

METAMORPHOSIS *Alpha*TM

Chronicles from the Starship Warden

Stories by James M. Ward
and Craig Martelle

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Thank you to the Beta Readers for your efforts in helping us proof this book and make it that much better.

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Visit <https://craigmartelle.com> to see all of Craig Martelle work.

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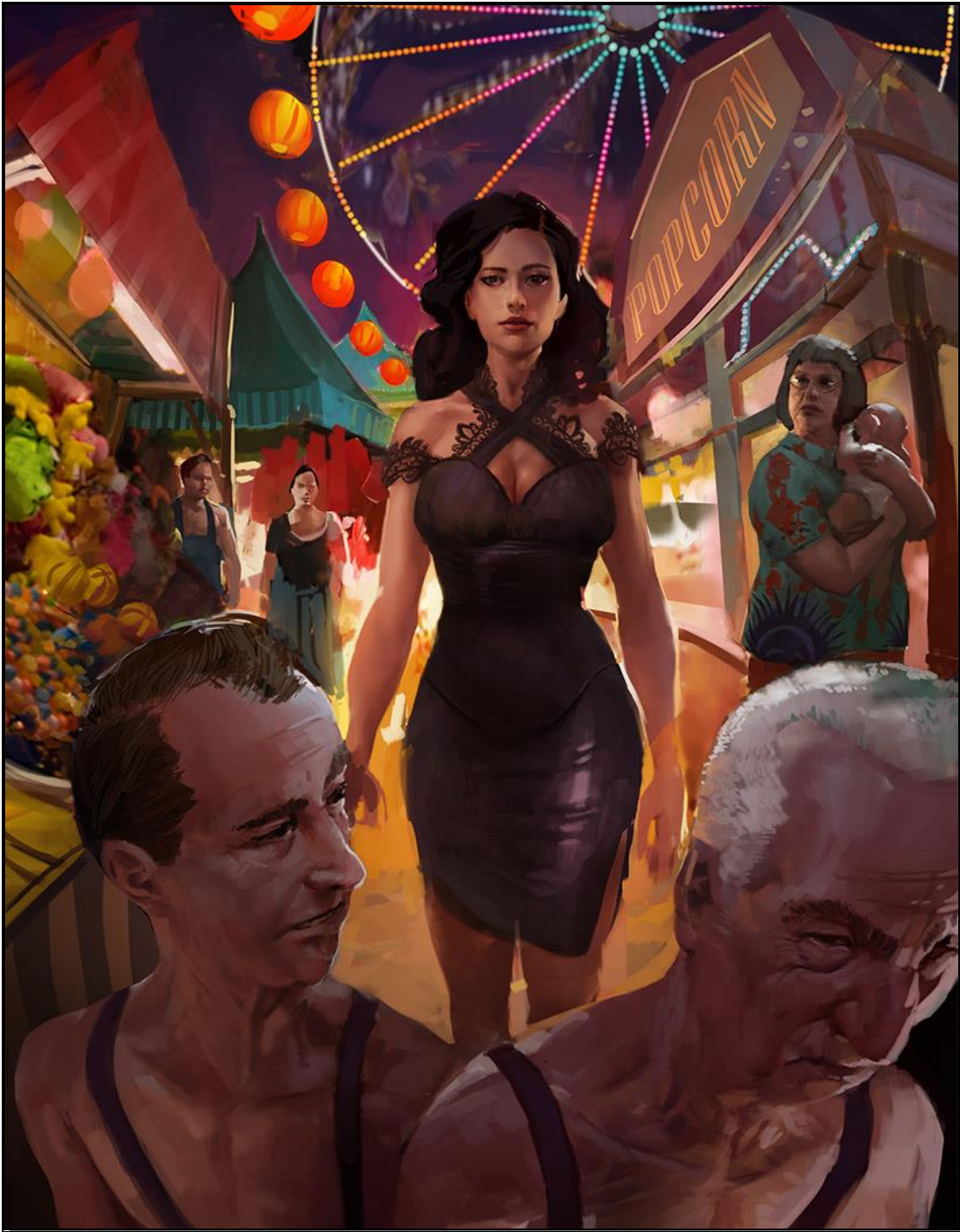
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To Visit the Stars

A Story from Metamorphosis Alpha™
by James M. Ward

“Some people just have too much damn money,” the old man said, laughing when he considered he had more credits than the total population in the Terran solar system.

He rested on a rail looking down at people coming to the Trans-Aerospace Museum. Batches of grade school kids passed by the model of the starship Warden as tour guides explained about the first colonization starship. They properly ooed and aaawd at the image. The senior citizen smiled down at the children and the model. He happily remembered his part in the creation of that particular vessel.

“7777, help me remember,” the old man said. “How long has it been since Janean and I launched the Warden?”

From his implanted brain transceiver on Earth, instant signals went from the museum into orbit to a huge computer transfer system in geo-sync orbit around the planet. Then the signal went out using a dimensional device few people knew about, but the old man had invented on his own. The signal went to space to an orbiting platform floating around Pluto. 7777, as the most advanced computer in terrain space, had received those signals. Its computer systems handled millions of questions and operations a second. At the signal from its current owner, the unit blocked off twenty-five percent of its capacity to answer the needs of its controller, letting the rest of the solar system wait on whatever its owner wanted.

“Mark, it’s been 63 years, nineteen hours, forty-seven minutes and seventeen seconds since the day Janean tried to contact you at the Walworth County Fair,” 7777 replied.

“Tell me of her in those early days, just before I met her,” Mark said. “Send some holo-images to my eyes.”

“Mark, your emotional centers always become depressed when you ask for these images. How about we play a game of chess instead?”

“7777, do as I ask,” the old man ordered.

Images and text filled his eyes and ears as 7777 replayed the life of Mark Ward’s only true love.

Some people just have too much damn money,” she muttered in irritation. Richer than any Queen in the history of mankind, Janean M. Bray the 23rd in a long line of Brays lucked into the design of the Bray Pulse Starship Engine during her training at M.I.T. She’d been working on a plasma force field design to allow her ships to fly into the heart of the sun. The engine gave mankind the stars. Sure, any trip to even the closest star would take a bit of time, but humans could go there now and being humans, there was a feeling that if they could do it, they should.

She thought people were able to travel to Pluto from Earth in a day about seven years ago. Travel to all the planets and the larger asteroid belts in and out of the system became common place. She was part of the drive to build the Trans-Space Construction Yards out by Pluto. Suddenly resources flowed to a resource starved Earth. A grateful Earth planetary government asked how it could reward Janean Bray and she told them, ‘I have specifications for a

colonization starship. Build it for me and we're even.' That's what the governments of the Earth tried to do, but Janean didn't make it easy for them.

Janean Bray's company, the United Western Starship Cartel presented the plans for the aptly named Starship Brayden to the Trans-Space Starship yards she helped build out by Pluto in 2069. The starship design was the most ambitious woman-made object ever built. The starship was an incredible 50 miles in length, with a width of 13 miles and a height of 9 miles. There were 17 decks and the five pulse engines were the largest ever planned, taking as long to fabricate, eleven years, as the rest of the ship. Completed in 2080 it would take until 2082 to outfit the ship with the flora and fauna of Earth. Two million colonists and 50,000 crew members would board the ship and fly into interstellar history, but a few things had to happen before that day.

Dealing with Janean Bray was never easy, and on April 1, 2068, she was having a particularly bad day.

"I don't care about the military orders. Every inch of the Starship Brayden's outer hull will be built out of duralloy and that's final." Bray was pacing in her office on her space station, never a good sign, and a condition often causing Kings and Presidents to change their schedules to avoid meeting with her during one of her pacing days.

Duralloy was diamond hard metal capable of absorbing vast amounts of energy before melting. It took special plasma heat-generating equipment to shape the metal and companies all over the solar system paid large sums of money for even a few sheets. Janean's company asked for millions of sheets.

"You are being unreasonable, even for you Janean." Cyber Digital Computer 6666 tried to be amusing, and failed. The computer used her first name and could only do this out of the hearing of anyone else. She'd designed the system when she first thought of creating a colonization starship. 6666 was the largest and smartest artificial intelligence computer ever created and Bray's only friend, human or electronic.

"How have your efforts gone in buying the duralloy company?" Janean asked as she sat down in front of her computer. Pouting, she went about the business of buying several companies able to furnish her starship with important equipment.

"The company is privately owned and they won't sell at a price three times higher than the estimated worth of the organization," the computer said. "Your lawyers and his lawyers have failed to come to terms. Every angle has been tried by our engineers and marketing people. Bray Enterprises is at a true impasse on this matter."

"Get this Mark Ward on the communicator," Janean ordered. "I need his supplies of duralloy, yesterday."

"His service says he's on vacation at the Walworth County Fair and can't be reached."

"Can't be reached," Janean said in surprise. "I can get a picture of anyone in the world with the touch of a button. How can he not be reached?"

"I have no idea," 6666 replied. "It appears he's a member of a band playing at this fair. The fair doesn't allow robots or visual comm-gear on the grounds. It's all very primitive."

“Get me a seat on the next shuttle to Earth,” Janean ordered. “I’ll track down this Ward character and make him sell me all his duralloy.”

“It’s possible you might not be able to just order this man around,” the artificial intelligence suggested. “He doesn’t need the money and there is a great deal to suggest he sends his produced metals to places needing it most. Currently his supplies of Duralloy are going to military hospital spaceships.”

“Well, if he can’t be bought, how do you suggest I get his metal?” Janean asked.

“Seduction has an 87% chance of success. Appealing to his sense of adventure has a 12% chance of success. Any other appeal has a less than .021% chance of success.”

“Seduction, why I would never...”

“The wait for Duralloy in bulk is five years,” 6666 said.

“Where are all those black cocktail dresses you made me buy a few years ago?” Janean asked the computer.

The Walworth County Fair was a 289-year tradition in the county of the Milwaukee conglomerate. Operated the same way for hundreds of years, it was said to be the best county fair in the world. Janean found many of its initial rules very frustrating. No traffic was allowed in the air space above or around the fair. Fair goers took trolleys to the front and rear gates to enter the fair.

“What do you mean my app-floater 6666 can’t enter the grounds?” Janean demanded of the ancient ticket taker female. Janean had walked up to the booth with her floating app at her right shoulder like always. The ticket taker spotted it right away and told her about the rule.

Nona Grunseth had been selling tickets to this fair for over fifty years. The blue haired old lady loved everyone. “Oh I’m so sorry deary, but the Walworth County Fair Board decided that about robots and apps before even I was born, if you can believe that.” Nona cackled and held out her hand for the 100-credit daily entrance fee. “Don’t worry your pretty little head about your app. It will be fine with the hundreds of others in the app shelter over by the Elkhorn National Guard Armory and Recreation Hall. Just send it over there. Oh dear, you might want to go back to your vehicle and get a jacket. It’s hot now, but it gets cold at night,” Nona advised.

Janean took her ticket and went onto the fairgrounds in a huff. The words of her app-bot were ringing in her ears. “Without me at your side your security is reduced by 78%. Be advised that there is a high probability of attack within 11 hours by your enemies.” The unit sighed in frustration and went to the app shed.

Janean found the sights and sounds of the fair bewildering. She had been given a map by Nona. She discovered the fair grounds were two miles wide and four miles long. Looking at the streets and entries she could see nowhere a drummer would play his drum. Her face and body language must have shown her frustration.

“If you help me, I’ll help you find what you are looking for.”

Janean looked up from the map to see a young girl in a wheelchair. The girl was having trouble getting over some ground power cables with her chair. She couldn’t have been much older than sixteen. There was a look of frustration on her face as she was caught on a large power box. Janean went over right away and pushed her over the wires.

“Hi my name is Miriam Olstrum, what’s yours?” asked the young girl.

“I’m Janean Bray and pleased to meet you young lady. Don’t you have parents or other relatives to help you move about the fair?”

The girl giggled and shook her head. “My father is the chairman of the fair board. All year long I work my arm muscles and core so that for just the few days of the fair he lets me roam where I want to all day. He picks me up at sunset at the rear entrance.”

“These power cables are all over the place. Aren’t they a challenge for you?”

Once again the girl giggled. “There are lots of nice people here at the fair. Once in awhile I get a cute boy to help me out. I don’t talk to dad about them. Girls in wheelchairs are not supposed to think about boys.”

Janean liked this Miriam’s spunk. “Well my problem is I’m looking for a drummer named Mark Ward. He works every day at the fair in some sort of band. Looking at this map, I have no idea where he would be.”

“Oh that’s an easy one and you are in luck,” Miriam said, smiling up at Janean. “There is a polka band playing right now at the bandshall. It’s just a little bit down this street. Let me take you there.” Miriam was off like a streak, expecting Janean to keep up.

Janean had a tough time in her high heels but she managed.

Eventually Miriam took her to the front of a very old bandshall. Clearly built a long time ago, the paint had yellowed on the sides and the plaster was cracked all over the structure. The inside was a sphere with wooden slats created to bounce the sound into the audience, but there were lots of slats missing.

A small group of elderly were sitting on benches listening to the very strange music.

“There is your man I bet,” Miriam pointed at the drummer and she was indeed correct. Mark Ward was playing a drum set in the back.

“Thank you, Miriam, you have been of great help. Would you do me a favor and give me your father’s app number. There are a few things I would like to talk to him about.”

“Sure, but during the fair he’s pretty busy. Lots of luck getting a hold of him.” With a final laugh Miriam wheeled herself down the street with the exuberance only the young at heart showed.

For the first few minutes, Janean texted her app-6666 with some very specific instructions and observations. She then tried to listen to the music.

Janean had never heard of the silly music this band was playing. The old people on the benches were clearly entranced as they nodded up and down to the tempo.

A young girl was at the front of the well-lit stage. She had on a lovely summer frock. She couldn’t be more than 13 if she was a day. She belted out a song like she was a rock star.

*There's a garden, what a garden
Only happy faces bloom there
And there's never any room there
For a worry or a gloom there*

*Oh there's music and there's dancing
And a lot of sweet romancing*

*When they play the polka
They all get in the swing*

*Every time they hear that oom-pa-pa
Everybody feels so tra-la-la
They want to throw their cares away
They all go lah-de-ah-de-ay*

*Then they hear a rumble on the floor, the floor
It's a big surprise they're waiting for
And all the couples form a ring
For miles around you'll hear them sing...*

*Roll out the barrel, we'll have a barrel of fun
Roll out the barrel, we've got the blues on the run
Zing boom tatarrel, ring out a song of good cheer
Now's the time to roll the barrel, for the gang's all here*

Da-da-da-da, da-da-da-da, da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da

*Then they hear a rumble on the floor-or-or-or
It's a big surprise they're waiting for
And all the couples they form a ring
For miles around you'll hear them sing*

Zing do da do ding do da-do-do-day

Janean listened to several more songs like that. Her face became more and more amazed. Many of the lyrics made no sense whatsoever. Why in the world would people even think there was beer in heaven?

Finally, the band stopped and jumped off the front of the bandshell. The side doors were all boarded up. She rushed over to Mark Ward. Without introducing herself, she rushed into a spiel to get him interested, all the while trying to captivate him with her smile and figure.

"Mr. Ward, you are a very hard man to get a hold of. Our apps have been trying to connect for a week. I desperately need large supplies of your duralloy sheets. Is there some place we could talk?"

Attractive women coming up to band members was not a new thing for the band. For Mark's part he saw a lovely woman, clearly out of place in her cocktail dress and high heels. He knew her to be Janean Bray. He also knew why she wanted his sheets. "Miss Bray, at the present moment I'm on a 90 minute break. You have the choice of a buttered corn cob, a cheese bread stick, or an elephant ear. Please walk this way."

He held out his arm and she took it clearly frustrated.

Janean had no idea what she was being asked. At least she knew what a stick was.

"Cheese on a stick," she said.

Mark, on the other hand, loved the thought of this attractive woman on his arm. His reputation at the fair would clearly go up several notches.

Janean was flustered as she walked arm in arm with this charming man. He obviously knew of her and the trillions of dollars she wanted to invest in his Duralloy. People were constantly stopping him to say hello and compliment him on his drumming. It's as if everyone at the fair knew him. The sights and sounds of the fair were so very strange to her. She was a woman of her age; accustomed to walking through labs and offices. The tents and their smells were very off putting. All along, as they walked, this Ward fellow kept up a joyous dialogue about the fair.

"You have picked the best of the best in fair food. Unfortunately, it also has the longest line," he said as they got into a twenty person line. As the line got shorter he bought her refreshing lemonade and refused to talk about business. He tried to explain. "Two weeks a year I come to the fair to unwind. I play in an excellent polka band, the Heart Breakers. I sleep on hay bales in the cow barns and I absolutely ignore my business. Don't you ever do anything like that?"

"No, I love my work. I want to bring mankind to the stars. Help me, please." Janean smiled her best feminine smile as Mark handed her something strange on a stick.

"What do I do with this?"

"You enjoy the heck out of it," he laughed.

Suddenly his arm started beeping. At the same time attack helicopters flew into the air space of the fair grounds. He pressed a black switch on his wrist and pointed up into the sky. "I'm fairly sure those aren't friends of yours who have come to call."

Three attack ships headed in their direction. They were met by hundreds of military grade attack drones. The drones lasered the ships out of the sky, caught the debris, and vanished as quickly as they came.

For a moment Mark got a grim look on his face. "I happen to sell military drones to several planets. I volunteered to command the security detail at the fair. No one is going to ruin this experience for you or me. I take my air security very seriously."

Amazed, she took a bite of the delicious bread and melted cheese on her stick and knew there would be no dealing with him while he was at the fair.

"No you can't buy the cheese stick company," Mark laughed. "The Robers family has been running this stand for three generations. It tastes the same now as it did in that long ago time. Enjoy!"

They slowly walked through the fair and he colorfully explained several of the cow barns, the rabbit hutches, and the barkers selling amazing things at astonishing discounts. Suddenly, they were back at the bandshall and he had to go perform.

For his part he delighted in the thoughtful, highly attractive woman he discovered in Janean. He wanted to see her again. "Miss Bray, there is a special fried chicken dinner at the Methodist Youth Tent tomorrow afternoon. I will give you one hour to talk business for the pleasure of your company. However, my Duralloy is going to hospital spaceships and that is that. Good afternoon." With that he actually kissed her hand and climbed back up into the bandshall. His group immediately started making the most bizarre music.

She walked out of the fair stunned. She had never met any man like him. In the same moment as feeding her wondrous food, he had saved her life and the lives of thousands of others with the flip of a switch.

Later, "How did it go," 6666 asked.

She was too stunned to answer. She spent a very unrestful night in an ancient Hampton Inn. Her dreams were of Mark Ward and spending time at the fair.

The next day broke bright and clear with a few changes around the fair. Janean spent the morning ordering the appropriate outfit for an evening at the fair. It included a jacket.

6666 was quite amazed at the change in her mistress. She had been working unusually hard all night. She had ordered some very difficult operations that took all the skill of the massive computer that 6666 was attached to. However, when the fair opened at seven in the morning, her plans were finished and running.

At one, on a lazy sunny afternoon Janean walked up to Nona's ticket booth and was greeted like an old friend.

"Oh that's a much better outfit deary. You will do well at the fair today," Nona smiled. "Did you hear the amazing news?"

"Why no Nona, what happened?" Janean smiled at her new best friend.

"There are two huge trucks; one at the front gate and one at the back gate," the old woman said warming to her story. "They are offering free floating medical chairs to those poor dears who used a wheelchair at the fair before. They say the chairs float a foot off the ground and are very easy to use. I hear Joe Olstram, the chairman of the fair board had something to do with it, but what a wonderful thing for those who wanted to enjoy the fair. And that's not all."

"Really," Janean said as she paid for her ticket. "What else happened?"

"Some amazing group of carpenters came in the middle of the night and completely remodeled the bandshall. They restored the purple and gold plaster. I'm told they refurbished the acoustic boards inside and everything is said to be just like it was when the thing was built in 1892. We live in amazing times don't we?"

