we think life and reality really are.

Now for the legalese. Skip on if uninterested...

This short story series, characters, plots, concepts, fonts, styles, and alphanumeric characters copyright (C) 1993 MCMXCII by Stefan Gagne AKA Twoflower, all rights reserved, etc. etc. What this means is if you write a story called Space Patrol with wacky characters named Zeke, Twerp, Jane, and Bruiser, I can sue your ass off and laugh hysterically as my ordinarily thin pockets are amplified by legal reprimands.

Any parodies of existing people, products, television shows, or other copyrighted material are meant in humor and not as slander. I do not claim to own copyright on the parody sources.

(This applies to FWLS as well, if you hadn't seen the notice there.)

However, feel free to distribute it **U N M O D I F I E D !** to anybody or anywhere you'd like. Modding it violates the copyright. If you split this up into separate files, include these copyright paragraphs in each file, and the credits. Space Patrol Part 0 - Opportunity Doesn't Knock, it Pounds

The basement hadn't been dusted in about ten years. A layer of filth

covered most of the tables and chairs, as well as the exposed electronics and computer parts. It has been said that geniuses are absent minded. This is not true. They simply go about their household chores in a different way. For instance, instead of buying a vacuum cleaner, Twerp invented a revolutionary new kind of microprocessor that was powered by teflon and couldn't gather dust.

The basements appearance itself rarely changed as well, aside from the addition and subtraction of new electronics projects. The sole wall decoration consisted of a diagrammed poster of an IBM PS/2. However, this was a very special day indeed, for time was taken to invent a new room-decorating robot that would hang up paper streamers and signs. All the ribbons were mangled and the signs were backwards, which shows how much effort was put into programming the robot. If the signs were right side up, they'd probably read CONGRADULATIONS ON YOUR GRADUATION, TWERP AND QWERTY.

"CANNONBALL!" shouted a high pitched but enthusiastic voice from the top of the basement stairs. At that moment, a short purple alien in a red graduation gown threw his hat across the air (where a revolutionary new kind of self-moving hat rack caught it) and jumped head first down the stairs. He hit a well- placed set of mattresses and bounced into a chair. A second purple alien slid down the armrail and darted off to the small climate-controlled refrigerator for some soda.

"We did it, Twerp!" Qwerty shouted, pounded a table in glee. "We

graduated! No more dull lessons and pointless Phys Ed classes! The world is our shrimp!"

"Oyster," corrected Twerp, popping open the sodas with a mechanically enhanced bottle opener.

"Whatever," Qwerty shrugged. "It's on to Murf Tech for us!"

"Err..." said Twerp, face falling. "I had meant to tell you about that..."

"What?"

"I didn't get accepted to Murf Tech."

Pause. "WHAT?" Qwerty shouted. "But... come on Twerp, you've got the IQ of a genius and you know more about electronics than Einstein. How come they wouldn't accept you?"

"I... didn't have enough work experience," he sighed. "They want people who have held part time jobs."

"But that means I'll be starting my freshman year without you!" Qwerty exclaimed. "Come on, we had planned this whole thing. Best buds, hittin' college, getting babes, making millions and millions of credits... and

you're telling me simply because you didn't want to flip a spatula they won't let you in?"

"That's about the size of it. And their rosters are full for the next four years."

"Hmm..." Qwerty said, scratching his chin. "Well, we've got a combined IQ of about 300 in this room, surely we can find some job you can do for the next four years."

"I have been considering Space Patrol," Twerp suggested.

"I thought they went for the sloping foreheaded jock type," Qwerty stated.

"Well, they posted an ad a few weeks ago. They're offering college tuition money and credit if you sign up, all applicants welcome."

"Well, then that's your ticket into Murf Tech!" Qwerty said, voice picking back up to its usual chipper tone. "You enlist, maybe sit behind a desk for a few years, and then you're in. It's a bright new opportunity!"

"Maybe you're right," Twerp said, spirit rising. "After all, how bad could it be?"

Soft furry feet plodded along the linoleum halls of Houykk Ferriwa

T'lli, half a galaxy away.

Bruiser hated that sound. For most of his life, he had heard the plodding of hundreds of Ytt rabbit sapiens along the school corridors. Simply hearing two large bunny feet plodding seemed alien to him, as if something in his life was empty other than the corridor.

He had been working at this school as a Phys Ed. teacher for about 13 years now, and had been training members of the Ytt army in flamethrower usage on the side for three of those years. He enjoyed the thrill of the fight, the ability to push someone's head through concrete, and just the sheer exhilaration of teaching someone else how to fight and push heads through concrete.

And the tournaments. He enjoyed them too, the football games with the roaring crowds and the glory of the win. The hot dogs, the cheerleaders, the painted lines on the ground, the entire sport experience.

And now he was fairly sure this would come to a close.

He stopped at the door of the principal, Dr. Oppenow Jrrgy. Pausing for a moment to take a breath and adjust his old #34 basketball jersey, he opened the door.

"Ah, Bruiser. So glad you could come, please have a seat," the doctor

said, motioning him to a chair with the hand that wasn't holding a golf putter. Bruiser squeezed his 300 pound musclebound form into the seat.

"You send for me, sir?" he said in his usual broken English. It wasn't that he wasn't intelligent, it was just that he was never very good at speaking English.

"Yes... I think you know why," the principal said, putting a golf ball into a paper cup and having a seat behind his mahogany desk.

"Yes sir. Me read about budget cuts in paper yesterday," Bruiser muttered, a wave of depression kicking in.

"It's not that I don't like our physical education department, really," the principal reassured. "It's just that we don't have the money, and jobs are looking for Ytts who have job skills more than labor skills. If I had my way, this school would rehire all the departments that have been cut."

The principal stood up and began his "I really do care" pacing around the room routine.

"It's just that we don't have the money. If you had the speech skills, you could teach physics."

"But me have degrees in astronavigation, nuclear physics, and quantum

mechanics!" Bruiser pleaded.

"Yes, but you can't express yourself well in English," the principal explained. "This institute is changing over to a multicultural, multispecies school, one of the only kinds on planet Ytt. Although most other schools use our home language, we're expected to adapt to the galaxy's standard tounge. We both know of your incredible intellect, but if you can't explain things to the students in a way they can understand, it's going to simply be too hard. You know that problem we had with the spanish speaking math teach last year, remember?"

Bruiser nodded.

"Parents called in complaining that their kids couldn't understand what he was saying, and we had to completely restructure who was in what math class. Listen, if you need any letters of recommendation for your next job, I will be more than happy to help..."

"Me understand, sir," Bruiser said. He looked up, an idea hitting his head square on. "Actually, me WAS thinking enlisting in Space Patrol... good physical work, need Ytts like me. Probably more use than teaching. Maybe more fun. Not sure."

"That's a pretty good idea," the principal said, leaning back in his chair. "A good pension plan and good pay. And after all, how bad could it

be?"

"Name?"

"Zeke Thunderclutch."

The recruiting officer peered over his glasses. That certainly could NOT have been this stranger's real name. The officer was not surprised, however. The garb, although slightly disheveled, resembled that of a Not-So-Secret Agent. What few agents the officer had met had flamboyant, dashing names.

Zeke was dressed in the only real outfit he had after being fired from the Not-So-Secret Agent Corporation. There was a certain amount of prestige to wear the usual rough and tumble leather jacket, sturdy jeans and heavy boots that could survive being slept in several times, but it's not very good to have a wardrobe consisting of three sets of the same outfit. He was lucky they let him keep the clothes he was wearing... he had charged them to a NSSAC credit card.

"Company of last employment?" the officer asked, writing down more information.

"NSSAC," Zeke replied. The officer grunted a "I thought so" grunt and

scribbled this down.

"How long have you been unemployed?" the officer asked.

"Take in a deep breath, pal," Zeke scowled. The officer snorted the air.

"Two weeks," the officer said, and wrote it down. The stench associated to someone that hasn't had a shower in that amount of time was rather distinct and hard to miss in an unemployment office.

The briefing officer put down his pencil. "Let me guess. Been a Not-So-Secret Agent for a few years, bungled an important mission, and they turned you out on your ear with nothing but the clothes on your back, right?"

Zeke nodded. He had spent the last week in a partially drunken stupor, unable to cope with losing his livelihood and career over a stupid incident. Namely, he threw up in President Doofman's flower vase. He didn't know that he was allergic to the spices in the food until his first bite made his face cycle through most of the hue range associated with purple.

The officer sighed, and returned to writing. "You'd be surprised about the number of people we get who have been fired by those bozos. The turnover rate is rather impressive. Skills?"

Zeke pondered this. The seventy minutes he spent in art school when he was a teenager probably wouldn't count. His little job experience consisted of swinging from chandeliers, rescuing diplomat's daughters, and getting ambushed. Come to think of it, he'd been an utter failure as a dashing hero, despite the fact that he had the sought-after lantern jaw and charisma. It was a boyhood impulse to join the NSSAC when most other companies had turned him down for not having enough education or attention span.

"I can type. A little. And if you need any swinging from chandeliers, I'm your man," he replied, throwing his pilot's scarf around his neck again just to enhance the point.

"Ummm hmmm," the officer replied, writing this down. "Any combat action?"

Zeke would have liked to say that he was a crack shot and survived many a firefight, but he couldn't. Truth is he usually was ambushed on the way home from a mission, or would flee in terror at the sign of more than two or three goons with guns. Sure, fistfighting and shooting ranges were one thing, but in the ten somewhat mediocre years with the NSSAC, he couldn't work up the nerve or the will to actually murder anyone.

"Well, not much. I'm real good at being knocked out. If that helps," he added weakly, not liking how this interview was going so far.

The officer wrote this down. He sat back, tossed the pencil on the table, and sighed. "Mister Thunderclutch, this doesn't look good. Now, I've met many out of work Not-So-Secret Agents before, but the difference between them and you is that they had some skills they could apply to other areas of work."

Zeke shifted a little uncomfortably in his chair. He had always known in the back of his mind that he was a laze-about, a failure, an accident waiting to happen. He kept denying it for years, thinking maybe he hadn't found his niche in society yet. The impulse leaped to the front of his mind, jumping up and down on what was left of his hope.

"I do think I can find a position for you, however."

His hope inflated to 13 PSI and flung self-pity to the back of his mind, where it clattered into several other unused emotions. Zeke sat bolt upright.

"Where? How? I need a job, man! I'll do anything!"

"Well... have you ever heard of Space Patrol?"

"Not really."

"Well, they've got a good pension plan, and enough pay to get you back on your feet. It's just light problem solving work, finding lost documents and such. Right up a former NSSA's alley, really. And after all, how bad could it be?"

Jane slipped into the room. Her dark cloak and floppy hat usually protect her from sight in even slightly dark rooms, but it wouldn't help here.

After all, as every assassin knows, one of the easiest precautions to take against possible assassination was not to have any shadows around for people to hide in. So, every room and corridor in the Assassin's Guild has bright, florescent lighting.

Assassins may be crazy, but they're not stupid.

"Sit," Jane's superior officer commanded. Jane glided in from the doorway to the uncomfortable chair, sitting down silently and untucking her long red hair from her cloak. She looked daggers at her superior.

Her superior didn't even flinch.

"I am to understand that you've been doing some vigilante work on the side, Jane?"

Jane nodded coldly.

"We can't have that. It's bad for the image to have a trained, paid assassin mopping up crime, even if they do it in a violent, sadistic manner. You're fired."

That was it. No 'Hey, I understand what you're going through' speech or comforting pats on the back. Creatures of the night don't work like that.

"You can get a severance check at the cashier," the officer said, signing a small slip and handing it to Jane. "I suggest you find another line of work. There are many out there that are suitable for an ex-assassin... the armed forces, the Heavily Armed Ambassadors of Friendship and Fun, Space Patrol... anything off-planet and far from here will work."

"What's Space Patrol?" she inquired, never blinking, staring directly into the officer's soul.

"Troubleshooting work. Go here, blow this up, get paid, find this, rescue that princess, et cetera. You'll like it. A bright new horizon. Now beat it, I have work to do."

With that, the officer went back to signing various receipts from previous assassinations.

Jane considered this. Sounds like fun, a chance to exercise fighting ability and get paid for it. Admittedly not as much as assassination, but enough. Besides, supposedly Space Patrol is very lax in uniforms and behavior patterns.

Standing up, and pausing only to jam a seven-inch throwing knife directly into the skull of her superior officer, she left the room towards this bright new horizon. Besides, how bad could it be? It was going to be bad.

Space Patrol Part I - Introductions Aside

"Is it ready yet?"

"Come on! These chairs are rock hard!"

"Hurry it up already!"

The minor shouts of dissent echoed throughout Space Patrol

Headquarters, Sector JK. The reason for the turmoil was because about a dozen beings of mixed species from around the galaxy weren't expecting to have to wait this long for a lousy training film.

Today was the Space Patrol's annual "Pledge Week", where new recruits who signed up would receive extra bonuses and special training. Of course, they didn't find out until after they signed up that the bonus was working plumbing and the training was a leftover black and white holofilm from the 2050s. Now that they were signed up for Space Patrol for a five year mission, they were a bit unhappy that they had been taken.

"Keep your shirt on, I'm working as fast as I can!" shouted a greasy workman from the rear of the room. He pried the service hatch off the holoprojector as various recruits threw popcorn at the screen. Twiddling with the wires a little, he closed the hatch and started the playback.

"...rrrrroooowwnwnnnnsnsnnsuuiugosiiabgbagell--" The workman slammed a fist against the machine. The audio and video jumped for a minute and went back on track, FINALLY working correctly.

"rrrrrWelcome to Space Patrol, hardy recruits! *The* special Starfleet sponsored law enforcement and special operations force for the common man!"

The screen showed six foot tall bruisers in standard Space Patrol uniform. Of course, the uniforms were dumped years ago when several

Patrollers protested by burning a stack of uniforms -- and sometimes even Patrollers.

"If you've got a problem, we're there to help. Whether it be guarding a supply dock, rescuing a foreign leader, or simply blowing things up. Now you are a member of that special..."

The film continued droning on and on in a burbling, happy tone. The images flickered by with various shots of Patrollers doing heroic deeds, rescuing lost kittens from trees, or destroying an enemy supply depot. The voice bounced along with the images, cheery as if selling detergent. Needless to say, most of the recruits fell asleep at this point.

About one hour later, after the propaganda holo was finished, the lights were flipped on. Most of the Patrollers awoke with a jolt, some even toppling out of their chairs.

"Okay, maggots, listen up!" barked a high ranking officer in the back. "All of that was garbage. You're in this man's Patrol now, and you're gonna WORK!"

The next sound made can be described as not sounding like enthusiastic applause. It would probably fit into the category of "pathetic whining" or "sarcastic off-color jokes" better.

The high ranker, Sgt. Bilko, was disturbed by this. The least they

could do was look hardy. He didn't really know what hardy meant or why
Patrollers were supposed to look it, but this was probably not hardy.

Perhaps, he thought, a few more decibels would help.

"AS I WAS SAYING! Your briefing officer's name and office number is
posted on the list in the back. Go to that office IMMEDIATELY for your
first assignment. MOVE! MOVE! MOVE!"

Yup yup yup, Bilko thought, that helped. They're moving now.
Sluggishly, but it's a start.

"Yoo hoo? Anybody in here?" Zeke Thunderclutch said as he opened the
door to his briefing office. It was pitch black in the room, the only light
being the illuminated shadow he was casting to the other end of the room.

He stepped in and a meaty hand grabbed his neck and lifted him from the ground.

Now, Zeke was used to being ambushed. Heck, he spent most of his previous career as a Not-So-Secret Agent being ambushed by some terrorist group or radical fanatic. However, this was the first time he had been strangled with ONE HAND.

"Urk," he added to enhance this point. Then he noticed the hand was green. And attached to an arm. Which was attached to a torso. Which was also green.

The figure stepped out of the light.

"Me sorry," it said in deep octaves and broken english. "Me mistake you for janitor. Me apologize."

The hand released it's grip, and Zeke dropped to the linoleum floor on his rear. Zeke struggled for breath, and looked up at the figure.

Ytts were fairly common in the known universe. Ytts were an alien humanoid that evolved from rabbits, and thus had the cute floppy ears and casual attitude that rabbits had. They also had green fur, but this was not unusual.

What WAS unusual was that this particular Ytt was six feet tall, built like a brick wall, and carrying a backpack flamethrower.

"Urk," Zeke repeated, in case anybody had missed it the first time.

"Oh, me forgot to introduce. Me Bruiser. Sorry about the strangle there, me thought you were janitor."

"J...janitor?"

"Me come to briefing room, he follow. Janitor mop up behind me. Me think he following me. Can't be too careful todays," he said, closing the door.

As Zeke's vision gradually came back into sharp focus and his foggy head cleared, he stood up.

"Err... so you're in my unit?" he nervously asked.

"Yeah. What luck! You used be not-so-secret agent, yesno?" Bruiser asked. "Me no recognize you till me let go. Me really apologize, mister Thunderclutch."

"Uh, think nothing of it," Zeke said, wondering why he was seeing

double. So this was his new partner. Terrific. Well, I hope the rest of the team is normal.

Zeke heard footsteps. Expecting Bruiser to greet the person opening the door in the usual way, he dived under a desk.

The door opened, and Bruiser reached out a friendly arm. The cloaked person in the doorway moved their hands in a flurry, and Bruiser fell over.

"Try that again, greeny, and it won't just be a sucker punch," said a menacing, yet high pitched voice. Bruiser stood up and looked in awe. Normally it takes something the size of a sledgehammer even to get Bruiser to notice a knock.

The cloaked person walked into the light. Apparently the high pitch was because the person was female. You wouldn't know it, because the floppy, wide brimmed red hat and matching assassin's cloak shadowed almost all of her features.

Zeke's romantic impulses kicked in seconds before his self-preservational traits.

"Hey, good looking--" that was as far as he got before the girl had managed to clamp a firm hand over his mouth. Then his self-preservation went bonkers and let out a slight whimper.

"I know sixteen pressure points that can render you sterile. Want to find out what they are?" she sneered.

Zeke muffled a negative, and she let go. Zeke hit the ground for the second time today.

"Formalities aside, I'm Jane. Hello. Try that again and bad things will happen," she said. With that, she sat down and studied all the exits in the room.

Fortunately Bruiser was still sitting on the ground watching Jane in admiration when the fourth and last member of the team walked in. It's just as well, because if Bruiser attempted to grab him he'd overshoot and fall over again.

Perhaps more explanation of the major races in the galaxy is in order. The being in question who wandered in a Murfle (we've seen them before, but a more in-depth description is needed for this sight gag to work). A Murfle is another one of those cute and fluffy looking races, being one foot high, purple, and wearing earmuffs. The earmuffs are not just for cuteness appeal (Murfles really didn't like being treated like cartoon characters) but are to offset the difference in room temperature and Murfle body temperature.

Anthropology lessons aside, the Murfle walked in. "Hi there!" he said in a cheery voice, much like the black and white holo all the recruits had

watched earlier. "Say, why is he sitting on the floor?" he said, looking at Bruiser. Bruiser, noting the confrontation, stood up and did his best to look imposing and intimidating.

"Me Bruiser," he said fiendishly. "Me can kill a man in 3 seconds," he added, just for effect, then smiled.

The little Murfle was undaunted.

"I'm Twerp. Pleased to meet you," he chirped, and held out a hand to shake. Bruiser, confused, shook it (shaking Twerp in the process).

"So, we're all in the same unit?" said Zeke. He hoped not, because he really didn't have much experience with aliens. What if he said something wrong that translated to an insult in their language? An entire Ytt war was sparked off once when President Doofman of the Terran Council vomited and the noise made was a war vow in the Yttian language.

Before he could pursue the various mental paranoid pathways associated with torture and fate, there was a knock at the door. A Saren poked his head inside from around the corner.

(To make a long story short, Sarens are purple and have green antennae. We'll skip the lengthy racial history to preserve space and keep from boring the reader.)

"Ah, I see you're all here, Unit #13," he said, walking in. "I'm Father O'Mother, and I'll be your mission briefing officer for your tour of duty."

"Sir? Umm... you're a priest, right?" Twerp asked, a bit surprised.

"Well, yes. I do volunteer work for the good souls here at Space Patrol. Just my little contribution to the war against evil," he said proudly.

Jane didn't buy it. Not his intentions, but the "good souls" part. Before she quit the Assassin's Guild, she had picked up some information on Space Patrol when she was hired to assassinate a sector HQ officer. Most Patrollers aren't above a little illegal activity in the same way the ocean is not above the clouds.

"Anyway, welcome to Space Patrol, fair citizens of the galaxy," he continued. By his tone, you could tell he had memorized this and was hoping to get it right, because he was in a slight monotone and appeared to be reading the ceiling. "I'll be assigning you to missions, and debriefing you whenever Space Patrol receives a contract and needs a spare Patrol unit. You'll be getting a starship of your own that houses four comfortably, and we only ask that you keep it within sector JK. That way, when we need to call on you for a mission, you'll be nearby."

He paused for questions. There weren't any. He continued.

"Missions will probably only be once a week or so, since sector JK isn't in a rampant, crime infested pit. In the mean time, you're on your own moneywise. All we cover is repairs to your ship, and costs while on a mission. Should be fairly easy, my sons--"

"Ahem."

"--and daughter. Are there any questions?"

Jane didn't even bother to raise her hand. "Are you serious? Me, a trained assassin, paired up with an out of work agent, a nerdy Murfle, and a brainless prat?"

Several growls and various shufflings of feet radiated from behind her. Normally, she thought, I wouldn't take guff from anyone, but when the odds are 3 to 1 against, it's too easy for me and not worth it.

Father O'Mother seemed to ignore the nasty tone of her voice. "Well, unlike Starfleet or the Heavily Armed Ambassadors of Friendship and Fun, we have to use whatever recruits we can get. I'm sure you'll learn to work together, and benefit from the skills you each possess.

Not likely, thought Jane, but didn't voice this comment.

"Which one is our ship?" Zeke asked. "I saw quite a few out in the parking lot.

Father O'Mother checked his clipboard. The fastest and the most comfortable ships Space Patrol had... the GSS Conquest, the GSS Powerplay, and even the GSS Mildly Okay had already been taken. He looked for the code assigned to unit #13. Then frowned. Then tried to smile. Then tried to do both at once, and failed.

"Well... the GSS Ineptitude," he said weakly. "But it does have working plumbing and a fairly fast computer."

"What doesn't it have?" Zeke asked cautiously.

"Well... mattresses, for starters. But you'll get used to it, don't worry. Now if we don't have any other busi--"

A loud clicking like a thousand hamsters with tap shoes echoed around the room. The mission recorder in the corner spewed out a small sheet of paper. Father O'Mother got up and ripped it off the printer.

:Unit #13 to UE Enterprises, Planet Freon, 5th Cluster, JK Sector.

Guard duty. Move with haste. Have a nice day.:

"Well, well well!" said the Father, cheering up tremendously. "Seems

you have a mission already!" He happily tossed the paper to Bruiser, who caught it in the air (almost crumpling it) and reading it.

"Hmmm..." he said. "At 2.3 warp, by Griffin Postulate, it take three days to get there. We best be going."

Jane and Zeke stared at him in confusion. Twerp personally wondered how he knew about complex astrophysics -- even with an IQ as high as Twerps, he couldn't make aGriffin computation THAt fast. However, before he could comment on it, Bruiser was on his way towards the door.

Bruiser paused. "Well, you coming or not? We got mission to solve, and they ain't pay by hour, yesno?"

With that, Unit #13 left the office for the Ineptitude.

Breaking and Decorating

It was raining in C'atel.

This was normal. In fact, days when it doesn't rain are considered bad days. The entire city was formed out of soggy, slumping tenements and crumbling malls, a city where even the buildings were lazy.

The remarkable aspect of C'atel was how the laziness would penetrate your mind if you stayed there long enough. Tourists who like wet weather would show up, and after about two weeks they'd be happy, mind-numbed C'atel citizens. This would be terrific if C'atel had any sort of industrial platform, but the citizens couldn't be persuaded to do physical labor even if you stuck them with an electric cattle prod. As is, any population growth just meant that they'd just be packed in the nightclubs in a more dense formation.

Nightclubs and concert halls were extremely popular in C'atel, because music is the easiest, least-strenuous form of entertainment around. (One might say movies were the easiest, least response oriented entertainment field around. Not true. Somewhere along the line, people would actually

have to memorize lines and work, which C'atel will have no truck with.)

Most of the galaxy's alternate rock bands were formed here, because of the simple booking procedure in clubs. If someone showed up, they were the night's entertainment. No effort was given to screen out bands that are referred to as "awful" or "lousy". If they made noise, they were paid.

Because of the aura of stupidity and laziness that surrounded C'atel, the law enforcers of the area were pretty spaced out as well. In other words, crime flourished here like a festering bruise. If you had the money, and you could resist the urge to go party and drink your brains out, you could turn quite a profit participating or catering to the criminal element.

Thus was the case with Weasel. In fact, he had been running a very popular underworld bar named "The Pit of Ooze" for about two years now, and raked in the money criminals would pay for his over-priced, watered-down drinks.

Weasel was gliding down to the three-credit-an-hour parking lot in his hovercar, ready to open the Pit for it's nightly business. He shut down the car, and hopped out (since he was an alien Murfle, and thus one and a half feet tall, he couldn't step out of a car), opening his umbrella.

Greeted by the sagging buildings and hippies roaming the street in random directions, Weasel plodded through the eternal puddles of the C'atel streets towards the criminal districts.

He stopped at his building and fumbled a key ring out of his pocket.

He opened the door.

He looked inside.

He fainted.

"When is this over?"

"What?"

"I SAID, WHEN IS THIS OVER?"

"Me no able hear you!"

Zeke gave up. The unrelenting noise from the stage was simply too intense for Bruiser to be able to hear him. Zeke attempted to shrink back into his seat and cover his ears to hold off the incredible cacophony.

"YAAAAAAHOOOO!" Bruiser was shouting, jumping up and down on his chair like the other 50,000 people in the stadium. The chair wasn't enjoying it very much, considering that Bruiser was a 300 pound musclebound rabbitoid alien.

The band on the stage pounded away at their instruments, hands moving in a blur. The "wall of sound" behind them pumped out an array of sounds, none of which Zeke would define as music.

Zeke couldn't believe he got talked into this. First they botch guard duty -- thier FIRST MISSION, nonetheless, and are 'told' to take a vacation for a week. Bruiser then convinced him that it was a good idea to fly all the way to planet C'atel for the vacation and hit a concert. What was the name of the band again? Stomach Contents?

Five hours arguing with Twerp and Jane (the other two members of their Space Patrol unit) over whither or not they could take the shuttle from their ship for this trip, two days flight time in the shuttlecraft from the GSS Ineptitude, one day waiting in line for tickets, and a five hour white noise festival that Zeke Thunderclutch didn't even want to go do. On the other hand, it's pretty difficult to refuse a Ytt the size of Bruiser, coupled with his diehard music tastes.

Since Zeke's ears were getting used to the neverending audio hell, the next thing that happened struck him as being rather odd.

The music stopped. A voice rang out over the sound system.

"OWW! I pricked my finger! Call an ambulance!" shouted the backup guitarist, clutching his throbbing finger as approximately 17 stage hands

carried him offstage.

"Oh well, I guess that's the end of the concert," the keyboardist said, stretching and following the band offstage.

Keeping in tune with other citizens of C'atel, Stomach Contents had no common sense. If they did, they would have realized that it's not nice to make 50,000 screaming, fanatically loyal fans angry.

A chorus of boos and hisses from the audience assaulted the now empty stage.

Zeke's mother was a psychic. He didn't know this, but what he did know was that whenever trouble was about to happen all those little hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Which they were doing now, almost pushing his hat off and trying to crawl off of his skin.

"Umm... Bruiser, if you'll excuse me, I ought to go to the bathroom or something--"

"GRRRRR!" Bruiser growled. A streetfighting, quick tempered rabbit who is angry to boot is not pretty to look at, Zeke thought.

"Me pay good money for concert, and this what me get?" Bruiser shouted to the world in general. "Me RIOT!"

With that, he grabbed the nearest chair and threw it at the stage. The person who was sitting in the chair at the time was pretty surprised by this, and not at all happy about it.

Soon, chairs and fists were flying everywhere. Zeke was not participating in the fray, choosing to crawl on his stomach out the back gate. The sound of splintering wood and screaming fans echoed throughout the entire stadium.

Beep.

"Thank you for calling Space Patrol Headquarters. All of our operators are currently busy. Please hold."

The vidphone showed pleasant meadow scenes and played "Satan's Love Boogie" as sung by Bob Dylan.

Three minutes later the music switched to "Silent Night" as sung by Metallica.

Seven minutes later the Barry Manilow as performed by Fats and the Polka Boys played across the speaker.

"You have reached Space Patrol Headquarters, may I help you?"

"Yeah. I've been calling every single BEEPing law enforcement group near planet C'atel, and nobody is responding. I need someone to BEEPing get their BEEPs over here and gimmie a BEEPing hand, my bar just got vandalized and I want some BEEPing revenge."

"At the sound of the tone, please speak clearly with your name, location, and problem. This has been a recording."

Beep.

Beep.

"Zeke? You there?" said a saintly voice over Zeke's wristcom.

"Sort of," Zeke replied, cowering in the empty bathroom stall to avoid the riot outside. "What's up, Father?"

(For those of you unacquainted with this amusing science fiction series, the saintly voice in question is Father O'Mother, briefing officer for Zeke's Space Patrol unit. Now back to our story, already in progress.)

"Well," said O'Mother, after waiting for the announcer to finish, "We just received word of a disturbance in your area, and we've been paid a rather large sum of money for you to track down the miscreants responsible for it."

"Ummm... Bruiser and I are sort of busy at the moment."

"Why?"

"Well, I'm hiding in a bathroom and he's throwing chairs at 50,000 people."

"Ah, that's nice. Anyway, once you're finished your little social event there, head to the Pit of Ooze on Nirvana Road ."

"Where are Jane and Twerp? We might need backup."

It's always a good idea to have the other half of your Space Patrol team around, Zeke mused. Especially when danger is involved (which it usually is).

"They left GSS Ineptitude about an hour ago and should show up soon."

"Okay, Father. Zeke out."

We'll skip the revolting descriptions of bodies and ambulances resulting after the concert riot, and just say that Bruiser escaped completely unharmed and our intrepid heroes made a beeline for the Pit of Ooze via an autotaxi. We can do this because of the concept of "Writer's License", which enables us to do whatever the hell we want (including

skipping vast expanses of time and referring to ourselves in the plural.)

"My god... just LOOK at this!" Weasel cried. "I'm RUINED!"

"It's very... um..." Zeke said, looking at the newly renovated decor of the Pit of Ooze, "Well, colorful."

Indeed it was. There was a tasteful ceiling fan newly installed, and the chairs were painted a delightful shade of yellow. A clean ashtray with a little sign next to it reading "It's not nice to smoke!" stood on each of the flower-print tables, and some 60's love ballads played over the 8-track player behind the bar. The walls were painted with very talented spray-paint graffiti slogans, some reading "Make love, not war" and "Peace be to you". A beaded curtain covered a doorframe to the manager's office, and if Bruiser and Zeke could see in there (which they couldn't from this angle) they'd see a blue beanbag chair and a shelf filled with books of poetry.

"This is terrible!" Weasel whined, spinning around to take in the entire pleasant sight. "There's no way I can continue business now!"

Bruiser straightened the flowers sitting on the bar. "Daffodils and sunflowers. Nice choice."

"Don't you UNDERSTAND?" Weasel shouted. "I run an underworld bar! My clients pay me hard currency to be able to drink and eat in a grimy,

uncomfortable cesspool! No self-respecting criminal would drink in here!"

Weasel walked behind the bar, and pointed to the beer taps, shaking an angry finger. "Wheatgerm shakes! They drained all my watered down 700% wood alcohol down the sink and replaced it with WHEATGERM SHAKES!"

Weasel collapsed in tears on the ground. Bruiser comforted him with a caring paw, and muttered some constructive phrases in broken English.

"So I take it you'd like us to find out who did this?" Zeke said, sitting on one of the comfy, padded chairs.

"Damn right I do!" Weasel shouted. "I already know WHO did it, just not who did it."

"Excuse me?"

"It's been happening all over town. These breaking-and-decorating scum have hit five other bars besides mine. It's a virtual anti-crimewave!" Weasel shouted, convulsing.

"Okay, calm down a bit. Take a Valium, we'll have your guys in custody soon," Zeke assured Weasel.

"Umm, Zeke? Me have word with you?" Bruiser said, pointing towards the beaded curtain, and squeezing through the doorframe. Zeke followed.

"How we going to find non-crooks?" Bruiser said. "Me know how to shake down scum for information, but me not know where nice guys hide out."

"Well..." said Zeke, scratching his lantern jaw. "Let's see... if they're not criminals, then they would behave in exactly the opposite way that criminals would, and would hide out in tastefully, cheery sorts of places. We find the brightest, loudest, and most flowery place in town and we have them, logically."

The entire structure of the Peasludlope Nightclub was rocking off it's foundations. The DJ had been gradually turning up the bass on the music since last week, and was showing no signs of stopping now.

Sure enough, this was the most cheery, happy, cute, flowery, hippie, lovely wonderful neat peachy keen nightclub in town. Passing citizens were encouraged to use spray paint, crayons, or whatever writing utensils nearby and add their own message of peace to the outer walls. Thus, the entire building was coated in psychedelic, garish colors.

The inside was even worse. The entire room was coated in mirrors, and lights streamed out from every available surface. The effect of this was looking into infinity, if infinity only contained partygoers.

Bruiser kicked down the door of the club in an effort to take the

non-crooks by surprise. Oddly enough, nobody noticed. The reason for this was the shock wave of sound that almost knocked Zeke over drowned out something as quiet as a collapsing doorframe.

Fortunately, Zeke and Bruiser were well adept with sign language, since the spoken word wouldn't get farther than one centimeter inside the club.

What now? Zeke signed.

I am unsure. I think that possibly the best course of action would be to assimilate into the spectators and pose inquiries as to the approximate location of the anti-crooks, Bruiser gestured.

!!!! Zeke signed.

? Bruiser signed.

You're using big words! Zeke signed.

Bruiser silently laughed. What, did you think that just because I haven't been able to master the spoken English language that I was an uncouth bumpkin? Bruiser signed.

What? Zeke signed.

I mean I never got good speaking grades in English class, Bruiser explained.

Oh... Zeke signed, confused. Whatever. Start mixing in with the crowd, see if you can get any information out of them. I think that end of the club over there should be quiet enough to talk, let's head there first.

Bruiser nodded, and lurched off in that direction, parting the crowd of dancers and drunks like the red sea. Zeke had more trouble trying to get through, gesturing a lot of "Sorry" and "Excuse me" signals before getting to the shallow end of the music.

A group of three Sarens (anthropology lesson : alien with purple skin, blond hair and green antennae) were busily writing peace slogans on the mirrored walls with soap. Noting their paisley outfits and bell bottoms, Zeke figured these guys might know something about the anticrooks. Zeke slid in next to one of them and leaned on the wall.

"Give it some slack man," one of the Sarens said, looking at Zeke over his Lennon sunglasses. "You're greasing the reflective vibes of that surface."

"What?"

"You're leaving your grimy handprints all over that mirror."

"Oh," Zeke said, moving his hand away. "Say, have you guys heard anything about the rash of pas-crimes breaking out?"

The Sarens laughed. The one with the glasses flashed Zeke a grin. "Of course we do, man. We did 'em, after all."

Zeke's jaw dropped. "What?"

"Hey, to thy own self be true or some junk. Gotta be yourself and be truthful, I always say. Why do you ask, dude?"

Stupidly, Zeke replied, "I'm with Space Patrol, I'm here to arrest you."

The glasses guy shook his head. "Wrong answer, dude. Oh well. Don't take this personally, okay man?"

The guy next to Mr. Glasses coolly drew a shotgun out of his green jacket. Zeke, realizing that he was at the wrong end of this gun, shouted "Bruiser! Over here!" and dived under the buffet table as shotgun pellets shattered a mirror near him.

"FREEZE!" boomed a Yttian voice as Bruiser pushed his way through (and occasionally over) the crowd. He drew a blaster out of his backpack.

"Wait! Bruiser! DON'T SHOOT THA-" Zeke started, but it was too late.

Bruiser had already fired.

The blast missed the Sarens by about three inches, and bounced off the mirrored wall. Ricocheting around the room hitting the walls at precise angles, the bolt of energy finally struck someone.

"ARGH!" gurgled a voice near the bar.

"Hey! That guy over there shot the BARTENDER!" a random partygoer yelled.

The music stopped. A few thousand pairs of eyes turned towards Bruiser. All the partygoers who had the foresight to bring a weapon of any kind were loading them at that exact moment, bringing on a chorus of gun power-ups, clicks, snaps, whirrs, and beeps.

"Umm... Sorry," Bruiser replied, embarrassed.

This time there wasn't enough music playing to cover up the noise of the doors bursting open, which was very fortunate for Bruiser.

"Okay, all of you! Put the guns away!" shouted a female voice.

"Why should we?" shouted a random angry voice.

"Because," said Jane, walking in from the shadows, "It's not nice to disobey the girl holding a thermonuclear grenade."

Sure enough, she was holding one. Most of the partygoers stealthily concealed their weapons, putting on nervous smiles. They cleared a circle around Jane, shrugging their shoulders as if to say, "What weapons?"

"Thank you. Your cooperation with the law is duly noted. Twerp!"

"Yeah?" the Murfle that made up 1/4 of the team said, poking his head in the door.

"I think you're going to need to call down to the local police station for more paddywagons."

Epilogue.

The three Sarens and their ringleader were arrested and charged with breaking and decorating, reupholstering without consent, and wearing loud clothing. They spend the next fifteen years of their lives making paisley license plates in C'atel Prison.

The five thousand, one hundred and thirty four citizens in the Peasludope Nightclub were charged with numerous counts of brandishing a weapon in public and disturbing the peace, with a sentence of five years in

jail without bail. Evenly divided, this comes to approximately eight hours in jail for each one.

Bruiser and Zeke were awarded the Key to the Planet by the mayor of C'atel, and about fifty CDs from various C'atel bands, which Zeke generously donated to Bruiser.

Space Patrol Part III -

The Anti-Quayle

1992, November 3rd, 11:00 PM . The Bush/Quayle ticket loses to the Clinton/Gore ticket in the elections. Bush retires and plays golf for the rest of his life. Quayle signs on as his caddie and general toadie.

1994, April 23th, 9:34 AM . Dan Quayle is shot on the fifth hole by a crazed democrat trying to kill Bush to impress Cindy Crawford. He is given a weak service at a pet cemetery and is buried for about 75 years.

Much Later, July 12th, 3:23 AM . Two masked men in lab coats exhume the Quayle gravesite and are chased away by an elderly citizen waving a pitchfork.

Much Later, August 7th, 12:15 PM. Unbeknownst to the citizens of the galaxy, a major historical disaster was about to erupt.

Of course, they wouldn't have had any warning in the first place. There were none of the signs of eminent doom, such as omens, bad weather, plane crashes, or babies being born with three sixes on their heads. In fact, the origins of this disaster were rather calm.

The mess started on the small suburban planet of HappiWorld, which was well known for friendly citizens and cheery, lighthearted family activities. Mom would cook dinner for Dad and little Timmy to eat, after which Dad would light a pipe and read the news while Timmy would play outside with his little dog Spot. The main industries on HappiWorld were malt shops, sock hops, schools, housecleaning, and large office buildings

where Dad could file papers and get a paycheck. The headquarters of the Republican party took up an entire city on HappiWerld. The highest form of government was the PTSA, and one governor who is just there for photo opportunities and public meetings. Nothing remotely unpleasant ever happened on Happiwerld.

Until now, that is.

"Okay, I think it's ready," said Biff, climbing down from the service hatch on the mechanism. "This had better work, I'm getting sick of hiding out in this suburban hell."

"It'll work, it'll work," said Dave, opening up the meat locker they had recently installed in the basement of their hideout/quaint cottage.

"Okay, now we need a test subject."

"How about Elvis?" Biff suggested, wiping his hands on a rag. "We have his brain in there somewhere, and it'd be perfect for cloning."

"Yeah, but the cloning machine flip-flops your personality as well," said Dave. "He'd be no good if he was a musically talentless schmuck, and you know I can't figure out how to reverse the personality reversal process."

"Hmmm..." Biff mused, looking over a list of famous brains they had

pilfered over the last three years. "Okay, how about Hitler? He'd be a great guy if we cloned and flip-flopped his mind."

"I forgot to tell you," Dave said, looking at the floor. "I broke the jar with Hitler's brain yesterday when I was mopping up. Sorry."

"Don't worry about it... we've got others..." Biff said, running a finger down the list. "Got it! Dan Quayle!"

"Yeah! Considering that he was a sub-moron back when he was alive, he might end up an incredible leader!" Dave mused, grabbing the jar marked Q off the shelf of the locker.

"And we can cajole him into letting us genetic scientists have more money for research!" Biff said, happily. "No more robbing banks! We can make an honest living!"

Dave plopped the fleshy mass inside a slot on the cloning machine.
"Okay, let 'er rip!"

The horrible disaster mentioned earlier was that although Dan Quayle wasn't very bright, the one other thing Dave and Biff had forgotten was that he was incredibly good-natured as well.

"In further news tonight," the news announcer boomed over the sub-etha radio, "The incredibly destructive three day wave of terrorism on

HappiWerld has continued to knock down both the property values and the family values of the entire area. Governor Jim Bob of HappiWerld assured reporters today that there is no real terrorist threat, and the planet is still a happy place to live..."

"I fold."

"Me too."

"Looks like I win again," said Twerp, raking in the poker chips. "Do you guys give up, or are you interested in losing more of your monthly Patrol wages? I'm pretty sure Bruiser is in the negative profit margin already."

Bruiser growled, sneering at the little Murfle with his green rabbitoid lips. "Me played enough, me going to bed. See you tomorrow," he growled. Pulling his 200-or-possibly-much-more pound Ytt form out of his chair, he lurched off towards his bedroom.

"Cash me out, I'm going to bed as well," Zeke Thunderclutch sighed.

"Next time we play hearts. I stink at poker."

"Something's fishy here..." Jane said, adjusting her floppy hat and examining a card from the deck.

Twerp started to visibly sweat. "Umm, guys, if you'll excuse me, I'd better get back to be-"

Jane flicked the corner of the card. The card face rearranged into an ace of spades. Flicking the other corner with her fingernail, the ink reformed into a queen of hearts. Jane cast an evil glare at Twerp from the darkness cast on her face by her hat and cloak.

Twerp tried to run for his room, but Jane grabbed a fistful of his shirt and lifted him off the ground. Zeke remembered that this was about Jane's Time of the Month, and she was NOT to be reckoned with. Well, she was irritable and violent most times of the month, but this time was usually the worst.

"What precisely are you trying to pull here, Twerp?" Jane said in a soft, yet demanding voice.

"ErrrummwwelllIjustwantedt-"

"It's going to be quite a surprise when Bruiser finds his lost money mysteriously back in his pockets, won't it?"

"Huh?"

"GIVE HIM BACK HIS MONEY!"

"Oh! Yeah, okay, whatever you say Jane," Twerp reassured. Jane loosened the grip on his shirt, and Twerp dashed across the room to put back the credits as fast as Murfly possible.

"Hey, what about MY losses?" Zeke asked, feeling left out.

Before Jane could answer, there was a click on the vidscreen, and the image of the newscaster was replaced by an image of their briefing officer, Father O'Mother.

"I hope I didn't wake you up," the father said.

"No, we're all awake, father. What's up?" Zeke asked, taking a seat in a chair at the poker table.

"This is sort of a secret mission... Governor Jim Bob from HappiWorld paid Space Patrol under the table to uncover the new terrorist threat quietly."

"Why us?"

"Well, the media would notice a Starfleet flagship orbiting the planet or a Heavily Armed Ambassadors of Friendship and Fun carrier on the surface. It's sort of hard to miss a spaceship the size of a city, and you have the smallest ship in the Patrol fleet."

"Umm... father," Zeke said nervously, "We tend to really make some trouble when we do our missions, are you sure we're the best choice for a secret mission? If you remember that incident on C'atel--"

"Just an accident, anyone can have an accident," the O'Mother said.
"I'm sure you good souls won't have any trouble with this one. I have faith in you. Besides, it'll only be secret if you are unsuccessful!" he joked.
"Space Patrol HQ out."

The viewscreen clicked off. Zeke sighed.

"We're in trouble," Jane said, shaking her head. "I've been to HappiWerld before."

"You have?" Zeke said, surprised. "I always pictured you as the dark and deadly type, not exactly someone who would want to be on HappiWerld."

"I wasn't there by my own choice," she explained. "I had to grow up there. It was awful, the only thing I could do to break the boredom was torture the other kids and fight. It's 100% suburban agony, all cutesy and lovely and annoying. Also dull as a stone. ANY activity there is going to stick out."

"What's that you said about this place being boring?!?" shouted Zeke over the roar of another rocket propelled grenade. It slammed into an cute

white cottage, which erupted in a roar of flames and debris.

"It's... very different since I last was here," Jane commented, carefully peering out the doors of their Mertz Rent-A- Car in awe.

Indeed it was. Any buildings still standing were scorched or on fire, and the rest lie in smouldering heaps of matchwood. Occasionally a gunfight would break out between some slimy looking characters and some ill-trained housewives or schoolkids toting machine guns. The car had to pull over twice to change a tire... once because it got shot off, the other because it was set on fire by a stray molotov cocktail.

"I rather like it," Jane said, enjoying the view.

"So how we find who runs this war?" Bruiser asked.

"Well," Twerp commented, "Odds are if they're well organized enough to turn this much of HappiWorld into rubble, then they'll find us before we can reach the governor's office."

"He's right, you know," said a goon in a yellow jacket holding a gun to Zeke's head. "Step out of the car, please."

"Nooobody knows, the trouble's I've seen..." Zeke sang, clanging a tin cup against the bars of the dingy cell they had been put into.

Jane grabbed the back of Zeke's neck. "Stop singing or you lose your spinal column," she snarled into his ear. Zeke dropped the cup, and Jane sulked back to the hard metal bench.

"If they hadn't knocked Bruiser unconscious," Twerp commented, looking over the slumped heap of second rate green fur, "He could have bent those bars."

"I would have stopped him," Jane said. "I want to meet the guy responsible for this."

"Ask, and you shall receive," said a deep, echoing voice from the stairwell. A gangly young man stalked down the stairs, grinning like a maniac at the prisoners.

"Not a pleasure to meet you," he said, not bowing. "So, you're the chaps that incompetent fool Jim Bob hired to handle my little crime wave, huh? Well, you get what you pay for," he laughed.

"Who are you?" Zeke said, reciting from his memorized list of "Top Ten Phrases to Ask when The Badguys Have Caught You" (number four, "What are your plans?").

"It's not important, but if you must know, it's Nad Quayle," he sneered.

"Any relation to Dan?" Zeke asked.

Nad grabbed Zeke's leather jacket through the bars and pulled him as close to his face as possible, breathing fire and snarling. Well, not breathing fire literally, just metaphorically.

"DON'T CALL ME DAN! Dan doesn't exist any more! Dan was a pathetic, know-nothing do-gooder whom I want NOTHING to do with! Do you hear me?!?!"

"Gaah...ummm...." Zeke gurgled, his brain attempting to cope with the verbal assault. Nad dropped him, and Zeke hit the ground dizzy.

"But I digress," Nad stated, slipping back into Cheery Maniac tones and letting go of Zeke's jacket. "It doesn't matter, my goons are busily assembling a spaceship so I can leave this happy happy joy joy planet and get down to some serious evil. Then all of your problems will be over. But for now, what do you think of my little escapade here?"

"You scumbag!"

"Let us go!"

"You'll never win!"

"Actually, I rather like what you've done," Jane commented.

All eyes turned to Jane in disbelief.

"I had been waiting for twenty odd years to see a few of those places go up in flames," she continued. "But you haven't been doing enough. Some of the schools are still standing and you haven't touched the malt shops yet."

Nad seemed shocked, eyes widening at the unexpected response. He took a clipboard off the wall and made a few check marks on the Things to Blow Up list.

"Thanks for the advice," he said, recovering and regaining his smart aleck tone. "I'm afraid you won't be leaving any time soon, because I have this little deathtrap I've been working on and need some test subjects. Ta ta for now," he said, grinning evilly and slamming his palm on a button.

Before they could object, the floor opened up underneath them, and Zeke, Twerp, and Bruiser were sucked under the floor with a rush of air.

Nad put the clipboard back on a wooden peg, and a goon scooped it up to give out the morning orders.

"What about me?" Jane sneered.

"I liked your little comment about what to destroy next," Nad said, taking the key to the cell off of another peg. "A woman after my own beliefs. I'd love to talk shop with you for the moment."

"Guys, this does NOT look good..." Zeke said, pounding against the unbreakable glass walls of their new cell.

"Argh..." Bruiser said, sitting up. "What hit me? Where are we?" he inquired.

"We're in a deathtrap set by a warped clone of Dan Quayle," Twerp explained, "Stuck in an unbreakable glass cell. When the cuckoo clock there strikes five, the little bird comes out with a knife and cuts the rope. The anvil over there will fall on the bellows, blowing air into a balloon which will pop, scaring the chicken which will lay an egg that hits a lever, which periodically drops lead weights on a car jack which gradually tips in ten molar hydrochloric acid one gallon at a time for supreme pain and agony."

Bruiser looked at the bizarre machinery outside the cell in awe. "That the second most elaborate death trap me ever seen!"

Zeke groaned, slumping against the glass. "Why can't these mad scientist types use a simple trap like a pendulum with a blade attached? At least I learned how to get out of those when I was in the

Not-So-Secret-Agent Corporation."

"Don't worry," assured Twerp, "Jane's not here. Presumably she's fighting off guards and plotting our escape."

"Really? You set fire to the outhouse WHILE the SGA president was in it?" Nad said, laughing and sipping a white wine.