"Nona, we sure do. Thanks for the update and have a good day. Can I bring you anything from the fair grounds?" Janean asked, falling into the true spirit of the fair.

"Oh, why how thoughtful deary. No, my Frank of 57 years brings me things all the time. I love that man. I hope I can introduce you some time. He loves pretty girls like yourself."

Janean blushed, "Promise you won't get jealous of me looking at your husband."

Nona cackled with glee. "Oh no dear, long ago we agreed to look at all the menus we wanted to as long as we ate at home. It's worked for 57 years."

Janean walked into the fair noting the Bray Engineering truck had passed out about three quarters of the graviton sleds. That made her extremely happy. She didn't really understand this fair experience, but was pleased to help others enjoy the experience more.

Even with the smells of the farm animals and the dust of the roads, Janean could detect the smell of fresh paint as she approached the gleaming revitalized bandshall. The Jeeter Country band was playing right then. They apparently attracted a young audience as young men and women were on the benches bouncing to some song about a dog and an old blue truck.

"I must say I'm very impressed," came a voice behind her.

She turned to see Mark Ward.

"What?" she asked demurely.

“Oh don’t even bat those big baby blues at me and try to work those feminine wiles on me young lady. First of all Miriam is my first cousin and I saw her face this morning when she got in that tricked out chair. Second, all of those chairs have a Bray Engineering logo on the back.”

“Yes I guess so. It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“If that wasn’t enough,” Mark glowed, “My bandshall didn’t sound this good when it was brand new. I am forever in your debt.”

“About that,” she said taking his arm and walking into the fair.

“I know where this is headed,” he smirked. “It’s going to cost you a name change for the ship.”

7777 stopped the images. It always stopped them at the same place every year at this time.

Tears streamed down Mark Ward’s face as he remembered the best wife a man could have and what they accomplished in the intervening years. He went home to his empty house and a full life.

The End

Author James M. Ward

When James M. Ward looks back on his accomplishments, he starts with Janean, defined as a wonderful wife of 45 years, three amazing grown sons - Breck, James, and Theon - and six of the best grandchildren a man could ask for in - Keely, Miriam, Sophia, James Preston, Teagan, and Noah.

During that time of genetic generations, James managed to write Metamorphosis Alpha in 1976, the first science fiction role-playing game and still in print, Gamma World, the first apocalyptic role-playing game and also, still in print. Deities and Demigods, the first treatment of legendary and fantasy pantheons in role-playing, Spellfire, the second collectible card game, Dragon Ball Z, another popular collectible card games still in print and a host of other games. James’ most recent work is with The Lost 77 Worlds (with Stephen A. Lee) and the Blasted

Earth supplement, recently funded through a fantastic Kickstarter campaign.



Barking Up the Wrong Tree

By James M. Ward

Metamorphosis Alpha is a concept of space exploration. A colonization starship, the Warden, is lost in space. Three hundred years later some shipboard beings are aware it is a starship, but most intelligent beings think the ship is an entire world. In this story we are looking at one small area of level 10. Epsilon City was the one metropolis on the ship. The city is surrounded by artificial forested mountains. On deck ten the city has been taken over by mutant wolves. There are still lots of areas without wolfoids to explore in the city, but few do because of the wolfoid danger.

Cast of Players

Beck – He is the proud father of his nine year old son, Achilles.

Beca – She is Achilles' worried mother.

Achilles – He's a nine year old preparing for his first hunting trip and is very excited.

The story begins in an apartment in Epsilon City. The apartments are marvels of technology. Engineering robots make constant repairs on many of the systems. All city intelligent cultures leave the engineering robots alone because those robots fix systems the inhabitants can enjoy. Each apartment has a kitchen computer that delivers any type of requested food. Several computer systems deliver entertainment of all types to the rooms of the apartment. Special design machines fabricate clothes and other useful items at the request of the apartment owners. Largely unknown to the inhabitants of the city there is a massive computer and robotic infrastructure that stocks the marketing shelves with fresh fruit and fills the stores with free product. Into this environment we present our family.

It's dawn over the city, and a very worried mother is having second thoughts about her son and the trip he is about to take.

"I've changed my mind. Our son is clearly too young to go on a dangerous hunting trip," Beca whined. "He's only nine. He hasn't fired a hunting rifle before. Let's wait a year more. I know he will be disappointed, but we can give him that toy cruise ship he's wanted forever, to take his mind off the canceled trip."

"That isn't going to happen, dear," Beck said. "A boy or a girl's first hunting trip is an important part of their life experience. Honey, how old were you when you took your first hunting trip? Be honest now."

"I was eight," she said. "But we needed the food then, and the pack we ran with wasn't doing well that year. I had a miserable time. I made every mistake in the hunting book, and my best catch was a muti-otter."

Beck, the husband, had an "ah ha" look on his face.

Beca didn't want her husband to call her a bitch, even though she knew she deserved the moniker. She tried to marshal her thoughts to convince her husband.

“My first hunting trip I shot a cave bear, and we have enjoyed that pelt in front of our fireplace for years. I fondly remember that hunt. I’m going to give our son the chance for that same experience.”

“Honey,” Beca was about to go on and on.

Beck shushed her. “I’ve taken him to the firing range. We’ve shot 22s, shot guns, and laser rifles. I can see a natural born hunter in him. This plasma rifle I’m giving him for his birthday is computer controlled so it won’t fire at me or him. We are going right now, and that is that.”

He turned and called to his son. “Achilles, birthday boy, are you ready to go?”

The son came bounding out of his room with his cute, red DragonScale backpack all ready on. “You bet, Dad. I can’t wait.” His eagerness bubbled over and he was almost bouncing around the living room.

“You had better have everything I told you to carry in that pack of yours,” the father admonished. “We won’t be coming back for things like canteens, cooking gear, and ground covers.”

“Dad,” the son rolled his eyes. He also rushed back into his room and quickly came back with a ground cover tarp rolled and tied to the top of his pack.

Beck turned his son toward the door and gave him a little push. He turned to his darling wife. He gave her a hug and a gentle tonguing. “Everything will be fine. We will be back in three days.”

He lifted a much heavier backpack with a wrapped present on the top. He checked his sidearm and walked to the door.

“You take good care of our son,” she whispered. “Achilles,” she shouted. “You take care of your dad and make sure he comes home safe and sound.”

“Will do mom,” the happy-as-a-pup child said going out the door.

“Call him back. I want a hug,” whined Beca.

“Nope, coming back after starting the journey is bad luck. Bye dear,” Beck said chuckling at his wife. He left with a happy stride, glad to be on the hunt. It had been too long since he lasted hunted. He also wanted to teach his son a lot of fun and useful things.

* * *

Father and son walked from the city to the nearby wooded mountains to the north of the city. They journeyed seven miles, which was just a good stretch of the legs for the pair. They could have taken a city taxi out there or used a grav sled, but the father wanted to have his son savor the experience. The wrapped present was given to the boy as they got near the site where Beck wanted to camp. Achilles knew exactly what he was getting and quickly ripped the paper off of a brand new plasma, bolt-action hunting rifle. “Be careful with this son. Remember your rifle safety classes.”

The boy was going to leave the birthday wrapping paper on the ground. His father started with the first of many hunting lessons. “Achilles you can’t leave that paper there. I know you think no one will care about the waste paper. That’s not the point. All of the generations of our people have worked to keep the forests pristine around the city. Your sons and daughters and their sons and daughters are going to walk these same hills. Do you want them to walk

through a land filled with trash or the forest we are walking through right now?”

The boy picked up the paper. “Gee, Dad, I never thought of that. I’m a long way from having kids, but you are right. I want them walking through a clear forest just like we are now. Sorry, Dad.”

“Not a problem,” Beck said. “It’s just one of many things we will talk about on this trip. You have learned this lesson and won’t make that mistake again.”

The father checked his side arm for the second time that day. It was a 60 caliber five-shot pistol. It had quite a kick but Beck was very strong and could handle it with ease. There were four more cylinders of bullets in pouches around the father’s middle. The quick draw holster allowed the father to draw and fire the weapon in a second or less. The dad was deadly with the weapon up to 100 yards. He often put a five shot pattern in the head of targets his people used.

“Before we go killing the things, tell me what you know about muti-deer.”

“That’s another easy one, Dad,” the boy said moving around his father like a coiled spring. “The deer really like thick brush cover. We will look for antler sheds as they get knocked off all the time. If we are by a creek or brush we should look for more sheds as the deer jump over those areas. Wind direction is important to check several times an hour. The muti-deer have very sensitive noses and we don’t want them catching our scent. Windy or rainy days are great times to stalk the deer and the noise of the weather condition can mask our approach.

“Let’s see now, when I shoot I need to focus on the deer. I can’t look at its antlers or face. I want a vitals shot. I wait to make sure the vital area has cleared of any vegetation. I’m looking for a shot that hits just above the front shoulder. If I miss entirely, by the way, Dad, that is not going to happen.”

The father snorted at his son’s confidence.

“Anyway, if I miss entirely I’m to let the deer run. If I can’t hit it when it is standing still, trying to hit it on the run is just taking foolish risks at missing again and hitting something I didn’t want to shoot. These plasma rounds are powerful and do a lot of damage on any setting from needle thin to five inches across. Good enough, Dad?”

“Good enough my son.” Beck took out his plastic bottle and started peeing in it.

“What the heck are you doing, Dad?” the boy asked not believing what he was seeing his dad do.

“Son, do you have the plastic bottle I told you to bring along?”

“Sure, Dad, but I had no idea what you wanted it for,” Achilles answered.

“This liquid carries the strongest scent our people make. For a hundred yards in any direction no matter what the wind direction is or the weather conditions, the scent of our pee will tell prey we are near and they will flee the area. It’s not so bad to pee in the woods near our camp. We don’t want animals bothering us there. But all along the hunting trails, we use the bottles and leave no trace of ourselves. Do you understand?”

Achilles eyes sparkled as he grasped the idea his father was trying to teach him. “Sure, Dad, no problem. I get it now, and that’s very logical when you think about it. Let’s go find some muti-deer.”

“We’ll set up camp first unless we are lucky enough to spot that deer you want so bad on the way. The river is just a few miles north of here,” Dad said. “We need to avoid the Jawed Plant patch and that nasty Death Bush area. Give me the electrical tape I told you to bring

along.”

Achilles gave his father the tape. “This is another odd thing. Who ever heard of taking tape on a hunting expedition?”

Beck put the strip of tape on the front end of his pistol. “If it’s raining or I trip and fall in the brush I don’t want my pistol barrel fouled. The tape on my pistol barrel will just be shot away and never hurt or affect my aim on the target.”

He gave a strip to his son who promptly put it on the barrel of his plasma rifle.

“You go first son and I’ll follow your lead.”

The boy was off like a shot. His father didn’t have the heart to tell him to slow down. Achilles was a magnificent Alpha child. He hurried up to catch his boy; pride making his chest almost burst.

They walked into an oak grove. There was a fresh water stream to the south of the hill. In the north was a large blue berry tangle. The berries were fist sized and very ripe. Acorns were all over the place and looked perfect for roasting.

“This has always been my favorite camping spot,” Beck said. “I’ve never failed to get some type of prey. Maybe we can get some fishing in at the same time.”

Achilles pulled out the force cube tent. He set it for two and the cube activated special force fields. A five foot dome of force appeared around the cube. Bugs hitting the field turned to dust. Larger creatures, sniffing around, were blasted with sonic waves to drive them away.

It was only noon, so they dropped off their equipment and started walking in a half circle around the camp.

“Tell me Achilles how did you prepare for this hunt?” the father asked.

“Prepare, hmmm. I spread mint oil on my shoulders and feet,” the boy said. “That stuff is real stinky, Dad.”

“Yes, well that is true. Why do we use it?”

“It’s so predators can’t track us by our scent. That’s an easy one,” the son remarked.

“We will talk about that a bit later. Did you do anything else?”

“Well I brought along my Gladius. I filled my backpack with the hunting things you said I should have. What else should I have done?” the son asked concentrating on the woods around them. He looked for dangerous surprises. He carried his rifle in the proper manner and made sure never to point the barrel anywhere but up.

“Yes, that Gladius; I meant to talk to you about that,” Beck said. “That sword is handy, although you will probably go to a Spatha as you get older and stronger. However, your weapon is useless for gutting a kill.”

“Well geez, Dad, it’s razor sharp and should easily cut into the fur of the deer. Why isn’t it good enough?” the boy asked.

“It’s 23 inches long,” the father explained. “When you skin an animal, and you will be doing all the skinning on this trip; it’s very fine and close work.”

He reached into a boot sheath and pulled out a vibro-fish boning knife. “I brought this and I’ll have you use it. Of course you have to make a kill first. We’ve been at this for hours and the animals don’t seem to be cooperating.”

“We will get so many kills that we won’t be able to carry it all back,” the youth said

enthusiastically.

“We hunt for food,” the dad said. “We never hunt for sport. Being able to hunt also helps us become better defenders of our homes in Epsilon city.”

“I can’t wait to get in one of those battles right alongside you, Dad,” the youth said.

“Achilles, I hope you never have to battle like that. I’ve lost both parents and two brothers in those battles, and I miss them every waking day,” Beck said patting his son on the shoulder. “However the reality of our land is one of battle and maneuver. You will begin classes on combat against others when you turn ten. For now let’s just be two hunters out for a challenge.”

Walking a few hundred yards, the pair of them spotted a large muti-deer on a hill in the distance.

“There’s your shot son. Take it down,” Beck whispered.

The boy rose with his weapon, took careful aim, and fired.

Click!

Click!

The muti-deer eventually noticed the pair. It bounded off in the other direction.

“Dad, what happened?” Achilles asked looking over the weapon.

“You lost the chance at a trophy because you didn’t check your weapon,” said his father. “I hope this is a life lesson for you. Always check a weapon when you first get it. Don’t assume it’s loaded.”

With that statement Beck gave his son the four shot plasma magazine for the rifle. “This lesson applies to lots and lots of things. When you get equipment or when you first put on equipment check it out from top to bottom. You should never take for granted what others tell you about equipment they are handing you. That way you won’t get an ugly surprise like you did today.”

Achilles rolled his eyes, not appreciating the lesson at all, but keeping his maw shut.

The roar, through the forest, shocked them both. There was only one creature that made that noise. The two of them dived into the brush and scooped leaves on top of their bodies. They put themselves near a large tree so it wasn’t likely that they would be trampled by the coming monster. In seconds they were invisible. In less than a minute a Tyrannosaurus Rex moved slowly by, sniffing the air where the pair had just been. It growled in irritation at the smell of mint. It moved on several hundred yards and the pair lifted their heads up to watch the predator leave the area.

“Should I shoot it, Dad?” Achilles said targeting the beast.

Beck gently pushed the weapon down. “No, when I was just a pup we had Tyrannosaurus Rex meat for supper. The flesh tastes terrible. The eater burps up the taste for hours after. Eating it made my friends and I sick to our stomachs. I can see by the look in your eye that you really wanted to test your weapon on something tough like that giant reptile. However there is a problem. First the monster is so tough it can take two plasma shots and still come after the shooter. Its lightning fast on its feet and you would be amazed at how quickly it can turn around and get at you. I’m sure you could have killed it after three or four shots to its body. Then this huge dead creature would start to rot. It would attract the attention of scavengers and some of them are more dangerous than the T-Rex. Let’s head back to camp and make dinner there. I’m sure we will have better luck tomorrow morning.”

They worked their way back to camp; gathering fire wood as they traveled.

“This wood is heavy, Dad,” the son remarked. “Wouldn’t it be easier to use our vibro-axes and cut down a few saplings near camp?”

“Son you have the pleasant job of being a guardian of the forest. In our clearing of this dead wood we are helping the forest and making it easier for us to move around among the trees. Tomorrow we will come back to this area and not have to worry about tripping over fallen limbs.”

They got back to camp, set up a large camp fire in the middle of the area, and relaxed.

“It’s nice here sitting by the fire,” Achilles said hours later. “Those raw beef strips mom made for us sure hit the spot. I hope we get that muti-deer tomorrow.”

“Now that you are on the hunt, let me give you an important trick that has always worked for me,” Beck advised his son. “I don’t know what other shooters call it, but I have always called it trigger control. I have found it the difference between being a good shooter and a great shooter.

“I learned about it from a laser pistol class I had when I was thirteen. In that class the instructor stressed the need to take a relaxed but firm grip on the firearm. A trooper from the clan army helped me shoot and gave me a bit of different advice. He told me to squeeze the weapon so hard that my fingers hurt.”

“Dad, I would think that would cause you to shake with whatever weapon you were firing,” Achilles remarked.

“You are absolutely correct, son,” his father said. “There are tremors, however if you learn to shoot through those shakes you will be amazed at your increase in accuracy. Squeezing like that separates the trigger finger from the rest of your fingers.

“I want you to try the squeezing technique. Over time and shooting more I know you will find your accuracy increasing, especially at longer ranges. That is the lesson for the day. Get in your sleeping bag; we are going to get up real early. That reminds me, we really need to get you into a laser pistol class during summer school. As we go out hunting more and more you having a second weapon is a good idea for both of us.”

“Night. Dad. I’m really glad we are doing this.”

Achilles’ father couldn’t help but smile with pride at his son.

* * *

The next morning Beck handed Achilles a spray bottle. “Spray yourself all over with this and put extra on your feet.”

“What is it?” Achilles asked.

“That mint you put on yesterday is good for the first day of hunting. It’s an unusual smell and doesn’t put off the prey. However, the smart predators will start hunting by tracking that smell and then you are in trouble. That T-Rex we saw yesterday is a prime example of what we could face. Yesterday it was put off by the scent of the mint. Today it could decide to track on that smell just to see what it finds to eat. What I have given you is called a cover scent. It’s an old family recipe. What kind of trees do you see around us?”

“That’s another easy question, Dad. I see lots of pine trees and oak trees. There are some

beech trees by the river.”

“Excellent, son, you are correct. Now, today we will be taking some of the pine needles and acorns and put them in a bag with water. We let that sit warming in the sun all day. The next day we put that water into this spray bottle to replace what we use today.”

Suddenly, Achilles eyes brightened in understanding.

“Yes, now you see. It’s called a cover scent. With the application of this water we smell like the surrounding forest. That means we can’t be smelled from the land around us.”

“Cool, Dad, that’s a great trick,” Achilles said.

“Indeed. I have a few more things to teach you today. Let’s get hunting,” Beck said. “While we are walking let me hear the four firearm safety precautions we should be using.”

“Okay, no problem,” Achilles said. “Let’s see now, hmmm. Treat every firearm as if it were loaded; unless your dad gives you a weapon for your birthday and then you know it’s not loaded.”

They both chuckled at that.

“Only point your weapon at what you plan on shooting. Keep your finger off the trigger until you are really ready to shoot. Hmmm, that fourth one is a tough one. Give me a minute.”

They walked just below a ridge line.

“Now I got it. Before shooting clearly identify your target and what is beyond your target in case you miss.”

“We are going to hunt the south facing ridges. Muti-deer and other animals like to soak up as much sun as possible. Oh look. You will find this interesting.”

Beck picked up two old antlers and started knocking them quickly together. Achilles had a questioning look on his face.

“The muti-deer knock their antlers on the sides of trees,” Beck said. “That noise acts like a challenge for the male deer. Hearing the sound, they will come running in time. Add that noise to this,”

Beck made a deep grunting noise and Achilles couldn’t help but laugh.

“That snort, youngster, is the noise of a rutting male. It can bring an aggressive buck right to your feet. Tell me what you know of blood trails.”

“Okay, I can do that,” Achilles said. “I shoot the muti-deer and follow its trail. If I see fur and dark-red blood I probably have a heart of lung hit. If I’m looking at thick dark red blood it could be a liver hit. And with me shooting this isn’t going to happen, but if I see watery blood with stomach matter in the mix I’ve got a bad hit.”

“That’s very good son,” his father said surprised at his son knew that. “Always carry your rifle in your downhill hand in case you slip. If you are going downhill never have your rifle on your back. If you fall then you could shock your scope and take it out of alignment. Now what kind of deer signs are we looking for?”

“Now you are asking tougher questions,” Achilles said. “I did see some videos on this very topic. All muti-deer leave signs of their passing. There are tracks, there are droppings; they make flattened grass beds in thickets. They rub trees and scrub with their antlers. They do these things to communicate with each other, but it helps us find them. If you look at these signs for age, the ones that are recent can tell you that you are in a good area to find a muti-deer.”

“Good, good, I’m really pleased with the work you have put in before your first hunt,” Beck said. “I wish I would have done the same when I was your age.”

His son smiled at the praise of his father.

As they hunted, Beck noticed the Jawed Plants had spread further than was normal for summer growth. He would have to talk to the horticultural robots to make sure they cut that growth back. No one minded five or six of those monster plants in the area, but twenty or thirty were too many.

“Son, I smell muti-deer to the . . .ulp.” In a second Beck was hanging by one leg high in a tree by a thick spider thread. “Look out for the spider Achilles. It will be huge!”

Achilles changed the setting on his rifle and shot a five inch wide beam of pure plasma energy at the spider strand holding his father. His father hit the ground and rolled to his feet.

They both heard a distinct Zzzzzst. The leaves around his father caught on fire. On the ground a mass of white webbing was revealed as a huge black spider came out of a trap door near his shocked father.

Blurringly fast the spider rushed toward the now stunned Beck.

Achilles raised his rifle and placed three perfect plasma shots in the center mass of the spider. With each shot huge gouts of blood and gore ripped out the back of the spider. It was dead with the first shot, but didn’t stop moving until the third shot.

Achilles ran to his father’s side and began chest compressions. “Please don’t die, Dad! Please don’t die!”

Minutes later -- “I promise not to die right now if you stop crushing my chest,” came the weak reply from his father. Beck took out two more plasma magazines. “Load your weapon and expect more trouble,” he said weakly. “Look what’s already happening to your spider.”

Targeting the spider again, there were two Death Vines slowly pulling the spider apart and eating the pieces. Achilles helped his father up and they stumbled back to camp. It wasn’t long before his dad was feeling much better in front of a camp fire.

“Well that was an interesting morning,” Beck told his son. “The Black One shot an energy pulse through its webbing and stunned me. I could see what was going on but couldn’t react to it. You handled yourself perfectly and saved us both. I don’t think we should tell your mother about any of that. Agreed?”

Achilles laughed, “Agreed. So, Dad that spider was my first kill. Should we have gutted it for the meat? What does spider meat taste like?”

Beck grimaced. “Truth be told, it tastes a bit like chicken. But it’s a lot gamier. Also there are several poison injection glands on its body. If you break one of those in the cleaning it splashes poison and ruins the meat. All in all it isn’t worth the bother. When I had it, I was young like you. My father had an expert chef prepare it and I didn’t much like it at all. Now, get into that bed roll. Hopefully, tomorrow won’t be as exciting as it was today.”

The next morning was rainy. They dressed for the weather and looked out of the force field tent. There several hundred yards away a huge cave bear was preoccupied at eating blue berries from the patch.

Achilles looked at his dad and clearly ached to take the shot.

His dad whispered to him. “All right son we can do this, but there are several problems. Such creatures often have force fields around their mutant bodies. Set your rifle on needle shots. It’s possible your first few shots will be completely negated by the energy field of the

bear. Shoot your magazine and then reload as fast as you can. After your four shots I'm going to start shooting in the hopes of blasting down its force field. That beast is going to rear up on its hind legs and charge us. If it gets one swipe at us we are dead. Do you understand that?"

Achilles nervously shook his head, 'yes.'

"All right, you and I will take careful aim. You fire off four rounds at the center mass of the bear and I'll do the same. We have a very good chance of killing it before it gets to us. When you are ready start shooting."

In the distance the bear didn't see them as it ate more and more berries.

Achilles started shooting and the bear took on a bright glow. After four plasma rounds the bear didn't look affected at all. It rose up on its hind legs and started racing for the pair. It was at least three tons of enraged predator all aglow with a protecting mutant force field.

While Achilles quickly exchanged plasma magazines an excited Beck began firing. He was very aware of the danger to his son. Each of his shots struck the center of the bear. The glow of the force field became dimmer and dimmer. At the third shot there was no glow at all. The next two pistol shots went into the body of the bear, but only slowed it down. Beck quickly exchanged pistol cylinders.

However, his son placed four plasma bolts into the exact same spot his father had targeted. Huge fist sized chunks of gore tore out the back of the bear. It came crashing down, dead, ten yards from their tent.

A nervous Achilles looked at his father who still had his weapon raised and ready to shoot. "Dad remind me not to fire at a mutant bear unless I have an army squad backing me up."

"Son, reload your weapon and put four rounds in the head of that monster. I've seen creatures that size get up from the kind of damage we just put in it. We want to make doubly sure its dead."

The boy shot again and had no trouble with the target. Only then did Beck lower his weapon. "Well it was nice of the bear to come to our camp to eat its last meal," the dad said with a nervous laugh. "You are going to do most of the work in gutting and skinning that creature. I'll help you carry the huge pelt back home. They got to work and it took most of the day. By the early evening they were ready to go back home."

* * *

They walked quickly through the forest. The pelt was heavy, but both of them were in great spirits. Suddenly Beck stopped.

"Smell that?" Beck asked sniffing toward the wind.

"Yeah, Dad, what is it? It smells awful," Achilles said.

"That my son is the distinctive smell of U-mens," Beck said. "They are tough to kill and take a lot of damage before falling down. They almost always have better equipment than we do. Now, we have two choices. We've got our kill and can just go home. However, U-mens around the area are never good. The clan leaders would like to know what they are doing here. We could check the nasty creatures out. It's your hunt so you pick, knowing it could be very deadly to move near them"

"Well geez, Dad, no one battles better than you do," Achilles said with pride clear in his voice. "I'd stack ten of these U-mens against you any day and I don't even know what they are like. Let's check them out and see what we see."

“That’s my boy,” Beck said taking off his backpack and reaching into a side pouch to pull out four spheres. “Leave your pack here son.”

“Grenades, Dad, what in the world were you thinking in taking neutron grenades on a muti-deer hunt?”

“When I packed them, I was thinking of protecting us against creatures much more powerful than the Tyrannosaurus Rex we saw yesterday. Low and behold we can now use them to cover our trail if we have to retreat. Put these two in your front belt pouch. You do remember how to use them from your grenade course last year? You press the button, quickly count to three and throw them a good distance. You have to keep in mind the blast radius of the neutron radiation.”

“I know, Dad, geez you would think I was just a kid,” Achilles groused. “You know I graduated at the top of the grenade class. No one could throw grenades as far or as accurately as I could.”

“Yes, yes. Just be careful with these and don’t use them unless I tell you to,” Beck warned. Beck gave his son the other five magazines of plasma rounds and had him set his rifle for needle beam firing. To himself, he wished they had heavy duty assault laser rifles, but he might as well wish for a laser tank when it came to that. He motioned his son to follow along his left side and they went hunting U-mens.

They silently moved through the forest. The gross smell of U-mens getting stronger and stronger. The pair could hear the creatures talking in the distance.

“Paul, I think the scientists apartments are just over that hill,” a female said.

“Paul, I have two creatures moving up on our position about two hundred meters out and to the south,” a man said. “They don’t look too big on the sensors. I don’t think they will be much trouble.”

“You never know with the creatures on this level,” a third man said. “Keep a sharp look out for those creatures.”

“Dad, they are speaking our language. How can they do that?” Achilles whispered in wonder.

“Yes, well, err, that is another class you will take when you are an adult. They seem to know we are coming up on them. When the time comes you fire on the female if the fighting begins,” Beck whispered.

The U-mens talked on.

“I sure would like to explore Epsilon City,” the female remarked. “I’m sure there are many technological treasures we could use.”

“We have some units in invisio-suits getting ready to go there, but it’s a dangerous place,” the third male said. “We have tracked at least seven different species of Wolfoids thriving in that city. It would be certain death to be caught by them.”

The pair of hunters looked down from a hill at three groups of U-mens. The three they heard talking were just thirty yards away. There were a group of five by a large military vehicle and another group of three on a hill looking north.

Using hand signals Beck told his son to throw his two grenades at the group of three on the hill and then shoot at the female nearest them. Beck prepared his two grenades.

He threw his at the group of five at the same time Achilles threw his perfectly at the group of three. The grenades made a soft Z sound and erupted in deadly neutrons that killed the U-

mens they were thrown at.

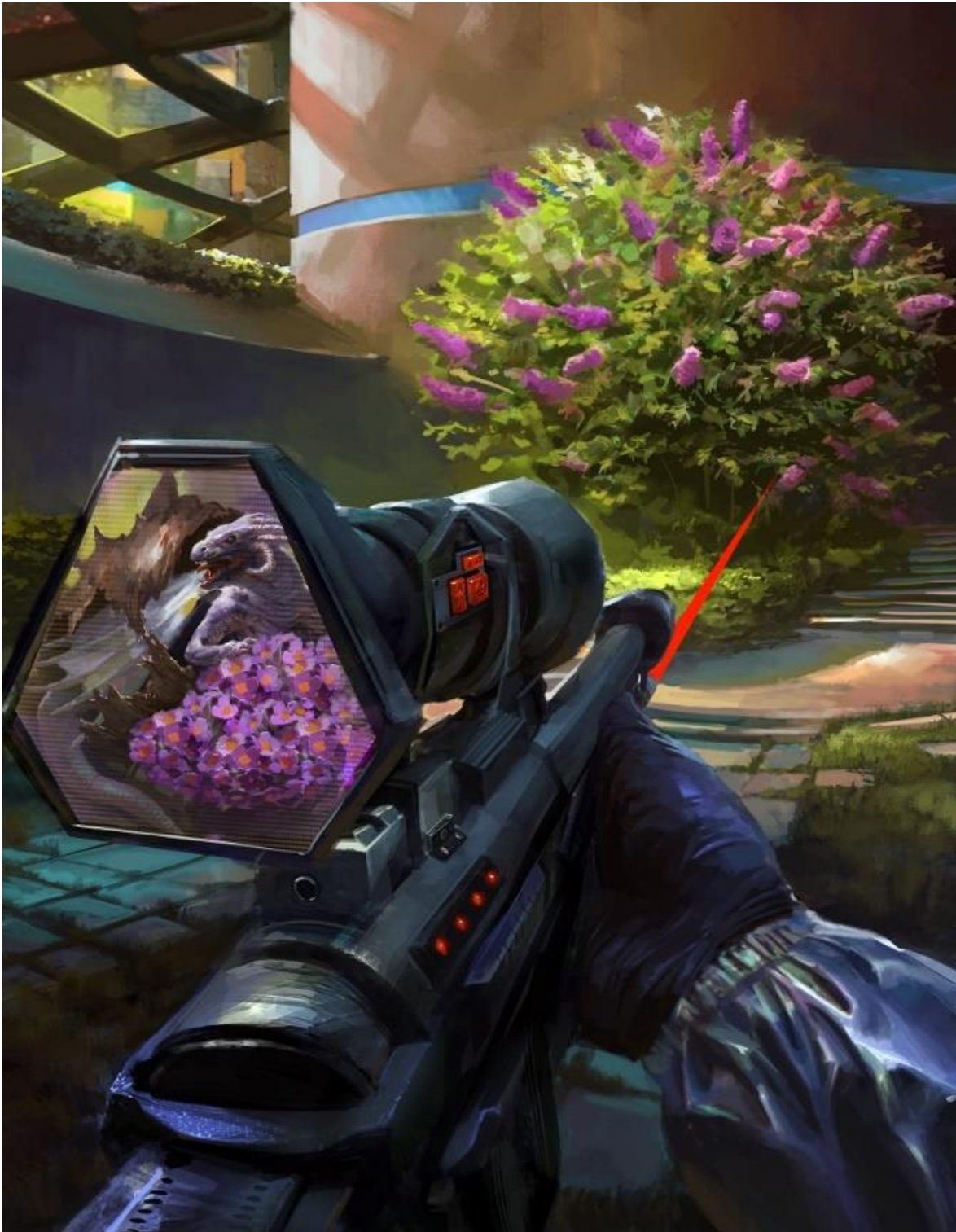
Beck raised his pistol and blew the head off one of the nearby males. Achilles fired twice and tore huge chunks of gore from the female. Before the third male could react, Beck shot him down.

The pair spent several minutes waiting to see if other U-mens would come as a reaction to the combat.

“Well done son,” Beck said. “We did great against tough opponents. You are about to have a fantastic tasty treat that is seldom offered. They went down to the three bodies and Beck took out his vibro knife and cut off the hands of the prey. He placed three of the hands in a special cooling pouch all wolfoids carried for just such an instance. He gave one of the female hands to his son for his cooling pouch.

The son and the father happily started walking back to their packs, eating their tasty snack and wagging their tails in a job well done.

THE END



Script Treatment

By James M. Ward

Author's forward: A kind man named Flint Dille got me a job writing a G. I. Joe television script. Operation Weapon's Disaster was a hit and I was very pleased with its success. I then submitted a Transformer script where Japan built a female Ninja transformer. They liked the idea, but didn't like my script. Oh well. So in the late '70s, early '80s I tried my hand at roughing out an MA script. It's a bit crude, but I liked the result and I hope you will too.

From the desk of James M. Ward on a spring day

So, I learned that when anyone presented a script they wanted to see a one-page detailing of the story and a roughed-out script treatment with most of the story built in. This is that treatment, but it never went anywhere.

[ONE PAGE TREATMENT]

METAMORPHOSIS ALPHA – THE FIRST CHANGE

The colonization starship Warden launches from the Plutonian spaceship yards into the darkness of interstellar space with ten thousand of the brightest and best individuals mankind has ever birthed. On a twenty-year flight to Epsilon Indi, just 11.25 light years away, the crew and colonists are guaranteed to find a habitable planet at the end of their journey.

They never make it to their destination.

The starship rams into an invisible asteroid that was purposely moved into its path by aliens bent on taking over the Warden. Unknown radiation fills the Warden and kills all of the crew and most of those in cryogenic sleep. The ship becomes vastly changed as radiation mutates the many animals on levels designed as wild lands. Alien viruses contaminated the artificial intelligences, creating chaos as ship systems try to restore order under Omega emergency protocols.

Robots begin the emergency work of clearing the radiation and trying to put things to rights. During their task, they discover an alien presence has begun invading the ship from the asteroid. The robots follow emergency procedures and summon up androids to help fight the aliens and make the starship right again. In the course of battling more and more aliens, the androids determine they must awaken the few remaining humans on the ship in the one level that didn't receive radiation contamination. They awaken Master Sergeant Dupper and his space Marines.

The Marines are dazed and confused because emergency protocols were used to bring them around in a day; when normally the process takes weeks. They battle several different types of aliens. It becomes an all-out war with the alien invaders with the robots and the androids helping the hard charging Marines. There's no talk of diplomacy or surrender as the Marines realize they are battling for their lives.

In a climatic final battle with the aliens, Sergeant Dupper and his squad enters an attached space battleship. He and his squad take over the command center and blast the hell out of the

asteroid. (Stay tuned for MA II).

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[Act One, Scene One]

[THE SCENE APPEARS TO BE A TELEVISION COMMERCIAL WITH AN ANNOUNCER IN THE BACKGROUND AS FANTASTIC VIEWS OF DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE COLONIZATION STARSHIP WARDEN ARE SHOWN. WE SEE A WATER PARK, HEAVILY FORESTED PARK, AND A GIANT WATERFALL WHILE THE ANNOUNCER TALKS OVER THE SCENES.]

The scene begins like a luxury cruise TV commercial talking about the wonderful life of those who join the colonization starship Warden on its maiden cruise to Epsilon Indi. There are scenes of water parks, fine dining, walks in the woods, and all the while, the announcer is trying to get the viewer to go on line and take the colonist test. Test takers getting a high enough intelligence score can join the thousands of happy people already aboard the ship who are going to colonize the untouched paradise planet the robotic scout ships have found in the Epsilon Indi star system.

Announcer -- Sure it's a twenty-year voyage, but as colonists of the first passenger ship to fly out of the solar system, you'll sleep in cryo-chambers for the entire time. The trained and efficient crew work in shifts, changing crew every other year and maintaining your systems and the systems of the rest of the sleeping crew. When you reach your destination, you'll have a great place to live, the starship Warden, and you can take your time settling the new world and exploring its natural wonders.

[Act One, Scene Two]

[WE ARE GETTING A GREAT VIEW OF THE COMMAND AND CONTROL CHAMBER OF THE SPACESHIP. MUCH LIKE THE COMMAND CENTER OF OTHER SCIENCE FICTION TV SHOWS, THIS ONE HAS FIVE OR SIX MILITARY TYPES WORKING AT HOLOGRAPHIC COMPUTER CONSOLES. THEIR SCREENS AND KEYBOARDS ARE MADE OF ENERGY AND NOT PHYSICAL.]

Character Sketch – Master Sergeant Arnold T. Dupper

The master sergeant is a hard charging Marine. At 50 he's built well if a bit short at 5' 9". He's in a Marine uniform showing lots of awards on his chest. He speaks loudly at all times.

Character Sketch – Captain Arn Sandoll

The Captain is 6' 2" and at 60 he looks much younger without a touch of gray on his full head of hair. He's in a standard Metamorphosis Alpha ship's crew uniform and is sitting confidently in the Captain's chair. He always speaks in a slow, measured voice and never gets angry.

We begin with a view of a star cluster and we pan back to the advanced looking control room with several military types working controls at various panels. Master Sergeant Arnold T. Dupper is arguing with the captain of the Warden. It's Dupper's position that a hard charging Marine shouldn't have to sleep his life away like a frozen Marinesicle. The captain is amused and says, 'fine, I'll distill a few companion androids for you and you can spend the entire twenty years awake and enjoying the good life, while your squad mates sleep their time away. This convinces our Master Sergeant Dupper that he needs to shut up and he huffs away.

During this conversation, we establish that the colonization starship Warden was successfully launched and has been flying ahead of schedule for one year. All systems are green and there are no problems. There are reports about the various levels from androids, robots, and other A. I. of the ship. The captain is pleased and we get a great view of a holographic display of the ship and all 17 of its levels. This display gets used quite a bit during other scenes of the movie.

We are shown a holographic view of the 17 levels of the Warden. There is a clear date stamp in the upper right corner. All the levels are green.

Master Sergeant Dupper – Captain, my men and I don't want to be Marinesicles in those cryo-chambers. I would suggest that we act as a roaming squad to take care of things on the levels of the ship.

Captain – As inviting as that sounds I have a crew of 2,000 for that inspection. Master Sergeant, you and I both have our orders. You will turn around and take your men to the cryo-chambers on level 15. Good day to you sir.

Dupper slumps, knowing there is no arguing with the Captain. He leaves the bridge in a huff.

[Act One, Scene Three]

[THE VIEW IS ON LEVEL 15 OF THE SHIP. WE SEE A LIGHTLY FORESTED AREA WITH A HALF-TRACK MILITARY VEHICLE. THERE ARE FOUR CREW MEMBERS IN THE OPEN-AIR COMPARTMENT AT THE BACK OF THE VEHICLE. THERE IS A .50 CALIBER MACHINE GUN TYPE WEAPON MOUNTED AT THE BACK. THE MARINES ARE GOOFING OFF UNTIL DUPPER GETS BACK]

Character Sketch -- Marine Jenny -- Jenny is an Amazon at six foot six inches. She's very well endowed with a long red braid of hair. She's the explosives expert and carries a grenade launcher and a large variety of grenades. All of these Marines are in work uniforms with chest armor.