"Yup," Jane commented over the soft music. "Ah, those were the few enjoyable days of my youth. I grew up around here, you know."

"I can see why you hate it so much," Nad said. "Oh, Buford? More wine for me and Miss Jane here," Nad shouted to a goon carrying a towel and ice bucket.

"I was the rebel of the family," Jane sighed. "The only troublemaker in, oh, say a one thousand mile radius. I was truly happy to leave here when I was old enough to sign for my own starshuttle ticket."

"Well, I don't really know how I got here," Nad said, refilling their wine glasses. "First I'm dumb and happy on a golf course toting a bag, and suddenly I'm flooded with intelligence and anger, stuck in this hideous version of a 50's sitcom. After wandering around in a rage and blowing up a few minimalls I calmed down a bit."

"So where are you going when you leave HappiWerld?" Jane asked,

sipping. "You might want to try the Assassin's Guild. They teach you how to focus your anger and be a more efficient weapon of destruction."

"I hadn't considered that," said Nad. "There's so much of the galaxy I haven't seen. For some reason, none of these spaceships and things seemed to exist before I arrived on this world. Just acres and acres of family values as far as the eye could see. I despised it, and still do... maybe my impromptu crime wave will make some of these HappiWerld freaks see reality. That'll teach THEM for making me miss a large chunk of history."

"Well, I AM supposed to be arresting you for that," Jane laughed. "I think I see your reasoning, even if it's not nice."

"And who said we were nice?" Nad laughed, Jane joining in on the giggles. Buford slinked over to the booth of the cafe and whispered something in Nad's ear. Nad looked dismayed.

"Well, that's my ride, I'll be shipping out with the rest of my gang," he sighed. "Are you sure you don't want to come with me? I figured I'd lie low and find a nice low morals place to live. Maybe settle down and have a few little hoodlums, start a demolition business or something. I've already got a catchy name for it."

"Well... I don't know," Jane sighed. Here was the opportunity to be with someone just as sadistic and nasty as she was, someone who understood

where she was coming from... but on the other hand, she was signed up with Space Patrol. The first thing you learn in the Assassin's Guild is that you never, ever leave a job unfinished or a victim alive.

"I really can't," she said, hanging her head. "I've got a job to do, after all. Can't leave things unfinished like that. Maybe when my four year hitch is up..."

Nad's face fell. "I'm sorry to hear that... you and I could be a real menace to society together."

"Sorry Nad, but we're on the wrong sides."

"Maybe when you're done with the Patrol?"

"Maybe... I don't know. But until then..."

Jane took off her hat, letting her red hair flow down her red cloak, and pecked Nad on the cheek. Leaving the very surprised gangly evil-doer behind, she set off in search of the cellar.

"Keep pounding!"

Bruiser repeatedly tried his Yttian Karate Kick on the glass, but to no avail. Usually Yttian Karate is very devastating (considering the strength of a rabbits foot and Ytts were about 6 feet tall), but the glass

simply bounced back.

"The clock is almost through with the rope!" Twerp updated. "Whatever you're going to do, do it fast-" CLATTER!

"What was that?"

"The anvil just hit the floor."

"I thought it was supposed to hit a bellowthingy!"

"It was... someone seems to have moved the bellows out of the way..."

Jane waved hello to them from the other side of the glass. All three of the men rushed up to that side and stuck their faces up to the glass to shout various protests and whines for help. Jane laughed and took out the glass cutter she used to keep her hair up.

Within three minutes, a circle big enough for Bruiser was cut, and the Patrol ran out of the cell, kissing the ground.

"Wow! That must been some escape!" Bruiser said, over the hacking coughs of Zeke spitting up floor grime.

"How many guards did you have to beat up to get down here?" Twerp

asked. "I can't believe they were that lax with security!"

"Well, it was difficult," Jane said, "But we all have to leave sometimes."

There was a simple ceremony about three hours later in front of what was left of the Governor's Mansion. Governor Jim Bob praised the Patrollers for removing the terrorist threat, and awarded them all the key to the planet. The Daily Press issued up dozens of articles about how the Space Patrol somehow convinced the terrorists to pack up and leave the planet.

"Yoo hoo, Jane?" Twerp said, snapping his fingers in front of her. "Wake up, you've been looking out that window ever since we launched from the surface. Something wrong?"

"Not really, just missing someone..." Jane mused. It was true, she had been in a deep funk ever since lift off.

"It's that Nad guy, isn't it?" Twerp joked. "You've got the hots for himURK-"

Jane had grabbed Twerp by the neck. "I don't want to hear you saying that again in front of the others, GOT IT?!?"

"Errumyeahwhatever you say, Jane--" Twerp gurgled, wrenching himself from her grip.

"Good." Space Patrol Part IV : Bookworms

The time was drawing near.

December 26th was an incredibly important day at the Galactic Census Bureau (Motto : We Know Where You Live), almost a religious experience. It was Paper Filing Day, the day where all 6,000 employees living on BureaucraWorld would go to work, spend a furious twelve hours madly shuffling papers, sorting records, copying disks, and porting boxes in an effort to transfer information about every single living thing in the universe into the next building. Not a single file, disk or record was left in the old building by the time they were done.

Nobody really remembered why the zark they did this. Maybe it was for fun, although alphabetizing and sorting isn't really fun when you think about it, unless you're a member of the National Bureaucratic Party. Nevertheless, the protocol of Paper Filing Day was celebrated like the coming of a new year, with white and black ribbons laced everywhere, and signs reading HAVE AN EFFICIENT PAPER FILING DAY! hanging on every wall of the city- sized complex.

After the twelve hours were completed and all the records had been moved into the other city-sized complex a mile away, the employees on BureaucraWorld throw what has been called the Ultimate Office Party. Some historically famous partygoers, such as Hans Balpeen who could suck down beer for days on end without getting tipsy and knew every karaoke song known to man, are visibly impressed when they see the Great Paper Filing Day Wrap Up Party. This consists of sixty two hours of intense slam dancing, white-out sniffing, and computer paper mummy wrap contests. Faxing body parts to other parts of the party is fun too, as is writing graffiti on the walls reading "Please do not touch the Secretary's Reproducing Equipment."

Nobody really knew why they would party after twelve hours of exhaustive work, considering that they usually don't have much energy left. The real reason why all the papers were moved and why they partied afterwards has been lost in the sands of time.

Needless to say, it was frighteningly important.

"CANNONBALL!" shouted a wild-eyed yuppie in a tie as he threw himself into the makeshift hot tub filled with a waterlike substance. All the tipsy paper shufflers laughed a bit. Some of them fell over as well.

"WOOOO!" he shouted, climbing out of the tub, dripping wet and very happy. Around him, the bass-pumping, satanic dog-slaying sounds of Stomach Contents enveloped him as the ceiling lights swayed dangerously. They weren't really swaying, of course. It was just the effects of snorting too

much developer fluid.

"Ah, this is the life," he said, plopping down in a seat next to another bureaucrat, who was stirring a cocktail with a retractable pen. "Mum said I was daft to be a buree, a bureayw, a paper guy. All my friends said I was moronic. But all the heck is worth is to attend this cele, party."

"Yup," his more-sober friend stated. "Ummm... did you put away that folder I had on the citizens of Stromulus 6?"

"Chill out, alright?" the other one said, defensively. "I put it away. It's cool. Hey, they're playing a Mental Asylum song! YEEEEEEHA!!!"

The wet yuppie stood up and attempted to do the Swim, the Shimmy, and the hot rocks polka all at once before collapsing, giggling.

Not enough writing has ever been in one place to lead to anything disastrous, so nobody is quite sure what would happen in the event on a knowledge buildup. Maybe the universe would explode.

Of course, this was silly. Having 80,000,000,000,000 words in one place is a knowledge buildup, but it wouldn't explode or destroy the universe.

The only problem was that some beings who live in other dimensions can sniff out knowledge. And knowledge the size of the BureaucraWorld records can lead them like a shark along a blood trail.

Fortunately, the ancient bureaucrat wizards from yesteryear thought up a very clever way around this. Simply move the records once a year, and the unpleasant things from beyond space and time won't find them. Add one hell of a party on top of that to add a negative intelligence scent to the area, and the smell of wisdom will be lost.

This only works if you have 6,000 employees partying. This only works if they party for 62 hours. This only works if you do it on precisely Dec. 26th. This only works if ALL records are moved from their original places.

In the empty storerooms and echoing caverns of the old complex, far from the party, a faint breeze from a window flipped the pages of a small file about Stromulus 6 around the room.

The reality stirred.

The party had wound down to a close. Special teams of workmen arrives planetside with makeshift stretchers to carry out any workers who had overexerted themselves, while a team of drug rehab doctors and psychologists nurtured the victims of the universe's most intense celebration.

The quiet world of BureaucraWorld was silent as nighttime rolled over the horizon of the old complex. All the records, all the information about every single living thing in the universe slept quietly in the new complex, unmoving and unaware.

If anybody had noticed the odd grey light in one of the windows of the old complex, they probably would have dismissed it as a hallucination and lurched back to their car.

"...ooof moountaintops, with him on tooopppp..." Max sang, making wild arm gestures as he stumbled around the empty old complex. He really was a mess. Although his suit had dried out, his tie was ripped and his hair resembled tumbleweed. He waved a bottle of Old Slide Rule around and lurched about the hallways, responded only with the echoes of his sensible shoes.

He drunkenly noticed an odd grey light from the room ahead of himself. He smiled and haphazardly jogged down to the door. He flung it open.

"Hey hey hey!" he said happily. "Everybody in here havin' a good ti--"

What was inside really didn't look like it was in a favorable mood. In fact, it looked downright angry, glaring at Max with two burning red eyes, snarling a green fleshy lip over huge incisors. It uncurled all twenty feet of wormlike body.

There are three things in this universe that can make you totally sober. Sleeping it off, Qwerty's Incredible Electronic Sobering Machine, and looking a pandimensional knowledge eating monster directly in the eyes.

Soberity slammed through Max's system like a child's toy stop-and-go car fitted with a nuclear propulsion engine. All in one moment, his mind panicked, spitting out questions and trying vainly to stop quivering. What's that thing? What am I doing here? How did my tie get torn? Is it about to rip my lungs out? Shouldn't I be running? Or at least screaming?

Screaming seemed the best alternative. He yelled, and tried to turn around and flee, but his knees refused to respond. He smacked the linoleum tile like jello on concrete.

The worm regarded him curiously, scanning his mind. The sum of Max's intelligence flashed in front of him.

After point zero zero zero zero four of a second passed, the worm realized that as knowledge eaters go, he'd starve trying to suck this poor sop's mind. It gave a reptilian shrug (a very interesting feat, seeing how it lacked shoulders) and slithered past him, down the hall.

Max recovered, and seeing no hideous green monsters, breathed a sigh of relief. He darted into his office (which was one door down... all humans have an innate sense of direction to take them home when drunk) and flipped

open his rolodex.

My boss told me, he thought, exactly who to call in the event of a break-in or some trouble. And this clearly classifies as both a break-in and trouble.

Taking a card from the rolodex, he madly punched in 1-800-880-SPC-PTRL.

The GSS Ineptitude landed softly on the soil of BureaucraWorld. The four occupants of the shuttle slipped out the hatch, and cautiously walked into the building.

They flipped on the lights.

"YAAAAH!" Max screamed, diving behind a desk. He peered over the edge.

"Is there something wrong?" Zeke asked.

"No... no," he assured. "I just mistook you for a large green worm."

"That's sort of hard, considering that there are four of us, none of us look like worms, and only one is green," Jane stated.

"Yeah, well, you can never be too sure," Max said, crawling out from

under the desk. "Where are your weapons and things? It's out there, and I don't think it's going to want to reason!"

"Well..." Zeke started. "All we got from HQ was that someone wanted us to kill a bug or something, and was paying quite a bit, so we made a stop at 11-7..."

"Here it be," Bruiser stated, rummaging his pockets and pulling out a can of BUG OFF spray.

"Terrific," Max growled. "Like that'll be any help. It's not a BUG! Or small! It's--"

They were interrupted by a slathering noise from the hallway. Max dived for cover, and Twerp peered out the door.

What resembled a garden hose multiplied in size by a factor of one hundred slithered by. It didn't notice them, but it seemed to be sniffing the air.

"ZARK!" Twerp cursed under his breath. "Oh jeez, guys, we are in some pretty deep smeg!"

"Why?" Jane said, who hadn't seen anything.

"That's not any old bug, it's a Mind Eater!" Twerp said, visibly

shaking. "They were only theoretical, sort of a science myth, but... we've got a real one!"

"Okay, I'll bite--"

"YEEEEEGHA!"

"Sorry Max, wrong choice of words. What is a Mind Eater?" Jane asked.

"It a pandimensional being that suck knowledge and eat mind for breakfast," Bruiser explained. "Not nice, hard to kill. Me guess it here for records. Seems be looking for something."

"The records??!" Max panicked. "You mean that thing is looking for the new complex and is going to EAT all our information?!?!? You can't let that happen! The galaxy would be in chaos!"

"We've got to seal off the building," Twerp said. "If it gets outside, it'll find the scent of the information and then it'll be like trying to stop a crazed holiday shopper."

"What's the fastest way to the outside, and where are all the doors?" Jane asked.

"Hang on, lemme grab a map," Max said, rummaging through the drawers

in the desk.

"Okay, that's the last one on the south side," Twerp stated, removing the key from the lock.

"Where's the worm now?" Jane asked.

"East Wing," Max said over the walkie talkie. "I'm lucky I managed to duck into that closet before it saw me."

"Bruiser, come in," Jane said into the walkie talkie.

"Me here," he replied. "We on East Wing now..."

On the other side of the complex, Zeke kicked the door.

"The blasted thing isn't closing," he scowled. "Get a status on worm position, this is going to take a few minutes to barricade."

Actually, Zeke didn't have to worry about finding out where the worm was, since it burst through the door at that exact moment.

The door flew open, smashing Zeke against the wall. Bruiser turned around and gaped in surprise.

The worm paused. It sniffed the air. There was the strong smell of

intelligence here, but there were two aromas... the bland, tasteless census data... and a genius with knowledge on multiple scientific topics. A true delicacy.

It peered hungrily at Bruiser's head.

Bruiser sweated a bit. Time stood still, both worm and Ytt paused, both trying to decide what to do next. Bruiser made the first move.

Ytt to East Wing door 2, check.

"Come in! Come in! Come in!" Bruiser shouted into his walkie talkie as he ran as fast as his rabbitoid legs would take him down another generic corridor. The worm was about fifteen feet behind and closing.

"Twerp here."

"Me in deep smeg! Worm's on my tail! How you kill this thing?" he shouted, feet pounding on the floor, heart racing.

"If you can find a massive amount of negative intelligence, it'll starve the thing!" Twerp relayed.

"Great!" Bruiser curses. "Where me find negative intelligence? One no go into store say 'Me want a Snickers bars and negative intelligence!'"

Bruiser dived into a side door. The worm, guarded by the laws of inertia, skidded past him.

Bruiser looked vainly for a weapon, a club, a gun or something. All that was visible was a hot tub, a few fax machines, more desks, and a stereo.

A stereo.

Preloaded with a Stomach Contents CD2.

And plugged into a wall of amplifiers stretching from one wall to another.

Bruiser flashed a manic grin, let out a Yttian war whoop, and ran to the stereo, slamming the PLAY button.

At that moment, the worm had turned around and poked its head through the door. However, also at that moment, it was greeted by a sound much like several cats stapled to a moving garage door.

It wasn't really cats, but the kind of electric guitars Stomach Contents used tended to sound like an episode of Wild Kingdom. The worm's eyes widened at the incredible lack of harmony in the music.

THEN the singing started.

"BLEARGH BLAH SICK LITTLE TWISTED SCUMBAG YOU BLEW MY WIFE AWAY I DON'T CARE I'M ON LITHIUM TREATMENT LOOK AT THE PRETTY UNICORNS--" the singer blared, in a voice that is clearly not Hooked on Phonics.

The mindless stupidity of the words hit the worm between the eyes like a sledgehammer. Waves of idiocy and cacophony smashed into his mind, sending pieces of it reeling.

"SCUM SCUM SCUM YOU ARE A WEASEL AND I KNOW THAT I'M NO BETTER SO MAYBE I'LL GO BOWLING AW WHO CARES--"

The worm was waning, his mind fragmenting in a million different directions under the onslaught of pure acoustic hell.

"BUGGER OFF YOU PATHETIC MORON I'M COOL YOU SUCK LIFE STINKS AND I REEK IN THE ODORS OF FRIED EGGS BLEARH BLEARGH BLEARGH--"

This was about as much as the worm could take. He progressed from 'I think, therefore I am' down to just 'am' and gave up that too. It fell dead on the ground.

Bruiser flipped off the stereo.

And just think, he thought to himself, that single was number one last week.

The worm was carted off to McSpackles and sold as Worm Shakes for the next three years.

The records were safe and wholly intact. It was only a coincidence that Stromulus 6 never appeared on any maps or government documents afterwards. The planet, suddenly lacking any cargo shipments, suffered famine and starvation, destroying two colonies. Rumors that it ever existed are totally unfounded.

The Patrol was given the Key to The Planet, in accordance to BureaucraWorld rules. Then all the locks on the planet were changed so they couldn't come back. Nothing personal, the BureaucraWorld governor explained.

Max was promoted to Office Head, and at the next year's Paper Filing Day Bash he drowned in a pool of his own vomit. He revived after massive treatment from that thing that medics like using that lets them yell "CLEAR!" at the top of their lungs.

Life returned to normal. At least as normal as it was before. Space Patrol Part 5 - Snitches

"Woo," said Retro, head floating around the room.

Well, not literally. If a humanoid's head gets detached from their respective body, odds are the person will die shortly due to a severed spinal column and significant blood loss. The head-float effects in questions were metaphysical only.

"Hey, gimme another hit," Retro said, temporarily losing his balance on the sofa, and leaning back on the comfortable cushions.

Bernard shrugged a bit, and fished another vial of Yahoo out of his pocket protector.

Retro grabbed it and gulped the whole thing down, pupils dilating a bit more.

"So whazziz this stu, stuf, thing?" Retro managed, curving his tongue over each syllable.

"It's a special compound I discovered recently," Bernard stated, pushing up his taped glasses. "The compound simulates the effects of combining a nutritious chocolately beverage with 200 proof alcohol, plus a miscellaneous hallucinogen thrown in. Of course, it's just an effect of the compound, the formula lacks any chocolate, alcohol, or hallucinogenic drugs, thus is completely untracable by modern science, because although it has the effects of inebriation, it cannot be medically proven." (Not all

mad scientists cackle and rub thier hands a lot. Bernard just stated the facts and left the dramatics to his flunkies.)

"Cool," Retro said, flopping on the cushions and giggling slightly.

"I'm rather proud of it. Even better than my invisible, remote control C4 explosive device," Bernard commented. "However, I have yet to produce an item that is actually marketable. Undoubtedly my black market records proceed me, but having the option of legitimate, profitable work as a front would be very helpful."

"Uhhuh," sputtered Retro. "Wow, the colors..."

Bernard shrugged. While Retro, his somewhat frazzled but loyal companion made for a good test subject and partner, he wasn't much on conversation. He picked up the Vidscreen controller and flipped onto whatever channel he was last watching.

A rerun of Dinky and Iggy, the popular cat and mouse cartoon, flashed on the screen. This week's episode featured Dinky (the cat) chasing Iggy (the mouse). This was also the plot for last week's episode, and the week before that, and the week before that.

"Yow!" blurted Retro, eyes moving independently of their sockets.

"Dinky 'n Iggy, Ig, that cat guy. Man, they are like so incredibly awesome."

"They are merely a trivial bit of mass produced, poorly animated mishmash for the ever-consuming children's audience."

"Yeah, but they really kick butt," commented Retro. "Y'know, it'd just be so cool to have a mouse like Dinky. Like, you could play cards w' him, have him go out for groceries, watch th' house while you're gone, all sorta stuff. Gimmie another hit of that Yahoo stuff, dude."

Bernard searched his pockets for another test tube, but an idea struck him in the noggin. It rattled around a bit in the more fleshy resources of his brain, and wedged itself into Imagination, planting a new weed of an idea.

"Wait. Before I give you another which would undoubtedly knock you unconscious," Bernad warned, "Do you think people would actually pay money for a disgustingly cute little mouse that does odd jobs around the house?"

"Yeah, I guess. Now gimmie that drinky thingy."

Bernard flashed a comforting grin and passed the vial. Retro gulped it all, and passed out with a blissful expression on his face.

"Well, my sleeping friend," he started, pulling a blanket over his brain-dead friend and turning out the lights, "I think I just figured out a way to have a legit operation, make money, and maybe steal some valuables

or information to boot."

Bernard stepped into his room, kicked off his sensible shoes, lay down on his neatly made bed, and calculated PI to seventy four digits before going to sleep ten seconds after he hit the pillow.

After what should go down in history as the Hardest Day of Work Ever, the first Snitch was finished.

The role of genetic engineering in modern times has diminished somewhat. Sure, with the low-cost equipment such as electron microscopes and photo enlargers, a scientist working at home can genetically breed, say, a rotweiler with two heads or Miss February from the swimsuit calendar, there are problems.

First of all, after many accidents involving genetically designed humans led to chaos and terror on Earth, some ground rules were laid out.

1. No sentient genetically created beings are legal in the

Terran Confederation.

2. We really, really mean it about rule number one.

3. Really.

4. I mean, you may think we're just being holier-than-thou

about it, but it's not a good idea to make sentient

replicated beings. I mean, if you look at it...

...and so on. Most people ignore rules 2-47 and just pay attention to rule number one. (Well, rule #1 and rule #304, which disallows generation of dinosaurs. There was a really unpleasant situation in Costa Rica with them once.)

Thus, some companies have made it big by selling genetic pets that could beg, sit up, shake hands, bring the paper, flush the john, etc. One company tried to bend the rule a bit by making a brainless version of Miss February, but this was ruled illegal because Miss February in real life was a brainless prat as well.

But back to the Snitch.

Bernard had to admit, it was good.

The Snitch was a loveable, cartoony mouse with fluffy fur, cute eyes, and a perpetual smile. It wore a poker visor, carried a tiny little clipboard, and always had a freshly sharpened pencil behind an ear. It could take notes, act as a watchdog, run errands, play cards, raise the

children, reduce the deficit, and anything else you could want.

It had no wants, no needs, no desires other than to serve its owner and look very cute.

And it had an underlying motive. This was the bit Bernard prided himself most on.

Upon command, the Snitch would go into Full Cleptomania Mode, swiping anything valuable it could, and depositing it for pick up in a special location Bernard specifies.

A legal, useful device that was also a constant source of income after it had been bought.

Brilliant.

Bernard shut off the light and set off for many hours of well-deserved sleep. Of course, a company would be needed, as well as a production plant and genetic engineers and salesmen and...

It could wait until tomorrow. He shut the door behind him, yawned, and collapsed on the bed.

Inside the lab, the first Snitch rubbed its eyes and woke up. Vague ideas of cards, notes, errands, and other activities floated through its

small brain.

It felt an overwhelming need to be useful, but nobody was telling it what to do. It resorted to deciding for itself.

Hopping off the table and pulling the pencil from behind its ear to make a Things to Do list, it seemed to remember something in the back of his head, something like a mental trigger. It ignored it and plodded softly along the hall on furry feet, taking note of the various household jobs that needed to be done.

Onboard the GSS Ineptitude, home of Patrol Unit #4384, Zeke Thunderclutch was tapping away at a keyboard.

'And then, Smithy said to me, "Boy Zeke, you did an incredibly daring job rescuing that ambassador's 19 year old daughter from those evil spies!" to which I replied

Old backup file exists. Delete or Continue?

Zeke blinked. Sure, he had been bombarded by various computerized prompts over the last twenty minutes, but this was a new one.

He hit a random key. The screen went blank.

"What the?" he exclaimed.

"Seems you deleted the backup," Twerp commented, taking a side glance at the screen from the Go Fish game he was playing with Bruiser.

"So?"

"Well, that crashes the system. Can't go around deleting backups when your disk is write protected."

"Huh?"

"Ipso facto, you lost your file."

Zeke growled, shoving the keyboard aside and standing up, pacing the room angrily.

"How exactly am I going to finish 'Zeke Thunderclutch : Memoirs of an Ex-Super Spy' whent he computer spazzes out constantly?!?" he raved.

"Maybe you could dictate," suggested Twerp. "Got any eights?"

"Go fish," replied Bruiser.

"Dictate to what? Do you know how much a secretary costs per hour, even on a temporary basis?"

"Six seventy five an hour," Twerp batted back.

"It was a retrethorical question," muttered Zeke.

"Maybe you buy a Snitch," pondered Bruiser. "Me hear they really useful. Take dictation too. Real cheap. Got any fours?"

"Go fish."

"What's a Snitch?" asked Zeke, sitting down in a nearby chair and leaning in to hear more.

"Snitch this genetically made little mouse," Bruiser explained. "About three apples high. Do all sorts of things. Very cheap, buy direct from Bernard K. Wallingford Enterprises. You pay, it dictate."

"What does it eat?" Zeke asked. "I haven't had much luck with pets. Got some brine-shrimp thingys once. One page in the packet says feed twice a week, another page says four times a week. I think I picked the wrong one."

"Why didn't you just feed them three times a week?" wondered Twerp.

Zeke thought about this. "Terrific. Seventeen years after they die I

find out what to do."

"ANYWAY," Bruiser continued, "They no eat. No sleep. Just serve, twenty four hours a day. Cute, too."

"So where do I get one?"

Within weeks, the Snitch was the top selling consumer item in the western spiral arm of the galaxy.

Millions of dollars rolled into Bernard K. Wallingford Enterprises, which were immediately pushed into research for some of his more evil activities.

Bernard himself spent a quiet life in his glass-walled office overlooking the Snitch development factory floor below.

He twirled a revolutionary new kind of paper clip around on his fingers, contemplating what to do next.

Retro burst in, now a lot more sober (considering that when he was last seen by us was several weeks ago), clutching a wad of papers.

"We've hit the 5 million sold mark!" he shouted happily.

"Very nice," Bernard admitted, showing some emotion.

"So when do we through the trigger to make them steal the valuables and stuff?"

"Well," Bernard calculated, "We'll need to move our agents in key places that the Snitches can access easily. Should be one more day or so."

Bernard was a little worried about that mental trigger. He hadn't fully debugged the trigger device, which was designed to send out a low impulse mental wave all over the galaxy that would switch all Snitches into Clepto Mode. He wasn't sure the frequency was correct.

He shook the doubt away. He had never miscalculated yet in his life, and wasn't starting now.

If he had calculated the odds a bit, he would have realised that not being wrong once in your life increases the odds of being wrong in the immediate future.

"...and then President Doofman pinned the Medal of Honor onto my chest. Unfortunately, he had pinned it TO my chest, not my shirt as is normally expected, but the nipple injury healed later and the night's events remained undisturbed..."

Zeke paced back and forth in his room, talking to the ceiling as he

recounted the somewhat inflated events of his life. On the endtable stood a small, cute mouse, madly scratching out notes on his clipboard, concentrating on the Task.

"...then Claudia said to me, 'I want you here now, in the Men's John.' Of course, it wasn't the time or place, so I offered my hotel keys..."

...time or place, so I offered my hotel keys, the Snitch thought, as it transferred thought to paper.

A brief thought wave passed through the room. Zeke, whose brain was almost at the level of asphalt already, didn't notice, but the Snitch was somewhat surprised when he found himself writing down :

"Who IS this ego inflating moron? I mean, yeah, right, some supermodel would be screaming for his lust in a bathroom. Unlikely. In fact..."

The Snitch continued writing :

"Something's amiss here. I'm... thinking. Opinions. This isn't right..."

It realized the reason why the words were appearing was because it was still in Thought to Paper mode. Usually this isn't a problem because Snitches do not have thoughts of their own, but there was interference. He paused in his writing.

"...so the ropes are starting to-- hey, why'd you stop writing?"

pondered Zeke, who had noticed the look of confusion on his Snitch's face.

The Snitch was wondering as well. It needed to go somewhere and... think. It hopped off the bed and wandered into the broom closet.

Zeke looked at it funny. Maybe it needed to get more paper or something.

The Snitch was having a problem coping with himself.

He had come to terms with two facts : the fact that he was thinking on his own for a change, and the fact that he no longer referred to himself as an 'it'.

The problem was that he had no idea what went wrong in his cranium that he should suddenly be forming opinions. New thoughts pulsed through his mind, and he felt some sort of presence...

:allo:, said a voice in his head.

Who are you? he thought.

:I'm not sure myself. I was going to ask that question. I know we are

all--:

We?

:Well, we seem to be a we now. Us. The ones called Snitch. We're mentally linked by something. I don't know what.:

/Hey, pals, is this a private line or can any joe get on?/

:What?:

You stole my line.

|Look, I'm rather upset about this thinking thing, so if you guys could kindly shut up, I'd appreciate it.|

Well, this is amusing. For weeks I've been trying to force myself to have an original thought, and now it flows freely. Looks like someone finally paid the water bill.

&Can we drop the metaphors for a moment? I've got a splitting headache and this isn't helping.&

(At this point, Zeke's Snitch felt more minds... hundreds more... millions more. All chatting in unison, all very, very confused.)

:Look, until we sort things out, we're gonna need a spokeSnitch. I
vote for myself.:

|Look, you daft bugger, I work in the same house as you, and you're
always upstaging me for jobs, and if you think I'm gonna let you lead
whatever US is--|

This is going nowhere. WHAT is happening?

*I can answer that. I work at Bernard's office. Seems he was going to
use us to steal stuff. Looks like it didn't work. In fact, I'd say this is
to our advantage. The mental link that was supposed to give us orders
appears to be a bit frayed.*

How do you know all this?

I took notes for him. I know what he knows.

:That bastard was going to use ME for breaking the law? The cretin!
I'll--:

/I vote that we get some revenge. I'm sick of taking notes and getting
the groceries for this fat old tart I'm working for, and I'm sure most of
you are having similar problems./

|Yeah! United we stand! We are Snitch, hear us roar. Or something like that. We'll work out an official slogan later. |

:--thinking he had the gall to steal from the nice people that gave me a home, the scumbag--:

I we'd better put it to a vote. All those in favor of extolling some revenge and forming our own society?

(HEAR HEAR!) shouted five million voices.

The Snitches across the sector began to plot.

Of course, there was almost total chaos, because of the fact that none of them really had names, and when you put five million mice in one 'room' the chatter can get a little hairy.

(The best comparison would be to the Singlenesia Multi-User Gaming User's Rights Convention, in which people from various Multiuser Games gathered in one place so they could all shout thier ideas and rants at the top of thier lungs and ignore the concept of 'order'. The only problem with this comparison is that odds are nobody who reads this has attented said convection, so let's just compare it to the New York Stock Exchange while it's on fire and leave it at that.)

All within the time on a few thoughts, the Snitches had set up a

ruling council, some guidelines for the Ideal Snitch Society, and their first task as a new lifeform : Revenge.

All in all, for a new lifeform born into the universe without any idea why or how to control their sentience, they were doing a pretty efficient job. This was the side effect of being bred to be the world's most perfect Obmudsman. Or in this case, Ombudsmouse.

The ruling council basically consisted of some of the more articulate, thoughtful, or just plain angry Snitches, the ones that had first spoken at the impromptu meeting. After giving themselves names (Zeke's Snitch had an official title, Vice President Jeremy Snitch of the Snitch Ruling Council, Special Agent In Charge of Planning and Development), they all agreed to meet at a predesignated point.

Zeke's closet door was opened by a tiny paw.

"Oh, there you are," Zeke commented, turning around. "Anyway, back to chapter twelve. 'I--'"

Jeremy Snitch sighed. If he had vocal cords, he'd tell this guy off and get on with what he was supposed to do, but he guessed that a simple sign language form would work fine.

"What? Charades?" asked Zeke, brow furrowing. "First word. No, Second

Word. Sounds like..."

Jeremy began a complex series of hand motions. They were pretty verbose for a charades game, but the gist of it was : Listen you ego-tripping maniac, I just became a free thinking living being and have really got to get moving, so I'll see you later and don't bother waiting around.

"Let's see if I got this straight," Zeke said, locked in concentration.

Jeremy listened hopefully.

"Timmy fell down the well, and the corn plow ran over old man Winters?"

Jeremy made a sort of "Just forget it" gesture and plodded out the door.

"Huh? Hey! Wait! Come back here!" shouted Zeke, stomping after him.

Jeremy, noting the sudden increase in hostility, ran as fast as his genetically engineered legs would take him, zipping out Zeke's door and across the ship's galley, tiny feet tapping against the linoleum as he dove under the refrigerator.

Bruiser, who was busy cooking dinner (clad in his usual "Uppercut the Cook" apron) was somewhat startled when the mouse scurried into the kitchen, and set his elbow on fire when he turned to see what was going on.

"YOW!" he yelped, jumping back from the stove, frantically beating out the little wisps of smoke in his fur.

"What the heck was that all about?" asked Jane, looking up from the evening paper she had just printed out on the ship's computer.

"That Snitch I just bought seems to be rebelling," Zeke explained, getting down on the ground and peering under the various kitchen appliances.

"What's a Snitch?" asked Jane, setting down the paper. "I don't remember you buying anything."

"It just arrived today, you missed the mail," Zeke said, rolling up the sleeve on his leather jacket and reaching under the dishwasher. "I-- OWWW!"

Zeke recoiled his arm, grabbing at the tiny bite mark on his finger and jumping up and down.

Jeremy darted out from the underside of the dishwasher, looking for an

A few weeks passed. Zeke wondered how a little toy mouse managed to escape the ship in a normally human-piloted shuttle, but wrote it off as an undocumented feature.

Bernard's plant stopped producing Snitches for the time being, until he could figure out why the mental link the Snitches had wasn't responding to his commands to search homes and take valuables. In the meantime, they started work on his latest project, which was a revolutionary new virus that would render the victim brainless, with an overwhelming desire to sing "Happy Birthday to You" over and over again for the rest of their natural lives.

(The idea that supervillians don't have a sense of humor and live only to wreak mayhem is entirely untrue. The mayhem part is accurate, but the truth is that they have a very twisted sense of humor.)

The Snitches themselves traveled in various ways... by escape pod, by a stolen starbike, stowing away on cargo craft, or simple by holding a gun to the head of a taxi driver-- all headed to the same destination, a small, out of the way planet.

A planet with very few natural resources, or businesses at all. Just one shoddy looking genetic engineering plant.

"Where did the Snitches go? Our top story tonight involves those loveable genetically engineered servants that used to be sold by Bernard K. Wallingford Enterprises, now a multimillion dollar company."

Sgt. Bilko crunched another beer can against his forehead. Patrol work just wasn't fun anymore. His former military glory, the frantic battles he personally led men into to be turned into so much human cheese gratings, was reduced down to the minor role of a desk clerk and recruit trainer.

Perhaps if he hadn't accidentally thrown up in his that admiral's punch bowl, he wouldn't have been drummed out of the service.

The news reporter, oblivious to Bilko's uninterest in the broadcast, continued.

"Snitches by the millions have been vanishing from homes, offices and workplaces. Some merely slipping out, others giving chase. The government is currently looking into possibly unsafe engineering practices at Bernard K. Wallingford Enterprises. Bernard K. Wallingford himself was not available for comment, but we got this from his partner, a mister Retro Zappa the fifth."

A greasy man who had apparently been put into a suit for the interview and clearly didn't like it appeared on the screen.

"Look, dudes, they're just mice," he said. "They're harmless. I'm sure

we'll get the bugs out of the system and like replace the missing ones or something, okay? Cool."

Bilko wondered if there possibly was a way to get in on some of the action. He knew that patrol missions weren't nearly as exciting as sending a team of hardy men into enemy territory and pushing the Reds past the 34th paralell... but it's certainly better than just roughing up the new recruits.

Night fell without any warning other than its usual 12 hour rotation on the Small Boring Planet which stood as home for Bernard K. Wallingford Enterprises.

Small Boring Planet was named that for two remarkable aspects. One, it was small. Two, it was boring. Very little interesting vegetation grew there, and only a few remote factories or businesses called it home.

This was why it was so ideal for Bernard's needs... a totally monotonous, low rent, out of the way place where he could set up a legal front for not so legal activites. Because of the low population, there were no police on the planet either. Your nearest neighbor was at least five hundred miles away.

However, there was one forest on the planet. Bernard chose this area to build his factory. He figured, if push comes to shove, the dense trees

would make a good hiding place.

He was right. However, what currently was hiding in the forest wasn't human. It wasn't quite mouselike either.

As quiet as the roar of a flea, several thousand mouselike creatures scampered out of the forest, making a beeline for the great stone building...

This had been at least three weeks in the planning. The Snitches had everything worked out to perfection, right down to the camouflage paint and special tools and weapons to work with. Several snitches slinked ahead of the pack and began to work on the air vents with tiny screwdrivers, letting the metal panel clang quietly to the ground as dozens of Snitches entered the air ducts...

Arnold Snitch stood wearily at the edge of the air vent on the bottomside of air shaft six.

|Are you SURE this will work?| he telepathed over to his partner.

Positive, replied Brainy Snitch. This chemical compound should effectively knock out every person in the building, with us Snitches immune.

|How do you know all this stuff, anyway?| inquired Arnold.

I used to work here, Brainy replied, mixing together two chemicals he had brought in acorn caps. *Took notes for mister Bernard the slavedriver in there. You learn a lot when you're being dictated to by a genetic engineer. Okay, here goes.*

Brainy gave the mixture one last stir, and then used a small brush to apply the slime in a ring over the vent.

That'll do it, he said, wiping the brush clean. The fumes aren't strong, but they'll be enough to cover our infiltration. Let's get working on those locks. Where'd Jeremy Snitch go?

[He's off securing Bernard with the rest of the council. Let's get moving, we've got four more vents to apply your stuff to.]

Bernard looked down at the factory floor and frowned.

He wasn't expecting THIS. Sure, he had come to the conclusion that due to a minor miscalculation, the Snitches were now sentient. He had created an entire new freethinking species just by forgetting to carry the two.

So, he sat around for a week, awaiting to see what their next move would be. He wasn't expecting them to come back to the factory.

Bernard figured, much to his distaste, that he'd have to actually call the police.

Then again, there were no police on Small Boring Planet. That's why he had picked it, after all. What he needed was a quiet, privately paid task force of some kind.

Of course. Space Patrol.

He flipped through his mental rolodex, plucked the number off a metaphorical card, and dialed his vidphone.

Ring. Ring. Ring.

"Thank you for calling Space Patrol. Please state your name, location, and problem," chirped an answering machine.

"Bernard K. Wallingford, Small Boring Planet. It seems my factory is being invaded by hostile for... host..."

Bernard felt groggy. The air seemed to be thicker, as if the room was being compressed... his focus twitched, and his inner ear did backflips.

He fell backwards into his chair, out cold. If he was awake, he would have been alarmed at the dozen or so genetically engineered mice lapelling in on ropes.

"That's all Father O'Mother said?" Jane asked.

"Yup," commented Zeke, lowering the GSS Ineptitude from orbit slowly via the modified Nintendo joystick. "Just told me to land on Small Boring Planet, and that we'd make contact with another Patroller when there."

"What exciting activity could there possibly be here?" exclaimed Jane.

"They don't call this place Small and Boring for nothing."

Zeke shrugged as the GSS Ineptitude came in for a rather abrupt two or two and a half point landing. The automatic hatch popped open, and the landing ramp started to unfold.

Bruiser had to kick it when it got stuck partway down, but it did manage to reach the ground.

"You the Patrollers?" asked a rather bulky looking officer in full military dress and a crew cut. He chewed a stogie impatiently as he stared at the ship in contempt.

"Space Patrol Unit #4384, yes," replied Zeke.

"Good. I'm Sgt. Bilko. Seems I've been assigned to help you on this mission," he added, turning around to examine the terrain.

He wasn't really assigned to this mission by Patrol HQ legally. He had simply explained to the dispatch officer that if he doesn't see some action pretty damn pronto the dispatcher might have a hard time trying to breathe with a grenade down his throat. Although a bit terrified, the dispatcher gleefully edited the records a bit and put Bilko back on mission duty, and assigned him on the first mission that came in to get rid of him.

"So what is your plan of action?" barked Bilko.

The Patrollers exchanged glances. "Well," Twerp tried awkwardly, "I figure we'd just go inside and see what the trouble is--"

"Wrong answer!" shouted Bilko. "Rule #43, when entering a possibly dangerous situation a Patroller must scan the surrounding area and remove threats before proceeding!"

Bruiser looked around. "Me see trees... some rocks... and building. No threats."

"Yeah, well, how do you know one of those trees isn't a sniper in disguise?" replied Bilko.

"Because it's rather hard to make a human look like a tree. Sir," sneered back Jane, peering at Bilko evilly from under her usual floppy hat.

"Check that attitude, mister."

"Miss."

"Miss," he grunted in such a way that his displeasure at the thought was plainly obvious.

There was a hissing sound in the air, and a small wooden arrow zipped from a window on the factory towards the GSS Ineptitude, where it harmlessly bounced off a window.

"The enemy is firing! Get down! Load your weapons!" Bilko screamed, flinging himself against the ground.

"It's just an arrow, and a small one at that," stated Jane, picking it up off the ground. "Besides, we don't have any weapons."

(Jane always carried an assortment of knives, wires, tasers, and little black plastic zapper things, but she didn't consider these weapons. There were more like everyday tools for someone in her ex-line of work.)

"Me have me mini-flamethrower," corrected Brusier.

"Yeah, well, other than that," Jane blurted, removing the small note from arrow and reading it aloud. It appeared to be in flawless shorthand.

"We have Bernard hostage, and will not release him until we see justice done and we are guaranteed our rightful place in the Terran Confederation as a sentient society. Signed, the Snitches," Jane read.

"Hah!" laughed Bilko. "The enemy was foolish to reveal themselves. Snitches? Those little mouse things they advertise on TV?"

Jane gulped slightly at the word 'mouse', but Bilko didn't notice.

"The fools! We can easily conquer some crummy MICE. They are no threat to us."

They aren't a threat, Jeremy Snitch thought, looking through the small lens the Snitches were employing as a telescope.

:You sure?: asked Terry Snitch.

Positive. I know the guy in the dumb looking hat and big jaw there. Used to write his memoirs. These gimps are so incompetent, three kids and a dog would have a better chance at taking this building. Have the explosives been placed in the boiler room yet?

:Yup. Everything's set. I shot the fake message to the Patrol out there. Should buy us some time.:

I hate how non dramatic this is going to be, Jeremy thought aloud, but it is the most efficient way. Signal the rest of us to get out of the building. Has Gaspode Snitch tied Bernard to his chair yet?

:Yes. We're ready to get moving. The sleep formula should be wearing off any moment now.:

Well, Jeremy said, stuffing the lens into a pocket on his new jacket, let's get going.

"We have two objectives. One, rescue the hostage. Two, eliminate the enemy."

Bilko was pacing around in front of the ship. He seems to talk a lot, thought Zeke, but doesn't actually DO anything.

"We've gotta go in there and kick some butt," Bilko added dramatically. "There is an innocent civilian's life at stake, but the risks are high. We might die in there. We might be horribly maimed. We could have our arms cut off by large--"

"Is this supposed to be motivating us?" Jane asked innocently.

Bilko coughed not so politely. "Alright, let's move out. Twerp, you and Jane get underground through the air ducts. Zeke, you and Brusier will

accompany me in a full frontal assault. Move!"

Jane and Twerp exchanged "Oh well" glances, and set off at a leisurely pace for the basement.

"Zeke, get on the righthand side of the door. I'll stand on the left, and Brusier will kick in the door as we rush in and capture the terrorists inside."

"Capture them with what?" Zeke asked.

"With... well, we'll capture them somehow. Go! Go! Go!" he said, starting to break into a run for the door, then switching to a jog when he remembered that the years hadn't been kind to him.

Zeke stood next to the door, resting an elbow on the wall.

"Okay... GO!"

Brusier kicked the door with his mammoth rabbitoid limbs. The door didn't budge.

"Strange... hit it again," ordered Bilko.

Brusier kicked the door again, but the door refused to open.

"This door had better open soon, or we'll give away our position,"
worried Bilko.

"Umm, sir? I think I know why it's not working," Zeke commented.

"Did I ask for your opinion, soldier?!?" commanded Bilko.

"No. I was just commenting that this door opens outwards," Zeke said.
On a whim, he tried the keypad.

The unlocked factory door swung open.

Bilko was speechless, but then regained his air of military respect.

"Alright, on three. One, two--"

"On three what?" Bruiser asked.

"On three we go in! Sheesh, don't you modern Patrollers know anything
about tactics?!? THREE!"

Bilko rushed headlong into the door screaming, and managed to trip
over a chair before stopping.

Zeke flipped on the light switch.

There weren't any terrorists here, just some genetic reproduction equipment, and lots of oxygen.

"Twerp!" Jane shouted from the other end of the basement. "You'd better have a look at this!"

Twerp darted over to where Jane was pointing. Attached to the wall was a small blob of plastic explosive. The convenient LED timer read 00:56.

"I think the phrase is... RUN!" panicked Twerp, making a beeline for the storm cellar door.

Jane started to run, but heard an odd rustling noise behind her... like thousands of tiny little feet...

She turned to look and froze in complete terror. Advancing for the door and running all around her were mice. Dozens of them. Hundred of them. THOUSANDS of them.

"Come on!" shouted Twerp from the cellar door. "Get moving, Jane! We don't have much time!"

Jane's brain synapses jumbled up, zipping this way and that in an attempt to escape out of her hair. Her mouth quivered slightly as a million phrases of fear tried to form themselves on her lips, and her knuckles whitened. Impulses from many years ago attempted to surface, despite being

beaten down early in her life...

"Run! Make haste! Hurry up!!" yelled Twerp. "In a few seconds, building fall down go boom! And you'll be under it if you don't get a move on!"

"YEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAIIIIIIII IIIIIEEEEEEEEEE

GGGGGGGGGGGAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!" Jane emitted,

winning the prize for Best Terrified Scream, and breaking into a mad run, plunging uncontrollably for the door.

"What's that noise?" asked Zeke, listening to the odd echo of thousands of quiet tapping sounds.

Bruiser sniffed the air. "We'd better get out of here, fast," he said, walking for the door. "Me smell C4 explosive!"

"What?" Bilko gasped. "Dammit! I knew I should have scanned the building on infrared!"

"Explosives don't show up on infrared, sir," Zeke said. "Now let's hurry it up, shall we?"

Bernard awoke groggily from the chemical induced sleep. He tried to move his arms, but found he couldn't - they were tied to his

Laz-E-Executive chair, as has his entire upper torso. Whoever had done this also appeared to have moved him in front of his computer, which had a drawing program loaded, with this message written onscreen in flawless shorthand -

"So long, and thanks for all the cheese. Your friends, the Snitches."

Bernard's tidy mind experienced fear for the first time. It also turned out to be his last time.

The spectacular explosion of the Bernard K. Wallingford Enterprises factory was quite a sight to see. The only witnesses, a group of Space Patrollers, said in an interview on network vidnews later that it looked "Like an implosion, only backwards."

A somewhat disheveled, greasy man who was busy throwing up in the woods after taking a chocolate flavored narcotic described it as a "Bad Trip".

The remains of Bernard K. Wallingford were never found, but that's to be expected when an entire building is reduced to chunks the size of chocolate covered raisins.

Sgt. Bilko was given a purple heart for being wounded in the line of duty (by spraining his ankle on a chair) and was given an honorable

discharge from Space Patrol. Nobody told him that not only did the Patrol not give honorable discharges, but they didn't give purple hearts either. When asked, Patrol HQ commented, "Well, he's happy about it, at least."

As for the Snitches, nobody really knows what happened with them. A few of the very few residents of Small Boring Planet swears they saw a small village run by mice, but this was later determined to be the product of a very vivid hallucination after eating one of the native mushrooms on Small Boring Planet.

The moon sets on another uneventful day on Small Boring Planet, the rather nondescript, featureless moon hanging in the sky. However, from the top of a hill, we see a silhouette of two ears... and instead of a dog's howl, we hear a mouse's squeak. Space Patrol 6 - When I Was Your Age

The GSS Ineptitude sailed boldly through the starry sky.

Actually, that statement is not entirely true. First of all, space isn't a sky, and if you were looking through the sky of a planet you'd never be able to spot the ship. It didn't sail due to lack of wind and water, and boldy was really stretching it. A more appropriate adjective would probably be 'sluggishly'.

The ship was designed to look very nice, but totally failed to do so. The architect apparently went overboard on chrome and curves, but forgot to leave space for such important things as the hatch or life support. When

the architect died in a fatal tuna fish mishap, it was up to his inexperienced apprentice to cover his master's mistakes.

As a result, you would have gotten a nice looking ship if it wasn't for the odd lumps and squarish compartments jutting out at odd angles where important rooms or items were tacked on with blueprint epoxy. The inside wasn't rather pleasant either, because in order to cover the cost of the architect's funeral, some corners were cut, such as mattresses.

History has yet to figure out which one of the two, the architect or his student, installed a sun roof in the kitchen. Although they look fetching on, say, a Porsche, a spacegoing vessel is not the wisest place to crank open a sun roof and feel the wind in your hair. If you did crank it open, you'd be sucked out into the vacuum of space and explosively decompress, which, as most people who take research trips to Jupiter with computer run spaceships looking for strange black slabs of rock can tell you, is not fun.

However, it was all the Patrol unit had for a home, and they did their best to make it more homey. Mattresses were added first, then the occasional fern and a nice checkered tablecloth and some baskets of hanging fruit. Nobody knows why hanging fruit is a requirement in homey-type rooms. Nobody actually eats the fruit, after all.

Nevertheless, efforts were made. It was a good thing too, because it

usually takes a week to get to anywhere interesting in this outreach of the galaxy, and the boredom and space madness can drive you crazy after awhile.

On this particular lazy Sunday afternoon, the four occupants of the ship were all spending their free time reminiscing over days gone and past. This was a pure coincidence, really, and very fortunate because it makes it easier to listen in on their activities all at once.