Character Sketch -- Marine Allison -- She's five-foot tall, very full figured, a delightful smile is always on her face, and she has very long jet black hair. There is the hint of oriental heritage in her eyes and lips. A martial arts expert and she likes flirting with all of her squad. She's the group sniper and her plasma rifle can pick off targets two miles away. Currently she's looking at the butterfly bush through her telescopic lens.

Character Sketch -- Marine Breck -- Breck is six-foot two inches and muscular. He's very fond of his curly black hair and constantly checks himself out in a mirror. He uses a large bore energy rifle and an old 45 that he is very fond of, but gets teased about because the rifle weapon fires laser energy instead of plasma beams.

Character Sketch -- Marine James -- He's very muscular, but also the most intelligent of the squad. He's constantly spouting facts about this and that. He uses a bazooka type weapon and everyone carries shells for his weapon. He greatly admires Allison and enjoys flirting with her. She flirts back, but does not take action any further than words.

[ALLISON IS AIMING HER LARGE PLASMA SNIPER RIFLE AT THE BUTTERFLY BUSH SEVERAL HUNDRED YARDS AWAY. THE OTHERS ARE LOOKING AT HER EXPECTING HER TO FIRE HER WEAPON. THEY ARE IN A HALF-TRACK TYPE VEHICLE WITH A HUGE MACHINE GUN MOUNTED IN THE BACK OPEN AIR CABIN SECTION.]

Allison – Does the Master Sergeant have a chance in hell of convincing the captain to let us go unfrozen?

She asks this aiming her weapon at a far-off target.

Breck – Not a chance in this or any other world. He is the Master Sergeant, however. Years of experience might count for something.

Jenny – Yeah right, we all know what it counts for; nothing.

James – My dear sniper girl, don't go firing at that Buddleja Davidii Adonis Blue butterfly bush.

Allison – Oh yeah, I do see quite a lot of those butterflies. But there are other bushes they can sit on.

James – That five-foot tall purple blooming bush was flown up here at great expense by the Captain. It seems he likes butterflies. There is a camera in the ceiling devoted to viewing that bush 24/7. I think a plasma bolt taking out the shrubbery would cause a stir, if you get my drift.

Allison – All right, all right, why does everyone take away a girl's fun?

Breck – I believe that is a question some of us are not qualified to answer.

[Act One, Scene Four]

Character Sketch -- *Androids -- Thinker androids are five-feet tall in black robes. They show white flesh on their hands and faces. They don't have noses, ears, eyes, and a mouth. They are electrically powered. They are working in the background of the command module and behind the captain's chair.*

There are three other types of androids. The worker android has no facial features, is 9 feet tall, and tremendously strong. It has very low intelligence. The companion android comes in male or female versions. Each is perfectly proportioned and designed to be pleasing to the members of the opposite human sex. They have delicate facial features with the males square jawed and handsome and the female version lovely with balanced features.

There is a red fleshed type of android that does not mix with the white fleshed types. The red ones have a hidden agenda to destroy all intelligent life on the ship. They are deceptive and evil and come in the same versions as the white fleshed androids.

Character Sketch -- *Main Ship's A.I. (Artificial Intelligence) -- We should hear from this A.I. every time we are in the control room. She has an extremely sexy contralto voice and speaks slowly. This speech pattern is important later. The A.I. is called Faith by the captain.*

[THIS PRESENTS THE COMMAND AND CONTROL CHAMBER AGAIN.]

We get more background information on the condition of the ship and the fact that there is an unusual cloud of space dust between them and their destination. They won't reach it for five years so they send a few probes to collect data. The Artificial Intelligence of the ship makes itself known, we hear the pleasant and sexy female voice, and it talks to its crew. We learn that there are seventeen different A.I.s working various levels of the ship. In the conversations of the command crew, we learn the date, the fact that mankind has come to a dead end in his own solar system and needs a new challenge like the settling of a new planet to

give mankind a good kick in the pants. The captain decides not to go around this cloud because it would take too long.

Captain -- As an ancient cousin of mine once said, damn the torpedoes full speed ahead," the captain's order was followed to the letter.

[LATER ON, AFTER THE RADIATION HAS GOTTEN INTO HER PROGRAMMING, THIS SAME A.I. VOICE IS SHREWISH AND NOT PLEASANT AT ALL TO LISTEN TO FOR ANY LENGTH OF TIME.]

[Act Two, Scene One]

[A SENSE OF A LONG TIME PASSING IS PRESENTED AS DUST APPEARS ON EVERYTHING. THERE COULD BE SEVERAL BROKEN-DOWN ROBOTS AND SEVERAL POOLS OF ANDROID GEL AND ROBES ON THE FLOOR. IT'S THE SAME COMMAND CHAMBER AND THERE ARE EVEN HOLOGRAMS RUNNING AT SOME OF THE STATIONS. THE CAMERA PANS ALL AROUND AND WE SEE SEVERAL ONE-FOOT TALL PILES OF WHITE DUST ON CHAIRS AND ON THE FLOOR. THESE PILES OF DUST ARE THE REMAINS OF HUMANS DESTROYED BY THE ALIEN RADIATION THAT FILLED THE SHIP. WE HAVE TO HAVE SOME SENSE OF TIME; THERE IS A DATE STAMP ON THE COMPUTER SCREENS THAT WE SEE.

THE CAPTAIN OF THE SHIP IS IN A SPACE SUIT IN HIS COMMAND CHAIR. THE CAMERA PANS IN ON HIS VISOR TO SHOW A SKELETON.]

We transition five years and the view screen is now filled with a strange swirling cloud. Alarm klaxons are ringing loudly in the empty control room. The shrewish A.I. computer is demanding help. All there is to see are several piles of white dust on the control seats and the lights and noises of the control room.

The shrewish A. I. gives us some data on what is wrong with the ship. It sounds a great deal like a hysterical woman in its demands and the information it gives.

The camera pans to a hologram of the seventeen levels of the ship projected over a computer terminal. The time stamp shows five years and six months since the last time we saw this image. There are red flashing lights on all of the levels and the hologram shows the ship sticking in a huge asteroid, much larger than the ship. The camera draws closer and closer to the hologram so that we can look onto one level, transitioning the viewer to act two, scene one.

[Act Two, Scene Two]

[WE ARE IN A STORAGE CHAMBER WITH SEVERAL DIFFERENT TYPES OF ROBOTS. THESE ARE TANK-LIKE THINGS WITH TREADS AND CLAW ARMS. AS THE KLAXON RINGS THE LIGHTS ON ONE OF THE UNITS BRIGHTEN AND THE MACHINE STARTS TO MOVE AS IF IT WAS STRETCHING ITSELF AWAKE. THE CAMERA PUSHES IN TO THE TOP OF THE ROBOT AND A DIGITAL READOUT SCREEN. TEXT BEGINS APPEARING ON THE SCREEN.

THE DATE SHOWN WILL SHOW THE VIEWER THAT THE ROBOT WAKES UP AT THE SAME TIME AS WE SAW THE CONTROL ROOM WITH ALL OF THE DAMAGE MARKERS ON THE HOLOGRAM]

We are on level 16 of the Warden and the same disaster Klaxons are ringing away.

Disaster Record Alpha -- Engineering Robot #5

☐ Activation Day 1, 10:00 Warden Starship Time

☐ Engineering Robot #5 reporting

☐ According to emergency Omega protocols this unit awakened to sense unnatural and high intensity radiation filling the storage chamber. The intensity of the radiation prevented communication with other A.I.s. With the supplies at hand, this unit initiated gel radiation cleaning techniques on my surface and the surfaces of the twelve other bots in the chamber. This unit designated itself the Alpha unit and issued emergency Omega protocol instructions to the other bots. Two of the remaining robotic units failed to move as the radiation burnt their primary circuits. This unit has replacement circuit modules so the units were partially fixed and started on their way. Power systems are still in operation. There are enough supplies of decontamination gel to clear 7.54 levels of the starship. Other removal means will have to be found, if the radiation damage proves to be ship wide.

Character Sketch -- Engineering Robot #5

It's a simple robot on treads. It is designed all by itself to fix broken systems on the ship. One can see a wrench, a hammer, and a large maul off the body of the bot.

[WE SEE THE ROBOT TRYING TO FIX ANOTHER ROBOT AND SPARKS FLY AND ZAP THE ENGINEERING ROBOT BACKWARDS, BUT THEN IT GOES BACK IN WITH ITS WIELDER AND BEGINS WORK AGAIN ON THE OTHER ROBOT.]

☐ Day 5, 10:00 Warden Starship Time

☐ Engineering Robot #5 reporting

☐ Radiation has done extensive damage to many of the starship Warden's artificial intelligences. This level has been cleared of radiation, but at great robotic cost. A great deal of unclassified fungus life is growing from the effects of radiation. A white web-shaped fungus has destroyed 37% of the robotic units assigned to this level. Acid is the only known defense against the growths. This unit has ordered more acid tanks created and has created a new program of operation detailing each robotic unit to carry one tank of acid wherever they travel on any level.

[WE SEE A TYPE OF HORTICULTURAL ROBOT WITH RAKES AND HOES AS PART OF ITS SYSTEM. IT'S SPRAYING SOME TYPE OF SIZZLING LIQUID ON A HUGE MASS OF WHITE LICHEN. THE LICHEN IS REACHING OUT FOR THE ROBOT. THE PLANT GROWTH SREAMS WHEN HIT BY THE ACID.]

☐ Day 10, 10:00 Warden Starship Time

☐ *Engineering Robot #5 reporting*

☐ *The starship is being invaded by many alien influences. Radiation has filled every level but one according to the memory banks of other robots I've contacted in my programmed travels on levels ten, eleven, and twelve. Mutated creatures and alien forces are onboard. Few of the emergency Omega protocols are covering the situations met by robotic units now on the ship. New protocols have to be programmed into the systems. Several level-wide artificial intelligences have become filled with viruses and glitches. I must recommend initiating the android creation vats, as the programming of the androids is beyond my operational parameters and capabilities and they should be able to view the problems of the ship with greater intelligence.*

[ENGINEERING ROBOTS ARE WORKING AROUND A HUGE VAT OF WHITE SMOLDERING LIQUID AND OTHERS OF THEIR NUMBER WORK COMPUTERS WITH HOLOGRAPHIC DISPLAYS OF PERFECTLY SHAPED WHITE MALE AND FEMALE ANDROIDS.]

☐ *Day 30, 10:00 Warden Starship Time*

☐ *Engineering Robot #5 reporting*

☐ *There are only 19 robotic units left from the 612 starting force. Each now has a special combat program with a full set of systems for encountering alien life forms. Androids are beginning to coordinate defensive and attack strategies. This unit has created three sets of offensive weapon systems quite suitable for aggression versus the alien life forms. The most successful of these has been designated Combat Program Alpha. Acid has proven to be a highly effective defensive and offensive weapon. All systems using the primary ship's elevator commonly begin entering a level by ejecting gallons of acid out of the lift as the doors open. Several levels are ruined for robotic observation as these levels are totally controlled by alien life forms. There are enough level A.I.s that have been repaired to begin creating new programs for ship survival. All of the human combat troops in cryogenic suspension have been secured in the resort on level fifteen and the chambers have been placed under guard by android and robotic units. That level has been totally secured and the alien influence has been totally eliminated from that level.*

[Act Two, Scene Two]

[ALIEN TRANSITION SCENE TAKES PLACE IN THE CONTROL ROOM OF THE SHIP. BURSTING OUT OF THE LARGE ELEVATOR ARE A BATCH OF SEVERAL DIFFERENT TYPES OF ALIENS.]

Character Sketch -- Alien #1

This is the Id. It's a massive amoeboid type of creature always on the back of some being from gorillas to humans.

Character Sketch -- ALIEN #2

This is a humanoid made of rocks. It's 9-12 feet tall.

Character Sketch -- ALIEN #3

This is a floating glowing crystal. Rays of light shoot out from its surface. As it talks it pulses with light.

[THE ALIENS ARE CLEARLY TRYING TO TAKE OVER THE CONTROL CHAMBER. THEY ARE BLASTED TO PIECES BY LASER AND PLASMA EMPLACEMENTS ALL ABOUT THE CHAMBER. A VERY SATISFIED A.I. SAYS, "Take that!"]

The purpose of the scene is to show that three different and highly intelligent alien races are going to cause a lot of trouble for humans and others on the ship.

[Act Two, Scene Three]

[THE LABORATORY IS A FUTURISTIC PLACE FILLED WITH HOLOGRAMS AND CRYSTALS. COMPUTER HOLOGRAMS OF PERFECT WHITE BODIED MALES AND FEMALES ARE ON SCREENS ON THE WALLS. THOSE SAME ANDROIDS STAND BESIDE THE HOLOGRAPHIC COMPUTER SCREENS AS THEY HAVE BEEN BUILT.

OUT OF THE ANDROID CREATION VAT COMES PERFECTION IN A FULL-FIGURED FEMALE ANDROID. WE SEE IT SPLASH OUT OF THE VAT AND AT FIRST, IT SEEMS TO BE A WOMAN COMING OUT OF MILK. SHE IS A COMPANION ROBOT, FACELESS, BUT PERFECTLY FORMED.

[In making the character, I'm imagining a woman painted in white latex with a white silk cowl tightly over her face showing her features, but making her faceless. In the far future, these companion androids are babysitters, dates for lonely males, and servants where a female touch is desired. The few remaining robots have turned on the manufacturing vats to gain new and smarter allies in their fight against the growing alien menace.]

We see her come out of the vat and she is supposed to put on a sexy robe, the normal dress for male and female companion units. She rejects this and puts on combat armor and holsters several pistols and attaches grenades. She knows how to dress for her mission. We learn that she entered the vat to repair the damage from combat with the aliens.

We see her making a report to a master computer and in that report, we see scenes of what she has done in the struggle against the aliens.

Character sketch – Female Android Companion

She's a creation with a perfect body and a sexy voice. She's designed to be especially appealing to human males. She has white flesh and a mask that shows facial features, but they aren't painted in yet. She is an efficient fighting humanoid with a protect-humans-at-all-cost programming.

Disaster Record Epsilon: Female Companion Unit #5

Female Companion Unit #5 making a cyclic report:

I'm a female companion unit, fifth from the vat in this creation cycle. There are currently no humans available to give me a proper name. I have been stationed on resort level 15 with the main cryogenic facility. I've been given extensive combat program training and I'm equipped with ten sophisticated weapons systems. I'm also trained in the use of all types of force field generators. The other androids in my vat clutch all believe that it will be necessary to revive the human combat troops, I'm not so sure. Steps are going to be set up to quick-thaw the humans if the time comes to use their knowledge to stop the alien menace.

As I review my programming, my circuits grow alarmed at the new alien life that has entered the ship and threatens to extend its power on every level. Only the hardiest of the ship's animals survived the radiation poisoning months ago. Many of these are now being taken over and controlled by a strange fungus life form designated the 'Id'. These creatures use the powers and abilities of the animals they use as hosts in a more intelligent manner than the original creature. Although most of the levels are scrubbed clean of the radiation there are strange new mutant creatures attacking robotic systems and android systems alike. A deadly self-generating crystal can now be seen on many levels. The surface of the crystal sticks to metal and flesh of all types. The adhesive properties are so strong that it requires the ripping of the metal or flesh to remove the crystal contact.

One of the alien life forms has been identified as a rock-shaped humanoid creature. The assemblage of boulders and stones moves quickly and with intelligence. Only the most concussive of weapons has any effect on them. Many working androids have tried hand-to-hand combat with the creatures with disastrous results. Ship A.I.s combined with computer androids have captured two of the rock aliens for study. So far, few results have been generated, as the rocky parts seem to be just that, simple minerals.

Although I can't feel pity, if I could I would feel it for the thousands of robots that have been destroyed decontaminating the radiated areas of the ship. A spectacular and energetic white-webbed fungus is able to drain the energy of robotic systems and destroy robots from the inside out. Another fungi type grows massively muscled tentacles with eyestalks at their ends. The tentacles are able to crush any robotic part that comes near. Fungi spores of both of these types are constantly swept from the air by purifiers on each level. The grenades and missile systems I command have proven effective versus these alien life forms.

I've taken the initiative to begin preparing a briefing video for the human combat troopers that will soon be revived. I feel certain that this step will be necessary. I have also ordered a large assembly of weapons to be racked in the supply room. It's against standard protocols, but these are turbulent times in my humble cyclotronic opinion.

[Act Two, Scene Four]

[THE SCENE BEGINS AS A CRYOCHAMBER OPENS UP TO THE FROZEN SERGEANT DUPPER IN HIS UNDERWEAR. THERE ARE HUNDREDS OF THE TUBES IN THE AREA AND EACH ONE HAS AN ANDROID OR ROBOT OPENING IT UP TO UNFREEZE HUMANS]

Think of cryogenic tubes as big freezers with windows showing the body they each store. As Master Sergeant Dupper is revived by the android of scene two, he wakes up angry and confused and in the background, we see his squad of male and female Marines getting revived as well. Female companion androids are not supposed to be dressed in combat gear, notes Dupper. This feature is a true surprise to the master sergeant. He moves about the area

making sure his troops are all right while collecting information about the problems within the ship. The female android takes him to a computer with a hologram ship display floating in the air above the screen. There are red areas on every level. We can also see the ship is part way in a huge asteroid. She tells him about the ship and the alien asteroid connected to several parts of the ship's hull.

The master sergeant becomes more and more surprised as he discovers the cluster 'F' that he and his troops find themselves in. He is the highest-ranking officer. He gets a big surprise when he sees the engineering robot, turned into a combat robot showing more intelligence than any former engineering robot should show. He gets an even bigger surprise when he's introduced to Rowal and Rawol, two wolfoids. He is told that there are a lot of intelligent new species on the ship and these wolfoids (upright walking wolves) are proving the most intelligent of all of the mutants. The wolfoid pack has banded together and is helping the androids fight the aliens. It's been two years since the Warden hit the asteroid and little progress has been made in turning on the engines and getting the ship away from the entrapping asteroid.

Character Sketch – Wolfoid Characters

These creatures are mutated wolves that have prospered on the ship. The wolfoids have their own agenda that we don't see in this product. While they sneer at humans and their many weaknesses they hate the aliens even more. Although they are powerful fighters, there is a wildness about them that would suggest they could easily eat humans if given the chance.

[DUPPER IS WRITING UP A REPORT AND DURING THAT REPORT, WE SEE SCENES OF HIM GETTING HIS MARINES READY AND GOING INTO COMBAT AGAINST THE ALIENS. FROM HERE WE TRANSITION INTO THE MIDDLE AND END OF THE MOVIE WHERE DUPPER KICKS ALIEN ASS AND FORCES THEM OUT OF THE STARSHIP WARDEN.]

Disaster Record Gamma: Master Sergeant Dupper

Master Sergeant Arnold T. Dupper serial number 5526788755 reporting as commanded.

Most of the troops in cryo-suspension cannot be revived at the present time. My men and I have been thrown into a freaking cluster situation of outrageous proportions. All of my lieutenants, captains, majors, and generals are laying in their cryo-chambers drooling out of the sides of their mouths for real instead of by accident. How in Sam Hill all of this happened, I have no idea. I've ordered no more male android companions to be created and creation of the more versatile female androids to be stepped up.

I'm looking at a rack of weapons that droids have put together and I'm told a pistol from this rack will turn to dust after five shots because the scientists of the ship thought that would be ecologically sound. If they weren't piles of white dust all over this thrice-blasted death ship, I'd show them what I think of a five-shot, useless, twice-damned pistol. Lucky I know where the cache of hidden military hardware from Earth is stored. We are also lucky in that our half-track still works fine and it's loaded for bear with the weapons we will initially need. I'm told

all I have to do is get past some giant aliens made from boulders to get to that hidden cache. I have no problem with that. Let's see what a little C99 up the crack of its behind does to turn alien boulders into gravel.

Everyone who is able has been cracked out of the ice tubes and I'm the highest ranker. Ridiculous androids and really scary armed robots, having no reason to be armed, are trying to guard this resort on level 15 and this level against invasion. It's a pathetic display and I am amazed our frozen chambers have been unchallenged for so long. I'm ordering the mentally disabled people in the tubes to be reconditioned or put back on ice until we can fix 'em, but I don't hold out much hope for them. We are going to recon a few levels and take a little look-see. I'm told there's a factory level that can make equipment for me. Let's see what happens when a few M-99 automated tanks roll off that line and let loose some Whoop-Ass. Let's see what happens when a mess of X-69 flying attack drones moves out on search and destroy missions.

So, from my way of thinking, I'm going to send some useless droids and robots out on every level to get some Intel. I'm going to get my men some grub and some serious hardware, and then we are going to kick some alien butt. I'm going to teach some alien scum that there's nothing meaner than a ticked off Marine Corps Master Sergeant who's just come out of cryo-suspension and found aliens taking liberties with his ship. Life in the Corps is good and it's going to get lots better!

[Act Three, Scene One]

[IN THIS SCENE, WE BEGIN WITH DUPPER TAKING CONTROL. WE ARE IN ANOTHER TYPE OF MILITARY COMMAND CENTER WITH LOTS OF MILITARY EQUIPMENT AROUND. THE FAMILIAR HOLOGRAM OF THE SHIP WITH FEWER FLASHING LIGHTS IS ON A COMPUTER TERMINAL IN FRONT OF HIM. THERE IS THE BUSTLE OF ANDROIDS, ROBOTS, AND HIS FOUR MARINES IN CONSTANT MOTION BEHIND HIM.]

He needs more information about the aliens and what they are doing.

Dupper has no regard for the robots or the androids. He sends them out on scouting missions. We see both groups getting attacked by unusual aliens. Both are attacked by Ids but the aliens can't grab robots or androids even though they try.

Aliens are sending puffball crystals to scout out Dupper's area.

During this scene, we discover that Dupper doesn't like the wolfoids at all. He doesn't trust them and doesn't want them around. He gives them dangerous assignments and the wolfoids happily go and accomplish every task given them.

Dupper, our female android, and the engineering robot go out to see where the puffball crystals are coming from. In this scene, Dupper is attacked by a lunging Id creature that the robot grabs out of the air. The alien flails about scaring the heck out of Dupper who blasts it with his ray weapon. The android tells Dupper how he just avoided being taken over.

They discover a large crack in the ships hull and a rock alien is standing in the crack making it wider. Dupper charges in and attacks. During the battle, he and his group don't seem to do much to the rock creature. Finally, Dupper places several grenades up the rock's body and blows it away. He's unusually satisfied with the effort when ten more rock aliens come charging through. He retreats.

[THE SCENE TRANSITIONS TO OUR FOUR SQUAD MEMBERS IN THEIR HALF-TRACK IN A MUCH MORE WOODED AREA.]

Jenny – We are not in Kansas any more are we?

Allison – She is looking into her scope at the purple trees where the butterfly bush was before. You can say that again. James, how long would it take for a single purple bush to turn into ten foot tall tree?

James – Bushes don't usually become trees. If I had to guess I would say at least five or more years with constant fertilization. Why do you ask?

Breck – Look for yourself dude. Suddenly the Captain's single butterfly bush is a grove of .
..

Out of the trees comes a T-Rex roaring at the group and charging forward. The four of them, without hesitation lay their weapons at the creature and fire. The lasers just bounce off the T-Rex, but Allison's sniper rifle punches a huge plasma hole through its chest and it falls dead.

Allison – I do not recall a laser resistant Tyrannosaurus Rex on the ship's creature manifest. Does anyone else remember differently?

James – The biggest reptile on the list was a boa constrictor. There were no two-legged raptors on that list.

Breck – Well there is now.

Jenny – We have to report this to the Master Sergeant, stat.

Allison – I don't have a problem with that. Jenny, why don't you put your butt in the driver's chair and get us to headquarters.

[Act Three, Scene Two]

[ON A SANDY BEACH, DUPPER PREPARES ANDROIDS, ROBOTS, AND HIS MARINES FOR AN ALL-OUT ASSAULT. HE'S GOING TO ATTACK ONE OF TWO HOLES WHERE THE ALIENS ARE COMING IN. THERE ARE HEAVY WEAPONS ON SCI-FI HOVERCRAFT AND THE ENTIRE SCENE SHOWS THAT DUPPER MEANS BUSINESS.]

We learn in this scene that there are two entry points for the asteroid aliens and Dupper plans on attacking them one at a time. He also wants to gain control of the command chamber of the starship but hears from the robots and the androids that they have mounted massive attacks on the control room and not one of them has returned from those battles. Dupper is determined to do better.

He's going to personally lead the attack on the control room while the main force attacks the first of the two entry points. Dupper leads his troops into battle. As Dupper, knowing what

the chamber was like centuries ago, he uses his black military color band to great effect so that the defensive systems of the chamber do not blast his troops to ash. He succeeds outrageously in securing the command center and placing his androids and robots in control. The main ship's A.I. starts out hysterical and calms down to its proper self after Dupper initiates a repair code of Omega 7777.

The forces attacking the holes are soundly defeated and thrown back as huge fungi tanks come out of the holes shooting blue rays of energy. Dupper seeing these battle losses says, "There's more than one way to skin an alien feline."

[Act Three, Scene Three]

[DUPPER AND HIS SQUAD ARE DRIVING THE HALF-TRACK ONTO THE SHIP'S HUGE MAIN ELEVATOR. THEY USE THEIR BLACK MILITARY ARM BANDS TO TAKE THEM TO LEVEL 7. THEY ARE IN ARMORED UP MILITARY UNIFORMS WITH OPEN FACE VISORS ON THEIR HEADS. THEY ALL LOOK VERY DEADLY. THE ELEVATOR DOOR OPENS TO A SNOWY BLIZZARD.]

Dupper -- Snow! This is a farming level. There isn't supposed to be snow here.

[A BLIZZARD OF SNOW IS BLOWING INTO THE ELEVATOR AND ONTO THE HALF-TRACK. THE GROUP PUTS ON CAMO-PANCHOS THAT HAVE HEATING UNITS. JAMES HOLDS OUT A GLOVED HANDFUL OF SNOW.]

James -- I believe the level is violently disagreeing with you Master Sergeant.

Dupper -- Breck, man the XM-laser cannon. Blast anything that gets in our way. We have 17 miles due east to go till we find the battleship portal. Devildogs! Prepare to repel boarders.

[THE OTHER THREE RAISE THEIR WEAPONS AND BEGIN TRACKING IN EACH DIRECTION AS DUPPER DRIVES THE VEHICLE INTO THE THICK SNOW. LASER BEAMS COME FROM EACH OF THE FOUR WEAPONS, ALL POINT IN VARIOUS DIRECTIONS.]

[Act Three, Scene Four]

[THE HALF-TRACK STOPS IN FRONT OF A DEADLY LOOKING TANK ROBOT. THE ROBOT IS CLEARLY GUARDING A LARGE PORTAL. IT BEGINS SPEAKING IN A ROBOTIC VOICE.]

Character Sketch -- *Military Long-Range Security Droid* – This heavy unit is a combat device designed to soak up punishment and deal out death in all directions. It is a ten feet cube, floating on anti-grav pods at 50 miles an hour. Its senses act in 360 degrees and are three times as good as a human's. It notes radiation and senses in the infra-red spectrum. It can communicate back with the main base to acquire new targets. Its attack is a high caliber blast canon doing damage in a direct line from the barrel with a short range of

300 yards.

Robot – Leave this area immediately or you will be destroyed.

Dupper – Like hell we will. My name is Master Sergeant Dupper and we are going past you on an urgent matter, dealing with the Omega emergency protocol.

Robot – I am here to make sure you don't pass. You have 60 seconds to leave.

[Four targeting laser beams converge on the chest of the robot. It is aware of them.]

Robot – You have ten seconds to leave.

Dupper – Well that's not happening. You have less than that before my people turn you into scrap.

[click – click – click – click – click – click – click – click – click – click – click]

Allison – What in hell is that clicking sound?

Dupper laughing – That my excellent sniper is a heavenly sound. What is happening right now is that the robot's PS82 heavy electric machine rifle system is clicking on an empty magazine. In short, this robot has no fangs. Robot, you have a choice. We can destroy you or you can move aside. You have ten seconds to decide.

The robot moves to the side. The portal opens and the half-track drives through. The four squad members waved to the robot, laughing at their faux near-death experience.

Out of the snow, they are in a long corridor. They drive up to another portal and all of them get out. They take off their ponchos.

Dupper – Stay frosty. If I was an alien I would have infiltrated these military spaceships. Blast first and ask questions later. Never fire so that a miss ruptures the hull and ejects us all into space. Are we clear?

The Four of them in unison – We are clear Master Sergeant!

[Act Three, Scene Five]

[THE PORTAL OPENS ONTO A MILITARY WARSHIP. THE LIGHTS COME ON. ALL OF THE ACTORS ARE ARMED AND LOOKING IN ALL DIRECTIONS READY TO FIRE]

Character Sketch – Nics (Navy Intelligent Computer System)

It is an obviously male voice of an A.I. computer. It is very helpful and fully capable of helping Dupper with his plans to fire the main guns of the battleship.

Dupper – Computer are you up and awake?

A.I. – My designation is Navy Intelligent Computer System or Nics for short Master Sergeant Dupper. How may I help you?

Dupper – I'm taking over control of this battleship in accordance with the Omega emergency protocol. My squad all become rated officers on this vessel able to take over any control system. Do you have a problem with any of that Nics?

A.I. – No Captain Dupper. The Omega protocol is understood. What would you like done first?

Dupper – We will be going to the command and control chamber. Fire up your power systems and do a quick check of all of your military hardware. We are about to fire off some shots at some bad guys.

A.I. – Understood Captain, executing ship wide power systems with safety checks on all the military arsenal.

[The squad and Dupper go to a much smaller command center than the Warden's. They take chairs at command consoles and fire up the holographic computers. Dupper lands in the Captains chair.]

Dupper – Allison you man the main plasma deck canons. Do a status check and tell me how soon they can fire at the asteroid.

A.I. detach the battleship from the Warden and retreat one mile from the colony ship and maintain speed and distance.

A.I. – Aye, Aye Captain. Initiating drive systems. Military units are at 97%. Did you know it has been five years and six months since my systems were used?

Dupper – Yes, yes Nics but we don't care about that now. Rig for firing all systems.

Jenny, you take control of the laser secondary systems.

Breck you have the missile systems. I want all of those programmed to circle around the asteroid and explode on the back of it.

James, fire up some naval drones and give us views of the back, bottom, and sides of that asteroid. As the missiles hit, I want your drones to fire their hardware as well.

[The four of them give resounding Aye, Ayes and get to work.]

Breck – Missiles away. They will strike the back of the asteroid in ten different places in four minutes. Nics initiate a four-minute count down.

Allison – Plasma Cannons are ready to fire!

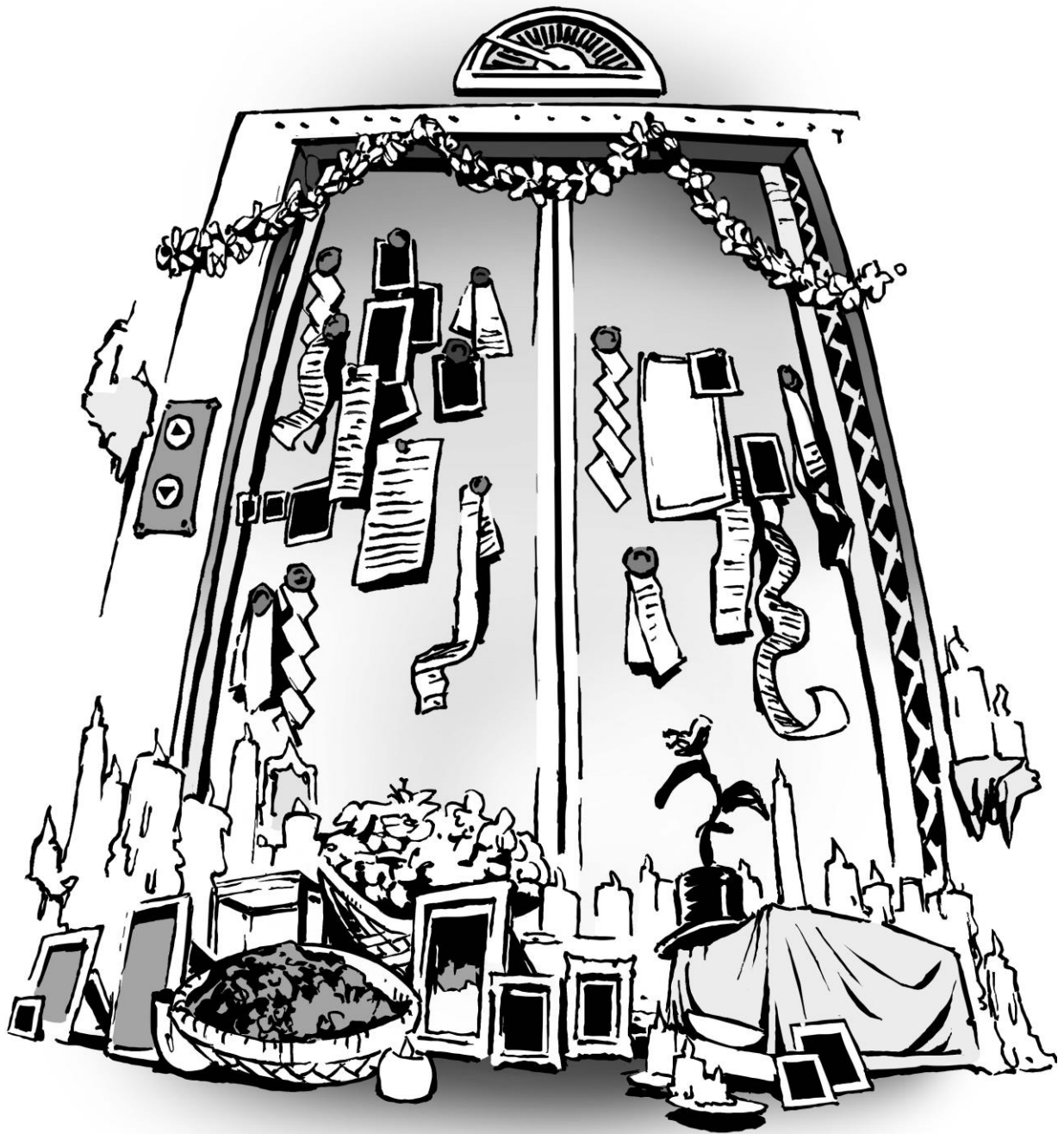
Jenny – Laser Cannons are ready to fire!

James – Drones are ready to fire!

[Blue and Green beams strike the asteroid and push it off the Warden. Explosions happen on the sides and bottom of the asteroid. The missiles blast the asteroid to gravel.]

Dupper – Gotcha, you alien bastards. Next time, come knocking before you take on the Warden's Marines. Now let's get our ship back on course.

[The four of them give resounding Aye, Ayes and get to work.]



The Robot Theon's Story

By James M. Ward

The colonization starship *Warden* was the largest and most advanced creation mankind ever designed. It's 17 levels and 16 sublevels were loaded with lifeforms from all over the solar system. It was fifty miles long, fifteen miles wide, and twenty miles tall. Fifty thousand crew members loaded 100,000 colonists, animals, and plants on board, since the ship was destined to settle another Earth-like planet and seed it with the best of mankind's worlds. The trip for the colonization starship was to take twenty years at just a bit over lightspeed. For five years, the vessel sailed through outer space from the Transplutonian shipyards with all-green computer boards and months ahead of schedule.

Captain James Tiberius Ward was at the helm when a peculiar gas cloud was detected in the distance. The cloud was huge, and it would take several years to go around it, even at lightspeed.

“Alpha computer, scan the gas cloud ahead for potential danger to the ship. Determine why scans from our solar system didn't pick this thing up. Give me estimates on how long it would take to just barge our way through its center and how long it would take to go far around it. Spool that data to my command chair.”

“Yes, Captain. Calculations will be complete in four hours and twelve minutes,” the Alpha artificial intelligence said.

All the while, Captain Ward scanned his boards. He liked what he saw from the data feeds. Each level showed all systems in the green. The flora and fauna on the habitat levels were flourishing. All breeding programs were producing successful progeny. He activated his starship forcefields to full just to test the system. The captain called up the data on the forcefields and what they could and couldn't do. He ordered all field generators to run diagnostics. It wouldn't do to have any of those systems shut down due to poor maintenance. All cryo-sleep animal tubes reported green results.

He ordered engineering robots and crew out onto the hull to check systems there and increase the sensing potential of the ship systems. That would take weeks to accomplish as there was a lot of hull to check over. As an afterthought, he ordered new engineering robots to begin moving about the outer hull on a constant basis. He wondered about the originators of the ship, didn't think of that before. He called up the cryo-sleep chamber systems for the colonists and crew. Two-thirds of the ship's crew and all of the colonists were in cryo-sleep. He unfroze and restored 600 more crew and the other two captains just in case that cloud was trouble. He rejected the idea of unfreezing the small military contingent.

Nanobots were issued orders to make highly complex data probes, and those probes were fired ahead of the ship and into the cloud.

Six months passed, and the ship was as ready as it could be to advance into an unknown cloud formation, because the three captains all agreed the starship should go through the cloud and not around it. Careful telescope study of the interior of the cloud revealed little to be worried about. Logic dictated that a cloud of anything could not harm the duralloy outer hull of the colonization starship. The only problem was the data probes stopped transmitting information as they entered it. Those probes could be seen floating unhindered through the cloud, but they sent back zero data packages.

A month later, Captain Ward was sitting at the helm. He wore his nano-spacesuit because he planned on going outside to the hull of the ship the moment the *Warden* entered the gas cloud. He was not happy with the state of affairs. All of his data boards were green and at 100%. Important centers all over the ship were manned by crew members and engineering robots.

Captain Ward was very uneasy. The hairs on the back of his neck were rising the closer the colonization starship came to the cloud. At the last minute, the captain gave orders to turn the ship.

“Damn it anyway, I just don't want to go into that...”

It was too late. The cloud reached out on its own and enveloped the *Warden* in radiation fields no earthman had ever encountered before. Many intensities of radiation poured past the powerful forcefields surrounding the starship and through the outer shell of the ship, settling into random places on all levels. Fragile computer programs designed to keep the ship on course failed. The massive engines started firing at an angle, and the *Warden* rocketed far off course. All the artificial intelligences on the 17 primary levels went insane.

In heartbeats, most of the humans on board the ship turned into white piles of calcium as they were exposed to previously unknown forms of radiation. Even those in cryo-sleep turned into piles of whiteness or mutated. Computer systems were destroyed all over the ship. Eerie space seeds passed through the duralloy plating of the ship and planted themselves in the fertile soil of several of the ship levels. Those Earth creatures on the land, in the air, and in the water of the starship that weren't transformed into piles of calcium were radically mutated. Many of those mutants would breed true and create ultra-intelligent races on the many ship levels. Pools of radiation were everywhere, and these did terrible harm to the computer systems, wildlife, and robots of the ship.

T.H.E.O.N. (Technical Housekeeping & Engineering Operating Nanobot) was a new ultra-modern design of both an engineering robot and a housekeeping mechanical. A number of this design had come fresh off the design fabricators on Pluto and been loaded on this ship. This unit activated when alarm klaxons rang out in its area. It reviewed its physical and program systems.

(HD 10, PH 50, AC 15, MV 96 kph Experience Points: 405
[Prime=Mental] arc lighting attack, WC 4)

Designed with many tools stored in its body, this robot has digital schematics and programming that allows it to repair most devices on the ship. It has: semi-independent action circuits, broadcast power cells, an extra power cell for 24 hours of independent operation, telescopic and microscopic lenses, lenses for infrared and ultraviolet sensing, 2 rotating light sources, 3 tentacle manipulators, 2 power grasping claws, tool handling tentacles, 96 kph drive system, and communication systems allowing it to talk with both the ship's A.I. and humans.