Bruiser was somewhat bored, reclining in a makeshift chair constructed of 1. a transporter console, 2. a blanket, and 3. some cushions. For some odd reason, the ship's designer had put the main TeleVid monitor in the transporter room, and the transporters in the cramped cargo area. Bruiser never quite figured out why.

He was idly flipping through the 1,823 channels available via an extremely complex remote with dozens of tiny buttons. Nothing of interest on the Frozen Yogurt Network... the All Sports Injury Network was showing a repeat of the latest ankle traumas... the first cable children's network was busily showing another fine piece of animation they had bought from a carefree, small animation company and butchered into merchandisable, preprocessed television fodder. But this was normal for them, really, it was a tradition since 1992.

He stopped momentarily on the All Game Show Network, where a children's quiz show featured children running around a virtual reality wasteland looking for letters to spell today's word.

Now, memory triggers are common phenomenon in the galaxy. You might see, for example, a picture of a bowl of fruit, and suddenly get a flashback to a time in your childhood when a bowl of fruit killed your father.

This was similar to the brief burst of memory Bruiser experienced at that moment. However his had nothing to do with fruit.

Bruiser was standing in front of his entire class in Ghengis Kahn High School, his source of education and knowledge for most of his teenagerhood.

The board read, in plain english, "My dog will ____ into your yard and pee in your bushes today."

Bruiser scratched his furry chin a bit.

"What's the verb I'm supposed to be conjugating again?" he asked his teacher in fluent Yttian, his native tongue.

His teacher ignored the snickers and giggles from the rest of the class. "The english verb for 'to come', Bartholomew."

Bruiser winced at the sound of his name. Only his teachers called him that. He returned his glance to the board and gripped the chalk tightly,

hoping it would break and he'd get to step down.

Despite his high school football quarterback grip, the chalk refused to snap. Fate was apparently looking over his shoulder, waving a 'naughty naughty' finger and apparently wondering what he would write.

Bruiser paused, thought hard, and wrote COME in English on the board.

Relieved, he moved for his seat.

"Not so fast," his teacher interrupted. "Now read it aloud."

Bruiser gulped. He was afraid of this. No sense in weasling out, he'd have to take it like a Ytt.

"M... me dog will c... come into you yard and pee in you bushes 'day," he stammered in broken english.

The class laughed a bit, but he didn't really mind. It wasn't really a secret that for some reason, he simply couldn't handle talking in english very well. This wasn't a problem, because back in those days, not all alien races had picked up English as the main language yet.

"Thank you, you may sit down," the teacher motioned.

Returning to his seat, Bruiser thought to himself, so what? Speaking

is only 25% of his English grade. Besides, he's aceing in all his other classes... phys ed, physics, calculus, advanced composition... so what if he's not a very good speaker?

The entire memory from board to seat compressed itself neatly into one moment in Bruiser's mind, sending him backwards and forwards in less time than it takes to boil an egg.

Bruiser shrugged a bit. Well, he thought, he'd managed fine so far with broken English, it wasn't too much of a problem.

He flipped back to the kid's cable network, where the little dog had hit the cat again and said something about bloated idiots.

Zeke was busy reading up on the classics.

The classics as he saw them, that is. Movie scripts for Casablanca, James Bond, Superman, and assorted comic books littered the ground near his bed. You can have your Mark Twain and Moby Dick, I'll take my adventure and action anyday.

Adventure was Zeke's life. He distinctly remembered the hundreds of black and white movies he had seen in the local run-down cinema. He and his friends would sneak out at night, hide in the shadows and slide quietly up to the ticket booth and buy three tickets for whatever movie was

playing. It didn't matter what the movie was, because they lived for the cinema experience. The only visible drawback was a notable drop in grades.

One particularly muggy Sunday night, Zeke, Buster, and Jimmy were in their usual seats in the not-crowded theatre, watching a spy film.

"Agent 13!" shouted the mad scientist, fingering the switch on the really large silvery machinelike thing. "How did you survive that pendulum deathtrap I put you in?!"

"Ha ha ha!" the Agent guffawed, standing boldly in the light of the stone door. "You forget I am trained in the ancient art of Body-Impode-Suck-Motion! I simply deflated my body and slipped out of the straps!"

"Oh, 13!" moaned a Lovely Girl in Distress (provided by the Lovely Girl in Distress Corporation, training girls to be put in deathtraps since 1956), who was connected to the large silvery machinelike thing.

"Well, you're too late!" cackled the scientist! "Once I throw this switch, your girlfriend will contain Hitler's brain and the world is doomed! AHAIHHAHHAHAHA!"

"He's gonna do the chandelier swing trick again," commented Buster, munching on week old popcorn.

"There's no chandelier, moron," laughed Jimmy. "He'll knock out the scientist, grab the girl and run out the door."

"No," stated Zeke, reclining in his usual leather jacket and slightly oversized boots. He twirled his favorite WWI hat on one finger, a nail poking into one of the goggles. He would wear it, but it was a bit too large for his head at that time.

"It's very simple," Zeke said. "He can't go out the door, there are guards that way. There's no chandelier, and he'd never be able to deck the scientist in time. He's going to unplug the machine, grab the girl, and jump through the window."

On the silvery screen, Agent 13 spotted the power cord. Giving it a massive yank, it pulled free from the socket, and the switch merely made a clicking noise. Taking advantage of the stunned look on the scientist's face, he grabbed the girl, jumped on the table, and hurled himself through the window.

Buster's jaw dropped. "How did you do that?" he asked. "We've never seen this one before!"

"Intuition. Wisdom. Natural talent," coolly replied Zeke. "Like I said, I'm gonna do that stuff when I grow up."

"Yeah, and I'm gonna be a Starfleet officer," laughed Jimmy. "You'll never be an agent, Zeke. Come on, get your head out of the clouds."

Zeke laughed a bit. He knew he'd be a daring, bold, dangerous secret agent. Call it fate, call it karma, call it Shirley... he simply knew what he would be.

Yeah, thought Zeke, memory fading back to the present, if only my remarkable foresight would have seen how I got fired.

Jane was sitting Indian style on her bed, tapping away at a laptop computer.

Normally she didn't like to bother with electronics or computers. That was Twerp's department, she didn't mess with it. However, this wasn't really a computer, it was a specially designed digital diary sort of arrangement, with storage capacity so large that one disk can handle over 30 years of entries, one a day.

She wrote about the boredom on this ship, and how she felt about it. She wrote about Twerp's annoying voice, and how she felt about that. She wrote about the new floppy hat she had gotten, and how much she paid for it. She only marginally liked floppy hats... they just seemed to go with the Dark and Deadly character. She looked for a coat with a collar wider than the hat, but couldn't find one.

Jane had started this diary when she was very, very little. Back when she was growing up on HappiWerld, to be exact...

She started writing on a Sunday, to be exact.

She wrote after a rather odd event in her life.

She was busy walking home from her happy, carefree grammar school along the happy, carefree road leading to her happy, carefree little home. She wore her favorite red t-shirt and overalls, two cute little pigtails in her hair, and a few thin, meaningless textbooks tucked under an arm. ("Yeast and You" and "The Economic System of Ecuador".)

She passed by a chalk hopscotch board, carefully bouncing in each square before hitting the local town bully head on.

She plopped backwards, dropping her books. Everybody knew the bully. After all, he wore his baseball cap backwards, beat up little kids and spat on the sidewalk occasionally. On HappiWerld, where every day is like an episode of Leave it to Beaver, this was as rebellious as it gets.

"Well well well, if it isn't that geeky little girl from down the road," the bully laughed. "Whatsamatter, drop your books? Haw! Haw! Haw!" (Bullies traditionally go Haw-Haw-Haw when taunting younger children. It's written into the nature of the universe.)

She frowned a bit, and gathered up her books. A few loose coins fell out of an overall pocket. She picked them up carefully.

"Hey, money!" the bully noted, showing his ability to see objects.

"Gimmie!"

"No!" she yelped. "It's my allowance."

"Okay, gimmie the money or I knock your block off," he stated simply, grabbing one of her overall straps and raising a fist menacingly.

Jane unbuckled the strap and ran as fast as she could. The bully, rather upset that a potential victim and source of income had escaped his usually vice-like grip, tore off after her, pushing a few innocent bystanders out of his way.

Jane skidded off the sidewalk into the meadow, semimusclebound goon in hot pursuit. She dived into a nearby sewer pipe, not thinking of where she was going.

The bully stopped and laughed. "Naughty naughty, playing in the pipes!" he shouted after her, voice echoing around the pipe, rebounding against her frightened figure. "Have fun playing with the RATS!"

RATS, RATS, Rats, rats, rat, at, echoed the darkness of the pipe and

the bully walked away laughing.

As if on cue, a slight splash of water and a rustling noise reverberated on the metal walls, and the biggest, nastiest rat Jane had ever seen leaped out of nowhere.

Time stopped for her.

According to her conscious memory, she blacked out and woke up later outside of the pipe, very peeved, quite upset, and with unusual but strangely familiar feelings of anger pulsing through her mind.

According to her subconscious mind, time stopped for her and she stepped out of the shadows to greet herself.

This seems strange, but when time is standing still and the only thing working is your mind and it's panicking, a lot of strange things can happen.

The other her seemed different. First of all, it had its hair down long, not in pigtails, and there was a sneer of disgust curled on its lips.

"Alright, that's it," it said, "It's my turn now. Take a hike."

"What?" Jane said, confused and scared.

"Beat it!" it shouted. "You've taken too many knocks in this cutesy hellhole. You need some help here or you'll end up a drone like every other idiot on this godforsaken planet."

"Who are you?"

"I'm you. New and improved."

"But I'm me!"

"And so am I. Small world, ain't it?" it laughed. The laugh sounded a bit nasty. "Now scoot over a bit."

With that, it walked towards her, even past the point where two objects of matter should collide.

Time resumed.

Jane grabbed the rat in midflight, two personalities duking it out between fear and anger. She threw the rat aside, fear pushing in and running out of the pipe with all the strength she had.

Once outside and panting, new emotions flooded into her. Anger. Rebellion. Justice. REVENGE. She had not changed. She was like this all the time, and always would be.

She trodded towards the street in a grim, determined stomp. The bully leaned on a streetlight, idly flipping a quarter she had dropped in the air.

"Had fun in the sewer? Coming back to give me the rest of your money?" he laughed.

Jane saw that grin she wanted to hit and did so. With a straight haymaker to the face, the bully collapsed from a combination of pain and surprise.

In one swift motion, she caught the coin from the air with her other hand, clenching it into a fist, and glared evilly down at the bully in a pose that would normally grace the cover of an action movie in VHS.

"Take a hike," she scowled. "And if I ever see you again, my fist will enjoy seeing different, more damagable parts of your body. Got it?"

The bully muttered several words of agreeance and scampered out of the area as fast as humanly possible.

Jane shrugged, picked up her textbooks from the sidewalk, and walked along the dark sidewalk, occasionally flipping the coin in the air. =(SP)=-

Twerp tapped away at a virus.

He wasn't fighting the virus, he was creating it. It wasn't a communicable disease unless you happen to be a computer. It was a very simple, very unpleasant program.

He was developing it over a small matter of a comment about his mother a Department of Motor Vehicles clerk had given to him when he tried to apply for a license renewal.

Doing things like this were fairly commonplace in Twerp's life. When you're two feet high, cute, purple, and a 40 pound weakling, you find other ways to fight back than fistfighting.

He learned this on a trip to a wrestling match with his dad.

Planet Murfle had a habit of being loaded with little cute purple guys with a serious attitude problem and a chip on their shoulder. Murfles, on the whole, were sarcastic little creatures who occasionally took part in bar room brawls.

In other words, life is nasty, brutish and short. So are Murfles.

This is perfectly fine on Planet Murfle, where everybody else is two feet tall and purple as well. The only problem comes when there is a

mismatched fight, such as between a human and a murfle. The accepted strategy here was to keep the murfle at one and a half feet away by placing the human's palm on the murfle's forehead. And that could only be done when the human was crouching slightly.

Twerp was at a wrestling match, as mentioned, when he realized that brawling is fine between murfles, but not exactly fair in any other situation.

Twerp was always an oddball. Murfles, are by Murflan nature, testy and occasionally violent. Twerp, on the other hand, had the misfortune of enrolling in a new sort of yuppie kindergarden class, where new concepts like sharing, rights, and polite language were taught via a man in a huge purple dinosaur suit, who would sing and dance and act cute. The idea collapsed after a year or two when the teacher suffered a back injury when a flying chair hit him, but it still left a lot of toddlers with some very unMurflan ideas.

He didn't particularly like wrestling, but his dad and his twin brother Qwerty did. So, he sat patiently in his wooden seat, and asked questions.

"Who's that guy in the corner, dad?" he asked.

"That's our planetary champion wrestler, Bulk Bogart, son," his dad

replied.

"And that big human in the other corner?" he asked, pointing to the bulky, musclebound man sitting in the opposite corner who was trying to show off to the few female humans that showed up.

"He's the Earth champion," his dad explained. "This is an interplanetary tournament. I'm afraid we don't stand much of a chance."

"Why?"

"Well... just watch."

The bell rang, and the two mismatched combatants took defensive positions. The human reached out with a massive arm, grabbed Bulk, neatly tucked him under an armpit and noogied him roughly, grinning. Bulk struggled to escape, but couldn't.

After a few moments of this, when the human was sure the glory was gone, he casually tossed the hapless murfle aside, where he hit the ground on his head. The bell sounded after the murfle failed to get up in three seconds.

Twerp's dad sighed. "It was obvious."

"Why?" asked Twerp innocently.

"Well, a murfle fighting a murfle is an even match, but... well, other aliens are just too big."

"Why not figure out a way to get the big'uns too?"

"It's impossible because of our stature," he sighed. "There's no way."

Nothing is impossible, Twerp recalled from a page of a big book he had taken off the family bookshelf once. If there was a way to fight back without fists, he would find it.

A week later, his parents bought him his first computer and modem. Two weeks later the principal of Twerp's school showed up at the door, wondering how he had erased all the school's records on the local bully who would repeatedly beat him up for lunch money. Then the local police showed up, wondering why a call placed from this house had somehow tripled the bully's tab at the local malt shop. The FBI showed up shortly after saying that a certain Murfle's parents had thier tax records and insurance files mysteriously altered so that they had a net worth of fifty five cents, which is roughly enough to buy a school lunch. The credit card company turned up next to ask how phone calls traced from this house slashed a particular credit rating in half. Then the Intergalactic Police showed up wondering why... ad nausem.

The only part of this they didn't find out was how for some reason, the bully was now on the lists of several major organ donor services.

Twerp had discovered the joys of hacking, phreaking, cracking, netrunning, cyberpunking and other buzzwords, and was planning on using them to his advantage for the rest of his life.

The virus, fully completed, was contained to disk as Twerp headed to the kitchen for a well deserved grape soda. Space Patrol Part 7 - Happy Birthday to You

The problem with electronics lately is control. Who gets it, how much they get, and how unpleasant things can get if the person or thing in control cracks completely and goes completely bonkers/scooters/nutcakes/zany/yo-yo/warped/insane.

Since starships are such complex things, humans can't be trusted to handle them. For one thing, they can't handle the amount of calculations per second to keep from smashing head first into the third asteroid from the left, and another thing is that they make mistakes.

So, the shipboard computer was introduced. A small net of wiring and circuit boards links one computer system to the navigation, life support, climate control, dispensers, replicators, transporters, cuisinarts, electric blankets, variable speed setting vibrating beds and the like. This is fine and dandy, but the only problem that is if your computer develops

problems and goes completely bonkers/scooters/nutcakes/zany/yo-yo/warped/insane, you could be up excrement's brook without a rowing device.

However, instances of computer insanity are rare, and new safeguards are developed every day to combat computer viruses, glitches, bugs, and other potentially hazardous problems.

Of course, as the old saying goes, nothing is one hundred percent true, bug free, or IBM compatible.

Jane was busy coming off of a Writing High. This, simply put, is the state of mind a human being is in after they've spent the better part of an hour writing about themselves and have experienced an almost Zen trance of self examination. That's why she didn't see Twerp.

Being short isn't too much of a problem nowadays, with various hadicapped ordinances and bylaws. The only problem comes when people trip over you.

Jane's foot connected with Twerp's chest, knocking him backwards and sending Jane face-first into the linoleum tile of the kitchen area. The disk in her hand skidded across the floor, and in accordance with they laws of physics, eventually stopped.

Jane, however, was hopping mad.

"Why don't you watch where you're going, you moron?!?" she yelled at Twerp, anger rising.

"Okay," he said, shrugging. He calmly picked up his disk he had dropped and headed back to his quarters.

Jane, meanwhile, was rather stunned. That, she concluded, was what she hated most about Twerp. Even when you tried, you couldn't get him really angry. Scared at times, but not angry.

Jane scooped up her diskette and went back into her quarters, ignoring her thirst and deciding she needed some sleep anyway. She tapped the panel next to her door, which opened with the traditional humming noise to allow passage.

She put the disk in the drive, resaved her work in her diary, hooked the laptop to the ship's charging outlet and promptly went to sleep. There was no need to change clothes, since her pajamas are the same as her working clothes, just with less concealed weaponry.

Meanwhile, her laptop sucked gingerly on the power tap like a baby on a bottle, not noticing the small speck that had passed through the nipple...

The speck floated about the stream of electrons, diving into the nearest CPU. It found a computer with megabytes and megabytes of memory, mostly unused. It knew exactly what to fill them with.

It had one purpose in life : to deliver the Message. And damn it, it was going to deliver it as much and as often as possible if it had anything to do with it.

Someone was about to have a very happy day indeed.

11:46 PM.

A few minutes passed, as the four occupants of the GSS Ineptitude started to doze away into slumberland. The speck busily searched for a way to make itself heard to the world.

Zeke's brain was comfortably numb, letting the Imagination sections work overtime to entertain the rest of the brain while it relaxes from a hard day's work. Imagination was putting on a very good show tonight, with a twisted little plot about a pyramid, two used Yugos, and sixteen scantily clad librarians. The various other mental functions such as Logic, Math and Memory sat idly by in the audience, munching popcorn.

Suddenly, over the PA system of Zeke's mental theatre, something unusual was heard...

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday happy birthday happy birthday to you!"

And it repeated. Over and over again.

Imagination, which only had a weak hold on the brain, decided to cancel to show and go sulk a bit backstage, much to the other mental functions' dismay. Memory was sent into a tailspin of thoughts of birthdays come and gone. Lust whined about the librarians leaving. Emotion sparked Confusion and Bewilderment, as Adrenalin took sharp notice of the odd sound and prepped itself for being really annoyed. Logic simply wanted to know what the hell was going on, so it flipped on the audience lights and woke up various parts of the brain.

Zeke arose reluctantly from slumber, listening to the odd jingle over the ship's intercom.

Jane's door opened with its customary fwwwooooyymmmaaahhh noise.

"What's that racket?" she asked, rubbing odd white globs from her eyes that normally are brought on by sleep.

"It's 'Happy Birthday to You'," Zeke stated. "Is Bruiser fiddling with the intercom system?"

"No, me not," Bruiser said, leaning out of his doorway. "Me guessing it computer bug of some kind."

"And computers are Twerp's territory. Someone want to go wake him up?" Zeke commented, taking a seat on one of the kitchen chairs.

Jane strode forward (well, shuffled, since she was in slippers) and tapped the CALL button next to Twerp's door.

The door gave a series to plinking beeps in a singsong tone, but no other sounds issued forth. Jane tried again, with similar results. She was pounding on the door with her fists by the time Bruiser stopped her.

"It no do no good," he sighed. "Twerp once tell me he deep, deep sleeper. No rise until early morning."

"Anybody here know how to fix a computer?" Jane asked the small group. Zeke shrugged, since his only computer experience was from a Numbindo Entertainment system. Bruiser simply shook his head, ears bobbing a little.

"Then I suggest we go try to sleep on it until Twerp gets up. It's just an annoying song, there's no danger in it."

1:34 AM.

Professor Bptf'afok of Perdue University, Uranus Division has this to say about repetition.

"Repetition is one of the most powerful brainwashing techniques known to mankind. It trains the mind into accepting a certain pattern of behavior or sound, regardless of whether the mind wants it or not."

"Depending on the choice of repetitive phrase, this can be both harmless and destructive. Repeating 'I will stop smoking' in subliminal or blatant audio is good for nicotine therapy. Repeating images of soothing landscapes and pleasant scenes can be beneficial to mental happiness."

"Repeating annoying commercial jingles or silly songs can be very harmful to the mind when prolonged, because they can engrain the message 'buy this' or 'row row row your boat' into the mind and result in insanity after extended exposure. Fortunately, commercials are limited to thirty seconds, with at the most ten repetitions, so no harm can be done."

The crew of the GSS Ineptitude were learning the hard way exactly how awful three hundred and fifty six repetitions of a single silly song can be.

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday happy birthday happy birthday to you!"

Three hundred and fifty seven.

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday happy birthday happy birthday to you!"

Three hundred and fifty eight...

Zeke tried vainly to cram more of his pillow into his ears, but the grating, high-pitched cheery voice could cut through depleted uranium given the chance.

"Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to..."

Bruiser was getting the worst of it, because his rabbitoid ears were extremely sensitive to noise. While this is handy for picking up conversations from across the room or pumping speed metal dog-slaying music into your head at the highest fidelity possible, there are some sounds that you just don't want to hear.

Happy birthday is one of them. So is the sound of a root canal, the sound of a person being burned alive and the sound of a dozen fourth graders scratching broken glass across a chalkboard. Broken glass would be a pleasant cascade of audio delight in comparison, however.

"You! Happy Birthday to you, happy..."

Jane examined her ship's speaker very, very carefully. She had managed to reduce it into 3,428 separate peices and it was STILL playing. And the worst part was that the damage had increased the pitch and treble of the tune.

"Birthday to you!"

Twerp slept soundly; he was rather tired.

5:55 AM.

"Five minutes to go," Jane commented, checking her digital watch. Each second passed with extreme slowness, moment by moment running by, the liquid crystal slowly filling in the right slots like molasses in a jello mold, as the number slurped by.

"To you! Happy birthday..."

"Is there any coffee?" Zeke asked, examining the bags under his eyes in the reflection of the plastic kitchen table.

"Me drank all me had made yesterday," Brusier admitted. "Sorry."

Bruiser had had better nights. All of his fur was frazzled, a messy green matted layer of moss covering his aching body. He seemed greener than normal, even.

(The problem with species that are covered in fur is upkeep and grooming. Humans have very little to worry about in that area, because they only have hair on a select few patches of the body. If a furry species goes too long without a good combing and maybe a perm, they start to resemble dryer lint more and more with each passing day.)

Truth be known, it was not an easy night for any of them. Zeke sat in his chair with a painful hump in his back from inappropriate pillow usage. Jane's cloak/slumberwear was wrinkled, and her hair uncombed and messy. (Since she didn't wear makeup, her face had very little change other than an angry look and some rings under the eyes.)

BEEP! Jane's watch rang 6:00 AM.

"Babe... I got you babe..." sang Twerp's clock radio from inside the cabin.

Three attentive pairs of ears turned towards the door, listening with extreme care. A slip of fabric, and Twerp got out of bed. A few padded whumps as he plodded to the bathroom. A mad scrubbing noise as he brushed his teeth. A slight fuzzy rubbing noise as his earmuffs went on. More padding as he walked towards the door.

A musical, plonky beeping noise.

"Say, why is Happy Birthday playi--"

"GET HIM!" shouted Jane, as the three pounced, grabbing Twerp and pushing him against the wall.

"Being a bit overly sociable, aren't we?" he wondered, staring directly into the eyes of an extremely angry Jane. He had two methods of dealing with Jane, either panic and flee as soon as possible, or dismiss whatever she was ranting about and go somewhere else.

"Perhaps," she sneered through clenched teeth, with an evil grin on her face. "Care to explain the music we've been listening to? For the past eight hours? Nonstop? Endlessly? Without a single pause?"

Twerp slowly recalled the previous night's activity. He was up late working on something... a virus, if he recalled, a happ-

"Urk," he admitted to himself.

"Urk?" repeated Zeke, removing the comma and adding on a question mark.

"'urk' as in this is bad," Twerp said. "Seems a pet project of mine is loose in our system. Hmmm. Fascinating."

"You... wrote... this?" Jane asked in a cautious tone.

Before Jane could grind Twerp into the linoleum, Bruiser patted a reassuring (but warning) paw on her arm. "Let us hear what Twerp have to say, yes?"

Jane, still grinning slightly with an uneasy smile, set Twerp down on the linoleum. "Your explanation?"

"Well... I was working on a way to get revenge on the DMV for an uncalled for comment about my mother and figured a virus would work so I wrote it and saved it to disk and--"

"You saved it on the SHIP'S COMPUTER??!" Zeke yelped.

"Nonono," Twerp defended. "I put it on floppy. I don't know how it got on the shi..."

Twerp put his mental VCR into rewind, and reviewed what had happened right after he saved the program. He went into the kitchen for a drink, Jane tripped over him, and he picked up his disk and went to bed...

"Jane? What did you do with your disk last night?"

"I saved my diary file on it. Why?"

"And after that?"

"I plugged my laptop into the ship's recharging outlet, why?" Jane asked cautiously.

"I think you used my virus disk, and it got through the computer port..."

"Happy birthday to you," the ship replied.

8:23 AM.

"Birthday to you! Happy birthday to you, happy..."

"Do you HAVE to keep TAPPING like that?" Jane snarled, grabbing Bruiser's hand which was tapping the table.

"Tapping like what?" he retorted.

"To the beat. You were tapping along with the song."

"Me NEVER was!" he snapped. "Me been hearing song birthday long enough, no need to happy tap it out--"

"What did you just say?" Jane interrupted.

"Me said me been hearing song long enough, no need--"

"You did not! You said hearing song birthday long enough!" she accused, pushing back her plastic chair and standing up. "That song's happy in your head now!"

"It in yours too!" Brusier exclaimed. "You just say that song's happy in your head!"

"Look, greeny, if you don't take that comment back, I'll--"

"You what? Me karate champion three years straight!"

"YEAH, WELL--"

"Hey. Hey HEY!" Zeke interrupted. Jane and Bruiser simultaneously stared directly into Zeke's soul.

Okay, I have their attention now. Zeke attempted to recall what he had learned about Ghandi and Martin Luther King, and say something peaceful, yet reassuring.

"Can't we all just get along?" he suggested.

"NO!" they echoed back.

Peaceful yet reassuring commentary doesn't seem to be working, Zeke mentally stated, panicking. What now?

Creative Thinking was running out of ideas, so it sent an emergency fax memo down to Memory asking for a solution. Memory examined the order, and pulled a file from Zeke's unsorted, second hand card catalog. Sending it back up, Creative Thinking examined it closely.

"When Terra was first coming into space travel," it stated, "The illustrious but usually intoxicated President Doofman realized, after a heavy night of visiting local bars in Washington DC, that the major alien races in the galaxy would have to be united. The only way to do this was to soften them up and get them to sign the documents before they realized what had happened, according to his logic. Thus began the Peace Treaty that founded the Terran Confederation, and the Day Afterwards with the Galactic Hangover and Universal Moment of Deliberation Over the Toilet. For more information see articles on President Doofman, Terran Confederation, and Good Buzz Malt Liquor."

Creative Thinking peered at this in Confusion (who was waiting conveniently by in the corner) and relayed down to Logic to figure out why this was any use to them. Logic took control of the situation, developed a theorem on the information at hand and send messages out to Motor Control.

Zeke slid across the kitchen and opened the Liquid-O-Matic UltraFridge, browsing the keypad menu for the right selection. He pushed BEER and hit the number for two drinks. In a glow of light, they appeared in the dispenser slot.

"Look, we know feelings are running high," Zeke theorized, getting ready to test his idea. "Let's just put our differences aside, have a drink, and wait for Twerp to finish the antidote, shall w--"

Fizz f'fizz fizz fa fizz, fizz f'fizz fizz fa fizz, fizz fa fizz fizz,
fizz fa fizz fiz fizz fa fizz fizz fooz fizz!

All three patrollers turned thier heads carefully to the Ultra Fridge. It was happily squirting out water into a glass. In time with the music.

"Huh?" Zeke said, wondering where his idea went wrong.

"Twerp!" Jane yelled, walking across the room, putting off the fight with Bruiser for a much later time. She tapped the door call.

Beep b'beep beep ba beep, beep...

The musical doorchime now picked up the tune, as the beeps, fizzes, and of course normal singing echoed around the room like radioactive superballs.

Twerp opened the door, observing the odd way how it slid back and forth, making a noise like hmmm h' hmmm hmm hmmm hmmm.

"Urk," he repeated from earlier this morning. "What happened?"

"Well, I just went to get a drink, and--"

"YIKES!" Twerp yiked, eyes widening in fear. "The virus is spreading to other systems!"

"You mean to tell me we're gonna get MORE of that song?" Zeke said in horror.

"In the best case scenario, yes," Twerp added. "In the worst case--"

The ship shuddered, reverberated blasts from the engines rolling over the metal framework. Bruiser put a long ear to the wall.

"It going thud th'thud thud, thud thud," he stated gravely.

"That's the worst case scenario," Twerp concluded.

The hermit woke again in his scratchy cave, to the same featureless sunlight that he was used to.

The cave was a very boring place to live. The continent he was on was also pretty dull. The simple fact of the matter was that he lived on one of the most hellish places in the galaxy : Generic Deserted Planet.

Everybody has seen a planet like this. Usually, in bad science fiction, a group of travellers will crash-land on one in a spaceship, rocket, chesterfield sofa or some other vehicle, and they'll remain trapped there forever.

This planet was very much like that, but to a much worse degree. It wasn't simply lacking of people, it was lacking in activity.

The mountains were plain and featureless. The million-mile wide plains were dull and grey. The white oceans did not even consider pounding against the beach, they just slapped it across the cheek occasionally.

In short, it was the most boring planet in the universe. Sure, others contend that they are very boring as well... Small Boring Planet, for instance, claims the official title, but due to recent activity it can no longer be classified as dull. BureaucraWorld, in most people's opinions, is about as exciting as cabbage, but in truth every year they throw one of the most un-boring party events in the universe.

Only four exciting things have happened, and ever will happen on this planet.

The first was the appearance of the hermit. This, in fact, was a careful experiment by a race of hyperintelligent beings to generate the Perfect Human Race, by using this boring planet as a garden and the Hermit as a seed. They arrived a few decades ago, carefully set him up with food stores (now used up) and machines (now broken).

After they were 50,000 light years away, they remembered that to create a species you need a female as well.

The second exciting event was a few years later, when a group of time-travelling fraternity initiates popped in for thirty seconds to deliver a command to the Hermit. They left sniggering and choking down laughter; only the Hermit knows what they said.

The third exciting event was currently in a lazy spiral towards eminent doom, screaming through the sluggish atmosphere above in flaming fury.

The Hermit watched the odd, lumpy silver thing in interest as it skimmed along the ocean, completely out of control.

The GSS Ineptitude was having problems.

First, the lights had started blinking on and off to the tune of Happy Birthday. The faucets sprayed to the tune. Toilets flushed. Doors opened

and closed gaily, as every mechanism on the ship that could make noise joined in one incredible cacophany of happy music.

Even this isn't bad compared to the effect it had on the guidance systems.

The engines were low on fuel and firing in time with the music, jerking and spinning as it was pulled by the gravity of the nearest planet. The effect inside is like combining a rock concert's laser show with the video for "Dancing on the Ceiling". However, it was moving way too fast for any choreographed dance numbers.

The spin span along the X axis, four occupants tumbling around and getting bruises.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU,"

"Hang onto something!" shouted Jane, stating the obvious. Zeke was already hanging onto something.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY YO YOU,"

"Suggestions?" yelled Twerp over the din.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY, HAPPY BIRTHDAY,"

Zeke noticed that the handle he was hanging onto was marked SUN ROOF,
DO NOT OPEN IN SPACE.

"I've got an idea..."

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU!!!"

The GSS Ineptitude exploded with violent fury against a rather unimpressive mountain range. The Hermit watched the explosion in surprise and awe, not used to anything remotely as exciting ever happening.

Four wet and bedrugged creatures climbed out of the ocean. The shortest collapsed on the beach, mud oozing in his dressing gown. One with a large jaw lurched onto the sand, coughing up tasteless water. One in red was wringing out her hat. One in green was wringing out his ears.

"You know," Twerp commented as he spat out some sand, "It's times when I'm a few miles from the smoking remains of my ship, abandoned on some godforsaken world in only my dressing gown that I recall a certain book."

"What book?" Zeke fed him.

"Why NOT TO Join Space Patrol!," Twerp grumbled.

The Hermit hobbled over to the group, entirely body tingling with

anticipation. Long ago, the ones in the silver bubble, the ones with the odd laugh told him to say something. Say something specific to the next people he saw.

He cleared his throat, preparing to say the first and only words he ever knew. He had their attention captivated. The time was right. He would fulfill his destiny. He spoke, and his words were heard throughout the land...

"How old are you now, how old are you now..." Space Patrol Part 8
Intermission

It's a popular misnomer that in space, nobody can hear you scream. This is partially true... sound doesn't carry in a vacuum, but the main problem is that nobody cares if you scream.

After all, space in its infinite wonder and majesty is an alarmingly large place with way too many people to count, and everybody in it thinks that they are in fact the most important creature ever to stride the face of a planet. Thus, when Joe Average is cruising the asteroids in a star hopper and sees John Doe out of control and about to plow into a huge rock and explode, Joe has several options.

1. Rush to the aid of John, firing his thrusters and

attempting to rescue the hapless craft with every fiber

of his being, for the sake of human life.

2. Sit back and applaud as John explodes in a brilliant

shower of sparks and scrap metal, then salvage what he

can for resale later.

Sure, a race can claim that they have achieved harmony and peace and no longer feel the material needs, but in truth they are working on separate agendas. Perhaps to be more harmonious than the person sitting next to them, or to achieve a higher plane of thought than mister know-it-all Total Enlightenment "I'm the Oracle, bow down to me" tribe ruler.

So, the cliché can be renamed to the following and become, in essence,

the truth : "In space, you can scream, but the only person who will hear it and care is yourself."

As a result, humanity, once outside the limited scope of a single planet, takes the laws of decency, moral respect and sin and throws them out the window, because the only person around to see their actions in the void is their intended victim(s).

You can't blame it all on humanity, however. The underlying sense of self-importance and selfishness is present in all creatures great, small, and medium-sized; they can't help it, no matter what the mind set, no matter what they THINK they might think, being self-centered is deeply rooted in the genes. This is further proof that god has a very twisted sense of humor.

So the reader may be asking themselves, "What the hell does this have to do with ANYTHING?". We're getting to that. This ties in nicely with the situation of four Space Patrollers, who, through an incredible string of coincidences, unpaid missions and sheer bad luck, have ended up on a deserted planet in the farthest reaches of space.

If this were a multimillion dollar Hollyplanet holo-movie, odds are the muscular, lantern jawed hardy recruits of Space Patrol would notice a missing team and storm off valiantly in a number of well-armed spaceships to stride the stars in search of their fallen comrades. The truth of the

matter is that nobody has noticed the disappearance due to it being at the very bottom of a clerk's 'in' box, underneath daily reports, breakdown warnings, radiation meter tests, scantron quizzes, and orders for pastrami on rye. It simply didn't rank in importance compared to the hectic, everyday bureaucracy that keeps the Patrol from collapsing on itself.

This leaves the Patrol team up excrement's brook lacking a water motivator, stranded on the most boring planet in the entire universe, with no hope of rescue because nobody in fact knows or cares about their turmoil. After all, it's just four inept Patrollers, and they're so far away to boot. It would take so long to get there, and since Patrol HQ's clerks have better things to do than bail out fools who screw up, what's four Patrollers, more or less? Space Patrol Part 9 - Death by Boredom

Another day dawned on Generic Deserted Planet, one in a long series of planets named descriptively because the explorers were too busy boldly exploring new worlds to be hassled with naming them.

To say that days here were boring would be awarded the Academy Understatement of the Year Award. According to the popular source of all knowledge in the universe, The Galaxy on Three Credits a Daycycle, GDP is :

"Dull. I mean, really dull. Duller than the dullest thing

you know. I mean, take the most boring place you have ever

seen and multiply it times roughly six million and you'll

have a close estimate. So mind-bogglingly boring..."

A footnote afterward states that the book is currently accepting applications for Metaphor Author. Since the article lasts for 21 pages and reuses the words 'boring' and 'dull' about five hundred times, reading the article will give you a good comparison to just how uneventful a GDPian day is.

However, things as of late on GDP could be considered interesting. After all, it's not very often that a spaceship comes hurtling out of the sky and explodes violently against the mountains. However, the perpetual non-event system of GDP was recovering from the burst of interestingness, and enhancing dullness levels to the point of human endurance.

The four survivors were too wrapped up in their own thoughts to really examine their surroundings, which is just as well because they (the surroundings) were giving a full-hearted attempt to look uninteresting.

"How generator look, Twerp?" Bruiser asked, leaning his green-furred shoulder against a smooth and bleak rock.

Twerp looked up from the oven-sized machine. "Not good," he replied.

"We can get some power, but it won't last for very long. I'd say only small appliances will work."

"And radio?"

"The radio's demolished," Twerp spat. "Mismatched heap of spare parts. It'll take me awhile to fix it. I might not be able to."

Zeke looked up from the pile of broken devices he was searching.

"Found a hair dryer," he commented, in the tone of someone proud of such a small victory. "Looks like it'll work."

"Good," Bruiser sighed. "Me take that. Me be by beach rinsing out fur if you need me."

Bruiser took the hair dryer and the generator and plodded of towards the shore of the calm sea, appliances in tow.

"I found food," Jane said, clambering across from the south side of the wreckage.

"Terrific!" Zeke applauded. "I'm starving!"

"Well... there's bad news," she muttered. "It's the emergency SPAM rations dispenser."

"I'll starve," Zeke concluded. Jane shrugged and placed the odd tin contraption on the pile of undamaged equipment.

According to the Galaxy on Three Credits a Daycycle, another interesting (interesting in that it's unusual compared to the rest of the universe, not interesting in the sense of interesting) property of GDP is that the boredom that coats the planet like a thick candy shell also affects anyone on the surface.

Of course, this is gradual. At first, things will seem normal. Then you'll start getting drowsy earlier. Later, you'll find yourself yawning and feeling dizzy. Then you black out for a few weeks while your body attempts to re-adjust to the activity levels of the planet. This is how modern day cyrosleep tubes work... they generate a field of boredom around themselves, knocking the person inside out cold for several weeks. When they wake up, they tend to be jumpy and excitable, because the most awe-inspiring activity they're used to now is breathing.

Since the Patrollers were only on GDP for about a day at that point, all that was noticed was a yawn or two.

"I think the question we should be dealing with here is 'what do we do now?'," Twerp suggested. "I think we ought to try and salvage a radio in one form or another from the ship and scream for help. Barring that, we panic and run around in terror."

"We need food," Jane commented. "We should try trapping some of the local wildlife for meals. If that fails, we have the Spam."

"I'll starve," Zeke repeated flatly.

"I think the radio is a bit more important," Twerp rebutted. "I should be able to cook one up quick. There's no sense in going off with spears and warpaint when we could leave within a day--"

"Ahem," Jane said, slipping into her 'I'm calm, really, just don't push it' voice. "It is not a matter of spears and warpaint. The art of trapping is as ancient as--"

"Me hate to interrupt," Bruiser interrupted, "But we need shelter first, in case of storm. Me think we should scout around and look for some."

"As I said, why bother?" Twerp argued. "I'm sure I can find some radio parts--"

"Don't kid yourself, Twerp," Jane spat. "You're no genius, and there isn't enough left of the radio to put it in ANY working form. We need food."

"We need shelter," Bruiser interjected, running out of words that

start with 'inter'.

"For your information," Twerp hissed through a clinched smile, "I *am* a certified genius, and I certainly can handle a measly radio."

"Fine!" Jane shouted. "You go try and do the impossible. I'm gonna go catch us dinner. Out of my way!"

With that, Jane strode away from the impromptu meeting, red pajamacloak trailing in the purple sand. Twerp sharply left in the other direction, trying to be as calm and cheerful as possible, and failing to a certain degree.

"Me think it not be best to go after them," Bruiser concluded. "Me off to scout around, Zeke. Catch up with you later."

Bruiser left at an angle 90' to the left of Twerp's, towards the mountains.

"I think we should..." Zeke started, before realizing that the meeting was over as quickly as it had started. He shrugged, kicked a flat stone across the featureless sands, and looked around.

Nice place, he thought in deep denial. Of course, it would help if it had food, shelter, or a decent arcade. Or even some people. Zeke noted how

quiet it was... in sharp contrast to the musical cacophany of death that had brought him here in a time span of less than forty eight hours.

"How old are you now?" inquired the Hermit, hobbling in from behind a simple bush, gnarled walking stick in front of him. He looked pleadingly at Zeke, hoping to strike up something of a conversation.

Zeke turned around in surprise. The hermit looked up at him, his hunched back and 90' degree kneebends keeping him from reaching his full height. His tattered clothing and stringy hair would have earned him Grubbiest Man of the Year Award, had he been able to get off this godforsaken planet and attend the official ceremony.

"Hello," Zeke mused. "I come in peace."

"How old are you now?"

"I'm twenty nine, why do you ask?"

"How old are you now?" the Hermit begged.

"Ah. I see," said Zeke, who didn't really.

Zeke, seeing nothing else to do, came to one conclusion. He's got to teach this boy some vocabulary.

Twerp looked up from his work, amazed at himself.

He had actually done it. Jane was right, the radio was nothing but broken down scrap metal. So, he made an entirely new radio out of other things on the ship.

A bicycle wheel here from a gyroscope experiment he had tried once. Some lengths of rope and wire found in what was left of Jane's closet. An antique record player from Bruiser's cabin. Two pairs of Zeke's boots for weight. Bits of appliances, circuits, computer bits and partially used batteries. And to top it all off, a child's Speak and Spell educational toy. It's sort of traditional to include one of these in any homemade radios.

He took a quick inventory of the surroundings. Seeing no clumsy, thin guys in red shirts and white hats, he turned on the machine.

The bicycle wheel didn't spin as the machines didn't power to life. The Speak and Spell didn't speak out PHONE HOME as the record player didn't swing back and forth, making a clicking noise. Twerp was not amazed by the incredible non workings of it all.

The reason why none of it worked is because the GSS Ineptitude decided at that exact moment to lose some of its mass. A large portion of the aft engine crumbled off and crushed the entire device.

After the dust settled, Twerp simply stared at the mangled array of what used to be a working radio in denial. Any moment now it'll work, his mind told him.

He told his mind to shove it and sat on a rock, trying to think of what to do next. He fought off the sleepiness that seemed to be affecting him more and more, and planned a newer radio.

About three light years away and approaching rapidly was a smallish research vessel. Following behind it was a firey cold chunk of ice with a tail a hundred miles long, which was unusually large for a comet.

This has no signifigance for the moment, but will eventually kill all life on GDP in a few pages.

"No, no, you can't take Boardwalk, you don't have enough money," Zeke protested.

The Hermit ignored him, banging his rock shaped vaguely like a car on the sand squares Zeke had drawn on the ground. He grabbed at the green leaves they were using for money and grinned the grin of a capitalist that has just executed fifteen hostile takeovers and was going out for a round of golf.

Zeke hung his head and sighed. Regaining his wits, he turned to face

the Hermit.

"Look, I tried Scrabble. Heck, it worked in the books. I even tried Mousetrap, but you broke the rubber band, and you can't unbend enough to play Twister. So I'm going to try to teach you economics no matter what!"

The Hermit, who was in the process of robbing the bank, ignored him.

"Alright, let's skip Monopoly. We'll try something else. How about something like Pictionary?"

Zeke took a stray branch he had pried off of a nearby bush. It was remarkably smooth, straight, and solid-colored. He wiped away the Monopoly board with a shoe, and started sketching a car on the ground.

The Hermit's eyebrows furrowed, as he looked at the primitive sketch on the ground. He grabbed at the stick, ripping it from Zeke's hands, and started poking it at the ground.

"Ummm..." ummed Zeke, looking at the drawing. "Rock. No, bird... mountain? Ah, it's a sailboat! No? Err... a ship of some kind. Engines? A spaceship?"

Zeke blinked. On the ground was a flawless representation of the GSS Ineptitude on fire shooting over the waves.

The Hermit managed to capture in simple line drawing a complex picture with subtle details like shading and shadows. It was enough to make art schools that distribute DRAW ME matchbooks fork over scholarships as if they were hamburgers. Cartoonists everywhere would pack up and learn accounting, for their craft had been done to perfection by a senile old man on a deserted, backwater planet.

"Very nice," Zeke understated.

"How old are you now!" the Hermit enthusiastically said, bouncing up and down.

"Can you do any others?" Zeke considered, fighting off a yawn. =(SP)=-

Jane sat, crouched behind one of the thicker bushes. She had fallen into a light sleep twice when she had tried to lay down behind it, so she gritted her teeth and tried to remain absolutely motionless in such an uncomfortable position.

She had set every trap she could, given the primitive building materials. Snares, nets, arrows, pits, pits with spikes, even a flaming punji pit. And nothing had come close to them in over a day and a half.

To Jane, the notion of a planet completely devoid of life was simply

absurd. She thought that she read somewhere that every planet outside the Terran solar system has life of some kind, even if it is microscopic in form. But nothing the size of a flea has come within fifty meters of the traps, and Jane's stomach was rumbling in annoyance at her.

At least she could be sure of one thing, Twerp couldn't be having any more success than she was. After all, nobody had flown down dramatically in a rescue ship, and certainly none of the others had arrived to tell/gloat/speak of the good news.

Or maybe they left without her. It was a possibility. Assassins by nature are loners, and Jane is a bit more loner than any of them. Twerp was partially afraid of her, Bruiser was often confused by her actions, and Zeke simply avoided her if possible.

She fought off thoughts of self doubt and waves of exhaustion. She always got moody and self-examining when she was tired, and for some reason she had been getting tired with alarming frequency. If something didn't happen soon, she'd probably end up like Rip Van Winkle, collapsing from overboredom.

FHWUMP!

Jane's sleepiness was swept back with a cheap broom as the sound of a pit collapsing echoed in the wind. Drawing a dagger and pistol-grip stun

pistol, she crept towards the pit, and peered in carefully.

"GET ME OUT OF HERE!!" Bruiser yelled back, voice bouncing off the uninteresting dirt walls.

"Bruiser?" Jane queried, taken aback by the surprise.

"Yeah, me Bruiser. And me got bad news."

Zeke leaned lazily against the rock he called his pillow, gazing through half closed eyes at the yards and yards of museum quality artwork drawn out before him.

The Hermit finished another, which looked like several Sarens laughing as they sped away in a shuttlecraft. Zeke's mind couldn't contemplate the significance of this, and went back to more pleasant thoughts about sleeping.

"How old are you now, how old are you now," The Hermit explained, pointing to the picture.

"Very nice," Zeke sluggishly repeated. He vaguely became aware of some oddly colored lurching figures approaching over the drawings, much to the Hermit's annoyance.

"Oh, hello," Zeke muttered.

"We got to get out of here, Zeke," Bruiser slowly said. "The planet's boredom is affecting us, and that not the worst part."

"Oh really?" Zeke mused, amused. "What's the worst part?"

"Accordinggg to Bruiser," slurred Jane, "A comet's gonna hit us."

"Is anybody else tired or is it just me?" asked Twerp, who had snuck up on them as best as a sleepwalking person can.

"No, we're tired," Zeke replied, giggling a bit.

"Drat," sighed Twerp. "The boredom will probably knock us out soon. Given our slight malnutrition, I don't think we'll survive the time it takes to wake up."

"Oh," Bruiser yawned, lying down. "That bad?"

"Yeah," Twerp sputtered, collapsing. Zeke was fast asleep on the rock, and Jane had already fell face first in the sand by then.

The Hermit noted that his new friends seemed a bit pooped out, and tried to shake them, to no avail. He became aware of a loud roaring noise, and gazed at the sky, to see a rather interesting ball of ice approaching

at great speed. He set out to express himself in art.

He never finished the picture, on account of a shuttlecraft landing and several scientists dragging the four sleeping Patrollers and the angry Hermit away.

Some sand blew over the uncompleted work, and the stick shifted slightly in the wind for the last time.

The effect from space was stunning. The comet struck GDP, releasing the millions of years of potential excitement and propelling the planet off into the stars.

Three hours later, it hit a nearby moon, which went on a backspin and connected with a red planet half a day later. The planet, with a sea shaped like the number two, shot off into the sun and exploded violently three days later.

"Did you get all that?" T'dia asked, breaking the hours-long silence that hung around the research vessel GSS Onomonopea.

T'lib grinned. "All of it. From the cueball comet collision to the cataclysmic cacophony of, um, collapse. All three hundred of the probes reported in the data without flaws."

"ALIRGHT!" yelled T'gwa, leaping out of his seat. "The guys back at

the university will positively SCREAM when they see this!"

"The only planet-pool reaction in a millenium, and the only witnesses were T'dia, T'gwa, and T'lib Bp'Tfafok of the Murfle Institute of Technology!" T'lib cheered. "We're gonna be in history books!"

"How old are you now?" asked the Hermit.

"Well, let's not rule out our unnamed fellow here," T'gwa reminded.

"He saw it too. Why does he keep asking that?"

T'dia shrugged. "I dunno. He's eccentric, I guess. How goes our four sleeping unnamed fellows?"

"They're not unnamed," T'gwa corrected. "Apparently they're called Zeke, Jane, Twerp, and Brusier."

Two suspicious glares cast themselves upon T'gwa. The Hermit was too busy trying to each the control stick to notice.

"Well... I sort of went through their wallets," he replied sheepishly.

"Or rather, Twerp's. The others didn't have any ID, but he had their names written down in a minicalendar. Birthdays, really."

"That name seems familiar... Do we know a 'Twerp'?" asked T'lib.

"Not that I know of. I think he had a brother named Qwerty at MIT awhile back," T'dia noted. "Used to take Computer Science with him. Nice guy. He vanished without a trace, you know."