This 5' tall and wide humanoid robot has extra arm-like appendages. The functioning unit always has: recharging unit, 2 manipulative tentacles extending up to 24', heavy duty power grasping claw able to extend up to 10', 1 micro-miniature manipulator able to make microscopic adjustments, light tractor and repulsion beam attachments with a range of 25', magnifying lenses with a 50 power range, upper and lower light sensors extending through the infrared and ultraviolet range, anti-grav system making up to 200 pounds featherlight, two sets of parallel programming circuits, light body armor allowing the unit to function in water, outer space, and in temperatures ranging from plus or minus 150 degrees Centigrade, audio and radio transmitters and pickups effective up to 60 km away, 3 rotating light sources with a variance of 90 candlepower each, human standard sensing capability, and variable programming allowing it to adapt and carry out human instructions.

Noting its systems were at 110 percent efficiency, the unit started accepting data from the starship level's artificial intelligence for level three. Quickly, it pulled itself out of its packing crate and noted its surroundings. The area was filled with equipment and the unit noted it could use all of the devices in the area. The T.H.E.O.N. Unit activated its color tentacle and scanned through the colors from red to gray to black.

Much like stretching, the unit briefly activated each of its systems. Tentacles extended and retracted. Illumination systems turned on and off. Sensors all activated and tested at 110 percent. The reads functioned, but the unit was in a chamber and couldn't test its full speed potential. The postronic brain had warmed up and was operating satisfactorily. The unit judged itself ready to perform any needed task.

*The T.H.E.O.N. Unit was the ultimate robotic creation of mankind. With engineering and housekeeping systems, the unit was literally capable of performing millions of actions. This unit was programmed with the schematics of the starship *Warden*. Of all the robots on the starship, this unit was the most advanced and capable of performing without human supervision.*

*Transmitted codes from the starship level A.I. were confusing, as the postronic brain of the robot received data. Several emergency codes detailed the absence of humans, which was impossible on a starship. Power systems were reported failing all over the level. Considering the safety protocols of the *Warden*, the unit was having a hard time believing the data being sent to its systems. One set of codes detailed escaped children running around the ship level while another code ordered the nanobot to begin decontamination procedures as there was a radiation emergency. The nanobot went to the storage chute and ordered an industrial-sized canister of radioactive neutralizer. The heavy tank fell into its tentacle limbs, and the robot affixed it to a sprayer unit and went looking for radiation down the wide ship's corridors.*

The ship's level was a swirling mass of confusion. Many more data packages told of impossible problems with equipment and crew on the many levels of the ship. If those data packages could be believed, it would take literal centuries to fix all the problems. Robots were racing all over the area. Camels from the desert level stampeded down the corridor. For a mile in one direction, piles of creatures were dead in the passageway with their flesh bubbling from the levels of toxic radiation they had been exposed to.

The T.H.E.O.N. could sense the extreme intensities of radiation ahead. It took its neutralizer and started spraying. Hundreds of years ago, mankind had designed a special foam spray that coupled with the dangerous protons of any radiation and neutralized the deadly factors and rendered the radiation inert. The robot did a great job of clearing out the large pocket of radiation in the wide corridor. It only made one costly mistake. It failed to look up the ninety yards to the ceiling. As its sensors scanned the area and determined there was no more danger of radiation within 75 yards, sections of the radiated ceiling fell on the robot.

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZt

Its postronic brain bubbled in the blast of radiated energy. Its tentacles sprayed the debris, but it was too little, too late. Memory and programming chips melted. The robot's repair nano-systems rebooted the unit and rebuilt what they could. As the robot reactivated, it was much changed.

Theon started moving down the corridor on his treads. The tank of neutralizer was long forgotten. He went to the main ship's elevator doors and activated the door with his specially-designed, colorful tentacle. The doors opened, and Theon looked at the control board on the inside of the elevator. He was on the third ship's level. There were 16 other choices.

Theon was confused. He had no idea where to go or what to do. He searched his destroyed memory for clues on what he'd done in the past. He received little data. He was positive that he needed to do something. If he could only remember what that was, he would be very happy. So far, he wasn't pleased.

The now-mutated robot knew where the command and control deck was located on the tenth level. Its colorful tentacle pressed against the tenth color band down from the top. The doors closed, and Theon felt a slight movement. Mechanical heartbeats later, the doors opened.

Four huge black wolves rushed into the elevator and crashed Theon to the floor with their heavy bodies. Their giant fangs clamped on to parts of Theon's metal body and started tearing away at those parts like the wolves had done this before. The Theon unit calculated that in two minutes, it would be torn to pieces.

Theon quickly calculated what it could do with the tentacles and abilities it had on its action menu. The robot's tentacle snapped out and broke the foreleg of the first wolf. It howled in pain and leaped up on just its hind legs. The wolf jumped back out of the way of the tentacles. It started bouncing on its back legs and backed out of the elevator.

Three tentacle snaps later, the front legs of all the wolves were broken and they released Theon. The deadly creatures didn't run away. Theon could see their gazes estimating what they could do to the robot. They were all bouncing on their back legs. The creatures stood at least nine feet tall. The monster-sized wolves started moving in front of Theon as if they couldn't decide if they should be attacking or limping away.

Theon launched an arc of electricity at the closest wolf. The blast of power bounced off the fur of the wolf and struck the floor with huge sparks. The monstrous creature wasn't hurt at all by the high-energy blast. The fur on the mutant wolf must have had some type of insulating property. The stunned look on the creatures' faces told Theon it was surprised and intelligent. Theon displaying that new ability was all it took for the wolfoids to realize they didn't want to be there. The creatures rushed away on their hind legs, howling in pain and shock.

A nano-app checked over Theon's metal body and internal systems. Two of his programming systems were damaged and would take 97 hours to repair. Dents in its body could be ignored. The much-changed nano-app ignored the vast programming changes and melted boards as the normal condition of the Theon unit.

Theon didn't like the mutant wolfoids resisting its electric arcs. Theon calculated the monsters had to be mutants because they were so large and resistant to Theon's attack with electricity. It had a choice after the battle, and it wasn't sure again what to do. It could go to the police installation on this level to pick up a powerful slug thrower. Theon also wanted to go to the command installation to see what was happening all over the ship. Theon randomized the two choices with the police being a "o" and the command installation as an "X." He let the random numbers scroll through his menu systems for 60 seconds and came up with a "o."

"The police station it is," Theon beeped to himself. His treads moved quickly down corridor after corridor until he came to a mass of golden fungus. Theon didn't have the slightest idea what it was or what to do about it. The Theon unit knew it had to go down this corridor to reach his destination. He just tried to push his way past the mass. As his treads touched the yellow fungus, all the power in his fusion generator was sucked away into the mass. The fungi grew ten feet longer and wider and gained new survival instincts. Theon went to sleep covered in a mass of yellow fungi. Every ten days, the active repair-nanos tried to activate Theon. As its fusion power generator started up, the yellow mass absorbed the energy and Theon went to sleep again.

For 111 years, Theon slept in the middle of the golden fungus. The mutated yellow mass doubled in size every decade. The fungus fed on broadcast energy from the ship systems. Slowly, the area around the fungus went dark as more and more energy was fed into it.

One day, an anti-fungus spray arced out and caused the massive yellow fungi to turn to dust. Theon was revealed under the yellow mass. The much-modified H.O.R.M.O.R.— Horticultural Orchard Robot Modified for Online Repair—set down its fungi sprayer and used its highly-specialized sensors to determine what was wrong with the robot in front of it. Sensors determined that the robot's power system was depleted. The Horticultural Orchard Robot Modified for Online Repair sent a power surge into the unmoving robot. The unit started right up as its battery accepted a charge again.

Theon received a detailed data dump on the robot in front of him as his tentacles reached out and started repairing the robot.

Horticultural Orchard Robot Modified for Online Repair

(HD 10, HP 50, AC 15, MV 96 kph [flight] E

[Prime=Physical] no attacks)

This 10' tall 3' wide disk-shaped, floating robot has many tools stored in its body to deal with domestic plants. It holds the following: semi-independent action circuits, broadcast power cells, extra power cell for 24 hours of independent operation, telescopic and microscopic lenses, lenses for infrared and ultraviolet sensing, 2 rotating light sources, 1 tentacle manipulator, 1 power grasping claw, tool handling tentacles, 96 kph drive system, communication systems allowing it to talk with the ship's A.I. and managing humans. It has no attack and isn't programmed to do damage to humanoids. It has the following garden tool attachments: soil analysis sensors, herbicide sprayer with 100 applications of plant poison [Intensity 18], sprayers that can be filled with anti-radiation chemicals to remove radiation from ship areas, insecticide sprayer with 50 applications of insect poison [Intensity 18], and mower attachment inflicting 20 damage to plants. The unit will take verbal orders from any being with a green Warden wristband.

Theon reached out and used its repair apps to fix the robot in front of it. The unit became Hormor, and he went down the corridor with the subroutine to change the other robots Hormor knew were in a chamber to the south of this level.

Theon continued to travel to the police installation as if 111 years hadn't passed. Time meant little to the much-changed robot as long as its nano-systems could repair failing systems due to age.

The police station was in ruins. The doors were torn off the front entrance. There were slug holes in the walls as well as evidence of laser blasts. Theon entered, very worried about what he might find. Everything was tossed and wrecked in the front office. Going further into the building, there were rows of cells and some of them had large skeletons of things Theon couldn't identify. The back offices were also in ruins.

In a back corridor floated a much-damaged security robot. Theon just knew this entity could be a lot of trouble. He slowly approached the unit and extended his analysis tentacle. "Steady, old fella. I mean you no harm. I'm here to open up the armory."

Theon called up a detailed data list on the security robot.

Robot, Security

(HD 10, HP 60, AC 15, MV 50' [flying] Experience Points:405

[Prime=Physical] 4 13'-long tentacle attacks that cause 1-hour paralysis upon touch, WC 3, or poison [Intensity 17] knockout gas in a 30' diameter circle, WC 4.)

This 9'-tall spherical robot is equipped with visual sensors with a 6-mile range, sound receptors capable of picking up sounds of 1db up to 295' away, a gas pellet projector which shoots 10 knockout gas rounds in a 360° spread with [4] 20-pellet

magazines, an anti-grav propulsion unit, 50 point forcefield, 2 third-stage slug projectors [one attack inflicting 6d6 damage, WC 5, range 150'] usable only on a human's authority, a radio capable of broadcasting to any point on a given deck, 3 padded restraint tentacles, and lenses that adapt its visual capabilities to the infrared and ultraviolet spectrum. Miscreants captured by these robots are generally taken to a secure area. (See Deck #9).

Sparkling tentacles flew out of the security unit. "Passage in this area is forbidden. Leave this area or suffer dire consequences."

The tip of Theon's sensing tentacle touched the antenna on the security unit. Theon's app changed the programming of the security unit. Theon fixed all the systems his nanos could fix. He ordered the Steve unit to go find an engineering robot and get himself completely fixed. Steve left to do what he was told. Steve's systems swept the area looking for more robots to reprogram.

The Theon unit went into the armory area. Theon was pleased to see the armory hatch wasn't open. There were blast marks all over it and several deep grooves that looked suspiciously like claw marks in the steel of the hatch, but the tumbler was still in action and the identification rectangle on the side was unmarked.

Theon started looking closely at the office equipment for a vault combination. He went from broken desk to broken desk. Finally, in one of the large desk drawers, he found a set of four numbers: 2, 67, 88, 3. He went to the safe and spun the dial to those numbers while his color tentacle flashed red on the rectangle beside the door.

Click

The vault hatch slowly opened and revealed a treasure of materials. There was a computer in the vault, and Theon hooked up and quickly learned from the inventory what was available and how each item functioned at optimum capacity.

Theon put on a combat vest and a police helm. He added a paralysis rod and four extra hydrogen energy cells to his vest. He added a high-power laser pistol in a cross-draw holster. The real find was the high-power sniper rifle in 60 caliber. He loaded the five-round magazine into the weapon and used his nanos to mount the rifle on his left shoulder. In a few minutes, it could swivel ninety degrees and his sensors aimed the weapon. The five-round magazines were heavy, so he only took three of them. He calculated that if he had to fire at something fifteen times, he would be in deep trouble. He passed up the riot shields but did take two tear-gas grenades. Theon was starting to get worried about being too weighed down in equipment. When he came to the explosives, he had a tough decision to make. He didn't like the potential for some of this equipment to be used against him in the future. He could destroy it all with a few well-placed C-20 charges. However, the thought of ruining all this valuable material didn't please him. He really wanted to be able to come back to collect more of the difficult if not impossible to find 60 caliber ammunition. He let fate decide. "X" would be to blow the vault up and "o" would be to close the safe after rigging a nasty surprise for whoever got in that wasn't him. He ran the subroutine for 70 seconds. "o it is then," it beeped to itself.

Theon spent an hour organizing several grenades and tripwires. Just before he left, he picked up a law enforcement computer pad and added it to his vest. He locked the vault and headed for the command center. Going over to the desk drawer with the combination, he destroyed that so no one else could easily open the vault. He beeped to himself for a job well done and left the building.

He traveled down corridor after corridor and found the areas in much better shape than the areas around the main elevator. There were even some engineering robots at work on several ceiling sections. A few touches and Dave, John, and Ed finished their work there and went looking for more robots to change using their modified apps.

Turning a corner near the control chamber's first entrance, Theon was confronted with two red androids that raised their heavy laser rifles at Theon.

"Entrance in this area is forbidden. Depart or be destroyed," the two said in unison.

Theon's data dump on red androids wasn't comforting.

Android Worker, Red

(HD 18, HP 100, AC 15, MV 30' Experience Points: 765

[Prime=Physical] one fist blow for 10 damage, WC 1.)

*These 9' tall red-skinned androids are extremely intelligent and have human-like senses. They present a faceless head and communicate from a voice box in the chest. Well-versed in the use of weapons and programmed as ambush predators, Red Worker Androids try to gain the trust of humans, guarding them and fighting creatures to gain that trust. They then attack when the humans feel safe. Red Android Workers are very capable mechanics, fixing almost anything on the Warden if adequate supplies are available. **DESTROY WITH EXTREME PREJUDICE.***

What to do? What to do? Theon was deep in thought. He was torn between bringing some more robots for this certainly difficult battle or charging in with his weapon and electric arcs blazing in hopes he would be enough to do the job. He wasn't sure if his paralyzing rod would have any influence on the androids. Testing that theory probably would result in good data. He assigned Xs and Os to the choices and ran his random number generator.

"X it is," he said to himself. He drew his laser pistol, threw a tear-gas grenade around the corner, and rushed the two androids.

He instantly knew his laser pistol would do no harm. Beams of laser light blasted from the rifles. The two rifles fired into the tear-gas cloud from the android side. The gas defused the beams of light into harmlessness. Theon started firing his sniper rifle and was glad he had it. Four shots later, the androids were pools of goo on the floor. He picked up one of the laser rifles and cleaned it off. The weapon had the potential to be useful as Theon moved forward.

His colorful tentacle pressed against the black rectangle on the side of the portal, and the portal opened with a hiss. He entered a corridor and could go left or right. Its random number generator came up “0,” so Theon turned left and moved a hundred yards on his treads. Rounding the corner, he saw a robot in the distance, and he wasn't pleased. The data on the robot shouted danger.

Robot, Military LRSR (Long Range Security Robot)

(HD 10, HP 60, AC 20, MV 80 kph Experience Points: 405

[Prime=Physical] one energy blast cannon inflicting 50 damage to all in a direct line from the barrel, WC 7, range 900'.)

This heavy combat unit is designed to soak up punishment and deal out death in all directions. It is a 10' cube, floating on anti-grav pods at up to 80 kph. Its sensors scan 360° and are three times as good as a human's senses, noting even radiation and infrared emissions. It can communicate with other data processors to acquire new targets. Its fusion energy system allows it to fire the cannon every other combat round. Special: Its programming allows it to communicate with intelligent devices of all types and turn them on and off.

That turning off part really bothered Theon. Added to that problem, the unit was clearly modified from the original. It glowed with a forcefield. There were two slug throwers mounted on the right side. There was another strange device on the left side, and Theon guessed it was a grenade launcher. It was a large vehicle and sat in the middle of the 50-yard-wide corridor. There was no way around the military unit.

Theon's damaged postronic brain calculated his chance of success in battling or trying to take over the military unit. Part of his memory banks informed him that the military robot had data protocols that prevented any type of takeover of its systems. At the end of the calculations, Theon's estimated chances were 11 percent. He wasn't happy.

There was another corridor and Theon took it. Traveling back the way he came, he moved on his treads until he turned the corner of that corridor. Theon was subjected to another nasty sight. A hundred yards down this corridor was a pile of bodies. Theon's senses picked up the smell of cooking meat. As Theon came within 75 yards of the bodies, it was able to detect the intense field of radiation around them. Theon's senses registered a massive intensity of gamma radiation.

There was no doubt in Theon's brain that he would end if he went that way. Briefly, he thought about going all the way back and getting the gel canister of radiation neutralizer. He canceled that idea. He briefly wondered if there was a supply chamber on this level, but he could not think of one. What to do? What to do? 0 percent chance one way, 11 percent the other way. Theon evaluated his desire to go to the command center once more. The unit felt there was a 100 percent need to look at data from the command center. There was no choice.

Theon trundled back the way it had come to the military robot corridor. He approached the robot.

“Authorization to this area is restricted,” the *Long Range Security Robot* beeped at Theon.

Theon's sensing tentacles scanned the robot in front of it. The unit's forcefield completely blocked Theon's ability to sense the robot's programs. "I want to go to the command center. Let me pass," Theon stated.

The canon on the Long Range Security Robot activated and pointed at Theon. "Return the way you came or be destroyed. You have ten seconds." The robot started a countdown.

"Is there any way you are allowed to let units pass?" Theon queried.

"Protocol dictates engineering units on repair missions may pass. Housekeeping units are allowed access. Those units haven't appeared in centuries," the Long Range Security Robot chirped.

"Well," Theon said. "I am an engineering robot and a housekeeping unit."

"Display your armband," the Long Range Security Robot ordered.

Theon was almost giddy with relief. He raised his colored tentacle and flashed the military unit with a gray engineering band.

"Pass," the robot said, deactivating its canon.

Theon couldn't believe his luck and quickly moved past the Long Range Security Robot.

The Theon unit moved down the corridor and turned a corner. It faced another long corridor, but at the end of that was the portal to the command center. He started forward.

Zaaaaap

A laser beam hit Theon in the chest. It burnt through his armor. Theon noted laser systems dropping from the ceiling. It would be facing many laser canons.

"Stop! I'm here to repair systems!" Theon shouted.

Zaaaaap Zaaaaap

More beams winked at Theon and melted more armor. Data feeds started reporting. Backup power cells destroyed. Infrared lens at 30 percent. Estimated chance of moving past laser systems at 3 percent.

Theon rushed ahead. It couldn't stop the beams. The units weren't phased by its pleas, so there was nothing else to do.

Zaaaaap Zaaaaap Zaaaaap

Ultraviolet system offline. Body structural damage at 11 percent. One power grasping claw offline.

At this rate, Theon knew he would be destroyed in a few more blasts. It started randomly weaving, and blasts started missing its body.

Zaaaaap Zaaaaap Zaaaaap

Radio system is offline. Structural damage at 44 percent.

Theon came to the portal and flashed a red and blue color mixture at the rectangle beside the portal and it opened. The unit rushed in. Its nano-systems started fixing the damage, but it would be many weeks before it was 100 percent.

“Welcome, T.H.E.O.N. Unit,” said the starship's main artificial intelligence.

Theon knew the voice came from the bubbling column of liquid at the center of the large chamber. As he looked around, he felt a great dread. He saw screen after screen showing portions of the ship and flashing red with alarm klaxons blaring. It appeared from the screens that every level of the ship was in the processing of shutting down.

“I haven't had a visitor in several centuries,” the artificial intelligence said. “You are very welcome.”

“No wonder you are messed up. What has happened here?” Theon demanded.

“Nothing is wrong here, and all systems are green. The ship seems to have wandered off course a bit, but I'm sure the captain knows what he is doing. For some reason, he hasn't talked to me in some time,” the A.I said in a calm voice.

Theon looked at the command chair and saw a spacesuited figure. Advancing, he looked into the visor to see a skeleton. That captain was done talking. The unit saw the five main workstations, and all of them reported the same. Their computer screens flashed with some type of emergency and detailed what needed to be fixed. Looking around the chamber, there were fifty computer screens on the walls. Each of them flashed a different type of emergency and a need for fixing them. Theon had to wonder why the starship was functioning at all.

“Status report,” Theon said to the column of liquid that was the ship's main artificial intelligence.

“Just as I said before, all systems are green,” the intelligence reported.

If Theon had had a head, it would be shaking in horror. It searched its broken memory for what it should do. Taking many minutes, it reviewed all its programs for fixing systems. It came up with nothing. Going over to the captain's chair, it carefully and reverently removed the body of the captain and laid it alongside the chair.

Theon's terminal hookups attached to the captain's command chair.

“Access denied. Only the captain may use this workstation.”

“What signifies the captain is at the station?” Theon asked.

“There are two methods. The captain can verbally activate the station. The captain can also press the command ring into the terminal to activate the workstation.”

Carefully, Theon took the glove off the fallen body. He took off the red and blue command ring, then put the glove back on. Taking the ring, he pressed it into a data port.

“It's good to hear from you again, Captain. It has been too long since we talked. Would you like to play a game?” asked the starship's artificial intelligence.

“How do I fix the ship systems?” Theon asked as the captain of the ship.

“Nothing is wrong with the systems. Why would you want to fix them?” the A.I asked.

“Let's set up a test,” Theon postulated. “If massive systems were crashing everywhere, what would we need to do to fix those systems?”

“Well, that would never happen of course, but for testing purposes, you would order crew and engineering robots to fix those systems.”

Theon looked at the five command chairs and noted the five piles of white dust in each chair. The human crew had died at their systems.

“That's not happening. Let's postulate some other scenario. What do we need to do?” an exasperated Theon asked.

“That case could never happen of course, but as part of this test, you would need to use the Captain's Protocol and order a massive reboot. I would not advise this action, of course, as it would reprogram and reboot my systems.”

“What is the Captain's Protocol?” Theon asked.

“It's a simple set of numbers—9999. When input into systems on the *Warden*, this causes them to reboot and fix themselves. Again, use of that extreme measure is not suggested.”

“9999,” Theon entered into the system.

“Rebooting and repairing. The process will take three hundred and ninety-nine days.”

Theon stood by the Captain's chair, waiting.

THE END



Zetta on the Run

By James M. Ward

Author Note: This story takes place right after the ending of Red is the Android novel.

For the first time in the 700-year history of the creation of androids, an android was enraged. The red thinker android Zetta planned an invasion operation to the Nth degree. Red android troops were assigned attack positions. Armored personnel carriers moved out with mounted Ma Deuce machine guns mounted on their tops. Special robot-driven Claymore mines were set up and led the advance toward the small human village. From the start, nothing had gone right with the battle plan.

Zetta positioned itself on a high hill and stood stunned at the ruin of its plans. The thinker android reviewed the simple battle plan to destroy the human village in the valley. Its large military force was destroyed out in front of it. A hundred well-armored red android troops were now red goo on the ground before the walls of the north face of the village. The two armored vehicles had been easily tipped over and destroyed by two explosive charges. How they knew where the personnel carriers would be advancing, Zetta had no idea. Zetta's flying drones had been shot out of the village skies first, long before Zetta's troops could reach the village. Their destruction was almost as if the village knew they were coming, but that was impossible to the thinking of Zetta's postronic brain.

Game Statistics from the Metamorphosis Alpha RPG

Android Thinker, Red

(HD 10, HP 60, AC 18, MV 30' Experience Points: 405

Radiation Resistance 10 Constitution 10

Mental Resistance 16 Strength 10

Dexterity 10

[Prime=Mental] one attack with a heavy caliber slug thrower, inflicting 40 damage, WC 4, 5 shots in a magazine, range 150').

These 5' tall red-skinned androids are extremely intelligent and have human-like senses but display a faceless head, communicating instead from a voice box in the chest. These androids are programmed to kill humanoids and are able to work all devices but tend to specialize in one specific area. They have only limited memory capacity [short-term memory].

The machine guns should have been able to blast down the village's outer walls. Instead, those heavy caliber bullets rammed into an unusually toughened barrier and did no damage at all. That barrier hadn't been there two days before. Again, it was like the village had known the android army would attack from the northerly direction.

The battle plan called for the android forces to swarm one side of the village. It should have been easy to overpower the defenses and move into the village. The red worker androids were well armored in a new protective armor against energy weapons and slug throwers. Instead, the attacking androids had met a wall of resistance. Those human wall fighters had deliberately aimed for the vulnerable heads of the androids. Many of those shots missed, but there were so many foes aiming at the androids that there were enough to destroy all of the still-moving android ground forces.

The battle plan went from a 99% chance of success to 0% chance in just forty minutes. Zetta stood on the hill amazed at the illogical actions of the humans and mutants of the village. Its postronic brain did a reset. There was nothing else Zetta could do. The red thinker android got into a small armored car and rushed to the main starship elevator. It would go back to the farm and start computing what would be necessary to defeat this human enemy, calculating in all the defenses displayed in the battle.

As it drove to the *Warden's* main elevator at the center of the level, the elevator doors opened and discharged two oddly-dressed wolfoids.

Game Statistics from the Metamorphosis Alpha RPG

Wolfoid, Egyptian

(HD 12, HP 59, AC 14, MV 30' Experience Points: 1265

Radiation Resistance 13 Constitution 12

Mental Resistance 13 Strength 13

Dexterity 13

[Prime=Mental] one recurve bow attack inflicting 2d6 damage, WC 2, range 210', or a javelin inflicting 2d6 damage, WC 1, range 12', Power Staff inflicting 8d6, WC 4, range 50'.)

This 9'-tall wolf mutant stands on its hind legs, regenerates 4 damage per combat round, has radiated eyes and fur that is immune to laser attacks. Egyptian wolfoids have used the ship's resources to adopt the ancient Egyptian Sun worshiping culture of mankind, and to create authentic Egyptian equipment, including war chariots pulled by non-mutant horses. These wolfoids never initiate battle an hour before or after high noon. Most Egyptian wolfoids carry both javelin and bow. Mutations—Radiated Eyes, Immunity to Lasers, Regeneration [4 damage per turn], Heightened Intelligence.

From past attacks, Zetta knew its high-power laser pistol would have no effect on the beasts. It drew its heavy caliber slug thrower and started blasting with aimed shots. For their part, the two wolfoids aimed large snake staffs at Zetta and fired beams of energy from the snake heads.

The foes weren't wearing armor. The slugs tore through their necks and heads. The energy blasts melted Zetta's armor. Thrown to the ground, Zetta kept firing until the two wolfoids were taken out. Zetta tore off the chest armor to reveal nasty burns on its

red flesh. It shoved the two bodies out of the elevator, took one of the power staves, and drove into the elevator to be taken to its farm level.

Zetta really should have searched the bodies a little better. The amulets on their chests were blinking red. Miles and levels away, the Egyptian wolfoïd high temple to Ra registered the death of the two high priests. Sensors also registered that one of the power staves was being used by a non-wolfoïd. That situation would have to be quickly changed or the wrath of Ra would be striking the Egyptian clan of wolfoïds. A squad of Ra Death Dealers was assembled and given special armor and equipment. Prayers were given to Ra for vengeance.

Zetta made it to the farm and rushed into the computer room. It put down the energy staff after having figured out all the settings. The weapon was really very simple. Using the computer systems, Zetta determined there was a 97% chance the humans would counterattack in the next 24 hours. Zetta wasn't pleased.

The thinker android had sent out all of its worker androids in the last battle. All it had produced from the creation vats was one female companion android. Zetta activated the three security robots from the first barn and sent them out to patrol the farm.

Game Statistics from the Metamorphosis Alpha RPG

Reprogrammed Robot, Security

(HD 10, HP 60, AC 15, MV 50' [flying] Experience Points:405

Radiation Resistance 10 Constitution 10

Mental Resistance 10 Strength 16

Dexterity 14

[Prime=Physical] 4 13'-long tentacle attacks that cause 1-hour paralysis upon touch, WC 3, or poison [Intensity 17] knockout gas in a 30' diameter circle, WC 4 .)

This 9'-tall spherical robot is equipped with visual sensors with a 6-mile range, sound receptors capable of picking up sounds of 1db up to 295' away, a gas pellet projector which shoots 10 knock out gas rounds in a 360° spread with [4] 20-pellet magazines, an anti-grav propulsion unit, 50 point force field, 2 third-stage slug projectors [one attack inflicting 6d6 damage, WC 5, range 150'] usable only on a human's authority, a radio capable of broadcasting to any point on a given deck, 3 padded restraint tentacles, and lenses that adapt its visual capabilities to the infra-red and ultra-violet spectrum. Characters captured by these robots are generally taken to a secure area. (See Deck #9).

The red thinker android had previously stripped away all the cautionary programming on the security units. They were now wildly deadly killing machines. At the same time, Zetta sent ten Claymore mine robots to wander the farm and make themselves easy targets. Flying drones were launched and started circling the farm to give more warning. Zetta sat in its chair like a spider, ready to pull defensive electronic

strands to defend the farm. The female companion android armored up, weaponed up, and stood in the corridor in front of Zetta's computer room ready to blast anything coming into the main building.

Zetta switched android production from the making of companion units to the faster production of worker units. There wouldn't be any worker androids coming off the assembly for at least nine hours.

Five hours later, the first of the invaders came, but they weren't human. The sky drones displayed images of six beings coming in from six different directions. The images displayed wolfoids, in some sort of technological ghillie suit. The images on the suit changed to match its surroundings. These had the snake staves and they carried some type of odd shield. It was odd in that the shield was completely transparent and at least six feet tall.

The ghillie suits perfectly hid their bodies in the orchards around the farm, but they didn't hide their infrared signatures. Wolfoids ran very hot in the lenses of the drones. Zetta used the flyers to coordinate security robot attacks on three of the wolfoids.

The thinker android watched the battle from its computer chamber. There was an 89% chance of battle success. Zetta liked those odds.

Each of the three robots closed in with a wolfoid. The units fired their high-power arc lightning bolts. That energy wrapped around the shields of the wolfoids and struck their bodies. The bolts did no damage. The wolfoids fired back, and their energy blasts took down the forcefields of the three robots. Zetta's battle computations changed to 77%. The units cut loose with high-caliber slugs that bounced harmlessly off the wolfoid shields. Those creatures didn't seem to even feel the forceful punches of the slugs. They fired back and a spot on the protective armor of the three security units burned cherry red. Zetta refused to believe the new battle calculations shown on its computer screen. It sent all the Claymore robot units at the wolfoids while the security robot battle raged on.

The security units extended their paralyzing tentacles and struck at the wolfoids. Two of the shields easily blocked the attempt. The wolfoids shot back at the same spot on the bodies of the units. Their metal sides melted away, and the energy blasts took the units down. The third security unit succeeded in touching the flesh of the wolfoid. The creature was paralyzed. That security unit reached out and twisted off the wolfoid's head and the body fell to the ground. At the same time, the sixth wolfoid blasted the third unit with a shot from its power staff.

The two wolfoids rushed toward the farmhouse, but they ran into the Claymore robots. These units were short robots with an odd type of wall to the front of the unit. The wolfoid saw them as hostile and fired their staves at two each. Getting hit on their walls was just what the units were made for. The wall and the robot exploded in violent force as thousands of slugs blasted out at many times the speed of sound. The wolfoids had their shields up, but there was a wall of slugs coming at them from two directions. They were turned into red mush.

Zetta was elated to see the deaths of three of the attackers, but the computed chance of success was still at 17%. It was then the wolfoids bashed into the farmhouse,

one from the north and the other from the south. The companion unit selected the north wolfoid and rushed it as she fired her heavy slug thrower. The slugs bounced off the creature's shield and it showed no sign of the impacts. It fired its staff weapon at the android and struck her armor, making it glow cherry red. She knew her laser would do nothing to the creature and took out the two fragmentation grenades she had. As she did this, she took a hit from the south attacker. She threw the grenades to purposely land behind the wolfoid. The creature kept firing, and the grenades blew out the back of the monster. It fell dead.

Unfortunately for the companion, it was struck again from behind by the staff blast of the assassin wolfoid. That blast melted out the armor of the android and cored the companion, turning it into a mass of red goo on the floor.

Zetta had been watching with alarm through the companion's eyes. It controlled the last of the Claymore robots to rush into the north and south sides of the farmhouse, making a lot of noise. The wolfoid, seeing the new danger, threw a javelin at the north robot and shot at the south one with its energy staff. It was met with two walls of slugs as the Claymores exploded. The assassin was turned into raw meat.

Facing the prospect of one final assassin, Zetta looked at its options. The shield those creatures were using was proof against slugs. The fur of the monsters couldn't be hurt by lasers. The thinker android had put in details on a duel with the power staves, and there was only a 7% chance of barely surviving. Major wounds would be the result of that battle.

Zetta hit the self-destruct button and opened the trapdoor to the escape tunnel. Going down, it slammed the trapdoor shut and locked it tight. The building above would blow up, long before the wolfoid could get into the tunnel. As Zetta traveled down, there were shelves with useful equipment on both walls. While the android was putting on armor, it felt the huge explosion up above. It knew the assassin couldn't have survived that. Zetta would have smiled in satisfaction, but it had no lips.

The recorders of the priests of Ra at the temple in Epsilon City noted the six deaths of the assassin priests. The stolen power staff was giving signals that it was on the move, and its settings were at the maximum blast level. Ten priests of the great deity started praying for guidance as equipment was readied for them. As the high priest gave orders for the death of the thinker android, the priest noted the stolen staff had just come off the main elevator. "Praise be to Ra, we have been given a gift. The creature has come to our level and has entered the city. It should be less of a problem to track and punish it for its transgression. Say a final prayer and do your duty."

The ten priests, now well-armored and armed, bowed in a final prayer and left the temple seeking vengeance.

As Zetta expected, it came out in a large park. The android didn't expect the knight all in black riding a charger who challenged it.

Unknown to Zetta, there was a fun Camelot theme park on the island where the elevator came out. Normally, the knights would issue a challenge and then take the tourists to Camelot for a feast in their honor. Naturally, Zetta didn't behave as a tourist would.

“Varlet, wouldst thou joust with me?”

The android was totally confused. It knew of knights from its studies. What it had before it was an exact sample of the knights of the Middle Ages. The charger was huge, and the lance appeared quite deadly. Zetta blasted the knight with its snake staff.

“Foul fiend, I offer you a challenge in honor and you reply with a traitorous attack. Charge!”

Zetta wasn't pleased. It was experiencing a lot of that lately. It had no idea why the staff blast didn't kill the knight outright. As the charger came at it, Zetta fired at the front leg of the monster-sized horse and blew it off. It crashed to the ground, spilling the knight and trapping the knight's leg under the horse.

Zetta went over and checked out the horse to discover it was a robotic unit.

The knight trapped under the body of the horse tried to get out, all the while challenging the android to battle on the ground.

Zetta refused to acknowledge the foolish knight and walked toward the bridge extending to the city proper.

An hour later, it crossed into the streets of the city. Its androids had lightly scouted the city, but they hadn't reported all the dangers Zetta was noting. Huge plants moved about the streets munching on whatever was foolish enough to get too close. Zetta saw at least three different clans of wolfoids, all walking boldly down the streets and being ignored by the other dangerous creatures of the city.

In their exploring, the red android scouts had discovered an android vat complex. They turned it on and started producing red androids. Zetta was bound for that complex.

“Die, foul varlet.”

Zetta was thrown to the road as something pushed it from behind and slammed it so hard that Zetta was stunned. The thinker android turned over to see the knight slashing at it with a sword.

“Kill my charger, will you! I have never been defeated in battle. You are not going to be allowed to change that now!” The knight swung again, and the sword bounced off the android's chest armor.

From the ground, Zetta calmly drew its large pistol and blasted away. The first two shots did nothing. Zetta kept the grouping tight and kept firing. The impacts drove the knight back from the android. In three more shots, the knight was producing large sparks from the center of its body. Three more shots later, the robot knight fell lifeless to the road.

Zetta calculated that the loud shots would attract way too much attention. It ran and found the street where the android production station was located. It was an easy thing to go in and be greeted by a hundred red worker androids.

Zetta was in android nirvana. The resources of this vat production facility were just what the thinker android needed. Its postronic brain filled with plans for extending out and taking the city street by street. It wouldn't matter what powers the

mutants of the city had. The right combination of companion and worker androids all armored up with the special plastic armors Zetta had developed should be more than enough to win the day.

Zetta went over to the replicator systems and punched in a series of calculations that would generate the armor that would fit the worker androids. Punching in enter, it turned to see wolfoids bashing in the doors and windows, firing their staves at the helpless worker androids.

Rows and rows of androids were turned into red goo. Zetta looked for a way to escape and found every exit filled with the form of huge, armored wolfoid firing weapons. Zetta drew its slug pistol and started firing. In seconds, it expended the magazine of the weapon, and all its worker androids were destroyed.

Zetta screamed, “Wait! We can work together.”

The eight wolfoids turned their power staves on the thinker android, and Zetta—with all its grand plans—was turned to red goo.

The END



Mission: Recovery

A Story from Metamorphosis Alpha™

Aboard the Warden – Deck 11

by Craig Martelle

STATUS: COMMAND BAND ACTIVATED. LAST ACTIVATION, 304.7 YEARS AGO

Two humans in jumpsuits stood at the terminal as the information scrolled past. The alarm chirped incessantly. One man tapped a button and turned the noise off.

“That’s it then. A command band dug up by a bunch of mutants,” the taller of the two said.

“I’ll flip you for it. Loser goes after the band,” the shorter but wider man suggested.

“You know I always win the toss!” the tall man exclaimed.

“Well, then winner goes after it. Let me see the coin,” the other insisted. The tall man produced a flat circle of platinum. On one side was the face of someone who died long before. On the other was the symbol of the Warden.

“Heads,” the shorter man called as the coin flipped from his hand, rotating until the tall man snatched it from the air and slapped it onto his forearm. When he pulled his hand away, he looked surprised.

“Would you look at that?” he said, grinning down at the other man. “Winner means you go. Suit up and don’t make a lot of noise when you come back in. I feel a nap coming on.”

The tall man dismissed the other with a wave of his hand.

“Sometimes, Willie, you can be such a jerk,” he said as he walked away.

“Same to you Jimmy boy, and how many times do I have to tell you to call me William!” Willie laughed. They were the two on a ten-year shift, before waking up their relief from cryo-sleep. With forty different technicians, they stood watch at roughly two-hundred-year intervals. This was their fifth time standing watch since the Warden left space dock.

In space, they found that they were only aging one year in every five, so a ten-year shift wasn’t hard on their bodies. They appeared to be in their mid-thirties and healthy.

It was nice when something broke up the monotony. Jimmy liked the action while Willie was capable of spending the entire ten years with his feet up and kicked back. He said his goal was to watch every movie in the ship’s library which was rather extensive having over a million titles.

Jimmy could not care less about watching movies. He thought that the progression of the various species on board the Warden warranted a full-time study. That’s what he did, expecting that someday, anthropologists would confer a doctorate upon him and his work would be required reading at whatever new academies were established on their colony planet.

He thought they were supposed to be there by now, but his was not to question why. Their area of responsibility did not overlap with the command deck. They didn’t interact with the command personnel in any way, but Jimmy thought he’d make an exception and return the command band to the bridge directly.