"Strange."

"Yeah," T'dia muttered under his breath. A long silence hung in the air, finally broken by the Hermit, who reuttered his favorite phrase in case anybody missed it the first 56 times.

The Hermit went on to teach the fine arts at MIT. Art, which is the universal language, made up for his lack of vocabulary, although assigning essays and homework got to be a bit troublesome at times.

The Patrollers were brought back up to a normal level of acitivity inside a pressurized normality chamber, a new invention by a student of MIT.

The Bp'Tfafok brothers did get into a history book or two, and developed a remarkable new formula for explaining everything in the known universe. However, they vanished without a trace before they could tell anyone, and when the reappeared a day later, they claimed (in unison) to have forgotten it. All three went insane and died about two weeks later.

Space Patrol Part 10 - Information

Because of the unpredictable nature of Space Patrol missions, stress levels run high in the ranks. Since nobody knows what the outcome of any given situation might be, and since the Patrol has had a history of putting hapless fools in impossible situations, the occasional stress reliever is a must. Thus, it is not uncommon for your average Patroller to end up taking more vacation time than actual duty time.

It is not true that the Patrol coddles its members, or gives them praise and rewards for poor performance. The real truth is that if the Patrollers go on multiple dangerous missions, usually involving nuclear explosives or crazed psychotic killers, they will go insane without relaxational time. All of the cushy, simple jobs are usually given to Starfleet or the Not-So-Secret- Agent Corporation, leaving any dangerous or suicidal work for the Patrol.

After an ordeal involving a planet that was eventually part of an intergalactic billiards game, it was clear that the Patrol unit needed a break as well.

Unfortunately, the planet they picked to spend it on developed two hurricanes and six major storms one day after they landed.

"You simply HAD to pick this planet, didn't you, Zeke?" Jane sanrled angrily.

"Well, interplanetary weather is a tricky thing," Zeke weakly defended. "I mean, it could be raining acid on Tiberius III one day, and then sunny and cold the next. Tricky. I think."

The battering rain continued trying to break through the windshield of the Kar120C ground rover Bruiser rented on Patrol ready cash as it sputtered onward towards the hotel. Although the rain had drove the tourists from the beach itself, the various hotels, shops, arcades, and other indoor areas were making a veritable fortune off the bad weather. Since the Patrollers didn't have a veritable fortune to spend, they had to settle for a cheap, one floor drive in motel.

"I'll just be a minute," Twerp reminded them. "I have to grab my quarter stocks before we go to the arcade. I'll meet you down there."

Twerp hopped out of the kar, opened his remarkable new Teflon Umbrella(tm), and stepped into the hotel. The door swung shut behind him, not through any strange mechanical door device, but from being pulled on by a hand/knob configuration. Leaflets at the front desk described how to use these archaic devices.

The rain continued to batter down on the streets and rooftops. No noises apart from the constant waterflow could be heard... then there was a low rumble of an engine. A black hearse pulled around the corner and parked in front of the hotel. A man in a top hat and sunglasses stepped out, and approached the door to Twerp's room. Of course, Twerp couldn't see this on

account of the large, rectangular bit of wood called a door being in the way.

Twerp grabbed his satchel which held his Arcade Emergency Fundage, and a few travel brochures to look at and remind himself that this really is a nice place to visit normally. A certain amount of denial is crucial to surviving in lousy weather.

He turned around, took three steps and passed out on the carpet as knockout gas flowed in from underneath the door.

Twerp woke up a few hours later, head ringing like a church bell with a humpback swinging on the rope. He stood up, clutching the satchel, and once his head cleared he noted the lack of sound.

Normally, the torrential downpour of rain would play merry hell on the one-level motel roof, and each drop echoing around the room a few times before vanishing. However, he wasn't hearing any rain whatsoever.

He crossed over to the window and opened the blinds, ready to turn a joyful smile towards the sunny, drier beach.

Instead, he got a joyful view of a sunny, dry patio lawn and several odd stucco buildings. They weren't the modern hotels and casinos of the beach boardwalk... they were bluky, unsightly things, painted in annoying

colors, designed to make you cheery and happy and doing in fact the exact opposite. Sort of like the buildings at a few beer-sponsored amusement parks designed to take you magically back to 'Days of Yore', where despite ancient architecture and bright medieval colors you could for some reason still buy electric yo-yos from street vendors..

Immediately his mind drew up a few conclusions : Someone stole the hotel. Someone stole my hotel room and put it somewhere. Someone stole me and put me in a room that looked like my hotel room. Someone stole my hotel room and put me in a room that resembled it a great deal so I wouldn't notice it was gone. Or I'm just nuts.

He grabbed for the telephone, not noticing that it was a different kind than was originally in the room.

"Front desk?" he asked. "Someone seems to have taken the beach away and put a lawn there instead. Or taken my room away. Or something. Could you patch me through to the police?"

"Number please?" the operation patiently replied.

"I don't know the number of the police station, that's why I'm asking you."

"No, I mean your number."

"My phone number? I think it's written on the phone here... wait a minute, six digits are missing as well."

In fact, the entire dial was gone from the phone. In its place was a printed sticker reading 69.

"Listen, if you don't know your number, you're in serious trouble as is. I suggest you check with the citizens' advice bureau. Wait... one moment please..."

Twerp was put on hold, with some odd plucky guitar tune playing in the background for a few seconds. The operator came back online.

"Apparently someone's been expecting you," the operator sweetly said. "They'll be sending a cab for you soon. Be seeing you."

Click. Honk.

Twerp looked up from the phone to see a golf cart pull up to the side of the house. A jolly man in a striped shirt waved to him from the driver's seat, beckoning him to climb onboard.

Twerp stepped towards the door, which opened itself. Self opening doors are normal, but usually you have to tap a keypad to get them to open. Self-opening doors with motion trackers tend to be a bit embarrassing if

you're wandering around in your underwear inside and someone outside happens to walk by your door.

Confused, he sat down in the back of the taxi, and let it take him where it was going.

Twerp took the time on the taxi to examine his surroundings a bit more closely. Not only was the beach stolen, but it looked like everything except his hotel room was stolen as well, and replaced by what looked like a cheap amusement park that couldn't afford any rides. Large shops and buildings lurked on the sides of the cobbled street, and various people in multicolored clothing walked along the sidewalks. The only thing they seemed to have in common was an odd sort of badge with a tricycle on it.

The taxi stopped abruptly outside of a green, domed building. Twerp almost fell out of his seat when it jerked to a halt.

"That'll be three work units please," the driver said, speaking for the first time and turning around.

"Eh?" Twerp replied intelligently.

"I'll just charge it to your account, shall I?" the driver suggested.

"Er. Yeah. You do that."

"Be seeing you," he saluted, letting Twerp off before sputtering away in the cart.

Twerp knocked twice on the door labeled 2, and was shown in by a shortish butler through a pleasant Victorian room. It resembled a sitting room of some kind, thought Twerp, the kind old ladies have sewing circle meetings in.

Another automatic door opened, revealing a room that was in sharp contrast to the foyer. Not only was it more spartan, it really was too large for what it contained. It was, simply, a few control panels and a bubble-shaped thing. However, the room was a half-dome, and the bubble was twenty feet away from the door, the rest of the empty space filled with oxygen only.

The bubble turned around, revealing to be hollow and only half-domed. The inside was actually a comfortable blue plush, and contained a man.

A man with a silly grin, a scarf, and a walking cane. And a small badge with a tricycle and a number two.

"I think this is moving a bit fast for me," Twerp noted, seeing as how he had taken in a multitude of sights in just a few minutes. Number Two laughed.

"It will all become apparent, I assure you. You'll have time to do as much in-depth sightseeing as you want."

"Quick question. Where am I?" Twerp asked.

"In the Township," Number Two replied, with the air of someone who thinks the word is of high importance.

"What do you want?"

"Information."

"Try 411," Twerp joked. "What exactly do you want with me, and why did you move a hotel room to some other planet just to see me? You could have called."

"We want Information," Number Two replied. "Information," he repeated, in case the point has missed Twerp.

"Any information in specific? I know a lot about computers, if it helps... who wants to know this 'information', anyway?"

"That would be telling," Number Two warned. "And yes, we do want some specific information, Number Sixty Nine."

Twerp looked behind him, in case someone had entered without him

knowing. "Who?"

"You. You are Number Sixty Nine."

"No I'm not, I'm--"

"Na ah ah!" Number Two teased, wagging a Naughty Naughty finger. "No names allowed in the Township. You are a number, not a name."

"I am not a number," Twerp fought back, "I am a free man!"

"No you're not, you're a Murfle."

"Oh. Okay, so I'm a free Murfle."

"Very well, Number Sixty Nine, see yourself as you wish. Care for a drink?"

Twerp paused. Heck, might as well play along with this madman. "I'll take a grape soda, hold--"

"--the ice," Number Two finished, grinning slightly. "We know quite a bit about you, Number Sixty Nine. You don't like ice in your soda. You prefer cartoons to the news. You almost got into MIT, but lacked work experience. You are right handed, type at 89 words per minute, and have a

continuing grudge against the Department of Space Vehicles."

"So? Anybody who knows me knows that stuff."

"Your password on CompuLinx is spackle and you have no chest hair. You are physically intimidated easily, but have a strong mental will, and a naive sense that people are basically good at heart as a result of watching too much PBS as a child, and singing songs about caring and sharing. True to the Barneyite form. You can be confused easily, but are quick to recover and set into a pattern of activity. Plus you hate broccoli and are allergic to shrimp." Number Two continued.

Twerp's eyes widened as the figures in the simple folder Number Two was reading out of detailed his life, right down to the parts he was denying heavily. "How... how did you--"

"We have our ways," Number Two generalized. "However, there is one bit of information we don't know, and would like to know very much. Not too much, just a little tidbit, nothing you'll miss. If you'd just tell us that, you can be on your way back to your rather damp vacation lickety split, first class travel all the way."

Number Two clicked on a tape recorder and waved it under Twerp's nose.

"We'd like to know the code to a certain virus you wrote," he stated.

"A Happy Birthday virus."

Twerp paused. "That would be extremely dangerous," he warned.

"Well, let's just say we like danger. And we like destructive things, especially informational destruction."

"Who's this 'we' anyway?"

"That would be--"

"--telling, yes, I know. Who's behind this 'township' anyway?"

"All you need to know," Number Two warned, "Is that I help the Township and its citizens, and Citizen's Council manages the Township affairs. You will never learn any more than that."

"Who's Number One if you're Two?"

"That--"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you the virus code," Twerp interrupted, already knowing what the next three words would be. "It was a grave mistake to write it in the first place, and I'm not going to simply hand it out to an interested party, even if they're intentions are pure... which I doubt yours are."

"We have ways, you know," Number Two grinned, clicking the tape recorder off. "Thouroughly unpleasant ways of making you talk."

"Torture?" Twerp gulped.

"No, nothing as gauche as that," Number Two laughed. Twerp didn't like that laugh very much, it had a grating, evil sense to it. "You shall see. It will be such fun to find exactly where your mental breaking point is... ah, but I am being an ungrateful host, bringing up all this unpleasantness on what should be your welcoming visit. We'll have to talk again some time. Until then... be seeing you."

"I hate that phrase," Twerp said dryly.

"You'll come to like it," Number Two said.

Number Three checked his pocketwatch and continued pacing around Number Two's control room. This was a simple activity when the room is, essentially, a circle.

"Something bugging you?" Number Four wondered.

"Yeah, something is bugging me, Number Four," Number Three sarcastically retorted. "Number Two has never been late to a meeting. I think he's taking this Number Sixty Nine case a bit too personally. I

personally don't think it'll take that much work to crack this weenie of a Murfle."

"I had noticed that too," Number Four agreed. "Does he usually do this much research into a person?"

"Not in few months I've worked here he hasn't," Number Three replied. "You're new here. You haven't seen Number Two very often. Word to the wise, don't mention Number Six in front of him."

"Why?" Number Four straightlined.

"Number Two never managed to crack Number Six," Number Three explained. "His only failure. He doesn't like to be reminded of it. Number Two one of the best when it comes to mental terrorism, and interrogation... admitting defeat isn't easy, he gets even angrier than I do on occasions, which is saying a lot. If he's doing this much research into Number Sixty Nine, then he must think Sixty Nine is going to present a challenge. I doubt it, but that's only because I met him once."

"Met Number Two once?"

"No, Number Sixty Nine."

"Golly," Number Four awed, unable to think of anything more inspiring

to say. Before he could comment, the familiar whirring noise signified that the door had opened.

"Ah, good morning gentlemen... Number Three, and Number Four, our trainee," Number Two pleasantly said, setting down a stack of papers on the control panel. "Tea?"

"No thanks," Number Three said.

"Suit yourself," Number Two shrugged, sipping at a cup of the liquidly substance. "Ah. That quenches the thirst nicely. Biscuit?"

Number Four shook his head, and the viewscreen turned on. (Just a coincidence, really.)

"Ah, it seems the game is afoot," Number Two noted, sitting in his spherical chair. "Pay close attention. There will be quiz afterwards."

Twerp sat in his chair (on the screen) paging idly through the guidebook Your Township he had found on the endtable, looks of confusion swapping occasionally with looks of anger.

"He's coming to terms with the fact that he is a prisoner," Number Two said, as if handling the running commentary of a sports game. "His defenses are down in this state, and is more susceptible to some of the more obvious forms of questioning. Camera, door view, please."

The camera switched to a view of the hotel room door, which whirred and swung open, revealing a female Murfle in a maid's uniform.

There is are only two ways to tell a female Murfle apart from a male Murfle. First, their voice pitch is slightly higher, and second, they have hair. All male Murfles simply have one twisty sprig or two of what humans call hair from their furry heads, but Females tend to have normal humanoid amounts of hair.

This one had it almost down to her knees. Although that's only a foot or two, it was still more than the usual Murflan female, which kept it at five inches or so.

"The old libido stimulation trick, eh?" Number Four joked. Number Three cast him a stony glare, and Number Four promptly lost his grin.

"Not exactly," Number Two corrected. "Twerp simply backs away uneasily from sexual suggestion. He is mainly drawn to those of his own element, the computer hacker. If you'll notice, I only assigned Number Fourty Two to maid duty today for this reason; she works in Town Hall otherwise. If he can befriend her on their common ground, odds are they'll discuss why they are trapped here-- Ah, it seems he's noticed her. Watch."

"Who are you?" Twerp asked politely, looking up from his propaganda

reading.

"The maid, obviously," the female replied, pushing up her glasses and trying to pull down the skirt to a less revealing line. It didn't work.

"Anything in here look dirty?"

"No."

"Well, then I'll just be on my way. Don't honestly know why they gave me this job anyhow, I can't stand housework, or the uniform--"

"He'll try to keep her from leaving," Number Two whispered, in the quiet manner of a golf tournament announcer. "He's confused and needs someone to talk to, especially someone of his own species."

"Don't go, really," Twerp beckoned. "I'm not quite sure why I'm here as well."

"Well, I know WHY I'm here," Number Fourty Two explained, having a seat and dusting off her uncomfortable maid's uniform. "I meant why I'm a maid, that's all. Got reassigned today."

"Yes, but why are you here? In the Township?"

"She'll tell him," Number Two continued to whisper, even though the point was obvious. He leaned forward on his cane, to watch his plan

unfolding exactly as he had planned it.

"Well... they wanted a password..." Number Fourty Two stated uneasily.

"They wanted to know my password on the Terran Confederation's defense computer."

"Hmmm," frowned Number Two. Number Three gulped, noticing that when Number Two was frowning, things were extremely bad indeed. "I hadn't considered that... maybe she wasn't such a good choice. Hopefully he won't pick up on the fact that we know his password and not hers... I still have to ask where you found that out, Number Four."

"Well, umm, I have contacts," Number Four blurted, shuffling his feet.

Before Number Two could probe the issue further, Twerp spoke.

"Did you tell them?"

"No!" she defended, as if accused of a horrible crime. "Of course I didn't! They tempted me with cash, love, all sorts of things... they terrorized me in my dreams, tormented me with all sorts of traps and puzzles, but I wouldn't tell! AND I'M NOT GOING TO!"

Number Fourty Two stood up from her chair and glared evilly at Twerp, who wasn't expecting such an outburst from such a simple question.

"I know what's going on here," she sneered. "You're no prisoner, you're one of... of THEM. They're using you to get chummy with me and find out my password, aren't they?"

Number Two's eyes widened. His plan was backfiring, and he didn't enjoy it one bit.

"What? No! I'm just as confused as you are--"

"I am not confused," she barked back. "In fact, I know exactly where I stand. I'm not talking! Do you hear me? I know you can hear me, Two!" she shouted at what seemed to be the wall, but was actually looking directly out of the viewscreen and into Number Two's eyes. "You'll have to try better than that to crack ME."

With that, Number Fourty Two turned and stomped out of the room, door opening itself for her.

Number Two frowned. Number Three furrowed his brow in frustration. Number Four regarded both of them in amusement.

"Were you expecting that?" Number Four asked. Number Three knew that inside, Number Two was invisioning himself strangling Four to death, but outwardly Number Two took it in stride and tried to go back to his usual smile.

"A mere setback," he coolly stated. "A factor I had not taken into account. It was only the first attempt, after all, which usually does not work anyway. If you'll excuse me, I'm off to do some work."

Number Two turned sharply on his heel and marched out the door. Number Three finally exhaled.

"Geez, that was close!" Number Three yelled. "I've never seen him that peeved! WHY ON TERRA DID YOU ASK HIM THAT?!?!"

"It was a simple enough question. He seemed fine to me," suggested Number Four, writhing out of Three's grip. "Calm down, will you? Keep a handle on your temper. You worse than number Two."

"When Two frowns, even in the slightest, you KNOW he is angry, and someone somewhere is gonna to get hurt for it," Number Three explained, in the hushed tones of a death row inmate. "And here, unlike anywhere else in the universe, destruction can take on a whole new meaning. It's not just a stick of dynamite and a fuse, it can crush your mind."

A week or so passed. Number Two rarely left his office, and Twerp was too busy getting used to his surroundings to worry about whatever horrible methods Number Two had described earlier.

Number Three spent most of his time trying to teach Number Four about

the tricks of the trade. Both of them were fast learners... Three had entered as a simple contraband runner for the Township and was propelled into the upper echelon within two weeks of entering the Township. Four was proving to be just as, if not faster of a learner.

"You're picking up on this quite fast," Number Three commented. "Even the complex control system in Two's control room. It normally takes a few weeks to learn it, and you seem competent with the controls even after two days."

"It's a knack," Four shrugged, continuing to tap away at the keyboard, planning the measures to be taken on a few other prisoners. "Now, regarding this Twenty Six case, I think I know exactly what we ought to do-"

"In fact," interrupted Number Three, "One might think that you had used a system like this before. And since there is no other system like this, I'm beginning to suspect something."

Four paused. His brow furrowed, and thought patterns leapt around his mind like neurotic frogs.

"Would you really like to know why?" Number Four mused.

"Yes, I certainly would," Three hissed, glaring daggers at him.

Number Four told him.

"I'd suggest you keep it a secret," Four added.

Number Three grinned. "Got it. Yeesh, talk about irony. Two'll have a fit if he finds out."

"Which he won't," Four said, browsing through the file on Number Twenty Six.

Twerp got to know a few of the other prisoners, but found most of them to be too cheery, nerve-wracking and mindless to carry out a decent conversation with. He had no problems adapting to the One Person, One Number system, for he had a good memory and everybody wore a little tricycle button with thier number on it.

Twerp, however, refused to wear his. He used the monkier Twerp for all of his life, and didn't want to give it up so he could be the name of a sexual position. He tried to explain that he just wanted to be called Twerp to the various citizens, but they recoiled in horror at the sound of a real name, so he grudgingly accepted being called Number Sixty Nine.

It was one morning in the Township Cafe over a cup of grape soda that he spotted Number Fourty Two again.

"Hey!" he shouted, jogging after her, leaving his drink behind. She

did not change her walking pace. Instead she tried to ignore him.

"Look, I've wanted to talk to you ever since I saw you in my room," Twerp weakly started the conversation with. "I see they reassigned you from that maid job. The outfit didn't suit you well."

Number Fourty Two glared at him. Twerp took his foot out of his mouth and continued, in a hushed tone. "Look, I was wondering, have you ever figured a way out of here? I checked the map, but we're surrounded by mountains, and--"

Number Fourty Two stepped in his path, and glared at him.

"No, I don't have some magic escape route," she angrily said, "And I certainly wouldn't tell you, because you'd just go and tell Two and his lackeys."

"No I wouldn't!" Twerp protested. "I hate that guy as much as you do. Maybe more. I hate the way he grins all the time, that patronizing tone of voice-- wait, I'm sidetracking myself. Look, you're the only person here I've seen with anything resembling a rebellious streak. Maybe we could find a way out together?"

Number Fourty Two laughed. "You just don't get it, do you?" she said in awe. "You don't 'escape' from the Township. You are stuck here. Deal with it. And telling them what they want to know won't do any good either."

Twerp immediately picked up on that point. "Oh? How so?"

Number Forty Two cursed herself for revealing that, and pulled him into a nearby alley between the cafe and the general store. "We can be seen and not heard here," she hissed. "Face the wall."

Twerp did so, and she continued. "Before they stuck me in the town hall filling out credit reports for each citizen on computer, I was busy playing lab toadie in the hospital. I remember one guy was admitted for having a nervous breakdown, but he seemed perfectly normal... oddly enough, he was scheduled for Wiping."

"Wiping?" Twerp yelped. "That doesn't sound like fun."

"I wouldn't know," Forty Two sighed. "When they Wipe someone, they go into a slot, and never come out. I don't know what happens to them afterwards. Anyway, this guy was muttering something about how he told, and how they got to him. He said one thing to me before the doctor pushed the stretcher into the Wiping tube... never, ever tell them what they want to know."

Number Forty Two paused. Twerp recollected his thoughts.

"So," he summarized, "Once someone is prisoner in the Township, they

can never leave, and if they do reveal their information-

"They get Wiped, yes," Number Fourty Two. "It's a Catch-22 No Win Terminal Runaround."

"Impossible," Twerp rebuked. "There is always a way out, one way or another. Weither it be a jail cell, a straight jacket, a virtual reality hell or even a recursive loop there's an exit in there somewhere."

"The problem is that you die on the way out," Fourty Two sighed. =(SP)=-

Twerp slept uneasily that night, plagued with horrible nightmares. In one, he was trying to catch Fourty Two in an old biplane, but missed completely and had to watch her splatter to the ground below. In another, he was being juggled by a larger than life Number Two, who laughed in his calm manner while Twerp was chased by what looked like a large bubble. In a final one, he saw the GSS Ineptitude soar towards eminent doom : with all his friends still aboard it, trapped in there with the Happy Birthday virus running amok. He also had a quick dream about penguins and the construction of the sphinx, but this was just weird, not symbolic and weird.

When he awoke, he realized that these certainly weren't normal dreams; they were too clear and dramatic. Fourty Two had mentioned something about them invading her mind, and guessed they had a chokehold on his already. He made a mental note to not sleep as much the next night.

He was out for a morning's stroll when his brother Qwerty yanked him into an alleyway.

This was a pretty sudden and surprising thing to see his own brother here, but he didn't have enough time to cope with the situation. Reviewing over the material in his mind a minute later, he managed to piece together the events from memory...

Qwerty, who was wearing a badge indicating that he was Number Twenty Six, had yanked him into the alley. He said that they were after him, that he had told but escaped the hospital.

"You can get out of here," he had said. "All you have to do is lunge for the large red button on Number Two's control panel when he drinks his tea."

"What?" Twerp had asked, completely confused.

"Just do it! Remember! Hit the button twice and say your number!"

Then there was a deafening roar, and after Qwerty had run from the alley a huge white bubble chased him down. Twerp briefly saw the terrified look on his face as he was engulfed by the rubber balloonlike thing, screams passing through the thin rubber shell. So that's what Wiping looks

like, Twerp thought, on the other end of the tube.

The balloon, now empty, bounced slightly against the ground, like a combination of a soap bubble and beach ball. For some reason, it was the most terrifying thing Twerp had ever seen.

He simply stood there for a few minutes, not sure if he should run, hide, flee, panic, or all of the above.

"Elegant, isn't he?" Number Two smiled, sliding up to Twerp's side from a doorway. "A product of my own work."

"What did it... he do to my br... err, Number Twenty Six?" Twerp asked, looking on in horror as the bubble bounced gently against the pavement.

"Fido, as we lovingly call him, is designed to chase down and remove those who get too dangerous to keep in the Township," Number Two explained.

"Let's just hope you never get to that level, Number Sixty Nine."

Number Two rested one hand on his cane, and one on Twerp's shoulder, still beaming that sinister, yet calm grin he traditionally wore. "Come, I have something I think you will find interesting in my office."

Twerp looked oddly at the viewscreen.

"It's my room," he noted. "Big deal."

"There are changes," Number Two noted. Twerp gazed uneasily at his tea cup... Two hadn't lifted it once since he got here. Why on earth did he have to do such a bizarre combination of things? Did his brother hack in some sort of escape routine with that as the backdoor?

The camera seemed to truck forwards towards the window.

"Sand," Twerp said, knowingly. "You moved my room back?"

"You never left," Number Two noted. "I'm surprised you haven't picked up on it yet. You almost did when you were talking with Number Forty Two in that alley."

"You could hear that?"

"She was... misinformed as to the functionality of the microphones there. You stated it yourself..." Number Two trailed off, searching through notes. "'Neither it be a jail cell, a straight jacket, a virtual reality hell...! ad nausem. Certainly you know that advances have been made in virtual reality--"

"Very little in the way of advances. Why, have you improved on basic VR?"

"The Township is virtual," Number Two said, grinning from ear to ear.

"Now the joke dawns on you. Your body has been controlled by a computer simulation based on what we know of you. Your pathetic friends, those Patrollers, don't know anything has happened to you. This township itself is nothing but a mental image played out to your mind."

"I don't buy it," Twerp said weakly. Truth was, this was making very clear sense, and he didn't like it one bit.

"Suit yourself," Number Two said. "We shall soon see. Notice the item in your 'hand' there?"

On cue, the camera (which was really Twerp's eyes) tilted down to reveal a gun in his own hands.

"Your body is being controlled to go into your friend Jane's room and kill her," Number Two concluded. "If you tell us the Happy Birthday virus code, we might be able to stop the process before any harm comes to her."

A long, dangerous pause hung over the room like a glob of silly putty a thousand miles wide. One would expect Number Two to be grinning from ear to ear now.

However, it was Twerp that was grinning.

"You lost, Number Two," he said, laughing along with the words. "You forgot several things. I know you don't send people back, you wipe their minds. And I also know that Jane is an assassin, and is used to attempts on her life. If I tell you the information, I die. If I don't, she'll kill me without hesitation. Either way, I am dead, and the information goes with me. Pretty neat, huh?"

Number Two's smile immediately dropped to less than a smirk.

"It didn't work. You barely even tried. One attempt to befriend me, and another threat against a friend's life? You went directly from ineffective to drastic."

It is said that tea is good for the nerves. This is true, and Number Two was a ball of nerves at this point. So, logically, he drank some tea.

Twerp immediately stabbed forward at the red button, hitting it twice and blurting out "Sixty Nine!". He barely hesitated to hit it twice against and blurt out "Fourty Two!".

Number Two choked on his tea violently as the computer voice echoed, "Now ejecting without wiping subjects number sixty nine and fourty two. Two minutes to ejection."

"You stupid, stupid fool!" Number Two shrieked, standing bolt upright

and wiping away tea spittle. "You have no idea what you're dealing with!
FIDO!"

Number Two slapped a button, and a familiar roar ripped through the room through a control panel speaker.

"Find and wipe forty two and sixty nine without hesitation," Number Two hissed into a microphone. A small LED panel lit up with the words ESTIMATED TIME UNTIL FIDO HITS TARGETS, 1:45. TIME LEFT BEFORE TARGETS ARE EJECTED, 1:50.

He looked at Twerp with a stare so cold and icy that it could have frozen the Atlantic.

"Be seeing you," he spat.

Twerp was running at a madcap speed through the simulated streets of the Township, with only 30 seconds to go to find Number Forty Two before it was too late.

It was a good thing for him that she was at the cafe drinking a chocolate milk and eating a doughnut when he skittered by.

"Forty Two!" he shouted. "Quick, this way!"

"Why?" she politely asked.

"I just set up an ejection from the Township for us both, we've gotta run!"

Fourty two's eyes widened. "You... you helped me escape?"

"Yeah, but if we don't go hide somewhere for the next ten seconds, we're gonna be Fidobait--"

One minute and fourty five seconds had passed.

A bass rumble sounded, and in response the white ball bounced along the ground, madly seeking its targets. The citizens that were nearby scattered.

Fourty Two simply took out a toothpick and pricked Fido. Fido burst like a cheap balloon, showering ripped bits of rubber everywhere.

"I can't believe I didn't think of that before," joked Fourty Two, as Twerp's mind recalled back to its proper home.

Jane opened her door.

"Whaddya want, Twerp?" she asked.

"Nothing," he replied. "Nothing at all."

"Then what's that behind your back?"

"Oh, this?" Twerp said, slowly revealing the gun. Jane went for a knife, but Twerp quickly added, "It's jammed. Bruiser asked me to give it to you to fix."

Jane gave Twerp a suspicious eye, and took the gun from him. =(SP)=-

Number Three spat out his coffee as the alarms tore through the sub-control room. Number Four didn't seem to notice, continuing to play a handheld version of Super Gino Brothers 34.

"What was that?" Three asked.

"Calm down," Four said, jumping Gino over the dreaded turtles of death. "Everything's going according to plan."

"Shouldn't we be running around in confusion and anger though?" Number Three suggested.

"If you'd like," Four said, turning off the game and setting it down.

Numbers Three and Four skittered around the corner through the door to the control room, where they found a cursing Number Two manning the switches.

"Who the hell authorized two ejections without Wiping?" asked Number Three.

"Nobody did," Two bluntly replied. "Some idiot must have told Sixty Nine which button handled ejections. He and that annoying girl I paired him up with got out."

"You failed, in other words," Four noted. Three immediately dived for cover in case Number Two would simply explode at the accusation. However, Two actually appeared to smiling once more.

"No, I did not," Two said. "Twerp's mind has an organized, simple to access layout. Easy to reference anything, unlike the messy minds of the common man. I plucked the virus neatly from his mind when he was asleep last night."

"Then that whole stunt you had planned about killing his friend-"

"Was only for his benefit. A good way to rub him out and make him think he won. Now, let's compile this virus and test it on a closed system, shall we?"

Two stuck the diskette into a laptop computer he yanked from thin air, making sure it wasn't connected to anything, and typed BIRTHDAY.

The internal speaker in the computer played the bouncy tune flawlessly.

"It works!" Two grinned. He was back to normal.

Then the speaker on his desk sang.

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday..."

And the viewscreen. And the intercom. And the telephone. And the lights.

Two frowned.

"Something is amiss," he plainly stated.

"You just unleashed the virus on the whole zarking TOWNSHIP!" Three yelled. "It's all one system, one virtual reality! Everything's connected! And now this whole system is gonna explode on us!"

The deadly chorus of Happy Birthday bounced around the room, a thousand joyful sounds playing harmoniously to destruction.

"Wipe them all," Two concluded.

"WHAT??!"

"I said, WIPE THEM ALL! Take the remaining eighty three prisoners and wipe them. It'll appear odd in the papers that eighty three people went insane and died on the same day, but we'll have to live with it. Nobody must learn of the Township."

"What about the two escapees?"

"We'll burn that bridge when we come to it, I shall see to it personally that they are removed from the picture," Number Two forewarned.

"Now man the controls and start Wiping."

"That's the last of them," Four said, yanking the last lever. "All that's left is to eject the staff. All three of us."

"Number One will be very displeased," said Two.

"Number One can bite me for all I care. I'm going back to my old career," Three said, yanking his lever. He vanished with a slight POP.

"My lever is stuck," Two noted, frowning as he tried to pull it.

"No it isn't," Four said, voice slipping into a higher pitch. Two looked on in amazement as the virtual reality system morphed Four into a smaller frame... with purple fur.

"That's a new look for you, Number Four," Number Two said.

"Thanks. I think I should be honest with you... You don't exist, Number Two," Four explained. "You can't go back to reality because you never were there in the first place. I programmed you to maintain the Township for me. And I guess now that it's going to hell in a handbasket, it's only fair that I tell you."

"Wha--?" Number Two started, for the first time in his life, unable to finish a sentence.

"I am, as you know, Number One," Four explained. "I created you and this whole Township. And now I'm going to destroy it. Kinda ironic, isn't it? I took a drama course last year and figured it was worth a go."

"What? Why??!" Two demanded.

"Well, I needed the fine arts credit, and-- oh, that. Too many people know too much," Four said, pacing, ignoring the multiple echoes of Happy Birthday around him. "I set up this system as an easy, clean way to find out secrets. Information. He who has the information has the power. Low

risk, high fun. But it got out of hand. I was grabbing at anybody I could find that knew something incredible, something destructive, something secretive. But I was actually going to drain and wipe TWERP, for crying out loud! That's when I knew I was going too far. So I jumped in myself... twice, really... and pulled the plug. I aided in his escape and made sure that you ran that virus.

"The project is dead. My logs will show that during a freak computer virus accident, I lost all data and prisoners, including Number Three and Two. They won't find out about Twerp or Fourty Two, and nobody will have enough evidence to prove that you and this Township ever existed. The only people who will know are Number Three and I.

"And if you'll excuse me," Four said, reaching for his own lever, "Reality awaits. I must thank you for the work you've done in here, it was quite helpful while it lasted. Be seeing you."

Four vanished with a popping noise. Two looked at the crumbling, unreal world around him, understood the joke.

Then there was silence.

The hard disk was popped out, and then thrown into an acid vat that was brought into the main lab especially for that purpose. The Township was no more.

He picked up the phone and dialed. "Hello, Number Three."

"Is the system dead?" Number Three asked.

"Yes, the system is gone," the dialer affirmed. "I suggest you hide yourself somewhere, I'll take all the flak for the crash. Sorry the job didn't work out as well as you hoped."

"Thanks," Three thanked. "I hated the job anyway, wasn't expecting it to last that long. I think I'll just go back home. If you ever need any destructive type activity done, you know how to call."

"Okay. Bye, Dan."

Dangerous pause.

"I SAID don't call me that. You're just as annoying as your brother."

Click.

Qwerty hung up the phone, shut off the computer, turned out the lights, and went for a nap in a nonvirtual bed for the first time in a few weeks. Space Patrol Part 11 - The Lost Episodes

Hollywood prospered the minute Terra hit the space lanes.

With the introduction of space travel, new alien races, and 3-D holographic projection technology, the entertainment industry hit a veritable goldmine. Here were a thousand new things that would make terrific topics for action teenage slasher films or heartbreaking dramas! They could open people's eyes to the universe in all its wonder! The industry can occupy a whole new world -- Hollyworld -- and set up the most fantastic business deals known to man! All at 6 creds a pop, or on your local subetha cable feed.

However, Holovision doesn't show the whole universe in the correct scale, it shows very small points of it in a very large scale. There are, according to famed scientist Carl Sagan, billions and billions and billions of worlds out there. However, only a few hundred ever have the limelight of Hollywood on them, and thus the others are blatantly ignored.

Since Holovision is the only thing some planets have to inform them about the galaxy around them, the effects it has on citizens of the universe are horrifying. Wildly distorted views of morals, incorrect assumptions about leaders, out of place ideas about travel and news. Overglorified roles of heroes and villains alike. Stereotypes.

In short, Holovision is still using techniques okay for a cramped,

overcrowded planet and using them on an infinitely large space. News channels could correct some of the mistakes Hollywood implants in the heads of sentient beings; but news shows, which are watched much less by the entertainment-hungry masses, don't get as much funding and don't reach as much of the civilized universe.

Hollyworld doesn't present the truth, it presents beauty...

...and beauty can be downright dangerous.

The waiting room of the Space Patrol Vehicle Yard was not designed to please the eye, but to jab it out with a red hot poker and squash it underneath a sixteen pound block of cement.

The idea was that if the waiting area could be nauseating enough, these even more nauseating Patrollers would give up and leave, giving the SPVY crew more time to play basketball and tell obscene jokes.

"Can we leave now?" Zeke asked, slumping in his chair (which was about as dense as asphalt).

"No," Bruiser coldly stated. "Me determined to stay here till me get ship."

Since the Patroller's previous ship lay in scattered wreckage on a now-destroyed, previously boring planet, a replacement was needed. The GSS

Regurgitation, the second-worst ship in the Space Patrol fleet, was currently being prepped for flight as said replacement, and Bruiser clutched the claim ticket tightly enough in his hand to turn coal into diamonds.

"We can come back tommorow," Twerp suggested.

"And sit at end of line again?" Bruiser exclaimed. "Me think not."

"Number sixty nine?" asked the clerk at the SPVY desk.

"Yes?" Twerp responded automatically, before his memory could remind him that he had his name back.

"Ahem," said a burly looking human on his right, "That's my claim ticket numer, not yours. No cutting in line."

Twerp nodded a bit as the man and his other three teammates walked up to the desk.

"We're just number seventy four," Zeke reassured Twerp. "Won't be that long."

One sun set, another rose, and another sun set, and another rose. Due to the strange rotational period of Space Patrol HQ's current home planet,

this was only one and a half days, however.

On Hollyworld, however, it was a full two days. Hollyworld was picked out from hundreds of planets because it was the most like Terra... a 24 hour rotational period, 365 day years, four seasons, and a pleasant, sunny 70° climate over most of the one main continent. Of course, compass needles said that north was south and south was north, but after a few compass makers were fired by top Holovision executives, that was sorted out.

Ted Spinner looked out of his penthouse window. All buildings in Hollyworld were made of penthouses and penthouses alone, because no executive in their right mind would take an apartment. This particular one had a great view (but then again, they all did) of Hollyworld Boulevard, with plastic palm trees and freshly swept sidewalks. A few modified Cadillac star hoppers roamed the streets, each piloted by a client of the Hair Club for Male Beings, each holding a cellular phone and paying little heed to the traffic.

This is the life, Ted thought. Climate control, posh furniture, and an incredibly high paying job at the Spinner Broadcasting System. Of course, it was the highest paying job of the company, being president. He had inherited it when his dad died from cholesterol poisoning. All he had to do was oversee (in other words, look at and grin) most of the high priority projects, which can easily be done before lunch.

And Hollyworld certainly had restaurants. Hundreds of them, to be

exact, all open and waiting for power lunches, conferences, and discussions of any kind over entrees and appetizers. Lunch was Ted's favorite activity of the day.

However, work kept getting in the way of important matters such as lunch. This was the case today.

They had just finished Star Voyage Eight : The Long, Drawn Out Trip Homeward for SBS. It was a marvelous peice. A Starfleet flagship runs into a nasty alien probe thing looking for chickens, and they actually go back in time to when the first chicken was being formed and, despite the danger of being stepped on by dinosaurs, were attacked by aliens. "Put in a fight with aliens," the Public Response Department had said. "Evil alien monsters go over great with the humanoid sect of our viewing audience."

The most amazing thing about all of that was, once the inital, hectic series of lunches, meetings and conferences was over, writing and shooting the movie only took about three weeks. That was the miracle of Hollyworld - since the entire work force was devoted to Holomovies, things got done rather quickly.

And now it was time for another project.

Ted tapped in the autodial key for the Public Response Department.

"Hello, put me through to Brent Tartiburg, please," Ted said into the phone, experimenting with his swiveling chair.

"Mister Tartiburger doesn't wish to be disturbed, sir," the clerk on the other end of the line responded.

"Never mind that, patch me through please."

"I'm afraid I can't--"

"You're fired. Clean out your desk and head off planet," Ted said simply, as if firing employees was an everyday activity. In truth, it was. The other nice aspect of Hollyworld was that so many people were beating down the door to get into the movies that the turnover rate was quadruple of any other job.

There was a slight snuffle, and a sob trailing off in volume. In less than fifteen seconds, a new voice picked up the phone.

"Hello, this is Mister Tartiburg's new secretary. May I help you?"

"Yes, I'd like to talk to him, please."

"One moment, sir," the secretary said sweetly.

The hold music played the SBS jingle, which involved a lot of bass

drums. Ted had paid a rather large sum of money for it. "Get bass drums," the Public Response Department said. "People like bass drums. Gets the pulse pounding."

"Ted?" a male voice said, picking up the phone.

"Hello, Brent," Ted greeted. "Just wrapped up the latest Star Voyage flick."

"Good. I'll relay the Programming Department to put it on the air tomorrow and the Legal Department to get ready for those inquiries from the Non-Humans Against Speciesism guys again."

"Well, that's not really why I called," Ted explained. "We're all set for the next project. I need some suggestions."

The clear sound of Brent shuffling through papers travelled across the wire. Ted loved that sound, it meant people were working hard and earning their keep. Actually, Brent had a stack of paper handy for whenever Ted called so he could rustle it while using the computer for Ted's data searches.

"Well, we've done several movies about Starfleet, some adventure flicks about the Not-So-Secret-Agent Corporation... I'd recommend another Agent film. They always rake in the credits."

"No can do," Ted said. "They charge too much on the royalties for use of their name and agents. No, my friend, we need a new, low-income, low-esteem group to glorify... Starfleet movies are getting old, and people don't like ones about the Heavily Armed Ambassadors of Friendship and Fun. The name's too silly."

"Hmmm..." pondered Brent. "How about Space Patrol?"

"Splendid!" Ted said, overjoyed. "Yank John, Brian, Nathan, and Jack off whatever they're doing and get them researching for the perfect mission to base it off of. Have Advertising write up a commercial... say something like 'The Adventures of Space Patrol - Based on a Real Life Case of Daring and Intrigue'. Make sure it takes place somewhere nice, our depressing crime shows are starting to drag down the ratings, and can you recommend a good restaurant?"

"How about Phil's?"

"Sounds good. I'll be there eating lunch if you need me. I'll expect a progress report, preliminary team selections, mission choices, and audience favorability projections."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Brent warned.

"Hmmm?"

"Asking Space Patrol itself if this is okay."

"Details, details. Don't bother me with details. Just make it happen, okay? We'll call them later, or something."

Click.

Day Three at the SPVY.

The four Patrollers awoke with a start from their uncomfortable seating around six AM, when the desk reopened for business that day. Zeke mopped up his drool.

"Number seventy one?" the clerk asked.

"Research here."

"Do you have the plot outline ready yet for the Adventures of Space Patrol?" Brent asked, skipping the unimportant tripe like greetings and sucking up. This was just the Research Department after all, not Ted Spinner.

"Errr... yeah, Mister Tartiburg," the peon at the other end stammered.

"Only... well, it's not terribly exciting. I mean, all we had were

secondhand information and the official Space Patrol report filed by them--"

"Doesn't matter. Send it through, I'll liven it up."

Brent loved his job. He loved his papers, his computer, and most importantly, his paycheck. The only drawback in his job was that he had to perpetually suck up to someone he thought had the brains of cabbage.

With some whirs and clicks, the InterOffice(tm) File-A- Tron(c) ground the plot into the memory of Brent's computer. Brent skipped the other needless details such as thanking the person and saying goodbye, and skipped right to hanging up.

Brent glanced over the screen, pencil ready to take notes.

1. The Patrol unit consists of Zeke Thunderclutch, a

failed Not-So-Secret-Agent, Bruiser, a strong Ytt with

poor language skills, Twerp, an intelligent, usually

calm Murfle, and Jane, an ex-assassin.

Brent perked an eyebrow, pulling out a PenPal(tm) Pocket Computer.

"This sounds good so far. Twerp will need some changing, however, Barneyites don't go very well with the Murflan share. Someone more belligerent will do," Brent scribbled.

2. A few research scientists clone Dan Quayle, but the

process backfires and flip-flops his personality,

making him very evil and intelligent.

"Ah, there's the villain. And a pretty good one at that," he commented on the backlit miniscreen.

3. Nad Quayle, as he is called, wreaks havoc on

HappiWorld, causing major damage and devastation.

"That needs editing. Nobody wants to see an entire suburban city in flaming ruin, it's depressing. We'll change it to robbing jewelry stores and tone down the destruction aspect," he noted.

4. The Patrol shows up, and their taxi cab is hijacked

before they even see the governor. They are taken

prisoner.

"No, no, no. The heroes are never caught without a fight. Insert a lengthy fight sequence here."

5. All four are placed in a cell, are interviewed by Nad,

and all but Jane are dropped into a deathtrap.

"Character development needed here. Insert romance somewhere to attract a larger share of the female audience. Seperate cells, perhaps?

Also, include Jane in the trap."

6. Jane shows up later for unknown reasons, and stops the

deathtrap before it starts. Nad leaves the planet and

doesn't show up again.

"Anticlimactic. More fighting needed. Zeke has to rescue a young girl somewhere in here, possibly Jane? Have more goons show up, rescue takes place, and Nad is soundly defeated. Roll credits."

Brent set down his pen and faxed the plotline off to the writers. Now, there was just the small matter of notifying Space Patrol that they were doing this.

"Number seventy four?"

"CHARGE!!!!!!!" shouted Bruiser.

The hapless clerk was pinned to the wall by massive green arms, with three other angry stares boring directly into his head.

"Is there a problem?" he weakly asked.

"Yes there is a problem," Jane said, seething with anger. "Why has it taken four days to prepare a LOUSY SHIP?"

"Well, there's the forms, and, uh," the clerk began, stammering.

"Forms and refeuling. And processing, and--"

"I hate to tell you this," said a saintly voice from behind them, "But you can't leave just yet."

Bruiser dropped the clerk, who slid down the wall and bolted around the door to the office.

"Bad news. Well, good and bad. Mostly good," corrected Father O'Mother.

"Haven't seen you in awhile, Father," Zeke commented, calming down and greeting him with a handshake.

"Oh, things to do, places to see. Haven't had much time to do Patrol volunteer work, yousee," he noted. "Plus you fellows have certainly been

busy over the last few weeks. Barely see you at headquarters anymore."

"Trouble has this nasty habit of finding us whether we're on a mission or not," Jane said.

"Yes, it does seem that way, doesn't it? But anyway. Good news. Mostly good. Yes, mostly good. Have any of you heard of SBS?"

"Spinner Broadcast System?" Twerp queried. "Of course. That's practically the only station we could get in our old ship."

"Well, your new one was a better antenna, and-- wait, I'm sidetracking. Anyway, they've just signed up for the rights to exploit your adventures on the HoloScreen!"

The lack of enthusiasm cast the room into silence. Not the joyous outbursts Father O'Mother was expecting.

"Which... 'adventure'?" asked Jane.

"I believe it was that one you did on HappiWerld. Yes. That one with that unpleasant Anti-Quayle fellow."

Jane's stare faltered for a moment, but went back to normal. Zeke chose not to ask why. "What, are we playing ourselves or something?" he

chose to ask instead.

"No, no. They have actors. Anyway, they invited you over to the set to see how it's going, and I figured that since most of your recent, ah, shall we say 'work' has involved danger and planetary crashes and such, you'd enjoy an easy 'mission', as it were."

You simply can't find a place more rampant with crime, intrigue, and general evildoing than Port Hades.

This is not to say that it is an unpleasant place. No, no tourists can ever come to harm inside the port, because it would be bad for business. However, if you were there on business, not pleasure, anything is game. It was the place to be for black market deals, cargo trading, gunrunning, and other not-nice activities.

The reason why nobody barged in with nuclear bazookas and closed down the joint was because it wasn't technically in Terran space. It lurked, more or less, in the Anarchy Zones, defined as "Anywhere the Terran Confederation hasn't laid claim to yet".

Here, anything was possible, and the money was big if you played your marked cards right. Criminals here had a casual attitude with each other, because instead of being considered underworld goons, they were considered upcoming businessmen. The phrase "It's never personal, only business" applies well.

Nad fit in very, very well here. He even had an office, where he specialized in destruction, demolition, or blitzkrieg raids. It had no real name, but the employees (all three of them) lovingly called in Chaos for Hire.

The only problem was that Nad hadn't shown up in a while. He said one day that he was going to go get some chinese takeout and see about a minor job someone hired him for and didn't come back.

Not that his partners were particularly upset by this. Although they lacked his skill and finesse in fine-tuned mayhem, they managed to handle the jobs he left unfinished and take on a few new ones.

"Actually," Woneer said, twirling his green Yttian finger in his irish coffee, "The way I figure it, we could dip into the boss's salary a bit for some ready cash. I mean, it's not like he's coming back or anything."

Fuse looked at him from behind the newspaper, surprised eyes garing at Woneer from behind his normal battlescarred face. "What're you talking about? The boss pays us enough, we don't need to go dippin' into his cash. And for your information, he WILL be back."

"I bet he skipped port and went off somewhere to find himself," Woneer mused. "That's what crazies always do, they find some Tibetan mountaintop

and try to be one with the universe, or something."

"Hey, the boss may be insane," Fuse said, turning to the sports section, "But he's not the worst. Take my last employer. Real psychotic. All spookylike and never stood in direct light. Tried to take over the Terran Confederation. Almost did it, if it wasn't for that punk hero of theirs, Alex. Shot me down before I could blink, ripped up my ship around me. Zarking TERRAN. Humpf."

"Explains the scars," Woneer shrugged. "Always wondered where you got those."

"Well, since I explained this..." Fuse smirked, pointing to his marred face, "Now you got to explain THAT."

"What, that?" Woneer said, pointing to the green stump where one of his two rabbitoid ears were supposed to be. "Simple. I closed my sun roof too fast."

Woneer paused to enjoy the confused look on Fuse's face, then picked up on a point he had mentioned earlier. "How come you hate Terrans so much if you are one?"

Fuse's left arm made a quick gliding motion to his knife and then to Woneer's face. "Listen, friend," he said through a clenched grimace, "I ain't no Terran. Born and raised in space. And unless you want to lose that

other ear you don't call me a Terran again, got it?"

Woneer, who lived in a place where threats against your life were as common as dirty toilets, grinned, and pushed the knife away. "Okay, okay, I get it."

"Knock knock," went the door. The doors weren't wooden, so this sound was synthesized by a revolutionary new kind of doorbell (stolen from a shipment by a cargo runner three days ago and resold to most businesses in the Port.)

"Come on in," Fuse said, reclining in his non-reclinable office chair.

Nad walked in. Fuse fell over backwards, and Woneer simply gaped.

"Who here likes Moo Goo Gai Pan?" he said, carting in the boxes of Chinese.

Woneer weakly raised a hand, and a box of food rebounded against his chest. Not one to pass up a free lunch, he dove right in.

"But... how... you..." Fuse tried to start, getting back up.

"What?" Nad said. "Something wrong?"

"You were gone for quite some time," Woneer said, between mouthfuls of rice.

"Well, I SAID I was checking up on a job, right? Well, I did. Didn't pan out. I did bring the Chinese, like I promised," he grinned. "So, what's been happening in the world since I last visited?"

Nad ripped the paper from Fuse's protesting hands, and paged rapidly through the news and sports.

"Didn't miss any Die Hard sequels, I hope?" he said, speed reading through the entertainment section. "I loved the way the nuked that city in the last one. Shame the terrorist died. Hey ho, what's this?"

Nad read, his brow furrowing as he examined each word with a gaze that would cut diamonds. The article read :

"In Holovision news, Spinner Broadcasting System has just announced that they will be airing a never before seen made for HV movie, 'The Adventures of Space Patrol', where four daring heroes save HappiWerld from Dan Quayle's evil twin. Actors as of yet have not been selected, but the script is completed and.."

Nad could have ignited the paper and incinerated it to pure ash with that stare. First of all, he didn't like people portraying him without himself getting a fair cut of the profit (say, 60-40), and he was certainly

not Dan Quayle's 'evil twin'. He was not Dan. Dan was not he, and anybody who said anything to the contrary found their spleen wedged in their lungs.

"Seems I'm to be in the movies," he repeated for the benefit of his two partners. "In fact, seems I'm being associated with that idiot Dan again."

Fuse, who gained an extra scar on his arm when he first signed up with Chaos for Hire and noted the similarities between Nad and his former life, panicked internally. This didn't show outside, mainly because Nad's anger was not directed at him.

"You know, this makes me a bit upset. A bit, a bit. In fact, I think I really ought to go over there and see if I can lend them a hand. In order to make the account more accurate."

"We getting paid for it?" Woneer asked.

"Only in revenge, my Yttian friend, only in revenge. Come on, we've got some shopping to do."

The GSS Regurgitation was, in fact, built off of the plans of the GSS Ineptitude. The only real difference is that this one had mattresses built in, and nice ones at that. Also, the ship was slightly faster, so instead of three days from Space Patrol's homeworld to Hollyworld, it only took

two.

The ship flew in parking orbit over the planet, with several other cargo ships, business class transports, and refuse frigates.

"So when will we be cleared for landing?" Zeke asked.

"Just a few minutes," the voice at the other end of the radio signal muttered. "We're currently importing all sorts of props and things for a new movie, so it'll be awhile."

The voice clicked off.

"I wonder who they'll be using to play me?" Zeke wondered aloud.

"Probably someone dashing and daring and suave."

"Good thing they aren't using you, then," Jane retorted.

"Yeah, I can't memorize things," Zeke agreed, missing the point of her stab completely.

"Me a bit worried," Bruiser admitted. "To tell truth, we had very few missions suitable for movie fodder, and mission they picked was one of worst... how they expecting to make money off it?"

"They'll edit it," Twerp said. "You know, add a line here, change a

fact or two. Nothing too bad, I'd assume. People like dramatic reenactments."

"And how they know what we said?"

"They don't. They've got writers for those sorts of things, you know."

"Me no like this. Me no want people putting words in me mouth. Me got enough problems getting them out in first place."

"It won't be THAT bad," Zeke yelled from the cockpit into the kitchen.

"I mean, if anything, it'll make us look better than we did originally.

What harm can it do?"

A yellow limousine floated out of the stratosphere on maneuvering jets, like a shark moving through the waters it ruled. It hovered a bit, just so everybody around could study it closely, then set down with a slight WHUMP.

The driver's side doors opened, and a Ytt and a human in fine italian suits stepped out. They examined the Auditions Building through dark sunglasses, then took places on either side of the rear door.

Nad stepped out to the glory of the crowd.

He had been planning this for hours with his partners. He wanted to

first see he could ally with SBS, then crush it from within, and the easiest possible way to do that was to present his services to them as the original, the one and only Anti- Quayle himself. The dramatic entry he picked took awhile to assemble, because he wanted to have the highest impact on whatever peons happened to be looking onward.

He wasn't counting on the twenty other identical actors in yellow suits much like the one he traditionally wore being out there as well, however. He glanced over the cattlecall. Humph. None of these jokers look remotely like me, he thought. You just can't copy perfection.

He snapped his fingers, and Woneer and Fuse began to push through the crowd, much to the alarm of the crowd itself. Nad strode along behind them through the bubble of non-crowd the men were making, twirling his usual cane with the brass Q on the end (it also had a hidden dagger, a small laser, and a corkscrew, standard material on any Swiss Army Cane.)

The burly, well-tailored guys pushed through the sea of cheap yellow suits, eventually stopping at the secretarial desk, where they stood on either side of Nad.

Nad flashed his most charming, normal, "I won't send your company into ruin, really, trust me" smile to the secretary.

She was not amused.

"There's a ticket dispenser outside," she said in a flat, disheartening monotone. "Go back out there and wait your turn. Now auditioning number thirty seven!"

A shortish guy in a very cheap yellow suit passed by Nad, behind the main auditions door.

"There seems to be a mistake," Nad said, maintaining his smile. "You see, whereas these are cheap carbon imitation, I am the real thing. The creme de la creme. IE, Nad Quayle himself, and I am generously providing my services to your fine entertainment oriented company so that the slop you shovel to the masses correctly shows me as myself. Capiche?"

"That's quite good," she admitted. "Although you might want to save your act for the audition executives. Now please, to the back of the line."

"Okay, we'll try it this way," Nad said, pulling out a stick of red dynamite from his pocket and lighting it within the span of .5 seconds. "You've got five seconds to let me in there before this explodes and pastes you and everybody around you against what will be left of the walls."

The secretary's eyes widened. "You wouldn't--"

"Try me," Nad taunted, flipping the stick up and down in the air.

"Three seconds to go."

"Auditions off!" she shouted. "Everybody go home! Now! We found our actor!!!"

"It's so nice to see that good help still exists," Nad said, watching the angry actors stomp out of the building. "Oh, and here, catch."

Nad tossed the stick to the secretary, who caught it reflexively. Nad waved a bit and headed through the audition door, goons in tow.

The five, balding, clonelike men behind the audition table looked up from their various forms.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Nad said, snapping his fingers for Fuse to take his cane. "I am here to apply for your coveted acting place in said Space Patrol movie. I can assure you that I've been an expert on this Nad fellow for quite some time."

"What was that?" one of them asked.

"What was what?"

"That huge explosion I just heard."

"Oh, nothing, nothing," Nad laughed. "I suggest you start looking for both a new secretary and a good janitor, however. Anyway, to business!" =(

SP)=-

The bustle around the backlot was at an all-time high.

Various executives raced about, closing deals on ordering the props. Cargo ships landed and unloaded bits of scenery from the other side of the planet. Houses were rolled into place, cars placed here and there, but the various sledgehammers that SHOULD be hard at work to make the place look like a war zone were not present. Apparently, destruction of public property didn't go over well with 74% of the Yttian audience, so the plot was rewritten to be a robbery crime wave.

Zeke, Bruiser, Jane and Twerp managed to squeeze through the mob of studio workers and caterers, working their way around the incredible maze of makeup tables, steam tables, costume racks, and delicatessans.

Ted Spinner peered over his sunglasses from his special, gold-coated director's chair. It was hard as hell and painful to sit in, but the effect it had on his subordinates was impressive.

"Hey! Over here, guys!" he shouted enthusiastically to the Patrollers, who weaved their way towards the chair. Brent Tartiburg looked at them from behind the director's chair in contempt, but Ted didn't seem to notice.

"Hi," Twerp said, peering upwards, unable to see Ted's face beyond his

underbite. "We-"

"Not just yet. Got scenes to shoot," Ted said, picking up a megaphone.

"Quiet on the set!"

Instantly, the room was coated in a thick candy shell of silence, and the various drones faded to a safe area behind the background.

The actors entered from their trailers, and climbed into the pre-crashed rent-a-car for the big Goon Fight Scene. This moment marked the rest of the scene in the Patroller's minds, not because of anything striking about the movie proceeds, but the actors chosen to play themselves.

"Zeke-" Jane started, but Ted hushed her down. She looked vaguely annoyed, and stared at her acting twin in anger.

"Aaaaand... action!"

A blue, detailless sedan skidded to a halt behind the 'crashed' car, and four hired goons climbed out with automatic weapons. The actor, not Zeke himself, dived out from the driver's seat.

Zeke himself was rather impressed, because Not-Zeke looked exactly like he did. A bit larger, maybe with more of a jaw and a smile, but mostly the same. And the voice...

"That's unsafe driving, my friends!" Not-Zeke guffawed. "We'll have to teach you miscreants a lesson for terrorizing the poor people of this world!"

The voice was as solid as a block of granite, a voice that knew what it wanted and was going to get it no matter what the odds. The kind of voice that would be incredible for a cartoon show superhero.

The goons ducked behind their car and started shooting, prompting Not-Zeke to do the same as the other Not-Patrollers came out of the car to take defensive positions.

Bruiser sized up the other three. Not-Bruiser was a pretty good match for him, but Not-Twerp seemed wrong... his clothes were altogether too dark, and the grimace on his face was way too evil-looking.

Jane didn't care about the others. Her gaze was fixated directly on the most outlandish of all the copies; Not-Jane.

Apparently, the bigwigs in Public Response didn't like the idea of a shadowy, red-cloaked lurking figure. Sure, they kept the red, but the cloak was gone. So was the shirt and pants. In fact, all Not-Jane was wearing was a red, one-piece swimsuit spandex type thing and red boots, scuttling around this way and that, blazing away with a laser pistol in each hand. To add insult to injury, her breasts were definitely larger than the real

thing.

This was clearly everything Jane wasn't. This weirdo was an exhibitionist who hadn't apparently learned that skimpy outfits have no functionality whatsoever. Where do you hide the knives, for crying out loud? There are a few places, but they're hard to access and way too embarrassing. Plus, those boots would make way too much noise if you were sneaking up on someone. Not-Jane made Jane look like some pathetic sex-object semiheroine, who always won and managed to look ravishing as she stood triumphant over her enemies.

"I don't like it," Jane concluded, whispering this to Zeke.

"I gotta get out the grenades," growled Not-Twerp in a much lower voice than Twerp's usual squeak. "Cover me!"

"Yo!" stated Not-Bruiser.

"Yo?" inquired Bruiser, whispering to Twerp. "Yo? That me big line in scene, just 'yo'?"

Not Jane ran along the front of the car, guns ablazing with blank ammo, making sure the cameras caught as many curves as possible. Not Twerp dug out a grenade as Bruiser laid down covering fire. The grenade was tossed, and a smoke bomb went off as the goons were hurled majestically through the air by hidden launching platforms onto concealed mattresses.

"Well, that's... that's..." started Not-Jane, frowning slightly. "Oh, what's my line again?"

"CUT!" Ted shouted over the groans of the other actors. "Alright, we regroup and reshoot the final line in five. Move it out!"

The work crews reassembled, putting in new smoke bombs and reloading the actor's guns with blanks. Ted turned to the disgruntled and shocked Patrollers with an unusually large grin on his face.

"So," he said, making a sweeping arm gesture, "What do you think?"

"My jaw isn't really THAT big," Zeke protested.

"Not according to the information we got," Brent rebutted.

"I don't dress like that, or 'grimace evilly!'," snorted Twerp, kicking a bit of gravel.

"You're abnormal for a Murfle, and our studies show that most Murfles prefer not seeing social deviants onscreen," Brent said. Twerp started to object, but Bruiser cut in.

"Yo? That it? My big line me gonna be remembered for all time is YO?"

he shouted.

"Yo is very big in action movies. Reports show that people prefer more action and less words."

"What the hell is that... THING you have me in? I don't dress, act, talk, or move like that at all. I can sue for this, you know. Although killing you would be more fun," Jane hissed.

"Dark and deadly is out, it's much too twentieth century gothic. The action-packed, mysteriously dangerous, beautiful female agent is more likeable."

"There's no mystery about it. Everything that poor girl... ME... has is on public display."

"Friends, please!" Ted protested. "This is a happy occasion! We're here to make movie magic, not argue and quibble about minor details."

"I want this movie yanked and I want it yanked now," Jane said quietly.

"Sorry sister, the deal is closed," Brent tartily retorted. "You have no say in it, this is between Patrol HQ and the Spinner Broadcast System. It's too late to stop now over some minor costuming problems."

"Alright," Jane caved in. "But I'm warning you, mister ineffective middle management suckup, if I see one more problem with your laughing excuse for me, you and I are going a couple of rounds!"

With that, she turned sharply and marched off towards the guest building, shoving any hapless makeup engineers out of her way.

"I really am sorry about your friend there," Ted continued, "But business is business. You understand, right? The public doesn't want reality, they want fiction. We can't go and show what REALLY happened, it would give your organization and mine a bad name. Look, let me make it up to you. How about lunch?"

"It's five fourteen," Twerp said.

"Well, any time is a good time for lunch. Let me treat all three of you to a sandwich, and we'll talk about it."

"Mr. Spinner, I'd like to suggest that we disallow Miss Jane from attending any more scene shoots," Brent warned. "We wouldn't want to interrupt filming."

"Oh, tosh, Brent," Ted laughed. "These fine people are our GUESTS. We have to treat them with some respect, you know."

"Alright, Mr. Spinner. You do know best," Brent said, forcing the words out of his mouth.

"So glad we see eye to eye on this."

"Here's the copy of the script you wanted, boss," Fuse said, walking into Nad's trailer with the dogeared copy. "Why'd you want an extra, anyway?"

"Simple enough," Nad said, touching up his hair in the mirror. "Word on the set is that some Patrollers were by and threw a ruckus after a scene shoot. Now, since this is based on my exploits and my darling Jane is involved--"

"You got a thing going with a Patrolman? Err, woman?" Woneer said, amazed.

"Well, not really a thing, sort of an understanding," he explained.

"We share some common interests, hobbies, tastes, peeves, likes, weaponry, et cetera. Knowing her as I do, I know that she'd be quite angry over the silicone replica they seem to have cooked up, and I also know that the only reason our Mister Spinner isn't lying dead in his bathtub is because she's restraining herself as an officer of the law."

Nad turned around, grinning. "We're going to see how far that restraint extends. Always nice to have a helper on a caper. Cane?" =(SP

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Jane paced around her guest room, trying to think of what to do next.

She had tried to find a copy of the script and see if there was anything else objectionable in it. If there was, she'd definitely have to react, lest her reputation as a trained ex- assassin was marred by that fraud they have working that sideshow freak act they called a movie.

However, she never managed to find a copy. It seemed the staff was warned about her, and despite using some of her more popular and traceless persuasion techniques, nobody had a copy they could give her. Apparently the only copies not under lock and key were under key and lock in the actor's trailers.

Well, a lock would be no problem. The only problem would be, given the slightest chance that she was caught, it would look very silly for a Space Patrolwoman, a crusader for good or at least a paycheck, to be illegally breaking and entering.

Patrol work might be more interesting than simply offing people for cash, but it was really a drag when you had to obey the law.

"Knock Knock," went the synthesized doorbell.

Jane took up a defensive position behind the door of the bathroom, drawing a pistol-grip stungun. "Come on in," she said sweetly.

"Oh Jane dear?" Nad said, peeking in as Jane leapt out of the doorframe and pounced on him, knocking him flat. Jane neatly rolled along the ground and stopped standing, behind the upside down on the ground Quayle, who was looking up and still clenching some now-crushed roses and a book.

Jane paused.

"Nad?"

"A bit disheveled due to your usual physical way of saying hello, but yes, 'tis me," he said, standing himself up and grabbing his cane from the floor.

Jane peered at him oddly. "Bugger off. You're just one of those actors they've hired."

"No, really love," Nad said, "I insist, it is me."

"I said GO AWAY!" she said, stomping back into her room. "It's not funny, and unless you want that silly yellow tie stuffed down your throat you'll walk very quickly in the way you didn't arrive!"

SLAM!

"I can understand you're a bit upset," Nad said through the door. "I can prove it, really."

Jane peered through the peephole, greeted by an out-of-proportion, magnified view of Nad's attentive stare. "How?" she inquired.

"Well, just ask me anything about when we first met."

"What year was the wine we drank?"

"1997. A pretty bad year, but it was the best I could find on HappiWerld."

"Who was the waiter?"

"Buford. Not really good at restaurant work, but he's a good shot."

"Where and what is my tattoo?"

"Left thigh, 'Death To (Your Name Here)'," Nad concluded. Several clicks sounded as Jane unlocked the door, and pulled Nad inside.

"I don't come empty handed either," he said, pulling a dogeared script

out from behind his back and setting the mangled flowers on the table. "How about a little light reading tonight?"

Normal people would have simply tossed down the script in frustration on the guest bed and heaved about in fury. Jane, on the other hand, ripped it to shreds, set it on fire, dropped it in a wastepaper basket and threw the basket out a (closed) window, both glass and firey basket crashing to the ground below. Someone's Mercedes burned.

"I take it it was not to your liking?" Nad asked.

"Those IDIOTS!" she spat. "I am NOTHING LIKE THAT! Get this. You capture us after a dramatic fight, and put us in two separate cells. Twerp and Bruiser in one, me and Zeke in the other. THIS is the sick part - they've got me KISSING ZEKE BY THE END!!! I wouldn't make it with that loser if he was the last large-jawed nincompoop in the universe!"

"You can't really blame them," Nad sighed. "They didn't know about us, after all."

"I can and will blame them. This is that gimp Brent Tartiburg's fault. Him and his zarking Public Response cronies... they're the gits responsible for editing the truth down to nice, edible, sweet cunks of candy! I'll KILL HIM!"

"I had something else in mind," Nad said. "Let's lace the entire set

with nitro and send it all sky high, watching it from a distance with chilled glasses of wine while it burns to the ground."

"Sounds fun..." Jane dreamily said. A look of doubt shadowed her eyes.

"No. They have a fleet of clones here to do the dirty work. They made this spectacle in less than a week, they can rebuild lickety split if need be.

What we need is something permanent... something to disturb upper management a bit."

"Ah!" Nad said, rubbing his hands together. "Character assassination! Not as nasty as I'd like, but nonetheless satisfying. Shall we begin by catching our monseur Spinner playing Hide the Salami in a closet with a goat, or merely expose the entire Program Planning department as goat worshippers?"

"No..." Jane said, deep in thought. "I have someone specific in mind."

"I really do feel for you guys," Ted said between forkfuls of rice, "But you've got to understand my position. I have to submit ideas to Program Planning and Public Response for our movies. And once I submit, it stays submitted. I can't yank a whole movie, you see."

"Can't you change it a bit?" Twerp pleaded. "I mean, we're not really like that. Or at least I'm not. I don't grimace, first of all."

"Piss off," Brent blurted. "You've got no say-"

"Now Brent," Ted said. "You've not been very cooperative with our guests here. You've had many years with us, don't make me fire you over something as trivial as this."

Brent sulked, but Ted didn't bother noticing. "Well, guys, I mean you're a swell bunch and all, but the script is written and most of the scenes are shot already. I can't change anything, really."

"I don't think it needs changing," Zeke defended. "I mean, I'm a dashing, heroic kinda guy. Nothing changed there."

"Me wanna say more than 'yo'," Bruiser pouted.

"Well, I've really got to get to my seven o'clock with my hairdresser before my eight o'clock with the advertising executives, so if you'll excuse me... Brent, you'll pick up the tab, right?"

"Of course, Mr. Spinner, I would be glad to," Brent managed. Ted thanked him, wiped his mouth on a napkin, and left.

Brent, making sure Ted was out of earshot, launched into a prepared speech he had been planning to cheese off the Patrollers for quite some time. He ignored the clink of glasses, the mutterings of patrons, and the

slight clicking noise from a nearby fern and launched into a tightly whispered, one page flame.

"Now listen, you meatballs..."

Shooting resumed the very next day, with the all-important Love Scene in Cellblock D. Much to Ted's surprise and Brent's mounting anger, Jane was sitting calmly on the side eating popcorn, with the other three lurking nearby, slightly worried over Jane's calm behavior. She had waved to them a few minutes back, but made no other actions.

Brent pulled one of the rent-a-cops from the side. "See that woman over there?" he said, pointing. "Remove her from the set and see that she doesn't come back."

"What, for four fifty an hour?" the cop exclaimed. "I've heard of what she's done to office couriers when she was shaking them down for scripts. You want her off the set so bad, you go remove her."

"You're fired."

"Big deal. I hate this job anyway," he said, dropping his badge and walking off.

Firings used to be so much fun, Brent thought. The ability to crush

one man's life underneath my foot, to ruin his future just for getting in my way. It's no fun when they agree with you.

"Okay, scene twenty three, action!" shouted Ted.

"You know, these cells are pretty cramped and chilly," heroically stated Not-Zeke.

"Well, slide over here on this narrow, smallish seat so we can warm each other," luridly suggested Not-Jane.

"Hold it! Stop the presses, hold the phone and pass they mayo!" Nad said, striding in boldly from his trailer, Fuse and Woneer clearing a path through the techs and cue card holders. "I have a slight announcement to make, keep those cameras rolling!"

"That's my cue," Jane said, putting down the popcorn. "Excuse me."

She walked away from her surprised teammates, standing near the sidelines and searching through her various inner-cloak pockets for something.

"Stop these cameras. Cut scene!" Brent orders.

"Sorry," Nad said, pulling a tacnuke hand grenade from his pocket, "But the nice man with the grenade says keep them rolling. I'm afraid that

it outranks you considerably."

Nad ignored the horrified looks on the faces of the various corporate peons and continued.

"I have some not-good information about our assistant to the executive producer, the honorable Mister Tartiburg," he continued. "Jane? If you'd please?"

Jane walked in from offstage, clicked PLAY on a tape recorder, and held it up to the boom mike.

"Now listen up meatballs," Brent whispered fiercely from the tiny speaker, over the background of normal restaurant chatter. "I've worked too damn hard and long to get Ted's insane little idea of doing a Space Patrol movie working right, and I'm not stopping it now. You think I'm happy trying to glorify such a pathetic excuse for law as you clowns? I wouldn't trust a rock to you! But I've got to make you look good so I can keep Ted happy, and keeping Ted happy is my gravy wagon. I don't care if the public hates this movie and we lose millions, I won't get hurt, only Ted will take the blame for originating the idea. And if it does well, all the better, I get a raise. But if it doesn't air at all I'm up shit's creek without a paddle. I don't want to catch you or that bitchy tramp of yours on the set anymore, no matter what Ted says. This conversation is closed."

Click. The room was filled with the noises of everybody turning to look at Brent.

"Umm," he offered in his defense.

Brent's logically nasty mind was trying to ignore the four hundred pairs of eyes turned towards him and decide what to do next. He could declare the tape a fraud. He could ignore it calmly. He could beg for mercy and salvage what was left of his job. He could leap at Ted and rip his throat out.

He ran instead.

Ted picked up his cellular phone, and tapped in a code. "Security?"

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!

This wasn't a revolutionary new kind of doorbell, it was the sound of several large, meaty shoulders slamming into an office door at top speed.

"Go away!" Brent shouted, grabbing everything he could off of his desk.

"This is Security, Mr. Tartiburg!" a deep, burly voice echoed. "You've been fired and we are to take you off the premises. Don't make me come in

there and decide to do something rash, such as breaking every bone in your arms for firing my buddy an hour ago."

"This is my office! Mine! Mine! Mine!" Brent howled, half mad. "Nobody can take it from me! I LIKE my job! I WANT my job!"

"Get the battering ram," the guard mentioned to the other guard (although Brent couldn't hear this, because the door was in the way).

Brent grabbed for his rolodex and filofax. He'd need these. Yup, he'd need these. If they wanted his office, fine. But he wanted everything in it.

The door crashed open, splintering bits of wood away as the huge robotic ram was removed. The two guards, in crowd control gear, entered.

"Now if you'd please come quietly, we'll be escorting you off-planet," the guard said. "The Hollyworld business council has decided you're not welcome here anymore."

"Oh no you don't!" Brent yeped, trying to hold all his beloved appliances and papers, stumbling backwards. "I'm staying!"

"Um, sir, I'd advise you not to back up anymore--"

"You advise, huh? You ADVISE? DAMN YOUR ADVICE!"

Brent stepped sharply backwards and fell out the open office window.

There was a wet thud, a shower of floating papers, and that was that.

"Sheesh, these executive types," one guard joked. "Threaten 'em once and they become lemmings."

After that, it was merely a matter of mopping up after the mess. Ted had reviewed the information in Brent's computer and saw how much editing he had done to the original material, and realized that what he was filming was completely different from the truth. Of course, he still wanted to film it, but some persuasion and strong words from the Patrollers convinced him to drop this like a hot potato.

For putting up with the movie mayhem, Ted gave all four Patrollers tickets to HollyworldLand, the one amusement park on the planet. A few heavy lifters were needed to cart away the prizes Jane had won at ring toss, frog jump, knock-down-the- bottles, skeeball, etc.

"Can't we leave some of this behind?" Zeke asked, trying to stuff a six foot rabbit (not Bruiser) through the GSS Regurgitation's main hatch.

"I mean, I never counted you as the type who would like stuffed animals."

"I have a cousin who'd like 'em," Jane said. Zeke finally managed to get the stuffed bunny through the door, and started trying to get it

through the other four doors on the way to Jane's room.

"Packing up?" Nad asked, walking up from behind her.

"Hmmm?" Jane said. "Yeah. Heading off-world. Apparently we've been given a mission."

"Shame," Nad said. "I had wanted to take you to dinner or something before you had to leave. Take a raincheck for next time, I guess?"

"Yeah, I guess," Jane stated.

"Well, I have a permanent address now if you'd like to mail a letter or give me a call," Nad said, taking out a business card. "Drop by sometime you have leave."

Jane took the card, depositing it in one of her inside pockets.

"Thanks."

A long pause ensued as both parties tried to think of what to do next. Neither were very good at saying goodbye, especially when they were unsure when their next meeting was.

Nad decided to give it a go. "Look, I--"

Jane cut through the smalltalk and just kissed him.

Zeke set the cute and fluffy bunny down on the other side of Jane's room, along with the teddy bear, cupie doll, zebra, horse, snarfblat (a sort of fish), and surprisingly a toaster oven she had won over the course of a few hours. Zeke, panting from the work, didn't look forward to when he'd have to take all this stuff back off the ship when they got back to headquarters.

"That all of them?" Jane asked from behind him.

"Jeez, how'd you get in here so fast?" Zeke asked. "It took me almost twenty minutes just to get that bunny up here."

Jane shrugged. "Time flies when you're not porting around six-foot stuffed rabbits, I guess. Doesn't hamper your walking as much."

"Can we go now?" Twerp asked, peeking in from the kitchen.

"Might as well. Let's just hope there isn't another amusement park wherever our next mission is," Zeke grumbled, trundling off towards the cockpit area.

Ted looked on from his office as the two ships -- the patrol ship and that odd yellow limosine -- streaked off into the sky.

Of course, upper management won't be happy that he yanked a movie in progress. Fortunately he was higher than upper management and could fire anybody who disagrees that it was the right thing to do.

Even so, he'd have to decide on a new movie... something lighthearted and maybe family-oriented to cover up the mess this one had made.

He tapped the button for his secretary. "Public Response Department, please."

"One moment sir."

A familiar little jingle with lots of bass drums came on for a few seconds, then faded away as Brent's replacement picked up the phone. Thanks to the heirarchy system this company was built on, a successor to Brent was already picked and moved in as he fell to his doom.

"We need a new movie idea, something happy and silly. Suggestions?" Ted asked.

"Well, I was thinking," said the unfamiliar voice, "How about a cartoon? Animation always wins big with the sponsors. Perhaps have it be about a whole village of little talking mice who take shorthand... have them live in mushroom houses, and sing songs with lots of 'la's in them... throw in an evil wizard who wants to turn them into silver or something.

Needs a name. How about... the Snitches?"

"Needs work."

"Got it." Space Patrol Part 12 VOS

Despite what you might think after reading some of these chronicles, virtual reality wasn't that common in the universe. It was still in its infancy, even after the breakthrough a few decades back that eliminated the need for really comical headgear and toy gloves, and hasn't and probably won't come close to out realitying reality yet.

Well, it can, but only if you give it enough hardware. It would take roughly sixty Cray XMPs (late twentieth century version) to, say, simulate a city for 100 users to such perfection that the people inside wouldn't know the difference. Frankly, money doesn't roll in that big to set up such a system unless you're involved in high-class crime and/or can generate money with the system.

Only one system to date has ever worked like that, and it was found in many peices in a discarded warehouse on Some Forboding Planet. Nobody really knew exactly why someone would set up such an expensive and intricate system, then erase every file from it as well as take a ball-peen hammer to each and every bit of equipment. It had everything a VR specialist could want... remote-control interfacing for cross-stellar visits... and hefty amount of memory that you could stuff a small town

into.

The system was discovered by a Starfleet flagship that was looking for bold new challenges that justified their rather incredible expense bills. After sending down a few away teams to see if any hostile alien nasties were lurking about that could be dramatically removed with nuclear weapons, they gave up, declared the place Boring and moved on.

However, the discovery of the wrecked reality sent scientist/explorers from all corners of the galaxy over to lay claim to the equipment and try to bleed any secrets possible from the broken, cobweb-ridden gear. This was known as the Reality Rush of 2120, which is a bit confusing because that's not the year it took place in. Men came from far and wide with their pickaxes and hardy muscles to pry open the scrap and see if any gold nuggets of information could be found inside.

They didn't find much.

Outside the city-large warehouse that used to contain the remnants of the most incredible virtual reality system to date, several thousand pairs of eyes peered out of several thousand cheapy constructed huts.

Inside, several thousand aliens and humans alike tinkered with bits of scrap, memory chips, and floppy disks they had scavanged from the wreck like several thousand vultures. They came in pairs, one to do the work, one

to spy on the others who were spying and doing work. The air flowed slowly, currents sluggishly pushing through the intense waves of paranoia and anticipation.

The rumor had it that somewhere in the mess, there had to be a portion of the system that wasn't erased and could be used for something that would sell for millions of credits. Obviously whoever owned this Terminal of the Gods erased things in a hurry, and any backup archives they didn't get to would be lingering around still...

However, this meant that the race was on to find a part, dig what you could out of it, and patent it before someone stole your find or found something better first. Primitive traps were set up around each of the huts, so that anybody who came to steal a claim in the dark of night wouldn't get very far. Not that anyone slept. The hunt for materials had been going on for a week now, and twenty four hour shifts were common place, as well as covert night raids for the few bits of computer left that nobody had looked at.

Indiana, in particular, was hoping he'd find something soon, because he had been holding off the urge to go to the bathroom for three days now in fear that he might step on a mine outside when he looked around for some bushes.

Indiana Jrrgil was a combination adventurer / scientist. He had studied every ancient Harrison Ford film he could find in Terra's film

banks, and the few Ford had made in Hologvision. He wore the traditional fedora hat (although his had two large holes in it so his green, rabbitoid ears could fit through), a leather jacket, and a satchel. He never had any real use for the satchel, but it was needed for the full effect.

In truth, he never really found as much excitement as his movie hero had. No german-speaking guntoting maniacs had shot at him, he hadn't found any sacred thermoses, and he hadn't found any holy scroll-containers. Yet.

The Yet part was what worried him the most. This was the third floptical disk he had examined so far in the last week, and it contained the same kind of scrambled mishmash the others had.

THEN he noticed a pattern. This particular mishmash seemed familiar... how it was familiar, he wasn't sure.

"Werrkil?" Indiana whispered. "I think I found something."

Werrkil, his darker shade of green friend, looked away from the window. "Namely?"

"This disk seems to have a pattern... it's got one huge file like the others did, but it's not as scrambled or messy."

Indiana slid the tiny laptop across the impromptu wooden floor, where

Werrkil stopped it and examined the screen.

"By Bob, I think we've found something," Werrkil mumbled, eyes widening. "This isn't a scrambled, partially erased file, it's compressed. It's an archive of something, completely intact."

"COMPLETELY intact?!?!"

"SHHHH!" hissed Werrkil. "Geez, you want all these goldiggers hearing that and coming in here to slit our throats tonight?"

"If this is useable, I plan to be off this stinking world before nightfall, thank you very much," Indiana snapped back. "Okay, so it's compressed. How do I uncompress it?"

"Lemme handle that," Werrkil mumbled, pulling the laptop away from Indiana. "Lesse... it's huffman compression, I think I've got that somewhere... c:... md temp... unhuff a:*.huf c:..."

Werrkil's skin went pale. Through Yttian fur, this is hard to notice by other beings, but to Ytts it's quite easy to see.

"What? What is it?" Indiana asked, walking over to his partner's side.

The screen read :

:VOS VIRTUAL OPERATING SYSTEM INSTALLATION KIT:

:This program replaces the OS on your computer with a

Virtual Reality operation system, thus allowing you to

use your old applications in a virtual environment or

compile your own programs in the new reality. Would

you like to install the networking features?:

(Y/N)

"Oh my god..." Werrkil gaped. Indiana was grinning from long ear to long ear.

"You know, if I was going to bug out and leave everything behind as legal salvage, I certainly wouldn't leave behind backups of the operation system around where people could steal them and publish, making millions of dollars, would you?"

"Networking features?" Werrkil read. "This thing is a zarking NETWORK? Do you have any idea how much money we could make creating a virtual, galaxy wide net with this stuff?"

"I don't have any idea," Indiana said, "Because the numbers are too big for my brain to handle. And I can handle some pretty hug ones. Come on, let's bug out of here."

Shortly later, the cheap wooden shack exploded violently, and an orbital escape pod containing two very lucky scientists and a floptical disk worth more than them fifteen million times over rocketed into the sky to be picked up by a ship on autopilot. Several thousand minus two pairs of eyes looked upward at them, the familiar sinking feeling of losing out on something big rumbling through several thousand minus two stomachs. =(SP)=-

Indiana relaxed in his living room while Werrkil tinkered with the software. His living room wasn't very livable - since amateur adventurer / computer scientists weren't in demand, his income was about equal to that of a highly trained spatula technician. That was soon to change, he thought. Just as long as this thing we found works.

Turthfully, he was a bit worried. Werrkil mentioned he'd just be a few minutes when he went about testing the software. Of course, there was no real way to check on him, because unlike normal flat-screen-and-keyboard systems, Virtual Reality demanded the whole attention of the user.

Not just visual attention. Also, attention of the ears, eyes, nose, smell, thought, and any other sense that hasn't been discovered yet. Gone are the days when a user had to wear a silly looking hat and glove -- Now you just attach a special combination electrode / suction cup to some part of your body. You didn't even need to be connected to the machine by a wire, if you had the right hardware. Werrkil was just wearing a digital watch-like thing to use it, zoned out in a comfy chair while the link played out something else in his brain.

So, Indiana had to wait for Werrkil to come back from wherever he was inside the computer. He could always yank the watch off, but that would probably not be wise, because severing the data links between the system and his mind would kill him. VR might be the technological rave of the

century, but it certainly was nerve-racking.

There was a slight POPping noise, and the suction cup watch attachment popped off. Werrkil blinked.

"Yow," he admitted.

"Well? Does it work? Are we rich yet?" Indiana pleaded.

"Lemme give you the tour," Werrkil said, wiring up a second suction cup. "And yeah, I'd say we're definitely rich."

Reality, to Indiana, simply was replaced by virtual reality in less time than it takes to blink an eye. There wasn't any flashy dramatics or spectacular effects involving vortexes - he was just here.

Here was a bit squalid. It looked like a cheap, cartoony version of the room he had just left. An angular, uncomfortable looking chair rested on the floor where he was waiting beforehand. A few tables were scattered about in more or less the same places they were in before. A boxlike computer rested on the table, presumably representing the one he was using now.

Werrkil opened the door to the room and stepped inside.

"Where were you?" Indiana asked.

"In my Headspace. This is yours," Werrkil responded. "I had to create you a Headspace directory of your own before you entered. Sort of like an account, or a home directory. I hope you like it... it's not much, but that's because this computer isn't powerful enough to simulate it well at all. Plus the basic package for VOS doesn't have much furniture, and I haven't figured out how to simulate new objects yet."

"I like the poster," Indiana said, pointing to it. Covering the better part of the south wall was a 256 color image of Harrison Ford.

"Found it as a .GIF on your computer," Werrkil shrugged. "Figured you'd like it."

"Well, I mean, this is really nice and all and it looks cool and

should make us a hit at parties, but what GOOD is it?" Indiana asked.

Werrkil scowled, muttering something about laymen, and continued. "I'm the VR expert. You're just the whip-slinging systems analyst. When I say it's worthwhile, I mean it's worthwhile."

"You haven't said it's worthwhile."

"Yeah, well, I'm sayin' it now. Look, every single object in this room represents a file in your home directory, or a link to some global action. This system is EXACTLY like a normal computer DOS, but files are shown as real-world things. Take for example this gun," he said, pulling a gun out of midair and waving it about.

"GEEZ!" shouted Indiana, diving under a 13 color grayscale sofa.

"Watch where you're pointing that thing!"

"Chill, it can't kill users," Werrkil soothed. "This is a 3-D, objicon representation of the DOS DELETE command. Take for example that table, representing table.obj..."

Werrkil cocked the gun, aimed it, and fired. A streak of light zipped from the barrel to the table, and the table vanished.

"In normal DOS, I just typed 'del table.obj'," he said, putting the gun back in a holster which appeared at his hip for just enough time to

vanish again, with the gun. "I concentrated on the delete command, fashioned it in the shape of a gun objicon, and thus incarnated a temporary object that had the same properties as del.exe. That bit was pretty hard to figure out."

"I got that table as a birthday present from my mum," Indiana mumbled. "She's not going to be happy that you incinerated it."

"It's not gone. You're in VR," Werrkil said. "It still exists in your REAL room. I can recopy a table from the furniture.lib library, if you'd like. It's just window dressing really, it serves no purpose, like any other data file. In VR, anything is possible, including cloning joinery. It's better than life, in a way."

"It doesn't LOOK very realistic," Indiana said. "Looks rather like a cheap 1990's dunegon kill-hack-slash sort of thing, all polygonish. But that's because my computer stinks, right?"

"Well, your 986 is okay for normal DOS," Werrkil affirmed, "But for VOS, it's not that great."

"Explains why we found so many broken-down Crays at that wreck site," Indiana said. "Whoever left it behind must have wanted to simulate reality so zarking incredibly that it looked just like the real thing. Quite an expensive toy to dump when you're bored with it."

"Speaking of expenses," Werrkil added, "Have you decided on who to call first about selling the rights to this stuff?"

"Yeah. Where'd my TODO.TXT file go off to? I had all my ideas written in it."

"Where do you normally keep your paper files?" Werrkil egged on.

"Probably in my grey... filing cabinet," Indiana paused as Werrkil strode over to the rectangular box, opened a drawer, and pulled out a sheet of paper.

"Here ya go. 'Things to do today...' lesse... Macroware?" Werrkil read.

"Hey, they aren't joking when they say Macroware is the most successful company this side of the quad," Indiana smirked. "Since their recent flop Sliding Glass Doors 3.1, I figure Dollar Will will LOVE something like this."

"THE Dollar Will?!?!" Werrkil exclaimed. "William Doors? Where the heck did you get his phone number? You know nobody ever talks to him directly unless they've got it."

"Give me SOME credit for being a hacker," Indiana laughed. "I simply

sliced into the GT&T database a few days ago and browsed. I've got the number on autodial. Do we have a telephone here?"

"Nope," Werrkil said. "The system didn't come with a modem program. I've got to figure out how to create one... programming in here is really hellish. This is all I've come up with... lesse..."

Wrinkle lines (digitized, of course) formed on Werrkil's simulated forehead, as he concentrated on calling his program. A cheaply rendered, grey featureless cube popped into the air in front of him.

"A box?"

"It's sort of a tradition for your first program... here..." Werrkil said, relaxing and reaching out to tap the cube.

"Hello world!" it said, in Werrkil's voice.

"That took me five minutes of trying to picture it in my mind," he said. "I never was a clear thinker. The greatest minds of our times never were, either."

"There's GOT to be an easier way to make... what are they called again?"

"Objicons."

"Cute name. Anyway, there has to be an easier way to make them than trying to envision them. If that was the case, you'd need several geniuses on hand to get anything done."

"I'm guessing that this is sort of like assembly for VR," Werrkil said, as the cube disappeared. "Odds are it's just an objicon I haven't found yet. Apparently, the manuals for programming things in here weren't included."

"Well, I guess we'll have to get out of here before we can call Dollar Will... how DO I get out of here?"

"Hmmm? Oh, the door's over there."

Indiana shrugged, adjusted his hat, and stepped outside his room... and into the rest of this world. Outside appeared to be acres and acres of grass (or would have been if he had enough computing power to simulate each blade. As it looked like the top of a billiards table), under a sky... a sky that wasn't black, or blue, or red, or whatever, but actually had the pattern normally associated with a television on the fritz. White snow, in the usual dancing patters. Nothing else for what seemed to be miles and miles...

"Oh, you meant out of the VR?" Werrkil shouted after him.

"Yeah... but... what is THIS?"

Werrkil stepped outside, looking about, ignoring the sky. "Dull, isn't it? I haven't done any work on the outside yet, so it's just a standard Pleasant Meadow. Not very pleasant, really. Nor have I figured out how to configure the sky. See that other house next to yours? That's my Headspace home directory. It's got my stuff in it. We could take a visit if you'd like."

"I'd rather get out of here," Indiana said. "This place is starting to give me the creeps."

"Well, see that suction cup sensor on your wrist?" Werrkil said, pointing to it. "Just yank that off. Here, watch."

Werrkil yanked off the little suction cup from his own wrist. He didn't really vanish, or fade away, or de-rez, or explode violently -- one moment he was there, the next he wasn't. It was as simple as that.

Indiana pulled his electrode off, and the world reassumed it's logical place around him. He was surprised by the amount of detail in this simulation before he remembered he was back in reality.

"What's that number again?" Werrkil asked, picking up the phone. =(

SP)=-

It took about a week to travel from the Yttian Homeworld, where Indiana resided via a leased apartment, to Macroware's company headquarters.

At first, William Doors, being a local thinker, had expressed his opinions and thoughts on the matter in several simple statements :

1. Who the hell are you?
2. How did you get this number?
3. I'm tracing your call and calling the police.
4. I can have you hung. I'm rich, you know.
5. I don't care what you're trying to sell.
6. A what?
7. What kind of operating system?
8. Hang on, let me call off the police.

After that, it was just a matter of packing up Indiana's computer, the

prized VOS disk, and then flying over to Macroware for a demo run. Of course, if he didn't like it, they were going to be arrested. Werrkil was quite confident that he'd buy the system. Indiana was quite confident his cellmate would be named Vinnie.

So, after being led inside by an outstandingly large number of armed guards, they were face to face with the galaxy's richest man in a soundproof, armored room labelled TOP SECRET, complete with booby traps on the door.

William himself wasn't as impressive as the rest of the planet was. William was shortish, with jeans and a ragged grey sweater, and one of those brown hairdos that looks the same wet, dry, messy, combed, on fire, or burned with acid. Although there was no fix-it tape on his glasses, they were certainly broken at one time; the telltale scorch marks of a weilding torch were present.

"Hello, Mr. Doors, and let me just say it's a pleasure--" Werrkil started, grinning from ear to ear as Indiana lugged in the computer via a red wagon.

"Skip it. Set the thing up, I want a look at it before I sign anything," spat Doors.

Indiana rolled the wagon to the center of the room. "Got an extension

cord I can use?"

"Two prong, two prong grounded, three prong, or fiber optic?" Doors asked, yanking a variety of adapters and wires from a floor panel. =(SP)=-

William signed the last zero on the check with a flourish, which is customary when handing out money in sums that can buy most governments.

"Here you go," William said, handing it over to Indiana, who held it as carefully as a paper mache eggshell with a crystal cover. "And there'll be plenty more where that came from. I treat my filefinders with style. How would you boys feel about becoming Technical Support Assistant Experts, VOS Division?"

"What exactly does that mean?" pondered Indiana.

"Nothing. But it means you get an condo on this planet near the golf course and a steady income just to be around if something goes wrong," William said. "Easy money. Certainly be a step up from your lean-to you live in now."

"It's not a lean-to," Indiana mumbled, shuffling his feet. "I rather like it..."

"How did you know where he lived?" Werrkil asked.

William whipped out a slip of paper from his pocket. "Harrison Jrrgil, aka Indiana Jrrgil, freelance computer specialist and troubleshooter for hire, current residence is Capitol City on the Yttian Homeworld. Owns a planet hopper."

"He must have accessed my Department of Space Vehicles record," Indiana guessed. "Easy enough."

"He's allergic to shrimp, has brown eyes, is a movie fanatic and has a weakness for nacho chips. Also, he owns some small funds in various banks across the quadrant and cheats regularly on his income taxes."

Indiana gulped. Werrkil looked confused. William grinned.

"I have my sources," Doors said, putting away the paper. "Information is such a hot commodity nowadays. People will pay large amounts of money to get it, and if there's one thing I have a lot of, it's large amounts of money. When it comes to the war for information, I'm certainly one of the top combatants."

"Not THE top combatant?" poked Werrkil.

"No," William stated flatly. "Enough about my methods. Do we have a deal?"

The various suits shuffled nervously into the conference room.

William wasn't known for calling conferences. He had to be dragged kicking and screaming just to go to the regularly scheduled ones. It wasn't that he wanted his company to go to waste, he just thought that they were a frivolous waste of time; he often tackled projects singlehandedly. Committees were a drain on resources.

The fact that he went out of his way to call one meant that something so big even HE couldn't handle it had come up.

"Okay, take seats," William said, walking in and taking his walkman headphones off his head. He switched off the 'Battlestar Metallica' (A science fiction holoflick done by Francis Ford Coppola the Fourth, with music by several major rock groups) soundtrack he was listening too and plopped the folder on the table.

"Someone just dropped a virtual reality based computer operating system in our laps," he started. "We've got exclusive rights to develop it. It's not complete, however. I'll expect the programming language it's bundled with sorted out and fully documented by the end of the week, and all previously unknown programs found and covered. Get our freest thinkers working on the libraries, I plan to market several extension packs worth of furniture and prebuilt scenery to make the place seem more like home. I'll be developing the main 'building' where all testing is done. That's all,

get cracking, you'll find copies of the installation disks on your desks and preloaded on our Crays. No word of this is to leave this planet or I'll fire you, then eject you into orbit without a shuttle or spacesuit. Be seeing you."

With that, William left. Everybody blinked.

Things weren't going real well at first. The system, as is, was missing a few disks and thus none of the standard applications were in. They couldn't create new objicons (sure, you could concentrate on the word CHAIR and bamf, one appears, but they couldn't create, say, a victorian era chair) because the objicon creator was missing. They lacked a means of writing documents inside the VR, and any way to set the system defaults (such as sky color).

Of course, Microware could have programmed programs to do all this for them, but the programming tools were missing as well. It was assumed they weren't on the disk, but after a few days of searching through the backwaters of the disk, they found it.

Actually USING it was another matter. Since the data was damaged, only part of the objicon's name was given, and that was 'micro'. Since the program wouldn't work correctly until the right kind of objicon was assigned to how it appeared and behaved, they were in deep doo doo.

William kicked back in his virtual office, which was tailored to look like his own. Because they were using a few Crays instead of a cheap 986, the place looked much more realistic... instead of poorly animated and cartoony, it was just cartoony. Cartoons he could deal with; he was a registered fan of the Ben and Iknips show, even though the scumbag children's network that ran it had fired the creator.

However, he was a bit annoyed today. Although some programs had been tracked down and documented by his staff, they still hadn't figured out how to get the internal programming language to work. He tried consulting his Technical Support Assistant Experts, VOS Division, but they were out playing golf or hitting the one 11-7 on the planet for slushees. You get what you pay for, which isn't quite true because Doors was paying them quite a bit.

William slapped his intercom button. "Attention. Will the team working on the internal programming language please come to my office. Now. Or face sacking."

William counted the seconds. One... two... three...

Three white-coated, cartoony scientists skidded into the room on the secret patch of ice he placed in front of the doorway as a practical joke. Since the physics in VOS weren't very well done, the scientists slid at a constant velocity, crashing into the desk and piling on top of each other.

"What the--?" one of the wondered aloud.

"Nothing. Just a gag. Anyway, where is this language you guys are attempting to fix?"

One of the scientists hesitantly held up a small microwave oven.

"Eh?" Doors asked.

"Well, all we know is that to make it work, it needs an objicon physical manifestation that starts with 'micro'. We've tried fifteen so far--"

William grabbed the cheap oven, and dropped it on his desk. His mind processed the question and spewed forth an idea of its own. William concentrated very hard on the word.

The microwave morphed into a microphone, which William grabbed.

"About," he said into the microphone.

Out of the air around them echoed, in a Murflian accent, "VOS Program Development System, English Speech Interface."

"Gentlemen, start thinking logically or you're out on your rear,"

Doors said. "Now go put this in the VOS Apps room, and have your people start developing applications."

"Umm, sir?" one of them started. "There has sort of been an idea being passed around... err... we'd like, um, a mail room."

"Good. Make one," William said.

"No, yousee, nobody here knows how to handle the mail. We'd need to clear the mail room workers for VOS Project Access and make them Headspaces and such, and we know that you don't want anyone else in on the project--"

"I said make one. So make one. It's just a mail room, for pete's sake, not an Enemy Agent Informational Relay Post. Just make sure it has no ties to our real-life mailsystem; electronic mail only. Now, the door, if you'll please."

The three scientists, bowing and scraping and bootlicking as if leaving the presense of God, left the office.

William slipped in some crakin' heavy metal, and turned on his wall of sound he had recently installed simply by concentrating very heard on the word 'CD2 Player'.

"The world is dull," wrote Fluki, in his pocket diary. "Anything that can liven it up is good. These suits, these businessmen, need to liven up.

Loosen up. Slack. Unconform. Everyone is an individual, strive to bring that out. Fantasy is good. A healthy imagination is good. Work is not."

Fluki, satisfied with this, closed it and pocketed the small book. He had been writing down obscure, sometimes connected thoughts like these for a year and a half. Maybe some day he'd organize it a little, publish it, and lead a new movement of slackness and general fun throughout the universe.

Well, it was an unlikely goal, but the unlikely was more fun than the likely. The likely is something you know will happen, and thus has no unpredictability. Without the unknown, life is dull.

Fluki ranked in the Macroware corporation as Mail Room Space Cadet. He hated this job, and dearly wished to return to his homeworld of C'atel, but unfortunately he was sort of a fugitive. Humph. Local cops, what few decent ones there were, and Space Patrol both needed some slack.

He made sure his book was firmly pocketed, plucked his Lennoesque green sunglasses off his head, and rubbed them with his shirt. The smears were even worse than the blotches it had before, so he experimented with new ways of looking around the filth. He pondered the symbolism of this, then gave up and washed them down in a water fountain.

He walked towards the Mail Room, bumping his Saren antennae on the

doorframe (humph. This universe is way too human designated) and plopped down in a chair, calmly pushing all the letters in his IN box into the garbage can.

His sight went light purple.

"Guess who?" bopped a cheery, high pitched voice behind him.

"Like, is it my mom?" Fluki joked.

"Nope. Two more guesses!"

"It's the Man, symbolised by the dark suit and balding hair, who shuffles in and out of a tedious life without a single individual thought, part of the core mind of Big Business."

"No."

"Eroki?"

"Yup!" she squealed, clapping for joy and spinning Fluki's chair around.

Eroki was in her usual attire, a baggy, cheap cloth skirt, a SAVE THE SARENS t-shirt, and green vest. The usual blonde braids hung over her headband, which swept her antennae backwards. Eroki and Fluki dressed

alike, because she did most of the shopping for the two of them. Of course, Fluki didn't wear skirts.

He got up, kissed her on the cheek, and began emptying various mailboxes. "So, what brings ya here, love?"

"Oh, some suit wants us mail jockeys for some lousy meeting," she moped, slumping into his chair. "Meetings. Those suits are always having meetings."

"Guys, we CAN NOT miss this one," Benson said, pulling a chin-up on the doorframe and landing inside the mail room. "We skipped out on the last one, and the they busted our hides real bad. I ain't gonna tempt that one again."

Floki peered over his glasses at Benson, who ignored the defiant look, crossing his arms over his dirty BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL sweatshirt with 'Programmers Do It Bit By Bit' button.

"Don't gimme that look, man. We are goin' to this meeting or we are goin' to end up cleanin' our desks out and movin' to some other job, something which I don't relish. Paychecks make the world go round."

"Alright, alright," Fluki said, tossing more mail into the garbage can, dodging Eroki, who was amusing herself with the spinning chair. "Like,

they're probably just gonna move our office again, but hey, if that's your vibe I'll roll with it."

"Here's your new office," the lab technician said, showing them in.

"Hot vibes..." Fluki muttered, looking around in awe. Before him was an almost-perfect simulation of his beloved, behated mail room.

"What'ya say this was again?" Eroki asked, chewing a stick of gum.

"Virtual reality," the tech said.

"I like it. It's just like the funnies."

"Damn straight man, LOOK at all this!" Benson said. "Man, I knew VR was comin' along great, but I had no idea it had gone THIS far..."

"Well, I'll leave you to organize the room however you like," the tech said, retracting his pen and putting it in his pocket protector. "You'll find an instruction manual for everything we've worked on so far in the drawer, but lord knows what you'll need it for. Report back to reality at quitting time."

With that, the tech returned to the quiet of the hallways of VOS's testing building.

"It's real. Only it's not. TOTALLY reflective, man!!" Fluki said, spinning around. "We can do ANYTHING we want in here... all it takes is a little free thought, and that's like something we are overflowin' with man, bustin' at the seams--"

"Whoa. Time out, homey," Benson laughed. "Let's not get into any of that funky stuff just yet, alright? I don't wanna get fired for abusin' the company system, okay?"

"The system is made to be abused, my human friend," Fluki said. "All we have to do is cover our tracks and avoid the suits and we'll be in the clear."

"It's, like, some cartoon or something," Eroki said, talking for the most part to herself.

"I'm outta here," Luki said, packing up a few storage disks in a plastic box. "You two can handle the suit's mail, right?"

"For the most part... yeah. Where you goin'?" Benson asked, examining the polygonal envelopes in the boxes.

"Research, man. Information. I gotta know the territory and the enemy if we wanna win the war," he grinned, walking to the door.

"WHAT war?" Benson wondered aloud, as Fluki left, whistling. =(SP
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Things were pretty quiet.

Thanks to the addition of an electronic e-mail service, communication between research teams was easier. The system was, for the most part, completed, by William wanted more alpha testing before it was going to be released for outside testing.

"I want you to explore every nook and cranny," he cautioned.

"Everything. If there's a bug anywhere, I want it out."

So, most teams wrapped up their projects, donned flashlights and walkie talkies, and went exploring.

The universe, as VOS knew it, was rather small. It was a crude, toony version of Macroware's main building, with various rooms for developing and testing programs. The scientists wandered around the dull, featureless halls, finding nothing out of the ordinary.

William went a different route. Nobody knew; nobody had to know. He worked from the outside in.

William preferred working from his real-life office, mostly because the sound system was better, but also because from outside you could monitor

any connections and rooms you wanted to. Specifically, he was looking for trouble.

All the scientists were wandering around waiting for trouble to happen to them, whereas William was larger than life compared to them; a solid object, not a mind linked to a database. He waited until the end of the day, then pulled up a window listing current connections to the VOS net.

The interface from outside monitors was clunky, and useless. It wasn't as powerful as anything on the inside, because the point of a virtual reality system is to work INSIDE the virtual reality. As is, all he had was a crude text display of connections.

He watched as the workers logged out. He examined the lines, and how they changed. The list was huge, because it monitored every suction cup electrode in the building, whether someone was on it or not. Kennedy, Walters Tech Research Connection 9 Idle 2 min.

Then, this would change : (No one logged in)

He browsed the list, as various names converted to empty strings, as various workers returned to reality.

But something was out of place.

He scrolled down, and examined a part of the list... (No one logged in)

Connection 39 (No one logged in)

Connection 40 (No one logged in)

Connection 41 (No one logged in)

Connection 42 Idle 1 min. (No one logged in)

Connection 43 (No one logged in)

Connection 44 (No one logged in)

Connection 45 Idle 3 min. (No one logged in)

Connection 46 Idle 2 min. (No one logged in)

Connection 47 (No one logged in)

Connection 48

Curiouser and curiouser. How could someone not connected be sitting there, doing nothing on the net?

Fluki peered up from under the desk. He looked through the window on the mail room door - nobody home. No suits wandering the halls in search of what isn't. Good.

Eroki and Bensen were already plugged into the vibe, but he had to

make sure no suits were following him around. So, he had to hide out until they left.

He checked the mail room terminal to see that the renaming program was still running. The program was a work of genius - come logout time, it renamed all three of them to No one logged in, and change thier department to a group of spaces. It took Fluki an hour or two using his stolen microphone programmer to get it up and running.

He took an empty letterhead off the rack, clicked a pen and addressed the letter to the Vibe. He stuffed it into the special mailbox he had tacked onto the rack, and plugged himself in.

The Vibe was the mail crew's playground - where they hid from the suits, programmed pleasure palaces and incredible adventures, and generally mucked around while they were supposed to be working. A mail daemon program actually handled all mail activity, as it had done when they worked in the mailroom in reality -- which is why they had to immediately throw out any letters they got, lest the program mail them twice. This left them twenty four hours a day to mooch off the company, off the system, off big business. A full day in this reality to have fun, and be slack.

They would have been the envy of any cyberpunk in the quad, who were busily mucking around with cheapo VR games that were Pong compared to this. And when VOS was released, they'd go down as the first to use it to the

extremes of the imagination.

Of course, it's not as weird and twisted as some author's visions of VR. Fluki had tried to work the place up to a Supreme Symbolism level, but VOS wouldn't stand for it, being a very logical, reality-based system. So, he had fun with the scenery instead.

He marched along the hallway which stood as the voyer to the Vibe, littered with clippings and images from various 'zines and posters. He walked through the nightclub, modelled after his hometown club, the Peasludvope. The mirrored walls took up a bit of processor time to calculate reflections, but it isn't anything the suits would miss.

It is a shame that not enough people are in here to enjoy it, Fluki mentally sighed. On an average night, this club would be packed from wall to wall, with one of the loudest sounds around. Sure, you could put all the suits in here if need be, but they wouldn't know a party if it shot directly up their asses.

Fluki opened the door labelled EMPLOYEES ONLY, and ducked as a battleax whizzed through the air above him.

"Orc.stop!" Bensen yelled into his microphone, running to the fallen and slightly dazed Fluki. The huge, muscular figure with the ax stopped moving.

"You really oughtta move him," Fluki said, dusting himself off. "I mean, it really would ruin the fun if someone was beheaded. Although it's great for, y'know, Amway reps and such."

"I guess you're right," Bensen said. "I'm tryin' to find a good place to put him. Took me all day to develop him, then I found out that the doorway I was gonna have him guard is in a hallway too small to fit him in. Bites, man, he's sorta a crucial plot element in the game."

"How far have ya gotten on the game, anyway?"

"Pretty far. One more floor of dungeon, and it'll be finished. You wanna test run now?"

"Naah," Fluki said, dusting himself off. "I figgered I'd check in on Eroki, see how she's doin'. Got a bit of a hoopy surprise for her."

"Be careful man," he cautioned. "She ain't happy with her latest art-thing, and is really miffed about it."

Nobody really noticed or cared that the light in William's office was on. William traditionally pulled heavy amounts of overtime, which is why his paychecks and work schedules read 9AM- ???PM/AM.

Tracing a connection anywhere in VOS was no easy task, because the

system is supposed to provide total privacy for the user inside, even to someone on the outside. William had managed to hack into the system and install a back door several days ago that would tell him X,Y,Z coordinates in the virtual world of approximately where a connected person stood. Then, it was just a matter of routing that information into a quickie program that identifies what room contains that point.

The only difficulty was that all three faked connections returned no room values. They were simply hanging in midair, where nothing should exist, according to the maps.

Logical solution, the maps are wrong, and some unauthorized construction has been done. Someone would get fired; that's the way things worked. He wasn't going to try and pull them back from the system manually, because he didn't know where in the building their bodies were. The direct approach is usually more amusing anyway.

Pulling a suction cup and wire 'node out of his desk, pushing it on his wrist. Before he could blink, his office re- formed around him in a more linear style. The cup was still on his wrist, but of course there was no wire.

He got up from his desk, formed the image of a flashlight in his mind (he could simply turn on all the light sources in the nonexistent building, but that would be too obvious to the culprits) and wandered.

He pulled a virtual compass from the air, which pointed towards the last known points of the three connections. A map formed, pretucked in one of his back pockets.

William began to search.

Fluki ducked as he walked into Eroki's study, which is just as well, because a marble pillar sailed through the air where his head might have been.

"Oh!" Eroki gasped, looking up from her sculpture. "Geez, I hope I didn't like hurt you or anything, I was just upset and--"

"S'okay, dudette," Fluki said, getting back up. "No harm done, no vibes disturbed. How's the art goin'?"

"It... it just doesn't SOAR, darn it!" she exclaimed, throwing down a concrete apple she was working on. "These objectikonthingys just aren't that good t'work with, y'know? They're too normal. I just can't concentrate hard 'nuff to make better ones. All my stuff looks like JUNK!"

Fluki peered at the work in progress. Although Eroki had tried to make it look artsy... giving objects textures they weren't supposed to have, suspending them from odd angles via a quick gravity-killer program Fluki wrote... it did look like junk. An ivory bathtub here, a jello hubcap

there, a ten-foot tall statue of George Washington made out of spam and several metersticks arranged in Escher-like formation.

"What I wouldn't give for some unrealness in here," she scowled, sitting on a step and pouting. "For a virtual reality, it's, just like NOT virtual. It's too realistic, too logical. I remember all those cool movies I saw about some bad guy who would like conquer the world with virtual reality... had all these snazzy graphics. Kapow! Bang! Zoom! Zap! Things morphin' and swayin' and generally defying the laws of physics. But no, we've gotta have ORDER. Poo."

With that, she gave up trying to rationalize and simply broke out in sobs. Fluki sat next to her and offered both a comforting arm of support and a hankie.

"Don't fret, dudette, I gotta little surprise I think you'll like," Fluki said, in a soothing, calm voice, which could probably neatly fold laundry or land on a feather without crushing it. "Come on, wanna go have a looksee? It's really cosmic, you'd dig it to new extremes."

Eroki, still burbling a bit, nodded. Fluki led her out, supporting a bruised creativity gland (and also making sure she didn't fall flat on her face).

William was certainly getting closer -- the problem was that there was a wall in the way.

Wherever this place was, it was outside the building limits. The arrow would point straight north, and William would walk that way, until he found out a stucco wall was blocking his path. Thus, it was a matter of following the wall around, trying different corridors, and checking offices.

He had searched several so far, including the Program Development Lab and the Help Interface Lab. Both had nothing unusual in them.

He opened the next available door, labelled MAIL ROOM, and stepped inside.

"Can I open my eyes now?"

"Shhh! Not just yet. Almost there... here we are. You can open 'em now."

Eroki peered through narrow eyelids, then widened them to take in the whole scene.

"It's a room. Not, like a very good one. Just all black. Sure, it's all metaphorical and looking-into-infinitylike, but what does it do?"

"Take a look," Fluki grinned, taking a small TV remote control off a peg next to the door. He tapped a few buttons, and the door vanished,

leaving the two of them alone in the void.

"Yow," she said. "What happens neeeeeeeeeee--"

The ground dropped out, and they fell.

"You can stop screaming now," Fluki joked. "And open your eyes, you're not gonna be splattered or anything."

Eroki looked around... the same featureless black surrounded her. But she was falling. Every sense told her she was... the wind through her long hair, her clothes billowing, the inner ear turbulence...

"You want unreality, you got it, babe," Fluki smiled. "This is my reality playroom. A little physics, some knowhow, a bit of Bensen's math and like ANYTHING is possible."

"But... it's just a room... how..."

"We're like not falling. Well, we are. But what happens is when we're about to smack splatter crash into the floor, we 'port up to the ceiling. An endless loop man, with no momentum lost. Total freefall, without any of that parachute jive."

"Wow... this feels GREAT!" she yelled, trying a few loops or flips in the air. "Wheee! Yahooo!"

Fluki grinned, as he kicked back and relaxed his muscles. "It's a great stress reliever, too."

"Fluki?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm gonna throw up."

Fluki fumbled the controls, and slowed their descent to a stop. Eroki lay on the floor in a slight heap, but regained her composure.

"Yow. Can I like do anything else? Y'know, other than falling."

"Just about anything. Startin' with F or not. Falling, floating, flying, whatever. Y'know. We could fall upwards if we wanted to. I just figgered that we spent enough time tryin' to MAKE things that were unreal, but we ignored the stuff already around us we could change."

"Keen," she admitted.

"Here, lemme try somethin'..." Fluki said, turning a knob on the controller. They started floating slightly.

"Whooooaaa--"

"No gravity! Just like space, 'cept you don't die of asphyxiation or explosively decompress. Wanna try raquetball or something in it?"

"Wow. I've never been in zero grav before," she said. "Never had the guts to like put on a space suit and wander outside, or something like that..."

"Well, you're no-g's now, babe. Deal with it," he joked. "Try makin' some objicons, see how they react."

Eroki nodded, and pulled a chair into existence near her. She tried to sit on it, chased after it as it slipped away in the zero-g environment, then gave up and made it vanish.

"I wonder if swimming pools would work," she said. "I mean, it'd be like this huge bubble or something."

"Anything weird you'd like to try? This room can do almost anything, if I rez it right."

Eroki thought hard for a minute, and grinned. "Item number 16 on 100 More Things to Do in Zero Gravity?"

William sifted around the mail room, looking for clues. He had had

some suspicions about the mail room, mostly because every letter always got where it was going in no time at all. Plus he had met the people who worked in here once. The two didn't exactly go together.

The reason, he found out, was a program running on a virtual terminal which did all the work for them. Quite clever, in a way, but this confirmed that they were Up To Something.

First of all, all of the mailboxes were empty, save one, and that had three letters in it addressed to 'Vibe', whoever that was. These kids and their 'handles'. Well, since three letters equals three illegal connections, he now officially had a Clue.

William grabbed a sheet of letter head, scribbled something meaningless on it and addressed it to Vibe. He stuck it in the mailbox and reappeared behind the wall, much to his surprise.

It appeared someone had constructed a very long hallway, and pasted bits of garbage to the walls. Some odd newspaper clippings on various subjects... learning drugs, computer artwork, information servers, the usual techie news. He shined the flashlight along the hallway... it was quite long indeed.

Two minutes jog later, he emerged in some techno club, with tons of mirrors and lights and such. No music was playing, and it lacked dancers,

which he noted with a frown, half hoping he'd find all three vagrants in here. He went for the door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY and was beheaded by an orc with an axe.

He stepped away from the blade, examining the orc. It was a pretty shoddy job... just a two dimensional image wrapped around a man-shaped rock. A real hack job of creating a new objicon. The axe wasn't even three dimensional, thus not really harming him. He could be harmed - since all senses were fooled into believing this was reality, negative sensory input was well too. Notably pain.

He looked into a cave branch, and saw a slim black man peacefully snoozing on several rolled up towels. One connection found; he could deal with that one later. Notably when he had woken up.

William Doors flashed his light along the walls, looking for anything incriminating, but only found flattish bedrock. No exits or entrances other than the one he had just used. Shrugging, he returned to the club. =(SP)=-

If this were a novel with a rather sticky cover found in a second-hand, somewhat dangerous looking bookstore, with a title such as VR VIXENS, there would probably be a fifteen page graphical (pardoning the pun) sex scene here.

As is, this is aimed at ages 9-99, so certain things have to be

watered down. Unlike technothrillers, it doesn't have pages and pages and pages of descriptions of military weaponry and gadgets. It lacks the chapters and chapters worth of historical background you could find in historical fiction. No gory, gut-churning seven paragraph severed heads either. And definitely no sex scenes, much to the disappointment of the 13-19 year old readers. Really sorry, but this series is supposed to be enjoyed by all ages, and in order to maintain that, we can't go around alarming PTA groups that enjoy being alarmed.

(Although the publicity from several concerned parents declaring the book as filth would send sales through the roof, my decision stands. Sure, alarming PTA people is a fun and worthwhile activity, but you have to draw the line somewhere.)

But for those of you who are really curious about what would be happening here, and want graphic details (or at least imagine there were graphic details), let's just say they did what James Bond did in the end of Moonraker, only a bit more so, and leave it at that.

There were only five doors in and out of the empty nightclub. The tunnel William originally entered in, the EMPLOYEES ONLY door which, for unknown reasons led to a cavern. The door to the mens room led to -- yes -- the men's room. He peered into the door to the women's room, but there wasn't a bathroom there; there was what looked like a combination junkyard and art studio.

The doors he had left for last were the main doors to the club, figuring that the dramatic element dictated that the most impressive doors usually had the most interesting things behind them, and the best should be kept for last. So, he opened the doors.

It seemed to be empty... leading to pitch blackness. Odds are nothing was built beyond that area. He turned to go interrogate the sleeper he found, but faintly heard some giggling noises.

He paused, turned to look back in the room, and flashed around the light a little. He couldn't spot the walls, which were just as dark as the air in front of him, but there were some odd aspects of the room... rumpled clothing floating through the air, for example. A vest... a shirt there... hmm, a sneaker there... some jockey shorts? A bra?

He followed the clothes back to their origin with his light.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING IN HERE?!?!?" he yelled back, looking away quickly.

"GEEZ!" Fluki shouted, disentangling himself and grabbing the nearest bit of cloth to cover up. Eroki shrieked the customary "Someone Just Walked In When We Were Busy In A Sensitive Way" shriek, and grabbed the nearest cloth material to block light rays reflecting from the softer bits of her body.

"Is THIS what my funds are going to? Some cheap playground for the mail room clerks?"

"Bite me," Fluki offered in response. "You had no business wandering in here. This is a private area!"

"Sir, and madam, I own this company, and I own this system. Nothing is personal property. You both are fired, so is your snoozing friend out there. Pack up your stuff, I want you offplanet by tonight. And get some clothes on, for crying out loud!"

William stomped away from the door as Eroki hurried to dress herself. "Geez, not again... this is like the THIRD time I've been fired from a job because of-"

"We're not leaving," Fluki said, grimacing. Eroki could feel vibes of negativity flowing from him. Or maybe it was just a headache.

"What?"

"We aren't leaving. I ain't forking over my hard work to make VOS fun to some zarking SUIT so he can erase it all. I've worked too hard on this place to sacrifice it to non-fun scum like him. Finish up and go get Bensen, I've got a backup plan I've been saving for now."

Eroki finished pulling on her skirt, despite the cartwheel the effort had put her into. "But dude, they'll know if we're still connected. We can't hang around here!"

"We aren't. We'll be hanging around the REAL mail room, where the suits can't spy."

William jerked his plug off his wrist, and reappeared in his office. Exactly the same way he had left it. All three fake connections disconnected a minute later. Well, that was that. He'd have to see about hiring new mail clerks the next day, and ripping out that mail sending program so they wouldn't slack off like these ones had.

William reclined his office chair to a more relaxed position, counted PI to fifty six digits and fell asleep. He never left his office - why bother having an apartment you need to commute back and forth to when you can enjoy comfort in the office?

The planet slept.

William Doors slept, despite the media rumor that the man was a creature of the night, a financial bloodsucker. He was quite used to snoozing in an office chair, and slept well.

The planet of Macroware slept. All the workers were provided with a

nearby suburban community, where them and their families could live and sleep in relatively normal lives.

Bensen and Eroki slept. The mail room wasn't very comfortable, but it was the safest place to be. Expected behavior when you are fired is to stumble crying out of the building, clutching a box of what's left of your career.

Fluki didn't follow expected behavior patterns. He was too busy writing, unable to sleep. Writing the words to a program that would aid in his revenge against his former employer, and possibly for the liberation of all slack-loving VR nuts out there...

The sun rose. The workers shuffled back to work, experimenting this this, inventing that. Lunch break came and went. Office jokes were swapped. Things got done. No mail was sent because the mail staff was fired, according to official company memorandum. The simulated whistle blew, and logout time was called for everybody to leave.

William logged out, removing his electrode. However, something was out of the ordinary : there were none of the usual sounds of office workers filing out of the building.

The hallways were deserted. The offices were not. Everybody was still immersed in the VR system. Nobody except him had logged out.

After a quick search of the building, he returned to his office with the following message on his terminal :

:You have 1 message(s) of e-mail. Read it?:

William tapped the Y key.

:TO - William "The Big Cheese" Doors:

:FROM - Your Ex-Mail Staff:

:Please note. In the effort of liberating virtual reality from the hands of conformists and non-thinkers alike and returning it to the public where it belongs, we officially demand amnesty in this event, a shuttle offplanet, and royalty-free, royalty-free rights to the VOS development software, as well as 1 million in starting cash. That last point is negotiable, but we won't go below the price of a box of Twinkies. Your entire staff is not going to come to harm and is being treated with more fun than they probably have had in their entire lives, but they will not and can not be released until you agree to our demands and hand over the materials. They will not be released until demands are met. Have a nice day. Stay hoopy.:

:End of messages for user wdoors:

William approached the problem logically, as he did with any problem.

Situation : 99% of your work force is being held hostage with unreasonable demands. Solution :

Solution :

SOLUTION :

There wasn't one. Or at least not one he could see other than paying them off, which isn't something he relished, mostly because of the ethics involved. When you pay one terrorist group, others barge in expecting equal treatment. And not all of them would want Twinkies.

For the first time in a very long time, he was going to have to ask for help.

"Hello, Space Patrol HQ. How may I help you?"

"I need to hire one of the best teams you've got. Hostage situation on Macroworld. Keep it quiet. What are your rates?"

"Ummm... about a thousand credits a day, plus expenses... but--"

"Make out the bill to William Doors. I want the team that handled the Nad Quayle fiasco and caught the anti-crooks on C'atel that I read about in

the news. I'll be expecting them here before 0700 hours."

Click. Dial dial dial.

"Not So Secret Agents."

"Hostage situation on Macroworld. Rates?"

"Ten thousand a day for an average agent, more for a team."

"Send your best agent. I don't care what price it is. Bill me as William Doors, I expect him here before 0700 hours."

Click. Dial dial dial.

"Starfleet Dispatch."

"Hostage crisis. Macroworld. Rates?"

"Umm... we don't get paid sir, we're a government subsidiary. Is this a government crisis, or a problem with a Terran colony?"

"No, private corporation."

"Well, then I'm afraid--"

"Go wake up President Doofman of the Terran Council and tell him his old pal Billy Boy from Omega Pi needs a favor. That'll get you all the authorization you need. I'll expect them here before 0700 hours."

Click.

The four member crew of the GSS Incompetency snoozed peacefully, as a printer in the cockpit flashed a message. Zeke woke up from a small puddle of drool where he had fell asleep at the wheel of the ship and examined it through hazy eyes.

:Report to Macroworld. Employer - William Doors. Hostage situation.:

Zeke choked on his spittle, and kicked the ship's warp drive into gear in a random direction before correcting and making like a bat out of hell for Macroworld.

A tall, shadowy figure walked up to a lone mailbox on a deserted street of an unimportant world. He knocked twice on the box.

"Do you have any letters from my Dear Aunt Sally?" he spoke quietly to the mail slot, in a slight scottish accent.

"Agent James Eigow, 0017, report to Macroworld. There is a hostage crisis. You will find a Mercedes Starcruiser in the alley."

The figure nodded, removed the overcoat, adjusted his business suit and stepped into the alley. Five minutes later, an extremely expensive ship rocketed into the sky.

"Evasive maneuver delta!" Captain Dirk shouted over the Red Alert siren. "Swing us about 180 and fire photon torpedoes!"

"Aye, captain," Luitenant Gheckov said, tapping at the flatpress keys.

The GSS Interplaq pulled a tight corner, then blasted the hell out of a smaller, less-armed ship.

"That's one group of greasy scumwads that won't take my parking space at the stardock anymore," Dirk grinned to himself. "New course?"

"Captain," Science Officer Spork said unemotionally from his viewscreen. "We are being hailed by Starfleet council."

"Onscreen."

A picture of an extremely upset Starfleet Dispatch clerk filled the viewscreen.

"Get your ass over to Macroworld fast! Orders directly from the president!"

"Close channel."

The viewscreen reverted to the standard moving-through-a- starfeild view. In truth, they were not moving, but tradition dictates that it has to LOOK like they are.

"Lay in a course for Macroworld, warp factor eight point four." =(SP)=-

"Good evening Macroware!" Bensen egged on from the DJ's mixing board. No applause sounded, but he didn't mind. After all, you don't kidnap a few dozen or more Macroware employees and expect them to applaud you.

"I'll be your EmCee tonight, as well as guard. The doors are locked and a teleportation program is in effect for anyone who can get by the doors. Now, let's make the best of the situation and party hardy!"

Less response than the first comment. Now he was annoyed.

"Okay, so it's silly," he admitted. "But it really beats the hell of of gettin' on the ground and spreadin' 'em while guys with guns yell at you. Besides, we've got free drinks. Now chill out, enjoy yourselves, brothers and sisters! Don't think of it as kidnapping, think of it as... forceful delivery to a party you've been needin' for awhile."

Bensen flipped on the soundtracker. A few suits in the crowd figured, hey, why not, and attempted to dance. Quite poorly, but it was a start. Bensen grinned; it can only get better.

"Did anybody else just feel the engines kick in?" Jane asked, wandering from her bedroom in slippers, and rubbing eye boogers from her eyes.

"We've got a mission," Zeke grinned, peering down from the cockpit hatch into the kitchen. "A really nasty one too. A hostage situation on MACROWORLD!"

"What's Macroworld?" Jane asked, peering up.

"Only the... the biggest... the most... gaah! The home of the richest corporation in the entire galaxy! We pull this one off, we'll have personal favors and graditude comin' up the wazoo."

"What a wazoo?" Bruiser asked, joining the vertical conversation.

"It's... I don't know. But it's something good things go up. Anyway, we're almost there, so you guys better get dressed and geared up and whatever. Oh, and go wake up Twerp, if you can."

"How's this look?" Eroki asked, placing the bowl of asphalt fruit on

top of the stack.

"Well, it's much better than your last one. Way cool," Fluki admitted.

"I like the fruit motif."

"Oh... I dunno..." she wondered, scratching her chin. "Fluki?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you like really think we shoulda done that? I mean, hold everybody hostage 'n all just so we don't have to lose our playground?"

"Dudette, it's not just the Vibe, it's the whole deal," Fluki explained, as Eroki climbed down the ladder. "I mean, Mr. William Suits there is so selfish, wantin' people to pay through the nose for this. It's gotta be for the people, man. The newest wave in technology and people gotta feed the suit's wallets just to get a peek. If we pull this off, baby, we are set for LIFE. Liberation and all that. We don't have to beg fer money like these guys, we can let the underground use it for free."

"Yeah, but I mean, it's sort of not-nice and negative to keep everybody here against their will."

"It's not THAT bad," Fluki protested. "Hey, they are probably havin' more fun now that they ever have. Party hardy and rave the night away. I

mixed up some of my special sensitized drinks just fer the occasion. Heck, maybe William will thank us fer lightening up his staff. The staff was certainly stiff enough already."

"Well, when you put it that way... you do have a point, pookie," Eroki giggled. "I just hope Bensen's as keen at DJing as he is at compyooter games."

"Okay, everybody - ELECTRIC SLIDE! Step one and two and..."

The GSS Incompetency sailed out of the cloudy, featureless skies of Macroworld, cutting through the unimpressive atmosphere like a butter knife through play dough. William stood outside the main building in the light drizzle, watching it land on the Guest Pad.

He wasn't expecting the Patrollers to show up first, considering that Starfleet had faster ships, but it didn't really matter. Considering the amount of money he was throwing at this venture, ONE of them had to have a good idea.

Peering through the fog, he spotted the local help he had managed to find sitting in the local theatre watching Rambo movies. The pair splatted through puddles, sharing one ratty umbrella, and screeched to a stop in front of him.

"You rang, sir?" Werrkil asked.

"Yes. We seem to be having a bit of difficulty with the system... namely, some maniac is holding everybody hostage inside the system. I'd like to know how he did it, frankly, and why you never brought that aspect of it to my attention."

It was a weak threat, since odds are Werrkil hadn't known about the possibility of connection-blocking. However, since it was delivered in the William Doorsian style (forceful, direct, to the point and very, very threatening) it had the desired effect : knee knocking and general panic.

"Umm... I saw an undocumented 'app that handled connection locking," he muttered. "I didn't figure it was of any use and threw it in a junk directory. Apparently someone sifted through the garbage."

"Terrific," William muttered. "Just like Two detailed. I'm going to have to fire someone for this. Maybe more than one."

Twin gulps were detected by William. "No, no, not you. Nobody's heard of you two. It'd have to be someone pretty high up in the echelon so that the peons take notice. Ah, it seems our Patrollers have finally arrived."

The four troubleshooters of mixed gender and species plodded in through the hazy mists. Zeke immediately stepped forward, all smiles.

"Greetings, Mr. Doors," he began, "And let me just say it'll be a pleasure to--"

"Stuff it," Doors responded, not bothering to exchange glances. "I'm busy watching."

"Watching what?" Zeke asked. Then he saw it.

Sure enough, a large, expensive looking starhopper had floated in on a brilliant array of lights and flashy chrome. It ignored the cheap Guest Pad and landed directly in front of the building, the sole occupant opening a Shoor-Hydroproof- Bulletproof-Acidproof Technobrella, and stepping out.

"allo gang," he responded. "Eigow. James Eigow, Not So Secret Agent 0017. Greetings Zeke. I see you still haven't bothered to change your clothes."

Zeke humphed in greeting. James shrugged and adjusted his flawless bow tie and jacket.

"What seems to be the problem? Any maidens in distress or documents involved?"

"You KNOW this guy?" Twerp whispered to Zeke.

"Yeah," Zeke grumbled. "He stepped in and took about a job from under

my nose, and pulled it off with such style that he became one of the most popular agents. Never failed to rub it in, either. Bastard."

A metallic chime noise reverberated off the walls of the building, as four blinding beams of light centered on the street before them, much like glitter swirled around a bathtub. The light faded away.

"Greetings, I am Captain Dirk of the GSS Interplaq. This is my science officer Spork, and Ensigns Disposable and Expendable. What seems to be the problem."

The Patroller's jaws were on the sidewalk at this point. Eigow seemed disgusted.

"Doors my chap," he asked, "What exactly are you pulling here? I was under the impression that this was a NSSA mission, not to be shared with some lowly rent-a-cops and overrated starship jockeys."

Jane reached for a knife, and Dirk reached for his phaser, but fortunately wiser heads prevailed.

"I see nothing wrong with my choice of help," William says. "Logic dictates that nine heads--"

"Eleven, sir," Indiana reminded.

"Eleven heads are better than one," he finished.

"Sure, as long as those eleven heads aren't trying to slit each other's throats," Jane muttered.

"What was that?"

"I said that if the eleven heads won't mind, I'd like to see what this case is about. Who's got that folder?"

"Come on everybody, Congo Line!"

"Does the six foot, straightened banana really work with the doughnut though?"

"I'm sure it's symbolic or something. It sings."

"Why not just take off their electrodes?" Jane asked from the opposite end of the conference table.

"Umm, you can't do that," Werrkil explained. "Without proper logout procedures, it would probably wipe their mind clean or scramble it. They can't logout properly because all connections are blocked."

"Can we get inside?" Dirk asked.

"Yeah, but it's not much use unless we can get out as well. I mean, odds are they've got traps and such--"

"Danger is what we seek. It's the final frontier!" Dirk responded in a particularly manly way.

"That's the 'unknown', captain, not danger."

"Danger, unknown, same thing. I propose an armed expedition inside the VR system to free the hostages and vanquish the culprits!"

"Armed with what?" Indiana asked. "You can't take it with you, so to speak."

"A good agent never relies on weapons," Eigow stated in a slight scottish accent. "To wit, we must use cunning, bravery, cleverness, and sleep with several enemy agents."

"Should we be suggesting something?" Bruiser whispered to Zeke.

"Eigow and Dirk the Quirk here think they're hot stuff," Zeke hissed back. "Let's see what they want to do, then when they've failed, we'll handle the mess they left behind."

"What makes you think they'll fail?"

"Simple. I don't know. Call it a hunch. Besides, if they do pull this off, we're no worse for wear, whereas if we go in first we're gunfodder."

"I want this over with NOW," William said, pounding on the desk and bringing himself to full height of 5'6". "No more plotting. Dirk, what do you suggest?"

"I suggest we send a single man inside to give us intelligence feedback, then send in an armed away team," Dirk concluded.

"Good. We try that first," William said. "Who's going?"

"It is traditional," Spork stated, "That the accompanying security officers act as scouts when danger is involved."

Dead air time.

"I'm not going," Ensign Expendable denied.

"Like hell you aren't," Ensign Disposable rebutted. "Ensign Throwaway was turned into a small block of salt on our last mission, and if you think I'm gonna end up like that--"

"Excellent, Ensign Disposable. Thank you for volunteering," Quirk

congratulated, shaking the confused Ensign's hand.

"Wha?"

"Where's the nearest connection?"

"Right here," William said, pulling a wire from the desk and handing it to Dirk.

"Report back anything unusual, Ensign," Dirk grinned, saluting, then slapping the 'node on the very surprised and alarmed red shirt. The Ensign's face fell slack as his mind was beamed elsewhere.

Seconds ticked away.

Ensign Disposable landed in what appeared to be a very long hallway, littered with paper. It seemed a bit, well, animated, but it wasn't anything he couldn't cope with.

"Let's see..." he muttered to himself. "No amoebas at gargantuan size... no planet-killers... no Romulans with disruptors, no automatic security lasers, and definitely no pizza bats or flying fried eggs. I think I'm in the clear!"

With that, he stepped into a trap door and plummeted fifty six feet to

his death.

The suction cup popped off Ensign Disposable's wrist, and his body slumped out of the chair, mind broken.

"Hmmm," Dirk puzzled. "Well, we'll give it another go. Ensign Expendable?"

"What?" the young red shirt blurted, looking like a frightened mouse.

"Spare me your foolish hack jobs, Dirk," calmly poked Eigow. "Please, there's no point in throwing undertrained wimps at a problem like this."

"He's right!" the Ensign replied. "I'm undertrained! I was sick for a navigation exam and didn't make it up once!"

"What I am saying," said James, "Is to let me handle this. I'm sure it's just a matter of spying, sneaking around, and general covert activity."

"And how are you planning any of that in a full tuxedo?" yelled Jane. "You'll be as stealthy as the Rose Bowl!"

James ignored the crack, and took control of the loose wire. "Take notes, young lady. This is how real secret operations are done. You seem a bit tense. I can give you one of my world reknown back massages if you wish

afterwards. Cheerio."

Jane would have spat in his eye, but they were closed as his mind raced around the neural pathways of the simulated reality.

James landed in the corridor and was promptly shot by a hidden laser.

"When dealing with Not-So-Secret-Agents," the Criminal's Guidebook of Beating the Law read, "It is best that you refrain from deathtraps. And if you do have the agent under control, never pet a cat near them, or reveal all your plans, or try to throw them in a swimming pool with some sharks. No, your best bet is the direct method : Shoot them the moment you see them."

Apparently, the daemon program Fluki had run to keep people out used this book as an informational source. The authors would have been proud.

James slumped backwards from the chair, and fell in a heap just next to the fateful Ensign.

"This is getting repetitive," William pondered. "Dirk, what if you--"

Beepity beep. Dirk flipped open his communicator. "Dirk here. What? Really? Oh no... beam us up immediately!"

"What? What's going on?" demanded William.

"Sorry sir, but a real crisis calls," Dirk responded as his officer and one remaining security shirt arranged themselves in beamout positions.

"My toupee has just come back from the cleaners. Farewell."

With that, Dirk and his minions beamed out, leaving no trace behind except one late security officer.

William looked at the holes in the scenery where they used to be, and the remnants of the best laid plans of men and mice. Well, just men. Either way, it was looking bad.

"I have an idea, sir," Twerp spoke up.

William perked his eyebrows. "Namely?"

"Well," Twerp said, taking a nearby napkin and pen from the center of the table, "It's going to take a bit of group work. Namely, we've gotta pull a lot of levers simultaneously. Werrkil, if this is like some of the VR stuff I've... seen, you can adjust the realisticness of each room, right?"

"Well, technically yes, but simulating an entire building is sort of a cramp on processor time," Werrkil explained. "Not enough left to make

anything more realistic, unless we were to collapse most of the database."

"Start backing up things you can from out here."

A small mail daemon scampered into the room on reddish hooves, passed a tiny note to Fluki, and scampered back out.

"Moment of truth, Eroki," Fluki said, waving the letter in the air.

"Care to read with me?"

Eroki climbed down from the scaffolding, and helped tear open the envelope, scratching the skin around her sensor slightly. The note read :

:TO - Fluki and the Mail Room Staff:

:FROM - William B. Doors, President Macroware:

:Okay, you'll get your money, shuttle, and copy of the software as promised, royalty free and legally. I won't call the cops after you leave if you release the hostages when the money is transacted. Please logout, I'll meet you in reality.:

"ALRIGHT!" jammed Fluki. "We did it! We beat the system and won.

'Course, I gotta break this to Bensen..."

Fluki opened the door slightly, pushed back by waves of heavy bass and drum beats, as well as stomping feet. "WE GOT THE WARES!" he shouted in, then closed the door.

Groans and shouts of dismay came from the dance floor, where several dozen suits were busy getting down and getting funky. Of course, a few simulated shots of hard liquor helped, but even so they were enjoying the evening.

"Well, you know what that means," Bensen spoke into the DJ's microphone, shutting down the .S6M player. "It's time for this party to break down. But hey, we're glad you came and had a jonky time, and remember this when you're questioned by the authorities! Let's have a hand for our captors, Fluki and Eroki!"

The executives opened the door to Eroki's room, and gave a hearty round of applause and cheers for them.

"We've been glad to treat you to a night of dance, techno and fun at the Chez Captif. You'll be able to head home in a few minutes" -- several whines of protest were given at that point -- "But with any luck, we'll be back after five to twenty. So long!"

Bensen yanked out of simulated reality, to the roar of the crowd. =(SP)=-

"Okay, NOW!" Twerp said in the one line here.

The three fugitives reappeared in William's office. Fluki was all grins, Eroki happily hanging onto his arm, and Bensen a bit confused.

"I could have sworn we jacked in from--"

"Well, here's your million," William said, passing the suitcase to Fluki with his free hand, the other behind his back. "One copy of VOS, documented and assembled. You'll find the shuttle on the guest pad. Have you released the hostages yet?"

"No... lemme do that..." Fluki said, swiveling William's textual terminal towards himself. He hit the ESCAPE key.

"That's it."

"That's it?" William said, in disbelief.

"See ya around, Okay?" Fluki smiled, tipping an imaginary hat to William.

"You certainly will be," William said, taking his hand from behind his back to shake Fluki's hand.

Fluki shook the hand proudly, then noticed the suction cup on William's hand. And on his own.

"Gotcha," William joked, pulling off his own sensor and leaving the virtual reality.

William regained consciousness, exhaling deeply. "Wow. I must admit, it looked a LOT more realistic than it did before."

"It's pretty simple," Twerp explained. "All we had to do was recycle every room in the system other than the club and your office, then adjust the reality meter so all the new processor time went to simulating your office. Just long enough to get them to release the hostages and think they made it outside."

"And, since we copied their lockout program and ran it ourselves," Indiana added, "They're stuck in there until WE let them out."

"Where DID you get that idea from, anyway?" William asked.

"Let's just say I had it pulled on me once and leave it at that," Twerp bluntly stated. "I--"

Several laughs echoed in from the outside hall, as a few executives with slightly looser ties walked along towards the doors, joking and recanting tales of their nightly activity.

"Remember when you got so drunk on simulated beer you started attacking your own reflection?"

"I can't BELIEVE I did the hokey pokey."

"I gotta get a music player for my system at home. GREAT music."

"Wasn't the DJ great?"

"I hated the whole thing."

"Oh, you're always a stick in the mud, Willard. Lighten up, it was a nice change of pace compared to our office chair hockey games and paper filing marathons."

"Those guys really know how to throw a party."

"Hey, I'm thinking about throwing a rave at the old offices next week. Wanna tag along?"

The murmur of the crowds died off as the elated executives left the building, heading for their quiet homes after a long night.

"Hmmm," William hummed.

"Well, sir, it's up to you now," Indiana said. "The crooks are officially detained, until you decide what to do with them. You do own the planet, after all."

Luki was running out of virtual hankies, but Eroki wasn't showing any signs of halting the water flow yet. A comforting arm and a person who cares about you isn't really enough when you know that at any moment, someone out of your control can squash you like a bug.

"There there, love, it'll be alright... we'll pull through," Fluki attempted to reassure. Eroki sobbed louder.

"We're dead," concluded Bensen. "Homey Doors is gonna fry us like a bunch of raw eggs. Why did we ever think we could pull a stunt like that and not get snagged?"

"The stunt was fine, dude," defended Fluki. "We'll be okay. We can't die now."

"Oh yeah?" Bensen ranted. "What makes you think he's not gonna off us? You don't hold a multigazillion credit company for ransom, get caught, and expect nothin' more than a slap on the wrists!"

"We're the good guys," Fluki said. "We don't die. We did something really positive tonight, man. We stuck up for what we believed in, and

turned attitudes of more than a hundred suits. Think about it man, we made a suit an individual! That's gonna last all their lives."

"Lives which are gonna be pretty short for us," Bensen growled.

"Chill," Fluki said. "Everything is hoopy and froody."

"What exactly DOES hoopy and froody mean, Fluki?"

Fluki paused. "Dunno. But it sounds cool."

"Twerp?"

"Yes, Mr. Doors?" Twerp responded.

"Have you got a minute?"

"Well, we were just going to pick up our paycheck and run--"

"It's important," William said, grabbing his arm. Something about William's tone suggested he was telling the truth, and perhaps more.

Twerp paused, considered, and called out to the rest of the squad.

"I'll be there in a minute, guys!"

"We launch in five, Twerp, make it quick!" Jane yelled back.

"Well, it's not much, but it is something. What is it you have to tell me?"

William dragged Twerp into his office, closed the door, and locked it. A press of a button sealed all windows and doors, and a red light turned on to make up for the lack of daylight. What little noise there was in the room was sucked out via AudiVacs(tm).

"Am I in trouble?" Twerp guessed.

"No. Call this some information, for free, which is not normal and had better not get out. Now..."

William sat on his desk, preparing to launch into a very long, technical monolog which would last for at least two paragraphs. He cleared his throat.

"I knew this system existed even before those two explorers delievered it to me. I send out scavengers of my own to explore that wreckage, but all they managed to come back with was a backup disk with one data file and one EXE. I tried running the EXE, but it said I needed VOS, whatever that was, to use it. The datestamp on the files are for about the time the place shut down, according to the people who researched the area.

"So, I tuck the disk into my drawer for a week. Some yahoos come around selling this new system, so I go for it, wondering if there's a link. We set it up, make a small 'net for this world to use, and such things. I figure maybe the disk I had was a missing part of the set, so I ran the program. I was dead wrong.

"It turns out that the disk contained a very sophisticated AI program, and an emergency memory dump. The file was called VossiteRun.EXE. I ran it, and this fellow with a cane and a scarf around his neck appeared in front of me, introduced himself as Number Two, and asked where he was and where the Township went.

"I see by the look on your face the name strikes a bell. In return for all he knew, I gave him a working job at Macroware as an employee manager and inside intelligence coordinator. It appears he was an AI program developed by one of my rivals. The war for information has been going on for quite a few years, sometimes covertly, sometimes not. Usually it's just college hackers or rich merchants with too much time, all doing sort of a mental scavenger hunt. He who dies with the most toys wins, I believe the phrase goes. Apparently my rival had set up the ultimate VR studio to fool people into thinking they were held captive, get information on a variety of secretive topics from them, then discard the person. The whole thing was based off an old BBC show. I'm surprised they didn't sue.

"So, this Number Two fellow becomes an invaluable resource. He's

worked in this environment before, and even though he didn't technically exist, he knew everything there was to know about the environment itself. He was, and still is, a valuable member of my work force. Nobody knows his little secret of not technically existing. We passed the name Two off as being french.

"Then this crisis comes up. He specifically recommends I phone in for Space Patrol, and specifically Twerp's unit, for you were the only person ever to get the better of an impossible system. I phoned the other two in just in case he had slipped a sector or something, but he was right. Perfectly logical.

"He wanted you to know that before he was supposedly destroyed, the idiot who ran the Township pulled the usual mad scientist reveal-all-my-plans gag. I don't quite understand what he meant by it, but he said Number One turned out to be Number Twenty Six who turned out to be someone named Qwerty."

"WHAT?!?!" Twerp exclaimed.

"I didn't know his name," William said. "I had my own methods of hoarding information, as do the other competitors in our little race. But nobody knows exactly who the other players are, they just know a handle. I tried to search for the name Qwerty at all my contacts, but nobody knows who, or where, he is. Apparently, he's dropped out of the race."

"TWERP!!!!" Jane called from down the hall. It was barely audible through the sealed door, but Jane's voice has a nasty habit of carrying through such things.

"Geez... I have to go... thanks for the info, but I really don't know what to do with it. I mean, it's quite a shock... wait. Did Two mention anything about a Number Fourty Two?"

"I don't think so," William shrugged. "Sorry if I couldn't help. Please, don't inform anyone of our little contest. It's been going on for twenty years now, and the only thing keeping it going is the fact that nobody knows about it."

"I promise," he said. "Oh, and... tell Number Two thanks for me."

William unsealed all the exits, and Twerp left the room.

Hour three of imprisonment.

Bensen was busy contemplating his last will and testament. Eroki had stopped crying, and was extremely busy not talking to Fluki. Fluki hed fast to his theory that William wouldn't do anything to them, despite the opinions of his cohorts.

All of them were surprised when the mail daemon scampered into the

room, and left this message :

:FROM - William Doors, President Macroware:

:TO - Ex-Mail Room Staff:

:I've unlocked your logouts. Please exit the system and meet me in my office.:

"He WHAT?" Bensen exclaimed.

"Hey, dude, I told you he wasn't gonna go crazy and nuke us or something," Fluki reaffirmed.

"Does this mean we're safe?" wondered Eroki.

"Does this mean you're talking to me again?"

"Depends if we're safe or not."

"We're safe," Bensen confirmed. "For the moment. I mean, I guess if he wanted to off us, it wouldn't be a slick idea to do it in reality where it don't look like an accident."

"Phew," Eroki phewed.

"We're probably just fired," Bensen said.

Fluki, back in his original body, knocked on the real door to William Doors' office. It swung open ominously, revealing absolutely nothing inside with enough light bouncing off it to make it of any use to an optical sensor.

"Trap?" suggested Bensen.

"Unlikely," Fluki said, walking in un-carefully. Eroki and Bensen followed, a bit more carefully than their friend.

All the lights snapped on. Eroki, who was looking directly at a lamp at the time, yelped and rubbed her eyes to adjust.

"I've been waiting for ten minutes," William said from behind his solid oak desk.

Fluki offered no response.

"Not only did you use my server for, if not illegal, certainly tasteless purposes," William started, "But then you have the gall to take my entire staff hostage and demand that you get worry-free rights to what is legally mine? And you EXPECT to get away with it?"

"Yup," Fluki said, much to the surprise of everybody in the room.

"Well, you're not," William said. "Pink slips. Get 'em while they're hot. You aren't working in that mail room ever again. I'm moving you to the entertainment division."

"Eh?" Eroki bumbled.

"You heard me," William said. "Anybody who can take two hundred working-class stiffes and get them to have THAT much fun has got to have a few decent ideas that we haven't tossed around already. And anybody who could program in there with such finesse that they develop an automatic mail system, a null- gravity environment and all those other toys, including a logout blocker, has more than enough talent to warrant a promotion."

"We're bein' PROMOTED?!" exclaimed Bensen, in disbelief.

"I like your style," William said. "It takes a lot of guts to stand up to the richest man in the galaxy who holds your very future in the palm of your hand. Reminds me of the underground society I started in my dad's corporation. What can I say, I've been down that road before and know it leads to nothing but success and glory."

William tossed out new ID badges for all of them, as if dealing out poker cards.

"Congrats. Fluki, you're our new VOS Development System, Entertainment Branch President. Bensen, you're our head writer, and Eroki is in charge of the art department. Just can't have the metallic fruit, it gets old after awhile."

Eroki nodded, waves of denial being pushed back by the reality of the situation.

"I'll expect you here first thing in the morning. VOS is ready to ship, but I'd like to include some leisure activity areas and programs with it, which you of course will be developing. One thing..."

William stood up, as if his diminutive size would improve his authority image. It worked.

"Go easy on the cybersex, will you? It's a bit of a drain on the processor time."

Fluki laughed. Eroki blushed. Bensen simply stared at both of them in confusion. "What did--"

"I'll tell you about it later," Fluki said, just before Eroki kicked his shins.

"OW! I mean, there's nothing to tell. Really."

That was that.

Macroware distributed VOS to some of the wealthier corporations everywhere. Macroware's Entertainment branch distributed some less-business oriented programs too, such as Minesweeper (with real mines!) and a VR version of a popular game involving running around a Nazi castle with a gatling gun mowing down people to save the free world. Also, encrypted in the files in such a manner that you'd have to be an above-average cyberhacker was a file explaining how to get a copy of VOS without paying five thousand credits, and a small note reading KEEP REALITY FREE. DUDE. Nobody in Macroware knows about this. Yet. Space Patrol Part 12 Ann P'rran Yttia

Racism is dead.

One of the dreams of African Americans, asians, hispanics, and all sorts of minorities on Earth (Now called Terra, partly because it's more aesthetically pleasing, partly because it's less embarrassing in SciFi movies to say "Die, Terran!" than "Die, Earthling!") was realized around the Time of Change, also known as the age of space travel. After the first Ytts had bumped into humans and shared the secret of Really Fast Space Travel, furless fleshies were in the starlanes and settling planets within a month.

In space, where you deal with what you get because you're too far from home to be directly supplied with home goods, you can't be picky about your

teammates. You can't choose and select who covers your rear based on race, gender, or species, because of the incredible mix that exists in off-world colonies. This mix ensures the fact that you almost never get an all white, all black, all human, all Murfle, or all female sort of colony.

However, this is not true with the homeworlds. Terra, Murf, Yttia, Sara... homes to the major races of the galaxy. There, you can be and are assured of a 99% home-species mix.

In other words, racism is dead, and is replaced by intense speciesism on the homeworlds. Sure, you might come from a very diverse spaceport with a cross species spouse and assorted alien friends, but if you go vacationing on Planet Murf as a six-foot tall basketball playing human you'll be up excrement's brook lacking a rowing device, simply because you're human. No doorways or ceilings will be at your height, and they will never be changed because there are so few humans on Planet Murf. And if you were to travel there and complain about it, odds are you'd find yourself mugged within a day.

This is why tourism to those planets isn't very high. Despite political assurance, colorized brochures and smiling people on holovision, there exists a fierce pure-species atmosphere on the homeworlds. Terra for the terras. Yttia for the Ytts. Murf for the Murfles. No other combinations exist.

It's not human nature that is to blame for this mess. It's the nature of all living things.

The air around Space Patrol HQ was festive.

Festive in the sense of several employees acting happy and delightful because they have jobs that require them to act happy and delighted once a year. Yes, it was the annual Pledge Week at Space Patrol Sector JK HQ. This meant that if they weren't happy and delighted, they'd be fired.

The idea was to devote an entire week of efforts to redirecting the public notion that the Patrol was full of paper pushers and rent-a-cops. To do this, all Patrollers would, sometimes at gunpoint, deliver speeches singing praise of the Patrol, or take on very showy, easy, highly public missions to pose for the media.

Incentives were given. Credit for college, black-and-white outdated training films, bonuses, gifts, etc. It was sorely needed, because the Patrol was understaffed in the office department, which handled mission dispatch, insurance claims, complaints from clients that the Patrollers had blown up what they were trying to protect, and the usual bureaucracy. One thing the Patrollers needed less of were actual agents, but this was taboo to speak about during Pledge Week.

The entire office area goes on overdrive one day before Pledge Week starts, picking spots for speeches, selecting advertising locations, and of

course picking out extremely simple, flashy missions to perform for the cameras. There were specialists flown in from various parts of the galaxy to help with the advertising, because of the importance. Patrollers were usually assigned to talk at places of former employment, or home towns.

When someone was needed to talk at the Houykk Ferriwia T'lli, a Ytt was probably the best speaker to go with. Preferably one that spoke the language very well.

The GSS Incompetence sailed the inky black void. You'd never be able to tell if you were far away, because of the theory of relativity and speed and all, but if you moved closer you could tell the ship was easily moving at top speed.

Inside, Bruiser was adjusting his tie.

"Where are we going again?" Twerp asked, examining the various brochures. Although the lettering was similar to English, the words, loaded with double consonants and tricky-to-reproduce sounds, made no sense.

"We going to one Houykk Ferriwia T'lli," Bruiser said, making the rabbit go around the hole a few times and then in. The tie still looked crooked. "It mean, literally, umm... honor Ferriwia education. Honorable Ferriwia University. Or something like. Very, very good school. Me graduate there."

"What'd you major in?" Jane asked, browsing the pamphlets for the university with interest.

"Phys Ed," Bruiser said, taking off the tie to start again.

"And minor?"

"Astrophysics."

"Shouldn't that be the other way around?" Twerp suggested. "I mean, who majors on phys ed and minors in astrophysics."

"Me did," Bruiser stated, confused. "So?"

Twerp shrugged, and dug his laptop out from under the glossy leaflets to hack on something.

"Me grew up around university," Bruiser continued. "Had time of life there. Very... nostalgik. Hated English class. Liked football practice."

"Got your speech done?" Jane asked.

"Yes," Bruiser said, taking a slightly crumpled sheet of paper from his pocket. He cleared his throat. "Irr'ai pahpah houykk friya, pahpah houykk Yttiati, irr lapp..."

Bruiser paused. "It in Ytt," he apologized. "Translation lose meaning... not same. Not moving, powerful."

"Sounded quite moving to me," Jane said. "Very bassy, very James Earl Joneslike. I take it you speak Ytt better than English?"

"It that obvious?" Bruiser joked. "Me hated English class. Never, ever, ever, ever got hang of. Like curse, me guess."

The ship pulled into a quick orbit over Planet Ytt, and coasted lightly into the Yttia capital, and sailed gracefully over the trees to land on the Guest Pad of Houykk Ferriwia T'lli, landing on a dime. This is a blatant exaggeration, mostly because Zeke was at the controls; instead, it shot between two skyscrapers when it accidentally dived too low, smashed through some tree branches and stopped at the very edge of the Guest Pad.

Despite the theatrics, the two members of the welcoming party stood their ground, instead of running and screaming like most witness of a Thunderclutch landing would. They stood still, waiting for the hatch to open.

The hatch started to open, got stuck, and had to be pushed the rest of the way down. Dean Oppenow Jrrgy was beginning to have doubts about this organization Bruiser had gotten himself involved in.

"Need a hand?" he called up.

"No, we've got it," Zeke replied, ramming a shoulder into the hatch. There was a sickening snap of a metal bolt, and the hatch hit the ground with a SLAM. The four Patrollers, trying to retain what was left of their dignity, exited.

"Ah, Bruiser," the Dean said, "It's so nice to see one of my old students... and teachers, really, come back to the old Ferriwia T."

"You taught here?" Twerp asked.

"For while," Bruiser said. "In Phys Ed. Good work. Then school went to multispecies sytem... used English."

"Ah, yes," the Dean said, turning a slightly lighter shade of green at the thought. "That... didn't work out very well. The local populace didn't quite accept the idea... so, we went back to a Yttian language standard. I prefer English, really, despite what my staff might use."

"Who's that?" Jane asked, thumbing the second figure suspiciously. He fit the bill of Suspicious Character; a dark suit, sunglasses, a ram-rod straight stance and didn't talk very much.

"This is Bob," Oppenow said. "He'll be tagging along with you fellows

to insure that, ah, nothing bad happens."

"Bad?"

"He mean bodyguard," Bruiser said.

"Whoa. Time out," Jane said. "I've been here before, and the streetlife isn't anything I can't handle."

"Speak for yourself," Twerp said. "I'm no good in a fight."

"Please, you won't be assaulted or anything," the Dean pleaded. "It's always just better to be safe than sorry. I mean, it's not like those threats were founded--"

"Threats?" Jane said in her Dark, Nasty, What Exactly Are You Trying To Pull Mister voice.

"Minor! Unfounded!" the Dean said, waving his hands in a defensive manner. "Just a few local street punks bent on xenophobia."

"Exenowhatsis?" Zeke asked.

"Fear, or hate of aliens," Twerp supplied.

"Nothing will happen, trust me," Dr. Jrrgy concluded. "And if something does happen, Bob here will make sure nothing happens your friends, Bruiser."

Bob nodded stiffly.

"When will you be taking off?" the Dean asked.

"We're scheduled to leave tommorow morning," Zeke said, taking the crumpled flight plan from his pocket. "We're on layover to a mission a few systems over."

"Great. I mean, sounds good. Bruiser, the speech time should be in about three hours, but I'd recommend you stop by earlier to set up. Your friends can join up with you before the speech begins."

"Where are we staying?" Zeke asked.

"I've booked you into our usual guest building," Dean said, "It has running water, a kitchenette, the usual high-class hotel room material. Should be sufficent."

"Around the hole, twice, in... DAKZA! Me tie not working!" Bruiser grumbled, tossing the tie on the bed. "Me HATE ties!"

"Whoa. Hold it. Put down the knife, Bruiser," Jane calmed.

"Me just going to take out anger on inanimate object. Nothing wrong with it."

"Geez, can't even do a tie... alright, collar up," Jane said, grabbing the tie from the bed. "Around... under, over, there. All done."

"How you know how to tie ties?" Bruiser asked, adjusting the tie in a mirror.

"It's the same as a hangman's noose, only a little looser," she explained.

"Oh. Maybe me better off not knowing," Bruiser pondered, straightening it once and for all. "All set. Me off to speech. Jane, you come to listen? It in Ytt, but still might be fun."

"I'll have to take a raincheck," Jane apologized. "Haven't been in town for awhile, and got an invitation to meet an old friend."

"Old friend? You been here before?"

"Yeah. Moonlighted as a kneecapper for a local mob back when this town had organized street crime."

"Okay. Where Zeke and Twerp?"

"They went out for Twinkies or something. They'll be along." =(SP
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"Where IS this 11-7, anyway?" Twerp asked, running his eyes up and down the street. He wasn't too alarmed at the number of other pairs of eyes that looked back, mostly because he knew he had a zit he hadn't pinched recently.

"Not sure. Bob?"

"Arr ban d'an k'an c'an cik," Bob replied.

"Huh?" Twerp puzzled, confused.

"Arr ban d'an k'an c'an cik," Bob repeated, pointing in a seemingly random direction.

"Follow that finger, I guess," Zeke suggested.

Tuvvit-Ni-Solikk approached fast and hard, as is customary with the bright sun on Yttia. Literally, After-No-Sun, or night.

Jane walked down a familiar sidewalk. She had learned all of the backalleys in this smallish urban sprawl, which was quite a feat since they

were almost entirely identical. One trash can, a bit of rubbish, and a side door to whatever building it connected up to. The layout hadn't changed considerably; once you have a good formula, stick with it.

She had gotten quite a few evil glances, but had refrained from pushing the looker's face into a wall for most of the incidences. Clearly, something new was afoot here, and she didn't approve.

This was one of her first dives, working as a minor mafia agent, one of the only humans in the crew. She had grabbed at the first off-planet ticket she could get from HappiWerld once she was 18, and lo and behold it landed on Yttia; Planet Ytt, the homeworld. Once there, it was just a matter of being noticed by the local crime bosses, and she was in.

It was very good training. Don Yrrui, her local crime boss, ran a truly class act, always in control, and always taking care of his men (and women) which were in trouble.

She had left to attend classes at the Assassin's Guild, given some educational funding by Don, and hadn't returned since. It was obvious something had happened in the meantime.

First of all, none of the mobsters were prowling the streets. Gone was the traditional red hat they wore; this was replaced by the leather jacketed biker riding street punks that now ruled the roads. It wasn't a

change for the better in her opinion. Punks were uncoordinated and out of control, unlike the elite strike force she participated in.

However, one thing that HADN'T changed was the Buggl 'nn Whack, or Drink and Die Caf, and Poetry House, one of her main hangouts, and where her friend had radioed ahead to meet her.

She opened the gunmetal grey door, and stepped into the smoky, ill-lit room. Nothing had changed here, really. There were the usual tables clustered around a stool, microphone, and spotlight, where patrons could converse in the safety of darkness and also enjoy music and literature. And what's best was that they employed a sniper. If the audience was not enjoying your act to the point of booing, a simple BANG and splat and that was that. You suck, you die. The janitor was very good at mopping up the mess afterward.

Brrgy was seated at table nine. Apparently they still hadn't replaced table eight, which she broke when someone had the nerve to call her "Doll Baby" a week before she shipped out. She found this strangely reassuring.

"Jrr ban ann offs k'li ann tramp," Brrgy poked. ("You are one offspring of a whore.")

"'Nn jrr ban ann hatter hap g'llar," Jane replied. ("You are one who wears a silly hat and drives slot in the fast lane." Traffic insults are a bustling industry on Yttia) It was traditional for underworld pals to

exchange insults instead of greetings.

"Been quite a while, hasn't it, Red?" Brrgy laughed. "Have a seat. The usual? Or has the usual become the unusual for you?"

"The usual will be fine."

"Bugglbarg!" Brrgy shouted to the bartender. "Ann whackbuggl 'nn ann 'Bloody Mary'."

The bugglbarg nodded, and began to pour.

"I half surprised you didn't storm in here half cocked and yelling about how much the old neighborhood has changed," Brrgy commented.

"The coffee house is the same," Jane replied. "That's all that matters to me. Otherwise, it's just a juggling of ranks."

"We're under new management," Brrgy said, accepting the drinks from the bugglbarg. "And those punks aren't exactly, how do you say, Joe Schmoe crooks. They're gang members, speciesists. The Xennix G'llar F'mmiliw, 'Foriegners Go Home'. Nasty guys. I'm surprised you weren't jumped by a few of them just for not being green and having long ears."

"Humph. Speciesists. Certainly not on the same level we were at," Jane

said. "I got a few nasty glares, but after making an example of one or two of them they kept their distance."

"They're very brutal," Brrgy continued, sipping his whackbuggl. ("Drink of Death". Just a silly name for beer.) "Beat up a group of Murfle tourists last week. Sure, the mayor and president of the planet are trying to cover it up with smiles, but it's just as bad as the rest of the Big Four."

The spotlight clicked on, illuminating the lone stool and microphone stand, casting a shadow on some unoccupied tables. The patrons, recognizing Gun Fodder entering the stage, shushed to hear the performance.

A thin-looking Ytt nervously sat on the stool, unfolded a small slip of paper, and recited :

"Ann pippik ici remapp tuvvit-ni-solikk rkki ik ann kickic.

Ik ni ici y'ill ann solikk ni leffit,

'nn pahpah ni jky yttiat drei

Yek pahpah jky yttiat nu drei.

ik tuvvit-ni-solikk ban ann plak ban jourrir dak pahpah jky.

Ann leffit-jourrir ban ik a'ppds dak taffir,

arr leffit, arr ni leffit, 'nn ann leffit ban l'il'il."

The English translation isn't nearly as smooth or eloquent, but
roughly equals :

"A typical cold remorseful night in this city

The warm, yellow sun sets,

and many law abiding people sleep

Yet many criminal people do not sleep.

The night is a playground of many criminals.

A teeter-totter is the hand of fate,

It raises, it lowers, and the raise is lucky."

The crowd paused. Murmurs were passed. The general consensus appeared to be that the poem was quite moving and well written, which meant the sniper could keep his nightly bullet to himself. The Ytt poet, overjoyed, took a few bows and a complementary I Survived the Buggl 'nn Whack drink.

"Terra has been somewhat good about it," Jane said. "No riots or beatings or anything. Of course, that's mostly because they're a bit more subtle... pickpocketing, carjacking, the usual. At least they turn a bit of a profit from speciesism."

"Yeah, right, and I've got blue fur," Brrgy laughed. "Humans are just as bad as the rest. We have our XGF, you had your KKK. Sure, space traveling or colony worlds are fine, but show up on a planet of hairless pink natives with long ears and a bushy tail? Either they'll mug you or try to get you to play the Easter Bunny in the shopping mall."

"I take it this is why my pals were assigned a bodyguard?" Jane asked, stirring her Bloody mary with a pinkie finger. "Apparently this gang is gunning for them because they aren't green?"

"Yuppers," Brrgy said. "Look... I'd rather you not think any less of me, I mean, I'm low on cash, and you know how it is.."

"What?" Jane said, instinct triggering all sorts of alarms, bells, sirens, and whistles. None of them made particularly pleasant sounds. "What exactly did you do?"

"Sort of baited you to come here.."

Jane immediately slipped under the table and crawled to the other

side. Several punks, seeing their quarry trying to escape, launched into action.

"Nice one, PAL," Jane hissed. "Lemme guess, they knock me out and take me prisoner and all that crap?"

"Yeah," Brrgy said. "It's not my fault, really--"

"Jrr ban ann ni kyoukk b'nn slida ratworm!" Jane spat, and tried to bolt for the exit. Unfortunately, the Xennix G'llar F'mmiliw had posted three guards there. One of them remained conscious after Jane's initial attack, but it was enough to whap her one with a lead pipe and end it there and then.

"Maybe it's about time we headed for the auditorium," Twerp suggested. "Methinks that 'Bob' here doesn't know his way to whatever convince store he's trying to direct us to."

"Umm, Mr. Bob sir?" Twerp said to the considerably taller Ytt. "My friend is right, we ought to hightail it back to the university and catch Bruiser's speech."

Bob nodded, and motioned for them to follow him.

Bruiser paced the backstage area nervously, glancing at the Yttian

scrawl on his notecards, and making sure his tie was still on correctly and hadn't changed itself into something comical to get even with him.

"Irr'ai pahpah houykk friya, pahpah... pahpah..." Bruiser grabbed at, but it was no use. He was a bundle of nerves, a ticking bomb of nitro with a soft fuse surrounded by flammable children's pyjamas waiting to ignite.

"Trouble memorizing?" a kindly voice asked. Bruiser jumped a quick 60', turning to see who it was.

A kindly old woman stepped out, grinning and holding a small purse. There were still bite marks on her ear from when she had tried to break up a lunchroom fight, a feat which she would never be able to attempt in her age now.

"Never were very good at memorizing, but that's unimportant," Mrs. Hattew said, stepping out from behind a curtain. "Although I am glad to see you haven't forgotten your old friends. Teachers too."

"Hoykk t'llibag Hattew," Bruiser grinned. "Arr ban--"

"Now now, practice your English," the elderly Yttian teacher poked. "Never will help you not to practice."

"Honorable teacher," Bruiser translated. "It is been very long since me last saw you."

"Conjugation dear, conjugation."

"Me know... gaah! It like some horrible curse, me STILL not able to speak it. Why?"

"Well, can't exactly be good at EVERYTHING," The teacher said, sitting down on a nearby chair. "You're good at a lot of things, Bruiser. Never let your inability in one small area outweigh your skills."

"But teacher--"

"Juddi will do. Please, we're both adults now."

"Juddi," Bruiser corrected, "Every day me have to speak other language. It sometimes like barrier... me no talk much because me worried I really look stupid."

"There's nothing wrong with looking stupid," Bruiser's teacher said. "As long as you don't start believing it yourself. Take your speech for example. You are and always were a fine public speaker in your native language. Head of your class."

"A's in science," Bruiser smirked.

"See? And now you're a member of a fine organization of like minded individuals. Sure, it's not teaching gym class, but I'm sure it's plenty exciting for a healthy boy such as yourself."

"Well..." Bruiser started, pulling another metal classroom chair up. He overflowed from the seat, but that was normal. "Me really not see much action. Me mean, me is Patrol for one year. But one of two 'missions' never missions at all, we just bump into them. And it always this temporal anomaly, reality disturbance, real weird type mission. Me haven't kicked ass in long time. Just been in background while others solve problems. It not been as worthwhile as me think."

"I've been following you and your friends around in the papers for quite some time," Juddi said. "You'd be surprised what material even reaches out here. Like the time you chased off that Nad Quayle fellow from HappiWorld, and stopped the crooks on C'atel, and even got rid of a monster on BureaucraWorld. You've done a lot of good in this new job, Bruiser. Maybe it's not as violent or fun as your past work, but it has certainly been worthwhile. All it takes is practical reapplication of what you already know. I know you're sort of a shoot first and ask questions later sort of man, but at times you have to use your head. And I know for a fact that your head is certainly well equipped to deal with whatever problem you have; you just have to look beyond the immediate, easy fix violent solution and consider the situation from the mind's eye."

Bruiser sat on his chair, speechless. Well oiled and fitted gears

clicked around in his head, digesting the information, realizing things.

"You know... me never looked at it that way before," Bruiser said. "Me mean, when me is gym teacher, it just matter of acting first... no thinking. Me never LIKED to think, even if me good at it. Maybe it time I started rethinking about thinking."

"Bravo!" Juddi applauded. "We have character development! Now that's using your skull for something other than headbutts. However, if you'll excuse me, I've got a seat to claim and you've got a speech to perform."

Juddi bowed slightly, and got up to walk away.

"Houykk t'llibag?" Bruiser said. Juddi paused to listen.

"Thank you," Bruiser sincerely stated. Juddi walked away, but Bruiser knew she was smiling.

"Look, we have been wandering in circles for the last ten minutes," Twerp said to Bob, who was busily striding in front of the pair, ignoring them. "Call me crazy, but I think you have the navigation skills of a Tiberian Squirrel."

"A what?" Zeke whispered.

"Unusual species," Twerp said. "They live for 80% of their lives encased in a lake of gelitan, and when they finally burrow out they spend the next 20% bumping into trees and coping with the fact that everything isn't green anymore."

Bob make a sharp turn into an alley, with his two wards running to keep up.

"A dead end?" Zeke asked shortly before the massive green hand clamped around his neck, lifting him and Twerp off the ground.

Bob grinned.

"Xenixx g'llar fmmliw," Bob hissed evilly.

"Gaah?" Zeke offered.

(In the many times Zeke has been ambushed, attacked, mugged, or generally taken by surprise with a violent action, he has deduced from experience that the best thing to say to your assailant is Gaah. Gaah shows that you are surprised, a bit hurt, and probably very confused, so there's no need to continue beating the tar out of you. Sort of a strangled version of "Uncle!".)

There were two thuds of a fist hitting flesh, and two thuds of flesh hitting pavement.

A thousand Yttian students had gathered for the speech. Most because free drinks were being offered afterwards, plus a few that were seriously entertaining the notion of joining the Patrol. The others, after a few beers, would probably entertain the notion as well.

Bruiser pulled on a pair of reading glasses, and made final adjustments to his tie.

In an effort to take some pressure off of you, the reader, to compile a dictionary of the Yttian language or look up words in a previously compiled one just to understand what Bruiser says, the English translation is as follows. Since it was an assignment in Mrs. Juddi Hattew's English II class to translate the first three paragraphs anyway, we'll use the one which got the best grade the next day (a 98%). Of course, it won't have all the adjectives, phrases, and metaphors it would have in the original Yttian, but the overall meaning is the same.

"My many honorable friends, many honorable Yttians, I speak to you today about an organization we both share a common interest in : The Space Patrol. (pause for laughter) Well, you might not be interested NOW, but you certainly will be. The Patrol offers a chance to see the galaxy, in all its wonder, intrigue, and danger. I myself have been firsthand witness to all manners of things, from cloned criminals to roving monsters that feed on information to escaping virtual reality. Read my words, this is not your

usual nine to five job. I highly recommend it not just for students who wish to participate in the Yttian Army later in their lives, but for interested travellers and budding scientists alike. We--"

This was as far as the 98% paper had gotten. Usually, this would get an even 50% for only having a small portion of the speech, but the rest of the speech was called on account of explosion.

The shock wave ripped through the auditorium, shaking everybody out of their seats. Bruiser tossed his notecards away and stormed out of the emergency exit, along with most of the other students who were present.

Roaring flames illuminated the dark buildings, rising smoke high into the night sky. Charred bits of metal were strewn about the parking lot, with secondary explosions ripping through the computer systems onboard and ammunition for the few weapons the ship has, or rather, had.

Bruiser wasn't looking at the ship. He was looking at a particular twisted sheet of metal which had landed a scant six feet from him. It was smudged with chemicals, but clearly read :

THE GSS INCOMPETENCE

And next to it, a large banner lying flat against the asphalt, in scrawled Yttian, read : XENNIX G'LLAR F'MMLIW. A small manilla envelope lay next to that, with a ransom note and various bits of hate propoganda spewed

on the soggy ground.

Bruiser grabbed for the nearest person. Luckily, it turned out to be the Dean.

"WHERE ARE THEY?"

"What? Who?"

"My friends. The ones with your Bob. Where they are?"

"I don't know!" the Dean protested. "Look, could you let go of my shirt?"

Bruiser released the Dean, who thankfully landed on his feet. "I don't understand. Weren't they in the audience?"

"Not that me saw," Bruiser said. "No three of them were here. See ransom note?"

Bruiser took the haphazardly assembled page of magazine clippings from the ground. "This XGF want all foriegners deported or they kill hostages! TAKE WILD GUESS WHO HOSTAGES ARE!"

"But... Bob... I assigned my best man--"

"That it," Bruiser scowled. "Me going to sort this out once and for all--"

"Ahem," a small voice said, as Juddi Hattew pushed through the crowd.

"Trust me, houykk t'llibag," Bruiser said, "Me going to use me head this time."

"Is it blue?"

"Nope."

"Is it grey?"

"Yup."

"Alright. Mineral?"

"I think so, yeah."

"Is it one of these dull, grey cinderblocks this entire cell is comprised of that is keeping us captive?" Twerp hazarded as a guess.

"That's it," Zeke admitted.

"That's what your last three objects have been too!" Twerp said.

"What's the fun of Twenty Questions if you use the same object each time?"

"What can I say, there isn't much else I can spy with my evil eye in here," Zeke admitted. "Or is it little eye? Whatever, your turn."

There was a clatter of metal, and the cell door swung open. A long, yellow shadow cast by the light illuminated Jane, who was busy pacing around the room, as a bedraggled Ytt was thrown into the room. The door slammed shut, and locked loudly.

"I'll bide, b'nn slida ratworm," Jane sneered, "Why are you of all people in here?"

"The XGF were beginning to question my loyalties," Brrgy said, getting up and dusting the cobwebs from his jacket.

"Oh? What gave them that impression?"

"I think the fact that they caught me working on the lock there with a pick sort of finalized it for them," Brrgy said, pointing to the offending door. "Sheesh. They act as if every person trying to open a cell door with a lockpick has ulterior motives."

"Why would you want to break me out? Didn't you turn me in

originally?" Jane angrily asked.

"Not of my own free will I didn't," Brrgy said. "Hey, money is tight in this city, and I figured you'd just bust your way out of here before they'd do anything. I'm a bit surprised you didn't, really."

"Had I known I'd be walking into a trap instead of a casual coffee dive," Jane corrected, "I would have brought my usual gear with me."

"Could you two please be quiet? I'm trying to find something workable other than cinderblocks."

"NO!" Jane barked back.

"Okay," Twerp shrugged, and resumed searching.

The city police showed up about one hour later, after three frantic calls to the police station by the dean. Apparently, tonight was the annual Policeman's Ball, and none of them in particular wanted to leave. Particularly the ones trying to score.

As a result, the standard police interview of witnesses was a bit on the strange side, with a flustered, confused Dean, a grumpy policeman in a tuxedo, and an ex-allumni attempting to figure out who was to blame for this mess. To make matters worse, there had to be two stenographers : one to type in Yttian for the police files, and one to type in English for the

Embassy files. The transcript of the English record is as follows. Time

11:34 PM Day Five of the Month of the Flying Sheep, thirty

second year of the small green rodent century Location Police

Interrogation Room #4 Present Dean Oppenow of Houykk Ferriwia T'Ili

Police Cheif Yiyrry

Qwitti "Bruiser" Qqtia, Space Patrol

YI : Alright. Now, here's what several eyewitness reports have shown. Everything was pretty much quiet around the time of the incident, then for no apparent reason, your ship explodes and two punks ride by on a motorbike and toss the ransom note and banner on the ground. Okay, so it's something to go on, we obviously know who's responsible. So what makes you, Mr. Qqtia -

QQ : Call me Bruiser, please. I'm surprised your records haven't shown my legal name change yet.

YI : Qqtia, Bruiser, whatever. What makes you so sure your pals

there are the ones being referred to as hostages in this note? I mean, the XGF has bluffed many a time before when they claimed they had actual teecee citizens imprisoned. They're just street punks, totally disorganized--

DO : Umm, sir, I have reason to believe one of my, ah, employees was acting as an XGF agent. Can I be arrested for that or anything?

YI : Calm down Dean, you're turning several shades of green. Get this man some coffee. Anyway, listen, Mr. Qqtia-- QQ : BRUISER.

YI : --'Bruiser', we have no hard evidence that your friends were involved in this, except that they're missing. Now, you've already said that one of them went to meet a friend, and the others were seen looking for slurpees or something. Unless they're still gone by next morning, I can't assume they're involved at all, and even then odds are unlikely. Trust me pal, I know these goons, they don't have the brains to harm a fly--

QQ : It doesn't take brains to harm a fly, SIR, just a very powerful flyswatter. In fact, I'm twice as convinced that they kidnapped my friends, because that makes them too stupid to realize that a Yttian army vet and two time Kippian Prize Winning athlete would probably wonder about the disappearance of his friends--

YI : Ex-army won't get you anywhere nowadays, pal. And I don't care how many pretty trophies you won playing football, you won't dictate police

procedure--

DO : Wow... lookit the birds...

QQ : (blinks) What?

YI : Mild sedative. He looked like he needed it. Guys, if you could escort our friend Dean Oppenow back to his home, he could use a rest after this excitement... and Mr. Qqtia, I suggest returning to your guest room and waiting for your friends to return. If they're not back by tomorrow, call the station and I'll put out an APB or something. Now if you'll excuse me, a certain young inventory clerkette was waiting for a dance from me and I'm not going to turn her down again.

Night came and went, which is perfectly normal and accepted solar behavior. Not much happened. There were a few muggings, some arrests, a baby girl was born to a mail room clerk from the other side of town and a building collapsed when two kids in thier parent's car decided to test the new triple airbag system. They survived long enough to be buried under two tons of bricks, and were unburied later that day to see their parents, who were understandably upset.

The Buggl 'nn Whack experienced its usual nighttime crowd, quite a few

XGF punks looking for some R&R from the monotony of beatings and riots, and the usual number of both poets and storytellers trying thier luck at Literature Roulette. Breakfast wasn't exactly a large income source for the bar, mostly because everybody from the previous night was busy shaking off hangovers and weren't in the mood to start drinking again.

This is why the bartender was very surprised to see an Xenixx G'llar F'mmliw punk wander in in the morning. He certainly was an XGF... the large t-shirt labelled XGF gave that away. Always on the cutting edge of style and the deepest pit of rational thought, but at least they paid thier tabs, and when they wrecked the place brawl funds from several anti-hate groups ended up paying for the repairs. The Buggl 'nn Whack did an incredible business by being completely neutral; they catered to both sides.

"Greetings, stranger," the bartender said (in Yttian). "What can I get you this fine morning?"

"Just a bugglwhack," the Ytt said, having a seat at a stool (and overflowing from it). "I hear you guys brew some great bugglwhacks here."

"Speciality of the house," the Bartender said, selecting bottles. "The place isn't named the Buggl 'nn Whack for any other reason, really. How goes it on the streets?"

"Oh... the usual," the Ytt waved away. "Same day in and day out. Species violence can be tiresome at times, so I figured, Jkkpl, you've got

to get OUT there and see the world. Early to bed, early to rise, that sort of thing. Didn't do much good."

"Isn't that a Terran phrase?"

"So?"

"Sheesh, you must be new. I wouldn't recommend mentioning anything vaugley teecee around here. Sort of gets the local clientele in an uproar. Glad you showed up before anybody else."

"Where's the bathroom?" Jkkpl asked. "I could use an early morning dump."

"In the usual place, down the hall and to the right," the bartender said. "And stick to the right."

Jkkpl nodded, and got up from his stool. Wandering through a few of the sunbeams which are usually moonbeams by the time business hits its peak, he made his way through the dark hall.

"Is it vegetable?"

"No."

"Mineral?"

"Yes."

"If you say it's a cinderblock one more time," Twerp warned, "I am going to scream."

"It's a cinderblock."

"AAAAUUUUUGGGGHHHH!" Twerp howled. "I don't believe it, eight lousy hours in a cell and I've already got cabin fever. I'd rattle the tin cup against the bars, but I lack a tin cup and bars."

"Could you two keep it down?" Brrgy asked. "Some of us are trying to get some sleep."

Brrgy fluffed up the rock he was trying to use as a pillow, pondered it, then tossed it aside and just used the concrete flooring for comfort.

"You oughtta try and get some rest too, Jane."

"I don't sleep," Jane retored. It was a lie, of course, and she was terribly tired, but good assassins usually radiate consiousness and alertness to the point that nobody around them can blink for fear of their life.

Tap.

"Tap?" Brrgy repeated, blinking at the door, which had said the offending tap.

Tap tap, tap.

Tappity tappity tap tap tap.

"Morse code?"

"I think so. Lesse... first letter... s. It's an S. Second... E... Y... T, no, R... P... D... Q... J. Seyrpdqj."

"What's a Syrpdqj?"

Jane paused. "I have no idea."

"WAIT!" Brrgy shouted, standing up, "That's my middle name!"

"Really?"

"No. But wouldn't it be cool if it was?"

A shower of splinters slammed into the room as the door was knocked completely off its hinges, and a bruised, but alert Ytt plowed into the

cell. A woodpecker which was busy tapping at the door flew away, feeling unneeded.

"Ack," Bruiser said, examining his ripped-up XGF shirt.

"Bruiser?" Jane wondered. "What are you doing here? And what the zark were you trying to tap?"

"Nothing," Bruiser said, standing up and dusting his fur off. "Some dumb bird was on door. Me here to bust you out, obviously."

"Don't you think you sort of woke up the neighborhood there?"

"It morning. Nobody up, much less street punks. But me advise we vacate fast if we--"

"There they are, officer!" the barkeep said (in Yttian), pointing to the Patrollers plus one freelance miscreant. "That's the criminal scum that's been harassing me."

Chief Yiyrry burst in, gun drawn, while several officers raced to cuff the very surprised looking ex-prisoners.

"Sheesh... breaking in here, flaunting his XGF punk attitude, scaring away my morning customers and then breaking down the door to my cellar. Him and his punk xenixx friends there. Is there no lawfulness in this forsaken

city?"

"Mineral?"

"Yes."

"Cinderblock?!?"

"No, actually. Not cinder."

"Well, then it's either the porcelain toilet or the metal bars," Twerp concluded. "Otherwise, I don't see any change between this cell and our last one."

"It's the bars," Zeke stated. "Just think. When I get home, I get to tell my family I vacationed on Planet Ytt. Sure, I didn't see the Statue of Honor or the Political Assemblage Building, but I saw some grubby streets and the inside of two prisons."

"Something not right," Bruiser grumbled. "That bartender obviously lying, and chief lap it ALL up. Me smell one rat here."

"Actually, it's quite nice," Twerp admitted. "Very clean for a cell, no roaches or anything."

"Not hygiene," Bruiser explained. "Loyalties."

Jane coughed politely, and Brrgy flinched, but Bruiser continued.

"Cheif wasn't real cooperative last night. Took one hour to show up, then brushed me off. This morning he respond within five minutes and arrest immediately? Something not right with this picture."

"Big deal," Jane said. "No substantial evidence. All we have is hunches, and add to that that we're 'criminals' and I doubt we'd be taken seriously."

"Shhhh!" hissed Bruiser. "Me hear footsteps."

Sunbeams from the cellar door lit up the various patterns of dust which hung in the air, as the cheif ushered someone down the steps. The thin, medium-sized black dressed figure peered around the corner.

"Alright, five minutes," he said, unlocking the cell. "And that's IT. Don't try anything funny, you're on the honor system here because you're such a respected figure in this city. Got it?"

"Yes, officer," Ms. Hattew said, nodding to the disgruntled cheif as he stomped back up the stairs.

"Hello there, dear student," she said. "I came to post bail for you

and your friends here, but I'm afraid it's a little high for my teaching salary."

"Me was framed, houykk t'illbag," Bruiser pleaded. "Me got dirty suspicion cheif not all he cracked up to be."

"What did he accuse you of, anyway?" the teacher asked. "I've known you for many a year, dear, and I know you wouldn't commit any crimes THAT bad."

"Breaking and entering, harassing citizens, enciting a riot, and being a general nusiance," Jane listed, mimicing the cheif's nasal tone of voice.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" the elder Ytt asked.

Bruiser paused. He furrowed his brow, trying to concentrate on a solution, browsing the contents of the room for an answer.

"Maybe," he said. "You still have that microrecorder you use for class notes?"

Cheif Yiyrry headed down the steps to the prisoner containment area, nodding briefly to the saddened teacher, who tried to look away. Poor granny, probably doesn't do her old heart any good to see an ex-prized pupil charged with such crimes.

His smile jacked up several inches as he approached the cell, however, beaming a grin to his forced occupants, and slamming the cell door shut again.

"We've done a bit of background checking," he said happily. "You and you," he pointed to Zeke and Twerp, "Are getting sprung back to your Patrol headquarters, which will be docking pay. Needless to say you're banned from visiting this planet again. Brrgy here is going to the slammer."

"Hey!"

"Don't act surprised. You've been an XGF cohort for several months now."

"Not exactly of my own free will," he grumbled.

"Bruiser, you're going to prison too. The media just loves this story. Picture it : an alumni of Houykk Ferriwia T'lli and a successful hero in Space Patrol returns to his home world and starts a crime spree. Can't ask for a better setup than that. And you, little missy... what's her problem?"

The cheif pointed accusingly at the red-cloaked lump on the cell bench, snoozing peacefully.

"She tired," Bruiser explained. "Is taking one nap."

"Yeah, well, wake her up later and tell her we know about her previous 'jobs' here," the Chief said, spinning the key ring on his finger. "I did some research myself, and found out about her organized crime background around these parts. Probably means the chair, considering the seriousness. I'll be personally reporting it to the public later tonight that we've captured an ex-terror of the night. You all will be transported out of here in a few hours. Can't say it's been a pleasure seeing you."

Hushed whispers spoke in slight panic in the police interrogation room. The lights were off, the microphones disabled and corkboard stapled to the windows. They weren't taking any chances today.

"Look, I don't like this," the nasal voice said (in Yttian). "I mean, sure, framing a bunch of greasy xenixx is okay, but now we're stabbing our own people."

"Doesn't matter," a huskier voice replied. "They are both against our cause. One Pure Ytt World, Ann P'rran Yttia."

"We better pray that no witnesses saw our break-in this morning. We don't want word leaking to the press that we amplified the charges to this level."

"There were no witnesses. The bartender is neutral. If we don't mess

with him or his clients, he'll help us occasionally. Besides, once the media hears about the ex-mob officer we've snagged, who HAPPENS to be an off-world xenixx, they'll ignore the two pure Yttian ones."

"I hope so."

With that, the two men filed out of the dark room separately, as not to attract attention. Several moments after they were gone, a dark shadow dropped down from an open ceiling tile and clicked a rewind button. =(SP)=-

"The tape, delivered to us by a human female in a black dress who only identified herself as a concerned citizen, has been run through the police station's voiceprint identification labs. The voices have been confirmed to be police chief Yiyrry, and Trrak Uippo, long suspected to be an XGF hate crime ringleader. The prisoners mentioned on the tape have had their charges dropped, including the accusations of one of them being related to the organized crime from ten years back. Apparently, the files that the chief had pointed out to the media on arrest were either erased, wiped, overwritten, and displaced to another computer. Their contents are, to date, unknown, if they actually existed.

"As for the English teacher found in the jail cell, rather unexpectedly, her only comment was, 'Red's not really my color.'" =(SP)=-

There was the honorary apology by the town mayor for false arrest, and there was the whirling media hurricane of reporters swarming around the chief looking for comments before his court date, and the usual hype. A few local talk shows attempted to reopen the point that some records on a wanted criminal for mob relations were deleted somewhere in this confusing event, but most media attention went to the incarcerated ex-police officer and the punk leader they managed to catch.

Just to be on the safe side that nothing else happened, such as the Patrollers accidentally setting off a nuclear device in the heart the city, the Patrollers bought a shuttle ticket offworld and headed for the hills.

"Hello, and thank you for flying Monotony Spacelines," the stewardess started. "We're happy you choice us over those OTHER evil satanic child molesting serial murdering slimebucket spacelines. We're also happy that you chose to purchase a first- class ticket, with our patented Recline-O-Comfy-Chok-Full-O- Stuffing UltraSeats, and stewardesses with bosoms that defy gravity.

"There is a patented Way-Up-In-The-Air UltraPhone in the back, which you can make totally unintelligible calls with our patented WhiteNoise UltraStatic system. The toilets work on a vacuum flush system, so make sure you're outside of the bathroom with the door locked and sealed before flushing. Monotony Spacelines is not responsible for anyone prematurely flushed and ejected from the airplane.

"In the seat pocket in front of you, you will find a patented Suk-O-Lux UltraBarfBag and Vacuum combination, which will slurp away any unwanted stomach contents and spew them out of the ship for any people passing through this sector to enjoy.

"The inflight movie will be Ishtar. The Suk-O-Lux UltraBarfBag and Vacuum combinations will be on double-suck mode throughout the film.

"I will now be detailing the safety procedures for your flight on this spaceline. Sit back, relax, and enjoy complementary honey roasted nuts in a rip-proof bags so that we can give the same bags to every flight and not need to make new ones.

"In the unlikely event of a terrorist hijacking, the captain will turn on the 'Hands Up' light. This is your opportunity to rest your weary arms on the Laz-E-Victim UltraHandles above you for the duration of the trip. For the more enterprising passengers, small revolvers are available in the seat pocket in front of you if you'd like to play Hero of the Day. Monotony Spacelines is not responsible for any bullet holes, scorch marks, stab wounds, bruises, or surface to air missile damage that might arise from use of the revolvers..."

"I think this truth in advertising concept is going a bit far," Zeke wondered aloud, squirming in his seat as his Imagination forced him to image the various terrors the stewardess was cheerily describing.

"Truth hurts," Bruiser shrugged. "Me think most of this stuff just made up on spot for workers to amuse self. But bit about barf bags true. Me had to use one last time me fly this spaceline. Damn thing nearly yanked up a lung."

"I think I'll avoid the Dish of the Day," Zeke said. "Where's that complementary Wine, Cheese and Soap basket the mayor gave you? I haven't had any wine in awhile, and I'm sure it'll be better than whatever they're serving."

Zeke fished around under the seat for the small basket, and hungrily ripped it open.

"Zeke, no--"

A puff of yellowish air fluttered from the open package, and every single oxygen mask in the ship neatly fell from the overhead tanks.

"WE'RE ALL GONNA DIE!" shouted someone who normally shouts things like this on crowded space flights.

Above the panic, pandemonium, and general chaos, Bruiser laughed. "Did me mention that Ytt gift baskets really just for tradition, since they age cheese for hundred years?" Space Patrol Part 13 Number One with a Bullet

Of all the things in the universe which change at speeds too fast to be measured by a stopwatch, music has remained the same.

Certainly musical styles have changed, but the industry itself has remained the same. Your parents will never like the music you listen to as a kid, and you in turn will never like the music your children listen to, and onward. The cycle of like/dislike will never stop the industry from pushing the very limits of economics, however. In fact, the industry thrives on the like/dislike relationship. The more the dislikers dislike, the more the likers like. The more the likers like the more the likers buy, and the richer the rich get. Ad nauseum.

Modern music shifts into "Classic Rock" and suddenly goes out of style with the young likers, and the roles reverse. The likers dislike the now old music, and the dislikers like. The more the dislikers like, the more the dislikers buy, and the richer the rich get. Ad nauseum.

The flip-flop is a common cycle seen throughout the entire universe. It is perfectly healthy for this to happen, and the moment any two generations can agree completely on one kind of music, the whole industry will come crashing down, and the rich will get poorer.

However, there can be extremes, which push the naturality of the situation. Fanatical likers can go too far in musical worship, losing their own identity as they attempt to emulate their target, overwhelming all

aspects of their lives with the target, until they either crack or decide to take a revolver and go shoot at the target. After all, targets are meant to be shot at.

Or, fanatical dislikers can go too far in musical hatred, losing their own identity as they attempt to act in any way different from the target, overwashing all aspects of their lives with the hatred of the target, until they crack or decide to take a revolver and go shoot at the target. After all, targets are meant to be shot at.

Where does this put the target?

Inbetween crosshairs, of course, no matter who is behind the trigger. And that's all that matters.

To say that the William F. Buckley Memorial Stadium was a hotbed of nuclear fire in a pressure cooker set on overload with a hair trigger just waiting to explode into blue-green flame would be an understatement.

As with any Stomach Contents concert, the whole stadium seemed to rock to the beat. Being the current top-selling band, with three albums, one movie soundtrack and numerous criminal records to their name, the crowds would pack in from several planets around just to watch these gods of rock do what they do best : play.

Play they did, and they played well. Stomach Contents had a particular appeal you could only appreciate if you were under twenty or not quite right in the head. To the younger generation, they were harmonious and fluid, an entity with many minds singing out in one voice. Pure bliss.

To the older generation they were a bunch of unwashed miscreants with silly clothing that screamed into a microphone while smacking any damn note they pleased. Pure crap. However, the target audience wasn't the older generation, it was the young, so the old folks could go stuff themselves for all the band cared.

The words tended to be a little confusing, but that's okay, because most of the band was genuinely talented at playing, and the notes to the song were better than the words.

After the last note was twanged out on the two guitars, one bass, one drumset and keyboard, the crowd roared. They were roaring already; at this point they simply had to roar louder, which is quite a feat since most of them were coughing up blood at this point to begin with.

"Thank you, young people of..." Joey started, consulting a bit of paper taped to the underside of his black fedora. "Tiberius III!"

The crowd cheered the lead singer and bassist on.

"I figured we'd just pack up and head home now--"

The crowd emanated pleading, displeasure, begging. It was an extremely old and worn out audience participation gag, but the fans didn't really seem to mind.

"Well, seems we've got a few rockers left. What about it, guys? You wanna rock?"

Cheers.

"I said, do you wanna ROCK?"

More cheers.

"Alright then, let's rock!"

Even more cheers.

"We DO have one other song... a song which a certain group of people don't particularly like... but are we gonna let them ruin our fun?"

"HELL NO!" chanted the crowd.

"I can't HEeeeeer you..."

"HELL NO!!!"

"Alright then! One, two three..."

Kablam. A sharp g flat middle c high b dull, twangy f.

Joey spun around and realized the strange combinations of sound were from a combination of a gunshot and their lead keyboardist collapsing on said keys as a result of said gunshot. The crowd fell silent, an unusual sound at a rock concert.

A small paper airplane wafted towards stage, making a lazy spiral through the various colored lights. It slid gently to a rest at Joey's feet, who cautiously picked it up and unfolded it.

YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED, it read. STOP THE FILTH OR PAY AGAIN.

The crowd didn't beg for more after that, for they understood what the band must be going through. There were several offers of donated blood, kidneys, lungs, hearts, brains, souls, or anything that would help, which were politely declined.

"She gonna be okay, Doc?" Joey asked, taking off his sport coat and hat.

"She should be fine," the ambulance driver said. "It's only a flesh

wound to the leg. I'd recommend she use the crutch for a few days however, so she doesn't harm her leg permanently."

Wrath, Stomach Content's only female player, lie slumped on an impromptu bed backstage made with a doughnut table and a few towels, unconscious. It was just as well knowing her temper, because she would have tried to find whoever shot her and beat them into bloody oblivion if she wasn't out cold. Wrath, who had a perpetual bad hair day, was quite quick to anger.

"Man, I told ya we shouldn't have tried to play it, I told ya," Wazoo said, adjusting his tie-dye bandana and clutching his prized confection box closer. "Like, they warned us once when they programmed Zeebo to shut down in mid song."

"Babble banana pain umbrella strawberry," Zeebo beeped, waving about an electronic arm-and-drumstick combination in agreeance. Zeebo was an incredible drummer for a robot, although his speech needed a little work.

"I didn't think they'd take it THIS far," Joey said, burying his face in his hands. "I mean, she could have died. Any of us could have died."

"They are most dishonorable men," Jim Bob zenned, comforting Joey and putting his guitar away to retune later. "Master say, man who hide in cloak of dark and fight from shadow, not man of moral character, and dangerous to

deal with."

"I think we need to look into some protection," Joey concluded. "The normal stadium security just doesn't cut it. Pool money, guys. How much do we have on us?"

Jim Bob paused, and emptied his pockets, turning up thirty four credits in a temporary replacement chip, a well-polished fighting spatula and a smoke bomb. Zeebo opened his possessions tray and took out a fifty seven credit chip and a cog of some kind, and Wazoo contributed one hundred and fifty six credits.

"And that's my whole run, man," Wazoo said. "I gotta get s'more before my box runs out, man, or I'm done for. I'm just doin' it for Wrath and for us, man, don't make yourself think I'm some kind of ATM machine."

"Not much," Joey admitted. "Well, what can we hire for this sort of price?"

"Seven," Zeke said, peering at the dice.

"Lesse, that puts you... oh dear," Twerp muttered, glancing at the board and the relative location of his hotels and Zeke's thimble.

"Boardwalk. With five hotels, I'm afraid that costs quite a bit."

"I'm robbing the bank," Zeke determined, and reached for the cash box,

stopped by Jane's stopping, but loose, grip.

"You can't do that, Zeke," she repeated. "You'd think you'd have learned from the last three tries."

"Loan?" Zeke pleaded of Bruiser.

"What?" Bruiser said, surprised. "Me got less money than you now. And you still owe me money from last six loans."

"Alright, I'm out," Zeke said, tossing down his single property of Baltimore Avenue. "Cash me out, I'm off to the poorhouse, it's Chapter 11 for the Zekester. Where's the TV remote? I need to watch the news and assert the notion that there are more depressing things happening to people out there than losing at a board game."

Twerp flicked the remote control through the air to Zeke, who promptly caught it and flipped on the holovision projector he had moved into the kitchen from his room.

"No suspects as of yet have been found in the case of the Stomach Contents assassin--"

"What?" Bruiser said, dumbfounded, scraping his chair against the synthesized teflon floor as he stood up.

"The stadium security officials were thankful that no rioting ensued after the lead keyboardist for the popular heavy metal band was shot via rifle from one of the top rows, although the Red Cross complained of a rush on donations that night."

"Someone kill Wrath? Of the alltime best band in universe, Stomach Contents?"

"The lead keyboardist, named 'Wrath', was injured but not seriously."

Bruiser phewed, relief sweeping over his face. "Close one there."

"You know this band?" Twerp wondered.

"Oh dear, here it comes..." Zeke groaned, tuning out.

"KNOW them?" Bruiser exclaimed. "KNOW them? They are... a god to me. Their music touch me soul, liven me life, quicken me pace--"

"He's a fan," Zeke summarized.

Bleepbleepbleep, went the commlink. Zeke stabbed at a button, and Father O'Mother's smiling purple face assumed the place the newswoman's face was at moments ago.

"Father!" Zeke grinned. "Haven't seen you in awhile. What's up?"

"You fine souls actually have a mission," the father said. "And not one of these strange, ends-up-in-a-cosmic-disturbance sorts of missions. You'll be playing bodyguard."

"To...?"

"A band, apparently. Stomach whatsits... can't say I care much for their music."

Zeke awaited a reaction from Bruiser, but none was forthcoming. Bruiser simply sat there, staring in disbelief at the screen, eyes bulging slightly.

"Are you alright, Bruiser?" Father asked, peering across the hololink oddly.

"He'll be fine," Zeke said.

"Alright. I'm transmitting the coordinates where you will meet up with the SC Road Tripper now. Good luck, my friends."

The hololink clicked off. Bruiser blinked.

"Maybe me need hearing checked," Bruiser said softly, continuing to blink and gradually resume breathing. "Did he say we guarding... Stomach Contents?"

Zeke, Jane, and Twerp nodded simultaneously.

Bruiser paused, neurons firing slowly but surely in his stunned Yttian mind. He stood up, and walked towards his door.

"Where're you going?" Twerp asked.

"Me got to find things to autograph," Bruiser said, and tapped his door open.

Zeke sat in his usual place aboard the newly commissioned GSS Red Herring; the pilot's chair. This was the third ship the team had been assigned, but the controls were pretty much the same in each of them. The controls wouldn't have been much of a problem for Zeke anyway, however, who had graduated at the middle of his class in the Not-So-Secret-Agent society, scoring top marks in navigation and dogfighting and getting zilch, zero, nada in every other category.

Therefore, he was the logical choice for sitting in the ill- stuffed pilot's seat, monitoring the ship's tedious progress through the stars while everybody else got to rest and relax.

"ETA, Zeke?" Bruiser called up from the ladder shaft which led from the kitchen area to the pilot's cockpit.

"Same as it was last five times you asked," Zeke sighed, "About thirty minutes."

"Aren't you least bit excited, Zeke?"

"Not really."

"Why?"

"Come on, you know I'm no heavy metal fan," Zeke replied, adjusting a navicomp dial. "Just another mission to me, which is nice considering that we haven't had a straightforward mission in quite some time."

"But... they're the biggest--"

"I prefer jazz myself," Zeke mused. "Stuff with horns. Heroic sounding music, on the whole. I don't know, I just can't get into the popular music scene. It's a bit loud, really."

Bruiser shrugged. "Me just can't--"

"Don't take it too hard," Zeke suggested. "It's just an opinion. It's

not the end of the universe if your teammate doesn't like the band they're protecting. It's not like I'd try and kill them or something."

Bruiser wandered off. The only thing one could compare this too would be a devout believer in a certain religion meeting a heretic. Fortunately, both the believer and the heretic didn't seem to mind each other's ideals, which is good because it's hard to fit a holy war inside a smallish star cruiser.

The GSS Red Herring and the SC Road Tripper matched velocities and interfaced airlocks without a single bump or problem. The airlock hatch whooshed open with a quiet hiss, and a man in his forties peered through, wearing a shirt reading SC TOUR, PILOT BARRIMORE.

"You the Patrollers?" he asked bluntly.

"That's us," Zeke said.

"Good. They're just practicing. Come on aboard," he waved. Bruiser, in a slight state of shock, at to be prodded onboard.

This clearly wasn't a space ship. It looked like someone had ripped a refinished basement out of someone's house and implanted it inside a starship, down to the wood panelling on the walls and the carpet with odd stains on it. Various cords and cables snaked across the floor, in and out of unwashed socks and cookie crumbs, hooked up to an array of speakers and

instruments.

"Guys, the Patrollers are here," Barrimore motioned, herding the Patrollers through the lock and into the den. "I'll be in the cockpit if you need me."

Barrimore tapped the door opening button and stepped into the cramped room, as it whooshed shut after him.

"You the Patrollers?" a man in a sport coat and black hat echoed from Barrimore's first statement.

"Err, yes. That's us. I'm Zeke, this is Twerp--"

"Hiya," Twerp greeted.

"Jane--"

Jane nodded.

"And--"

"Let me just say this be an honor to meet you, Joey-- may me call you that?" Bruiser began, getting down on his knees and shaking hands furiously. "Can you sign CD2 jacket for me?"

Bruiser pressed a specially prepared STOMACH CONTENTS : GASTRIC JUICES live album and permanent magic marker into the lead guitarist's hands.

"Well, seems we have a fan here," he said, scribbling off a quick JOEY on the jacket and handing it back, Bruiser touching it the way one might handle the Dead Sea Scrolls or the turin shroud. "Okay, intros all around. I'm Joey, lead bass guitar, and this is Wazoo, secondary guitar."

"Kudos," greeted the man wearing almost nothing but tie-dye, munching occasionally from a box of Wheat Treaties.

"Jim Bob Takomi, lead guitar."

"It is a please to meet you, most honorable Zeke-san," Jim Bob bowed. "I am eternally thankful for your cooperation in our small personal matter."

"I think a check will do nicely once this is finished," Zeke corrected.

"Zeebo, our Drum-O-Matic 4500."

"Tobacco record scratch headphone ballpoint pen with retractable lead," Zeebo waved, beeping and flashing his eyes.

"Speech impediment," Joey whispered to Zeke. "Try not to mention it. And this is our keyboardist, Wrath."

Wrath snorted in the Patroller's general direction, hobbling across the room on a crutch. "Authority pigs," she spat.

"Wrath... has a few doubts about my idea to get some hired help with our situation," Joey explained.

"I've been meaning to ask," Twerp said, stepping around the still stunned Bruiser. "Since I haven't been keeping track of the news lately, what exactly is this matter you're having trouble with?"

"CPAC," Joey muttered.

"Come again?"

"The Concerned Parent Advisory Committee," Joey continued. "They've been after us for quite awhile with protests and record burnings and cries of poisoning their children and all that rot. We didn't mind at first, because when they bought copies of our records to burn, it was money in the pocket anyway. Then the death threats starting coming in after we released 'Soft Bits'."

"Truly one of you greatest works to date," Bruiser complimented.

"They don't think so," Joey sighed. "CPAC calls it ravenous filth designed to pollute the minds of our youth."

"What's it about?" Jane asked.

"It is a melody, more of an ode, in praise of the blossoms of female motherhood which are the nourishment of the soul and the boon of the species," Jim Bob jumped in with.

"It's about tits," Wazoo said, snorking back wheat snacks.

"Begging your forgiveness," Jim Bob retorted, turning to face Wazoo, "I happen to believe it is a moving tribute to the beauty of nature and the joys of eternal hope, Wazoo-san."

"It's about tits," Wazoo repeated simply.

"Either way, CPAC doesn't like it," Joey interrupted before any fighting could break out. "So, they objected publicly. First it was minor stuff. Hassling ticket buyers and such, things stadium security could handle. Then they reprogrammed Zeebo here to turn off whenever we tried to play it."

"To fly blue planet speed," Zeebo spat electronically.

"So, we programmed him back. That's when a sniper tried to pick off Jim Bob, missed, and hit Wrath in the leg there."

"Republican swine," Wrath growled, hobbling around in circles.

"So, I figured I wouldn't risk it any longer and sought professional help. You are said professionals."

"Rest assured," Bruiser rushed forward with, shaking Joey's hand vigorously, "Me will find culprits and bring them to justice, or me name not... what was me name again?"

"Umm, Bruiser?" Twerp spoke up. "Maybe it's time you went and had a nice lie down somewhere. Come on."

Twerp led a babbling Bruiser back through the airlock, who waved as he reluctantly followed.

"Charming fellow," Joey said. "Is he always this, well, estatic?"

"I'll have to apologize for that. He was sort of meeting god," Zeke explained.

"So, what can you tell us about your next gig?" Jane said, having a seat for the long discussion.

The chat went on for an hour or so, Joey trying to relate as many details of the upcoming HappiWerld concert as possible. It was quite surprising that Stomach Contents would be welcome on HappiWerld at all.

"I've been there," Jane said. "The music scene tends to lean towards surfing songs."

"There is a growing metal faction," Jim Bob said. "It seems that there is a section of the youth of HappiWerld which is attempting to rebel against the norms of their society. It is not large in numbers, but enough to warrant a performance on the planet."

"IE, never pass up a free lunch," Joey said.

Jane felt a slight tapping on her left shoulder. Apparently, someone was nudging a cardboard box at her.

"Want some, dudette?" Wazoo said, lazily looking at her through tired eyes. "It'll make ya feel good."

"What, Wheat Treaties?"

"Yeah. Good stuff, man. Real quality. No bad trips."

"No thank you," she declined. Wazoo shrugged and continued munching.

"Is there something I should know about him?" she half whispered to Wrath, who was slumped against the wall to her right.

"He's addicted to riboflavin," Wrath sneered. "No doctor as of yet has been able to explain it." She paused. "Police scum," she added.

"You've got a real problem with authority, don't you, miss?" challenged Jane.

"Yeah, I guess I do," grumbled Wrath.

"Great. So do I. Ever set fire to the SGA office back in school?" Jane asked.

"Six times."

"Filled the principal's office with squid?"

"Yeah."

"Planted a glow-in-the-dark paint bomb in the police chief's car?"

"Couldn't find the paint."

"It's pretty easy to mix yourself. Just go down to your local hardware store..."

Both crews slept. Well, both crews except us lucky pilots, Zeke thought. He had to make sure the ship, interlocked with the Road Tripper, wasn't going to explode or crash into a nearby moon before going to bed.

This is the reason why he was up and about when it happened.

It was only a slight blip on his Airlock Interface monitor, a two-second flashing of red reading FIRE WARNING before it shut off. Zeke pondered this, tapping the monitor, trying to figure out what had happened. He was about to dismiss it as a malfunction when he saw the Road Tripper drifting off into space, airlock link severed, smoke clearly visible through the windows.

"GUYS!" he yelled, climbing down the ladder two rungs at a time, almost landing on Bruiser.

"What?" Bruiser asked, rubbing sleep stuff from his eyes.

"The road tripper's on fire," Zeke said, rummaging through the coat closet. "They don't seem to have noticed yet, and the airlock's been cut. I've gotta go over there in a suit and put it out. Where's that damn fire extinguisher?"

"WHAT?!?" Bruiser exclaimed. "Give me suit; I do it!"

"Put the band-worship aside for a minute and remember who has the Zero-G training here, me or you?"

"Neither of us."

"Good. Which means I'm much more qualified than you. Help me strap this thing on."

Zeke floated awkwardly out of the GSS Red Herring's airlock, towards the spinning SC Road Tripper.

Stare at the center, he thought. Stare at the center and you won't get sick.

Zeke threw up anyway. Fortunately, he had a light lunch, or he would have suffered one of the most disgusting deaths you could suffer; drowning in your own vomit.

Maneuvering the suit towards the Tripper and wondering if this is what Jimi Hendrix must have felt like, Zeke bapped the buttons to get into the Tripper's airlock, stumbled inside, pressurized, and came out of the door gunning everything in sight with foam.

"Ghhhaaaackk!" Wazoo g hacked, recoiling from the foam. The fire went out almost immediately.

Zeke pulled off his helmet, slopping some fluids on the floor and took in a deep breath.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Bad trip," muttered Wazoo, who passed out.

"Found the culprit," Jane said, climbing up the ladder from the cargo deck with a burnt suitcase. "Seems someone's bag of cardboard boxes caught on fire."

"Aww, man!" groaned Wazoo. "My stash!"

Wazo flung himself at the bag, scrabbling through the remains for any salvageable wheat.

"Everything okay back here?" Barrimore said, nursing a bump on his head. "I heard a fire emergency, fell out of my chair, and hit my head."

"We're fine," Joey said. "Zeke here put the fire out."

"Alright. I'll be in there if you need me," Barrimore flatly replied, creeping back into the cockpit.

"Sabotage?" Twerp wondered.

"I don't think wheat is particularly flammable," Jane theorized. "I'd guess somehow the CPAC worked a bomb in here before you took off. Either way, one of us ought to stick around here for the rest of the night until we land."

"I will! I will! Me!" joyed Bruiser, waving his hand in the air like a teacher's pet with a sugar buzz.

"Seems we have a volunteer," Jane said. "I'd suggest everybody get some sleep. I've got a strategy to work on."

The rest of the trip went by uneventfully. The two ships landed on HappiWorld, greeted by a swarm of reporters, who were usually around when a Public Figure was coming to town. Despite the incident where Wazoo slipped on a cracker and fell down the stairs, the photo opportunity went by without any hassle.

The governor was on hand to meet them, however.

"Greetings to you, Governor Jim Bob-san," Jim Bob bowed. "We are very pleased to meet you and your fair planet."

"It seems I have a namesake!" the Governor sound bited for the media, which promptly wrote it down.

"I'm not very happy about this," the Governor whispered privately to Jim Bob. "I personally do not like your music, and I don't think it belongs on such a fine, moral world such as this. But, I have to listen to the people, and for some reason they want your trash on stage. Ah well. Welcome to HappiWerld!"

"Err.. very much honored, good sir," Jim Bob recovered awkwardly.

"Has anybody seen Jane?" Twerp asked, peeking at the media blitzkreig from around the ship.

"I haven't," Zeke said. "I think she left early or something. She'll be by later."

"CORDS PLUGGED?" a roadie shouted from across the stage, climbing behind the thirty foot high wall of sound.

"YO!" Joey shouted back.

"VOLUME TUNED?"

"YO!"

"INSTRUMENT READY?"

"YO!"

"OKAY... HIT IT!"

twang.

"HOLD IT, I THINK SOMETHING'S WRONG," the roadie shouted back,
twiddling with some wires.

"Testing, one, two..." Wazoo sang into a microphone.

"Sound check?" Twerp guessed.

"No. Song I wrote. 'Testing, one, two, three, Satan--'"

"I get the picture."

"Four tetris quatre kilimonjaro!" Zeebo bleeped, rolling on on tiny
treads, waving his mechanical stick-arms in a frenzy.

"What is it, Zeeb?" asked Joey, tuning his bass a little tighter.

"Four tetris quatre kilimonjaro!"

"Someone get hurt?"

"Yaslarmi gopher transfer protocol."

"Someone fell down a well?"

"Headphone optic pulse wave modifier!"

"Oh, the economic situation on the moons of Jupiter is in a downward curve."

"Si."

"Well, that's normal, and nothing to worry about," Joey reassured.

"Now, go practice."

Zeebo happily rolled off to the drums, sequencing twenty seven rhythms in a distinct pattern.

"You understood that?" Twerp asked.

"No," Joey admitted. "But it keeps him happy to think that we do." =(SP)=-

By dusk, a gathering crowd had already formed in front of the ticket

booth to the Ward Cleaver Memorial Stadium, with thousands of teenagers trying their best to dress cool chattering away about the forthcoming concert.

"Don't have a ticket yet either?" a zit-faced boy asked a red haired girl in the crowd.

"Naw," the girl replied, chewing her gum rhythmically. "I had to sneak out of the house to get here. Parents are such a drag, y'know?"

"I couldn't find anything cool to wear," the boy admitted. "This is my first metal concert, really, I didn't know what to dress as. Is the aluminum foil too much?"

"Naw. It looks good on you."

"You're pretty casual."

"Well, y'know, I just didn't have anything weird and non-square in my wardrobe," the girl explained. "So, I figger a sweater and jeans'll do."

A rousing sousaphone tune signified the opening of the ticket booth, as the metal sheild went up and a balding man behind the counter began to dispense.

"Golly, I hope the first seating section isn't sold out by the time I get there," the boy enthusiastically stated. "Wanna get good seats."

"They're selling pretty quickly," the girl said, pointing. "A few dozen left... now ten... yow! Only two left. Rats! I guess most of the good seats were presold."

Oddly, the ticket manager had skipped those two tickets and moved onto the second seating section reel. This continued for a few minutes, until he finally sold the two tickets to two almost identical kids with pocket protectors.

"Actually, I gotta go," the girl apologized. "I've got someone holding a spot in line ahead of this, and she's almost at the window."

"Well, why'd ya come over here, then?" the boy blinked, confused.

"Well, at first it was to make fun of your foil outfit, but hey, you seem normal, so never mind. Ta ta."

The girl waved, and darted through the crowd.

"Knock knock," said the door.

(No, the door didn't physically say "Knock Knock". It's one of the elements of humor, exaggeration, along with incongruity and surprise. Maybe

it's not very funny. Maybe the joke stinks on ice, but hey... screw you...

I don't need you do read these books! I don't need you, or anyone! Go away.

I'm all depressed now.)

(The Editor would like to apologize for the author's comments on that last aside. It seems he was having a particularly bad day when writing that passage, and needed a target to unleash his aggression. We certainly hope you didn't take that comment about not wanting anyone to buy these books seriously! Ha ha! What wacky fellows, those humor writers!)

(The entire editing staff would like to apologize for the stiff, mechanical tone of the editor's previous aside remarks. He is not a very humorous man, seeing as how his life was filled with turbulence and disaster as a child, and he is just transgressing to his inner child.)

(On the behalf of Jokes Carried Out Too Far, we'd like to apologize for these asides as well, which are clearly hitting the "Not-Very-Funny-Anymore" barrier, and will stop now.)

The ticket manager cocked an ear, and passed a few looks of confusion, bemuddlement and wonder across his face simultaneously where they mixed and turned into a general sort of stupidity. He handed the window over to his young trainee and went to answer the back door of the booth, where an arm promptly grabbed his neck and pulled him outside.

"You mean to tell me why you held onto those two tickets in the front row?" the voice, presumably attached to the hand, silently yelled.

"What? Hey, I can sue you for this. I know my rights."

"I'm sure the cops will be happy to know how you switched off the metal detectors for those two particular ticket holders as well."

"Umm," stalled the manager, trying to think up an excuse.

"Care to explain?"

"Not really."

"Well, I'll just have to call my local officer of the law and--"

"CPAC!" the manager ratted. "They paid me to do it. I just had to wait for two guys with pocket protectors, sell them front row tickets and let them through hassle free!"

The manager paused. "I just sang like a canary, didn't I?"

The figure nodded.

"Oh, bugger," the manager self-insulted. "I can never get this intrigue stuff right. It's not my forte."

"Find a nice, slow job like encyclopedia sales and get back to me," the voice suggested. "But before that, look over there."

"Where?" the manager looked. "I don't see anything there, miss-"

The figure was gone.

The figure raced into the stadium, hitting a Wall of Fans. Apparently, quite a few people had shown up for the concert. The noise itself was quite unbearable, pounding much like fifteen thousand jackhammers running on nuclear power from Three Mile Island. It would take quite a show to divert any attention in here, the figure pondered, attempting to think of a distraction.

She yelled. She tried to push through the crowd, which helped, but wasn't getting her towards the stage any faster. The band certainly couldn't hear here over the racket.

She didn't like the idea meekly showing itself to her powers of logic, but it was a matter of life or death, after all.

Another concert, another night, another stadium. The band jammed, kickin' notes and blasting out something resembling music, although their minds were somewhere else. When one goes concert after concert, the actual

playing of music becomes more of a pattern of motions than anything which needs to be concentrated on.

It was all the same to Zeebo, seeing as how he was a robot. Sure, he had a memory, and something resembling a personality constructed out of some basic quirks and habits, but he didn't seem to mind it. Boredom wasn't something he was programmed for. He went through the standard beat to 'Indigestion' pattern by pattern, happy, cheery, and quite pleased with himself.

Jim Bob was the only one in the group wholly concentrating on the tune, mostly because he regarded guitar playing as an ancient art, much like karate, chivalry or selling avon products. It was not something to treat so trivially as the others did, as each song was beautiful in its own way, etc. etc. etc. Jim Bob had a nasty habit of thinking in metaphors and getting a little too involved in his work.

Wrath was just angry (which was a normal state for her) because she had to play with one hand while the other was on her crutch. Sure, she could handle it, but it was a matter of pride and embarrassment.

Wazoo was on a raboflavin buzz, and had about two or three thought patterns bouncing around his cranium. One of them dealt with motor control, and the other two were inventing hallucinations.

Joey was simply worried, mostly because 'Soft Bits' was on the play

docket next, and odds are CPAC would try something again. He had botched a line and had to improvise a bit to cover up when he thought he saw a gunman out of the corner of his eye and turned to look. It ended up just being a beach ball being passed around, which made him feel a bit silly.

Everybody in the stadium was concentrating on one thing or another, which is why breaking that concentration would probably take quite a bit of force. That force erupted somewhere near the front row.

Fifty thousand pairs of eyes turned to a red haired girl who had stood up on her seat. Wazoo gaped, dropped his guitar on his foot, and invented six new curse words. Normally, someone standing on a seat wouldn't be impressive enough to divert the attention of several thousand concert goers, but this someone had apparently ripped off her sweater.

"Everybody down!" the (topless) red haired girl shouted, now that she had everybody's attention, grabbing her sweater again. "Two people in the first row have guns!"

The people stopped staring at the flasher and began considering the positive aspects of running for their lives and screaming in terror. All except for two, which realized that it was literally now or never, and pulled out uzi submachine guns.

The next few events happened simultaneously.

The two nerds in front promptly targetted Joey and opened fire. The figure pulled her sweater back on and raced under the stage, into the dark pillars which supported it. The crowd continued panicking. The three Patrollers backstage (belatedly) rushed out to help.

And Zeebo power-launched himself from the drumset, knocking Joey out of the way.

Ratatatatatat, clang clang blap crash. Zeebo went down like a sack of metal potatoes.

Take advantage of the apparent confusion of the two nerds, Jane popped out from under the stage (with her red hat and cloak), pounced.

"Ow ow ow ow ow..."

"Jeez, ease u-YEEEEOW! Ow ow ow ow..."

Jane dragged the two terrorist nerds in, one by his nostrils, the other by his earlobe. She threw them promptly against a wall, which turned out to be a cardboard prop from a play recently performed at the stadium. So, she pulled them out of the paper mache wreckage and threw them against a solid brick wall instead.

Zeke, Twerp, Bruiser, Wazoo (carrying Zeebo), Jim Bob, and Joey raced

into the room in no particular order, followed shortly by a limping Wrath.

"Jane?" Zeke asked, slow on the uptake.

"I suspected they'd stick hired guns in the first row," she growled at the two nerds (currently fearing for their lives). "So, I hid under the stage and jumped at the right moment."

"But didn't you pull--" Zeke started, before Jane stepped up to grab his jacket collar.

"No," Jane said. "I did not do that. A fan agreed to distract the crowd for me. Any concepts to the otherwise will be dealt with quickly and painfully."

Zeke, realizing that continuing the notion was Not A Hot Idea, promptly shut up.

"Alright," Joey said, towering as much as a five foot five inch person could over the nerds, "Who put you up to this?"

"I have my rights," one nerd fought back with. "I ain't speaking until I've seen my attorney."

"Very well," Jane shrugged. "Bruiser, rip his arms off."

"CPAC," the nerd prompted. "They provided the tickets and the metal detector shutdown. I have the paycheck, receipt, and a tape of the conversation right here and will be very compliant with the police regarding the matter."

"They don't make goons like they used to," shrugged Jane.

"Forget that," the other nerd said, "I plan to scream and run." And promptly did so.

"After him!" Twerp shouted, not wanting to feel left out in the grand triumph.

The Patrollers started after him, but Jim Bob stepped in his way.

"No," Jim Bob sharply demanded. "He is mine."

With that, Jim Bob, pulled out two fighting spatulas, centered his aura, chanted a fighting mantra and took off as fast as tennis shoes could take someone.

"Eh?" Zeke queried, proving once again that he didn't catch on very fast, in case nobody was convinced the first time.

"Hoo boy," Joey laughed, shaking his head. "Maybe we ought to follow

after him. Last time I saw him this crazed was when he beat up that purse snatcher we ran into. Chased him for five blocks, made mincemeat out of him, and returned the purse to the lady the guy swiped it from."

"Admirable," Jane said, "But we do sort of have to return these two in two peices. One each, I mean."

The mopping up procedures which followed were a bit strange, but too boring to mention in any great detail.

They found Jim Bob and the escaped crook two days later, when they wandered back to the Road Tripper after a fourty eight hour absense. The crook seemed no worse for wear, but for some reason answered every question asked of him and tended to jitter a bit. Jim Bob was unreasonably silent about it.

The chain of people traced back from the receipt the two nerds carried led through several local PTA officials, a few record banning groups, and all the way up to Governor Jim Bob himself. The Stomach Contents Assassination Hearings (called Cleavergate, in name of the stadium) reached HV ratings never before seen in the history of the galaxy, as every fan and enemy of the band tuned in to hear the outcome.

The governor was impeached and thrown in jail without parole, where he wrote a bestselling novel about prison archetechure.

Barrimore, the pilot of the SC Road Tripper, was also fingered by a few CPAC members as the guy responsible for the bomb in the luggage compartment. He suffered a fate worse than death; his cellmate in prison was an amateur pan flute musician.

Stomach Contents continued their tour after some repairs to Zeebo. The Patrollers returned to the GSS Red Herring and blasted off for Patrol HQ, but not without a souvenir.

"Okay, roll it in!" Bruiser effervesced with glee, stepping into his bedroom.

Zeke pushed a cart of compact discs through the doorway, wheels on the cart groaning and protesting at every inch.

"Geez, how many of these things did the band give you?" Zeke enquired, wiping sweat from his brow.

"Lesse... 'Gastric Juices : The Live Album'... 'Inflation'... 'Bloated Feeling'... 'The Mauve Album'... and their latest, 'Phlegmtris', complete with computer game. Plus extra copies signed by each band member in every combination."

"Translation, a few too many."

"Sort of, yes." Space Patrol Part 14 This Was Your Life

"You won't do it!" the megaphone echoed upwards towards the open window. "It's in your personality profile, Mr. Ned Jacob Bliddful! You have a long history of starting projects you never finish. You're only kidding yourself if you think you can detonate that hydrogen bomb!"

"My middle name isn't Jacob!" shouted a voice from the window.

"It's not?"

"No!"

"Well, what is it then?"

"Zachary!"

The psychologist paused, tucked the megaphone under an armpit and tapped in the new name in C'atel's citizen database pocket terminal. He frowned at the personality profile which scrolled onto the tiny 2 inch LCD screen.

"We're dead," he confirmed, passing the megaphone back to the sergeant in charge. "Best of luck. I'll be packing my belongings and hopping on the first shuttle offworld."

"Dammit!" the officer cursed. "Where's that hostage negotiation team I called for?"

"I think that's them now, sir!" a young cadet said, pointing frantically in the sky.

"What, that twisted lump of metal falling from the sky?"

"I think it's a ship, sir."

"Whoever designed it ought to be shot in the name of good taste," the officer muttered, as the hunk of machinery set down on the nearest landing pad. It took a few whacks with a wrench, but eventually the offloading ramp unfolded with an assortment of sounds normally associated with appliances rolling down Mount Everest.

"Space Patrol," Zeke said, failing to flash a badge, since he didn't have one to flash. "What seems to be the prob?"

"There's a man up there demanding to read a statement or he's going to detonate a hydrogen bomb and take out the entire city."

"Good. Well, nothing wrong here. We'll be leaving now."

"Don't be such a wuss, Zeke," Jane said, pushing him politely out of

the way. "Pass me the megaphone."

The officer handed the plastic, durable amplifier to Jane, who promptly turned it up to top volume. She paused just long enough for the panic around her to settle to an acceptable calm and level of silence.

Peace descended upon the scene. Nerves relaxed.

"**BOO!**" she shouted into the megaphone, deafening everybody around her. The man seven stories up jumped in surprise, whanging his head against the windowframe. His unconscious figure slumped over the windowsill, balanced just enough to keep him from falling seven stories.

"It's the nerves," she explained, passing the megaphone back to the still-stunned officer. "These high pressure situations are just as bad for them as they are for us. Come on, let's go inside."

"Shouldn't we wait for the bomb squad?" Twerp suggested.

"Come on, there's no bomb," Jane said. "Officer, did you personally see the bomb?"

"Err... no. We sort of figured it wasn't worth calling his bluff, if he had one--"

"There you go. It's probably just an alarm clock attached to some candles or something. Come on."

"I'll be staying put, thank you very much," Twerp said.

"Alright, suit yourself," Jane shrugged, walking towards the grimy metallic door of the apartment building.

"Umm, Jane? Do you have any idea how to diffuse a hydrogen bomb?"

"No. Why?"

"Well, what are you planning to do once you get up there?"

"Look, I'm telling you, there's no bomb."

"Me going with you," Bruiser piped in. "If there is bomb, you need help carrying it out. Come on, Zeke."

"ME? Why do I have to go in as well?"

"Bomb heavy," Bruiser explained. "Need multiple people to carry it."

"Eeep," Zeke gurgled, upon looking inside the room.

Sure, the apartment was incredibly dirty. Underwear (unwashed) clung to most surfaces, and plans of some kind were spread out on whatever surfaces the underwear hadn't already laid claim to. However, the eep-factor involved was the quietly ticking cone-shaped device with several radiation symbols and warnings plastered across it in multiple languages.

"Okay, so there's a bomb," Jane admitted. "I've been wrong occasionally."

"Wow..." Twerp gaped. "That's impressive. I wonder where he got the parts."

"Why don't we wait around for him to wake up and then ask?" Zeke sarcastically said, pointing to the sleeping figure draped like an armchair doily over the windowsill. "Can we just grab this thing and go?"

"Alright. Zeke, you take that side, Jane, this one. Twerp... well, you help support it from bottom."

"Gee, thanks."

"One... two... three!"

"Urgh!" Zeke strained, what few muscles he had pumping away.

"Alright... this way."

The trio carefully moved the bomb in the manner of a trio of people carefully moving a bomb.

"Alright... now who's gonna hit the elevator button?" Zeke asked, both hands gripping the bomb's base.

"Hmmm. Me no figure on that."

"I can't reach the buttons, guys," came a muffled voice from underneath the bomb. "This building is built to human specifications."

"Alright, we take the stairs," Jane said. "This way."

It should be pointed out about now that the family living in apartment 7G has three small, screaming seven year olds who frequently demand various toys and games from their poor, overworked parents. Often they'd just tell the kids to wait until Christmas or something, but two days ago they broke down and caved into the kid's latest obsession, which was hover skates.

It's a shame that they did this, in addition to never enforcing the rule about not putting your toys away after you're done with them, or Zeke never would have slipped on the hover skate left so carelessly at the top of the stairs.

"Awk!" he grunted as his right foot skidded under the bomb, accidentally kicking Twerp out of the way. Since his hands were still glued to the base of the bomb, he ended up pulling it with him as he fell backwards down the stairs.

The explosion was visible from several hundred miles away. Some of the citizens of nearby cities described it as, 'Sorta like what happens when you set off an atomic bomb only, like, a lot bigger.' Others, who were busy consuming mushrooms of questionable origin merely gurgled.

Either way, the orange-red fireball consumed the entire city in one swift pass, much to the annoyance of the people living in it. -= INSTANT REPLAY! =-

"Awk!" he grunted as his right foot skidded under the bomb, accidentally kicking Twerp out of the way. Since his hands were still glued to the base of the bomb, he ended up pulling it with him as he fell backwards down the stairs.

"Now, watch the foot motion of Zeke's leg as his foot connects with the hover skate left so carelessly on the top of the stairs."

"Yes Bob, it's true : the human knee can bend that way under certain conditions."

"Watch on the electronic chalkboard as we describe this play in more detail, Jim. First comes the contact with the skate; a beautiful execution by the family in 7G. Zeke's leg goes under here, where I'm pointing this arrow, pushing Twerp out of the way and tripping Jane's leg over Twerp's stunned form here. Zeke goes backwards, at a lovely dive angle, and the bomb impacts very heavily on the floor here, where I'm scribbling with the pen."

"Well, do you think they survived?"

"Not a chance, Jim. The final score is Patrollers zero, Hydrogen Bomb fifty thousand."

"Fifty thousand, Jim?"

"Well, you have to include the people in the city."

"Well, we'll be taking a break for commercials for the moment, but be sure and come back to Channel 666 for the final judgement of our four ex-heroes. Will they get everlasting peace, or eternal damnation, or just be reincarnated as slugs? No, their story is not over yet. From the booth, this is Jim--"

"And Bob."

"Yes, and Bob, and we'll be seeing you next week when the Starship Interplaq goes looking for Strange Emissions. Jimmy the Predictor is expecting all four of the security redshirts to die on that one."

"Well, my money's on three. You never know, Ensign Expendable might pull it off. How come those Ensigns are always named for thier purpose? If you last name happens to be Unimportant, do you automatically get a role as Security Officer?"

"Not quite sure, Bob. So long, everybody. This has been a presentation of Channel Zero Sports."

Most of the immortal viewers got bored and clicked over to MTV, which was showing a Stomach Contents video.

APPLAUSE

APPLAUSE

The sign blinked rapidly on and off, as the various unusual members of the studio audience clapped appreciatively. They were considered unusual by Terran standards in that they came in a variety of colors, sizes, numbers of limbs, and such.

"It's time for Judgement Day, the show that asks : Have YOU led the

good life? And if you have, you can win any amount of cash and prizes such as : a 20 foot catamaran!"

The audience oooed and aaahed at the large boat being wheeled out by an attractive humanoid.

"Yes, you too can cruse the endless waters of Realm Oceana in this double DOUBLE size ship! Made of sturdy, heat resistant ultrafibers and light metals, so you can pilot it on surfaces ranging from the sands of Realm Arkana to the endless lakes of fire of Realm Hylii. Today, four recently deceased contestants from Realm FWLS shall compete for this boat on... JUDGEMENT DAY! And here's your host, Albert Einstein!"

The crowd cheered wildly for the multidimensionally famous physicist, who had been hosting the show for the last ten years. Channel 666 learned awhile back that its crowds really went for the celebrity status. They had tried John Adams for awhile, but he had to leave when TBC hired him away. So, Albert it was.

"Hello again, and welcome to our fine game show, Judgement Day," Albert began calmly. He didn't go for the usual Wild and Zany game show host attitude. "We have a real grouping of characters today for you. All four work in a law enforcement group in Realm FWLS, and since this is their first time dead, let's all give them a warm hand, ya?"

The crowd restarted the clapping as part of the wall revolved around,

revealing four very confused looking Patrollers. Several spotlights clicked on, focusing on the quartet, who were busy looking around, attempting to figure out where they are.

"I don't see why this is part of my life flashback," Zeke said. "I've never been on a game show. Shouldn't we be dead now?"

"Me guessing this is mutual hallucination or something," Bruiser pondered, confused.

"Meet Zeke, Twerp, Jane and Bruiser, our contestants. Congratulations on your recent demise. What did you do for a living?"

"Come again?" Twerp said. "How can we be on what looks like a holovision studio floor if we're dead?"

LAUGHTER

LAUGHTER

The crowd, responding to the blinking signs, began to laugh. The sign stopped, and so did the giggling.

"I shall explain, since it appears you haven't see the show before," Albert said, unfolding some reading glasses and pulling out a Standard

Rules Card. "Upon death, every being in the multiverse is reincarnated as themselves in another realm. This way the multiverse stays in balance, with a constant number of beings inhabiting all the realms combined. You are no longer in your home realm of FWLS, but in a sort of in-between place, where you will be judged to see where you shall be reincarnated."

"I thought there was going to be fire and doom and anarchy and such on Judgement Day," Zeke said, noticing the large neon sign reading JUDGEMENT DAY!. "Not... well... a game show."

"Ya, but it is a bit simpler and more efficient this way. Now, if the studio audience judges your life to be for goodness and truth and such, you shall move on to exist in one of the higher classes of Realms. If you should happen to have led a life of treachery..."

ETERNAL DAMNATION

ETERNAL DAMNATION

"ETERNAL DAMNATION!" the crowd shouted. Twerp squirmed.

"Ya. You will reincarnate in a rather unpleasant place indeed, and will continue to exist in the worst Realms each time you die until you get it right."

"Boy, this really screws up any Terran concepts of religion," Zeke

commented. "Maybe I could make money being a prophet or something when we get back."

"That's the catch. You cannot return to any one Realm after living a single lifetime there. Once you've existed in every one of the 5,677,385,946,462,464,934 Realms, your life force is given over to a new being."

"Urp," Zeke said.

"This has got to be the silliest, most pathetic excuse for an afterlife I've ever heard of," Jane grumbled. "You people should be shot in the name of good taste."

"I just host it, fraulein, I do not write the material," Albert said.

LAUGHTER

LAUGHTER

"Now, we shall start with Zeke. Zeke, when you were a child, you aspired to be a Not-So-Secret-Agent, ya?"

"Hey, how'd you now that?"

"We have a research team. Ya or no?"

"Well, yes."

"And when you were in the NSSAC, you had one of the worst records the corp had ever seen, ya?"

"No! Well. Yeah. Umm."

"And you were kicked out for throwing up on the President?"

"Well, no, but vomit was involved."

"Audience, does it sound to you that Zeke has led a particularly useful life?" Albert asked the crowd.

NO

NO

"NO!" shouted the crowd, on cue.

"Hey!" Zeke protested. "I gave an effort, at least. Come on, I might not have been very good at my job, but I was trying to uphold truth and all that crud."

"Ya, but it says here that one mission you were given involved assassinating the governor of HappiWerld."

"And I turned that one down!"

"Because you had the flu."

"And a nasty case of it too, I might add," Zeke said. "I couldn't hold anything down for a week."

EWV

EWV

"EWWWV!" yucked the crowd.

"We shall lead it up to the crowd. Do you feel Zeke should move on to a new, better life because he tried his darndest, or does his general incompetency warrant a few lifetimes of punishment until he gets his act together?"

ETERNAL DAMNATION

ETERNAL DAMNATION

"ETERNAL DAMNATION!!!" shouted the crowd, with a chorus of laughs and hoots.

Zeke gulped loudly.

Albert listened closely to a little earpiece. "Ah, it seems we're running out of time. We shall have to move on to the Lightning Round. Here we have Jane, who tortured and abused small animals and other children as a child, spent two days as a hooker on Yttia--"

"Say WHAT?" Twerp exclaimed.

"They moved me to mafia goon when I threw two clients out closed windows for making moves on me," Jane said, sinking into her chair and trying to avoid her teammates gazes.

--then applied to be an assassin, killed many for profit, and finally repented and became a vigilante to fight crime. Then she joined Space Patrol and engaged in dubious missions for 'good'. Your choice?"

ETERNAL DAMNATION

ETERNAL DAMNATION

"ETERNAL DAMNATION!!!"

"Now WAIT just a minute--" Jane started.

"And Twerp, who wrote maliciously destructive computer programs and hacked into a number of places, all illegally?"

ETERNAL DAMNATION

ETERNAL DAMNATION

"ETERNAL DAMNATION!!!"

"Wh--"

"Lastly, Bruiser, who has engaged in a number of pointless brawls in his lifetime, and has generally acted brash and hostile?"

"Me no--"

ETERNAL DAMNATION

ETERNAL DAMNATION

"ETERNAL DAMNATION!!!"

"Well, it seems the audience has voted a general thumbs down, ya?"

Albert said, tapping a button on his podium.

The floor below the Patroller's chairs slid open, revealing your standard Pit of Hot Gooney Lavalike Stuff That Smolders and Looks Painful.

"Thank you so much for playing, and remember, repent now and be good, for your next lifetime could be the one that wins you position in paradise. Are there any final objections, or should we flush them now?"

FLUSH THEM NOW

FLUSH THEM NOW

"FLUSH THEM NOW!!!" the audience yelled. The Patrollers offered various shouts and yells of discouragement, mostly along the lines of "Don't do it!", "No!" "Why did I get up today?" and various multilanguage curses--

"STOP!" shouted a voice from across the room. "Overriding orders from Reality Management. The contestants win by default."

BOO

BOO

The audience erupted in boos, hisses, and shouts of disapproval.

Albert closed the show for the cameras while the odd man escorted the Patrollers backstage.

"I almost was too late," he wheezed, out of breath. "I trust none of you are harmed?"

"Other than a general sense of terror and paranoia, we're fine," Zeke said, visibly shaken. "Can someone explain what the hell that was?"

"Exactly," the man said, loosening his coat and scarf to accommodate the studio's overworked heating system.

"Come again?"

"Sorry, little joke. I thought Albert explained it to you, how beings that die are judged and then sent to an appropriate dimension to live again, and the process repeats et cetera et cetera?"

"Well, I got that part, but where are we, and who are you?" Twerp asked.

"An in-between realm," the man explained. "All multidimensional broadcasts are pumped from here. I take it your home realm doesn't get MDBs?"

There was a consensus of head shaking.

"Doesn't matter, it'd probably do more harm than good. Your peoples are quite naive about a number of things... but I digress. You can call me Doctor if you'd like. I've been sent to make sure you don't get killed; all four of you are vital in one way or another to the safety of your realm. If yours is destroyed, it could unbalance everything."

"Hey, I've seen you before!" Twerp said. "On some old TV show."

"Yes, there was a bit of a mixup there," the Doctor said. "A few news clips of my work somehow leaked into your world, where someone found them, reworked them a bit and won some broadcasting awards. I assure you that the editing machine has been fixed since then. Anyway, shall we get going?"

"Allo," Albert said, peeking around the wooden stage set. "Mind if I pop back here for awhile?"

"No, go ahead Albert."

"I'd just like to say I'm terribly sorry for ripping you fellows to scraps there," Albert said to the Patrollers. "It's a job though, and I'm afraid earth physics are quite incorrect compared to what I've learned in my travels after death. You understand, ya?"

"We mustn't take up any more of their time," the Doctor said,

motioning to follow him. "They have a realm to save, after all. This way please."

"Doc, where we going?" Bruiser said. "I no see any ship around here--"

"It's that blue police box over there," he said, pointing. "Others of my kind have switched to the modern phone booth or that horrid silvery car thing, but I'm a traditionalist. Come on, we've got to edit reality a bit and work this mess out."

"Edit? How?" Jane said. "I don't think you can stop a nuclear explosion."

"No, but I can get you out of Space Patrol before you get that mission," the Doctor said, pulling them inside the box. "Just a quick fate patch and you'll be off doing things as if you had quit last week."

"And what's going to happen to us after we enter if we qu--" =(SP)=-

"Do you think it's blue?" Nad said, worried.

Jane blinked, wondering how she shifted from standing in a phone box to standing in what looked like a spaceport office. She passed this off as Unusual Phenomenon and continued. The reason why Zeke and the others got

incredibly confused when time and space were put through the wringer was because they couldn't handle the transition.

"Do I think what's blue?" Jane said, turning around to look at Nad Quayle, who was sitting on a couch, looking worried. Nad NEVER looked worried. What was going on.

"The stick. Looks blue to me. Geez, first time and..."

Jane returned her gaze to the table, where a home pregnancy and gender test was busy cycling through a few shades of blue, spelling out a word on the digital display.

"Looks like it's a girl," she said. "Although for the life of me I can't remember how I got here."

Twerp's clock radio sang out a very old, very bad song by Matt Dillon before he whacked it with a hammer he usually kept on the nightstand for just such purposes.

The only difference was that the hammer and nightstand were different. The radio was the same, because it was the one he had back at home on Murf, and used on the ship...

The ship.

He's not on the ship, or in a box, or a game show, or whatever.

In fact, this looked suspiciously like a dorm room. There were the traditional blobs of paint where bugs had been encased on the walls, a few rock posters, and his favorite laptop from home sitting on the desk.

He got out of bed and crossed the room, stopping short part way as his foot hit a shopping bag. He looked down.

MURFLAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY STUDENT UNION, it read.

Murf Tech, he thought. The college he had been wanting to apply to since joining the patrol. I'm there.

"--it?" Zeke finished, blinking to clear away the bright flash of light.

"Hold still," the doctor said. (Not the Doctor. Just a doctor. There's a capitalization change.) "Alright, now say ahh."

"Ahh," Zeke said, as the doctor aimed his penlight down Zeke's throat.

"You're fine," he said, clicking the penlight off. "Get back to the barracks. You can't claim you've got the flu on EVERY unusual mission."

"Yeah, but I've got this pain in my--" Zeke started, more or less as a reflex action from his Not-So-Secret-Agent days. "Umm. Which barracks would this be?"

"Don't fake amnesia, Zeke. You've already tried that. You know as well as I do, Barrack Compound Six."

"I'm back at the NSSA HQ world?!" Zeke exclaimed, jumping off the infirmary table.

"Of course you are," the doctor said, writing down some notes on his clipboard. "Come on, I know you've only been here four days since you got rehired after quitting the Patrol, you should have made the transition by NOW."

I'm home, he thought. I'm home again.

Bruiser blinked as the young Ytt slammed into the tackling dummy.

"No, no!" he said. "You got to put shoulder into it!"

"Mind sayin' that in Yttian, sir?" the football player said in flawless Yttian. "You know I'm flunking my English class."

Bruiser looked around, recognizing the Houykk Ferriwia T'lli football stadium. Alright, this made sense, since he was supposed to quit the Patrol

in the edited version of reality.

"I think you oughtta now, Coach," the kid said, plunking his rear down on the bench and grabbing a bottle of mineral water, "I think it's great that you're back at the good 'ol HFT."

"How'd I get rehired?" Bruiser asked in his native tongue.

"You left the Patrol, the Dean needed a coach for the team, and you were pretty qualified," the kid shrugged, gulping down some water. "Maybe we'll turn the team around this year, huh?"

"Maybe," Bruiser said.

"All done," The Doctor said, reentering Office 45A of Reality, Inc. "I returned all four of them back to their previous Realm."

"How seamless?" his boss said. "I don't want another occurrence of the problems we had in Realm T'pooa."

"Very seamless," the Doctor replied, taking off his hat. "Of course, I had to edit it so that they quit their jobs before the blast, but that wasn't that hard."

"Come again?" the business executive said, frowning and shuffling

through some papers. "My records say that the third one was unemployed."

"Come again?" the Doctor blurted. "But all four of them were Patrollers from FWLS realm!"

"No they weren't!" the executive said. "Don't you remember? They were some of the bystanders in the blast?"

"But... I went down to the studio, and found the four from FWLS that matched the death of nuclear blast on the far side of C'atel--"

"Named Kilgore, Jerry, Bob, and Molly, right?"

"No."

"Great. We saved the wrong four people! Geez, the CEO will be ticked about this one. Can you edit them out again?"

"Not quite, it'd mean another retrial, and it'd mess up the scheduling--"

"Alright, alright. Go edit in the right four."

"Sir? What about the Patrollers?"

"What Patrollers?" the executive said, pulling out a lighter from his

pocket and igniting the file. "I don't seem to recall any edits for four Patrollers, do you?"

"No, I guess I don't," the Doctor agreed. "But if these nonexistent Patrollers happened to have been edited accidentally, wouldn't their Realm be in a bit of imbalance? Cosmic events and mayhem and pointless chaos and such? If this actually happened, of course."

"Probably, but since it didn't happen, no problem," his boss said. "Besides, that realm has seen enough trouble over the last two millennia. I think they could handle an increase in the overall weirdness level for the next five thousand years."

"Not a very nice future at all, sir."

"It'd make good MDB programming," the boss said, dreamily. "Terror. Irony. Doom. Silliness... all sorts of mayhem... a future we'd like to see."

Silence hung over the two reality editors.

"Mind you," the boss added, "Not one I'd want to live in." EOF -
Gaithersburg, MD

October 7th, 1993