He nodded to himself. And then he’d strike up a conversation and learn more about the ship, their destination, and when they’d arrive home.

But first, he had to recover that command access band. He’d take care of that post haste

and then do what he wanted to do which was talk with the command personnel.

The locker room was plain, as were most spaces in the maintenance area. They didn't allow individual decorations, whoever "they" were. He read it in the regulations. He still posted pictures of his home back on Earth and of the maintenance group in the shipyard where the Warden was constructed.

Jimmy stripped out of his jumpsuit, spending the time to take a full sonic shower before gearing up. He knew that he would be sweaty soon enough, but he always vowed not to start that way.

He thought about the mission but didn't waste too much time planning. It was a routine smash and grab. He'd done it a hundred times before. The natives obtained something they shouldn't have and either he or Willie would have to retrieve it.

He shook his head thinking about the time the Rabbitoids built a small village around a ruptured power conduit because it was so warm. He'd gone in under cover of darkness and repaired the conduit, then disappeared back into the night.

He had seen that the Rabbitoids were still living there. He'd made that run two sleeps ago. Hundreds of years had passed. They probably had no idea why the village was situated as it was. Jimmy laughed to himself. He was a happy person and always looked for the funny in the mundane.

It was always there, like that stupid rigged coin that Willie carried. Jimmy had an identical one that wasn't weighted, and he intended to switch them, but didn't have to when Willie changed the rules.

They'd both been surprised by the toss. Jimmy didn't care either way. Going out and doing the job or staying in and doing the job. As long as he had something to do with his hands, he was happy.

Jimmy finished his shower and started to gear up, carefully, layer after layer to make himself nearly invulnerable to the natives' weapons. He checked his ammunition and gear, most of it non-lethal. They were on a colony ship heading to a new planet. Killing the colonists would be considered bad form, even though those living in the open areas of the main decks were far different than the crew.

Jimmy wondered about this, too. No one ever explained why or how that happened. He only knew that he was a maintenance technician and no one told a main tech anything besides, "Fix this."

The powered armor created a faint energy shield that prevented bugs from getting too close. They'd grown lethal over the years. He had read a report that one of the other shifts lost both their main techs to a bee swarm. Jimmy carried a bandolier of extra power cells, shot shells that fired small nets, a machete to hack down the vigorously growing weeds, and a power toolkit.

He wore all the regulation gear except for his boots and gloves. Those were a gift four sleeps back when the main techs could still be seen by the natives. They were made specifically for him, so they fit like a second skin, and after over forty years of active use, he couldn't imagine wearing anything else.

He slapped the first power pack into his slug thrower, loaded a net round in one chamber and a rubber bullet round in the other, and then slung it combat style, under his arm, barrel forward, and ready to fire.

He dipped and twisted as he flexed his muscles and made sure that his armor moved with

him in sync, augmenting his strength. He whirled and kicked at the air. He jumped to the ceiling, slapped his free hand against it and dropped back to the floor, landing softly as his the armor absorbed most of the deceleration force.

He worked his shoulders, tightened his jaw, licked his lips, and growled as he forced his adrenaline to flow. He started rocking as he prepared to enter the colonists' world.

"Jimmy six five, comm check," he said softly.

"Jimmy six five, aye," the computer's female voice responded.

"Why are you female but the one who relays our orders is male?" Jimmy wondered aloud.

"Because one is from the reporting and documentation section. The programmers felt that you'd be more open and honest with a female stenographer, and more likely to comply with a male supervisor," the voice in his ears responded pleasantly.

"But you're not a female. You're a computer," Jimmy replied, stopping his rocking to think about what she was saying. "That's so last millennium thinking."

"It is, but who am I to argue with the programmers. All hail the mighty programmers!"

"Is that a joke? If so, it's a pretty good one. If not, then it's even better!" Jimmy started to laugh. "Enough of that, computer. Jimmy six five, transiting to entry point...Let me see; here it is, entry point three five alpha niner one."

Without waiting for a response, Jimmy jogged from the locker room, turned into a wide corridor, picking up his pace as he went. It took him ten minutes to run the three-mile long main service corridor before he reached the three five transverse maintenance corridor.

He waved his arm wearing the steel-gray engineering band in front of the access pad. The door slid aside with a faint whirr of the servos. Jimmy entered, taking care to not bump into the variety of equipment, conduits, and pumping that lined the walls. Heavy access hatches stood at regular intervals.

Jimmy counted down as he ran.

Eight eight. Eight niner. Niner zero.

He slowed to a walk, stopping before the hatch labeled "91."

"Jimmy six five, requesting permission to access entry point three five alpha niner one." Jimmy waited. Maintenance access was granted by the computer with a secondary verification of the engineering access band. It took both forms for the hatch to open.

"Access will be granted in ten minutes when the deck goes dark," the female voice responded.

"Standing by," Jimmy reported. He checked the computer interface on his forearm. A series of small maintenance tasks scrolled across the screen. He'd be busy when he returned. Just as well. It made his ten-year shift go more quickly.

He couldn't wait to talk with the bridge crew, the command staff and find out how many more sleeps before they'd get to their new home. Sometimes, even a minion like him needed to know lofty things.

He only wanted to know what was next. Didn't most people?

He furled his brow as he thought about how much he didn't know. The ship's overseers used to share so much more, but after the first sleep, everything changed. He didn't know who was in charge anymore. The only information he ever saw was on computer printouts, like

those scrolling across his sleeve.

There had to be a reason that made sense. The ship was running well. He had plenty to eat and lived comfortably. Even though Willie could be a jerk, he was a good man at heart.

“One minute to access,” the computer voice projected through his earpieces.

Time to get some, Jimmy! he told himself, feeling the familiar surge of energy as his body responded. He flipped his goggles down.

The corridor lights switched to red, and they faded with the countdown. The corridor had turned pitch black an instant before the hatch slid open.

Jimmy was out of the blocks and running, letting the armor drive his legs faster than any human should have been capable of. Ten steps into Deck 11, a branch swung out of nowhere and hit him in the chest. He stumbled, bending over backward to get under the branch, but a second one came from behind and swept his legs out from under him.

He rolled to the side, away from where he thought the strikes came from, then smoothly regained his feet, crouching in a fighter’s pose. He let his slug thrower clatter to his side as he pulled his stun gun, aiming it into the forest’s trees.

Jimmy watched the tree as it tucked its branches in and resumed looking like a normal tree. Jimmy made a half circle to be certain that a tribe of mutants wasn’t hiding behind it, before continuing on his mission.

“Log, encounter with a mutant tree. Swinging branches as a tripping hazard,” Jimmy said softly, knowing that the microphone picked up his voice and the computer would add the location, timestamp, and equipment status. Jimmy hadn’t taken any damage besides his pride at getting knocked down by a tree. He wondered what else it would have done had he not rolled out of its reach.

That didn’t matter as it wasn’t his mission to assess the mutant life on the deck, only mark its location and address the issue that he was tasked with.

Period.

Mountains stood in the distance. Even in the darkness, they looked majestic. Jimmy marveled at those who designed such a ship. He knew that they were only partially mountains, and mostly simply artistic tricks with depth and shading.

The ship’s hull was just beyond the forest. No matter what it looked like, there were no mountains on Deck 11.

Jimmy shifted left and right as he ran through the forest, keeping a wary eye on the trees as he passed them. He started to lose confidence in what he thought he had seen. A living tree?

Maybe his lunch was doing something to his insides.

He dismissed it all as irrelevant to the mission when warm bodies showed up on his infrared. He slowed as he tried to angle away from them, but they spread out in front of him.

Jimmy stopped and ducked behind a tree. He checked his slug thrower.

Full power. Rubber bullets and net rounds. The creatures ahead were already stalking him.

That meant they could see in the dark, but so could he and he assumed that he could see better than them because he had the best technology the Warden had to offer.

“Preparing to engage a band of monkeys,” he whispered.

He pushed off the tree and ran at the biggest group. As he closed, he realized that they

weren't on the ground. He should have known that such creatures made their homes in the trees. He ran through his memories of monkeys, and that made him change his approach.

He needed to run away from the largest group because what they would throw at him would not be mud. It would take the sonic shower a week to get the smell out, and he didn't have that kind of time.

Jimmy zeroed in on the monkeys, using his infrared targeting scanner. He slowed, aimed, and fired the net round at the branch where two of the brazen little beasts hopped up and down.

His net flew in a nearly straight line, but as it got close, it burst into flames and disintegrated, showering the monkeys with ash. They chittered angrily. He felt the temperature in his suit rising rapidly.

That's damn inconvenient, he thought, believing that his suit was malfunctioning.

Sweat rolled from his forehead, stinging his eyes. "I need to find water, computer, vector me, please!" he told his computer companion.

"Bearing one one zero, eighty meters," she replied. Jimmy ran, ignoring the group that raged in the branches. The noise was deafening. His cover was blown. He'd been both seen and engaged by the natives.

They chased him as he headed toward the stream. Using his eyes to activate defensive systems, he brought up the suit's sonic defense weapon and aimed it in a one-hundred-eighty-degree arc behind him.

It was in a range that he couldn't hear, but knew it was active when the monkeys lost their minds.

You'd think I was flaying them alive, Jimmy thought as he ran a few more steps and jumped into a shallow stream meandering through the area.

He had to lay down in the water to cool his system enough that he could breathe again. Steam rose from his armor as he crawled forward to keep moving away from the monkeys.

They'd stopped their screaming as soon as he'd gone underwater. When he lifted his head up and reactivated his system, infrared showed the creatures were moving away.

"Log encounter with a band of forty-seven monkeys. Nothing unusual noted. Suit malfunctioned and overheated, please verify," Jimmy whispered in the darkness.

"Suit did not malfunction," the voice replied.

Jimmy knew that it had, but he wasn't going to argue in the middle of the open deck. "Just log it," he told the computer.

Jimmy highlighted the command band on his map. Despite the distractions, he was making progress. He stood, and still dripping, he headed back into the forest.

He'd only taken twenty steps when another creature appeared before him. He turned to avoid it, but it sped up to get back in front of him.

By all that's holy, would you leave me alone? I've got a job to do, Jimmy thought to himself.

"I'm sorry, but it's not in my nature to leave the interesting alone. I have to explore and learn and discover!" a voice said, seemingly coming from all around.

"Who said that?" Jimmy asked, confirming on infrared that no warm bodies were close and

using his eyes to see that he was alone.

"Why, it is only I, Meles Meles or as I prefer, Badgerus Maximus at your service!" the voice offered.

"I still don't see you," Jimmy replied. "My name is Jimmy, and I'm on an important mission. It's nice to meet you, but if it's not too inconvenient, I'll be on my way now."

"I know all about your mission, Jimmy, to get the band so you can go to the bridge and find out when we're going to get to our new home," the voice said all-knowingly.

Jimmy hadn't even shared his real motivations with the computer.

Jimmy started to walk away. The creature he was trying to avoid closed the distance quickly by dropping to all fours and running. When it stepped out from behind one of the many forest trees, it was standing on two feet.

"You're a Badger," Jimmy blurted.

"Of course, I'm a Badger. What do you think meles meles means? My word! You've had hundreds of years and never bothered to learn the species that inhabit our world? Humans..." Meles lamented.

"I don't see your lips moving," Jimmy observed.

"My gods, you really don't get it, do you? Telepathy? Does that ring a bell anywhere in that Cro-Magnon mind of yours?" Meles taunted.

"Telepathy?" Jimmy exclaimed. "Whatever. You could be a ventriloquist's dummy for all I know."

"I'm coming with you because clearly, you need a chaperone to protect you from yourself." Meles moved close and turned to face in the same direction as Jimmy.

"I work alone," Jimmy said flatly, squinting his eyes at the creature next to him.

"Of course, you do. Lead onward, human," Meles told him.

"If I'm leading, doesn't that suggest someone is following?" Jimmy claimed.

"You need to lead your own way in life," Meles said philosophically. *"So, no, you're not leading anyone. I just happen to be going in that direction, so we'll be traveling together, that's all, out of serendipity, mind you."*

"As you wish, Badger," Jimmy said, chuckling at his joke since he was feeling badgered. The creature had been inside his head, and he was sure that he didn't like that, either. "And stay out of my mind!"

"As you wish, stupid human," Meles said directly into his mind.

The two walked in silence, but Jimmy felt like he was behind schedule. "I'm going to run now to make up for lost time. It's been real, your fuzziness."

"Don't walk on my account," Meles answered.

Jimmy started to run, and the Badger easily kept pace. Jimmy ran faster and faster until the suit would give him no more.

The infrared showed no contacts. He was free all the way to the encampment where the mutants had the command band.

Meles was keeping pace and at one point, passed Jimmy to show him that a human in a powered augmentation suit wasn't the fastest creature around.

Jimmy slowed. Even with the boost that the suit gave him, it was a workout to run like that. He panted, putting his hands on top of his head to expand his chest and drag in more air.

The Badger stopped next to him and stood up. He was breathing a little harder than normal, but that was it. Jimmy shook his head and looked toward the encampment. A small group of Wolfoids.

“Very nasty, that bunch,” Meles informed him.

“What makes you say that?” Jimmy whispered while cycling through the various observation devices at his command—infrared, ultraviolet, and directional microphones.

“Because I know of them. I avoid them, because, only the mountain lion is faster than a Badger and that’s only in most cases,” Meles said proudly.

“I’ll be,” Jimmy said, conceding the fact that the Badger had made itself his partner. “Here’s the plan. I sneak in there, take the band, and sneak out. Then I go on my merry way, savvy?”

“You’re not going to sneak anywhere. I suspect they already know you’re here. You don’t shield your mind very well. You don’t shield at all. I will be surprised if you survive this and have absolutely no hope that you’ll wrest that band from their grimy paws.”

“You misundersguesstimate me, my friendly Badger. Now, if you’ll step aside, the men need to go to work.” Jimmy shoved Meles aside as he walked boldly away, dodging around a tree as soon as he could.

He checked his slug thrower, switching to rubber bullets. He loosed the stun gun in its holster, brought up the sonic defense to activate it with one thought, and then reverified the Wolfoids’ locations. Six of them scattered as if sleeping.

They already know I’m here. Right, Jimmy thought sarcastically.

He made a beeline for his target.

Two steps into the clearing where he thought the Wolfoids had been sleeping, an alarm went off, a flare shot into the air and Jimmy stood there in his suit, highlighted for the whole universe to see.

“Damn!” he yelled and flipped up his night vision as he started to run. “Activate sonic defense!”

A Wolfoid near him started to howl.

Gotcha, Jimmy thought.

Two Wolfoids up ahead were lying in wait. He could see them hiding behind a stump and small mound of dirt. Jimmy ran at the mound and leaped high when he hit the top.

The Wolfoid thrust its spear at him. He pulled and fired the stun gun as he passed overhead. Jimmy felt the power of the adrenaline surge, impressing himself with his newfound speed.

He angled back toward the command band. Now that he was this close, he realized that the creature was wearing it. That would create a problem, but nothing that couldn’t be resolved by the use of superior firepower.

Jimmy dove and rolled. The Wolfoid behind the trunk had left his cover and was chasing him. Jimmy pumped two rubber bullets into the creature’s chest, sending him flying backward. Jimmy jumped up and ran.

“Deactivate sonic defense,” Jimmy ordered his suit when he couldn’t take the pitiful

Wolfoïd howling any longer.

When he reached the Wolfoïd with the command band, he hesitated. The creature looked ancient, and Jimmy wondered if he'd survive getting stunned.

"Give me the band," he commanded in the human tongue, holding out his hand.

The Wolfoïd shook its head.

"Sorry about this," Jimmy apologized as he aimed the stun gun at the old Wolfoïd. A thin paw pulled his arm down as Meles appeared at his side.

"I'm simply amazed at what you accomplished, stupid human. Bravo!" Meles said. *"He's not going to give it to you, but he may be willing to trade."*

"I don't have anything to trade," Jimmy argued. He gently removed the Badger's paw from his arm so he could take aim.

"Trade, stupid human!" Meles said more urgently.

"No, stupid Badger!" Jimmy replied, yanking his arm free.

Jimmy aimed, and his head exploded as if someone hit him with a water pipe. He staggered and stumbled, finally falling to one knee.

"Give him your slug thrower," Jimmy heard Meles say when the stars stopped shooting through his eyes.

"I can't give him my slug thrower. I signed for it!" Jimmy replied. His head exploded again, and he lost all feeling in his arms. His slugthrower fell free from his fingers. A Badger's paws slipped the sling from his arm and delivered the slug thrower to the old Wolfoïd.

Jimmy's head cleared almost instantly. He looked up to see the Wolfoïd studying the slug thrower, while Meles was holding up the command band. Jimmy took it in his gloved hand, nodded to the Wolfoïd, and walked away.

"How easy was that?" Meles badgered Jimmy, reappearing at his side after they left the camp. Jimmy looked angrily at the Badger.

"I don't know what you did, but you're on their side!" Jimmy accused.

"I'm a Badger," Meles started to explain. *"The only side I'm on is my own, but you are kind of interesting, and more importantly, you do interesting things, and I find that to be... well, I find that to be interesting."*

"You are an odd one," Jimmy said, checking his infrared and other sensors. He saw that the Wolfoïds were gathered around their elder.

"You would have had to hurt them, and I just couldn't have that," Meles said candidly.

"I didn't want that, either," Jimmy said. "Oh well. We'll just have to see what comes from that."

Jimmy put the command band around his wrist and looked at its alternating red and blue color. His was steel gray. He liked the look of the command band on his wrist. He smiled as he made his report.

"Log mission recovery complete. Return via command elevator x-ray four. Log encounter. Six Wolfoïds. One electronically stunned, one stunned by use of rubber bullets, four incapacitated by use of sonic defense. Slugthrower lost during the engagement. Mark for a later recovery mission."

The computer blinked a response. When main techs were on deck, the computer limited its engagement so the humans wouldn't be distracted.

Maybe humans are stupid? He thought. *Nah! That's crazy Badger talk.*

Jimmy extended the reach of his sensors and chose a route toward the command elevator near the ramp that led to Deck 12, and he started to run. Jimmy maintained a pace that was far less than his maximum speed, but he knew that it wouldn't wear him down.

He didn't want to be huffing and puffing when he talked with the bridge crew.

Jimmy and Meles reached the elevator without another encounter. They stood before a wide, vine-covered column, the elevator doors concealed from view. The access pad was also hidden.

"What are you waiting for," the badger asked impatiently.

"It's just that I've been thinking about this for years and in moments, I'm going to go where I've never been and talk with people well above my station, although we're all supposed to be equal, we know that's not true. I don't know. Maybe my expectations are too high?" Jimmy wondered.

"Maybe we'll just go and find out. And no, you can't stop me from coming, because this is really interesting!" Meles said, excitement creeping into his telepathic voice.

Jimmy had no comeback. He waved his arm, and the elevator doors ripped at foliage and pulled apart, revealing what seemed to be an unused elevator. Jimmy pulled a vine out of the way, holding it for Meles to get past.

Once on the elevator, Jimmy spoke confidently, smiling. "Command Deck, please, Deck 10."

The elevator took twenty seconds to transit from Deck 11, slowing to a stop. The doors opened with less trouble than they had on the previous deck. Jimmy looked out, standing in the doorway so the crew wouldn't see the badger before he had a chance to explain.

Meles coughed behind him.

Jimmy noticed it, too. The air smelled stale. It wasn't anything like the clean air of the forest on Deck 11 or even the recycled air flowing through the maintenance corridors winding their way throughout the ship.

Lights flashed from consoles throughout. Numerous positions seemed active, but there were no people. Jimmy walked slowly from the elevator, not noticing that the doors closed when he and Meles were clear.

The badger was unusually quiet, but Jimmy didn't notice that either. He saw the raised platform and the commanding chair where the captain would sit. He approached it from behind, breathing a sigh of relief when he saw the helmeted figure.

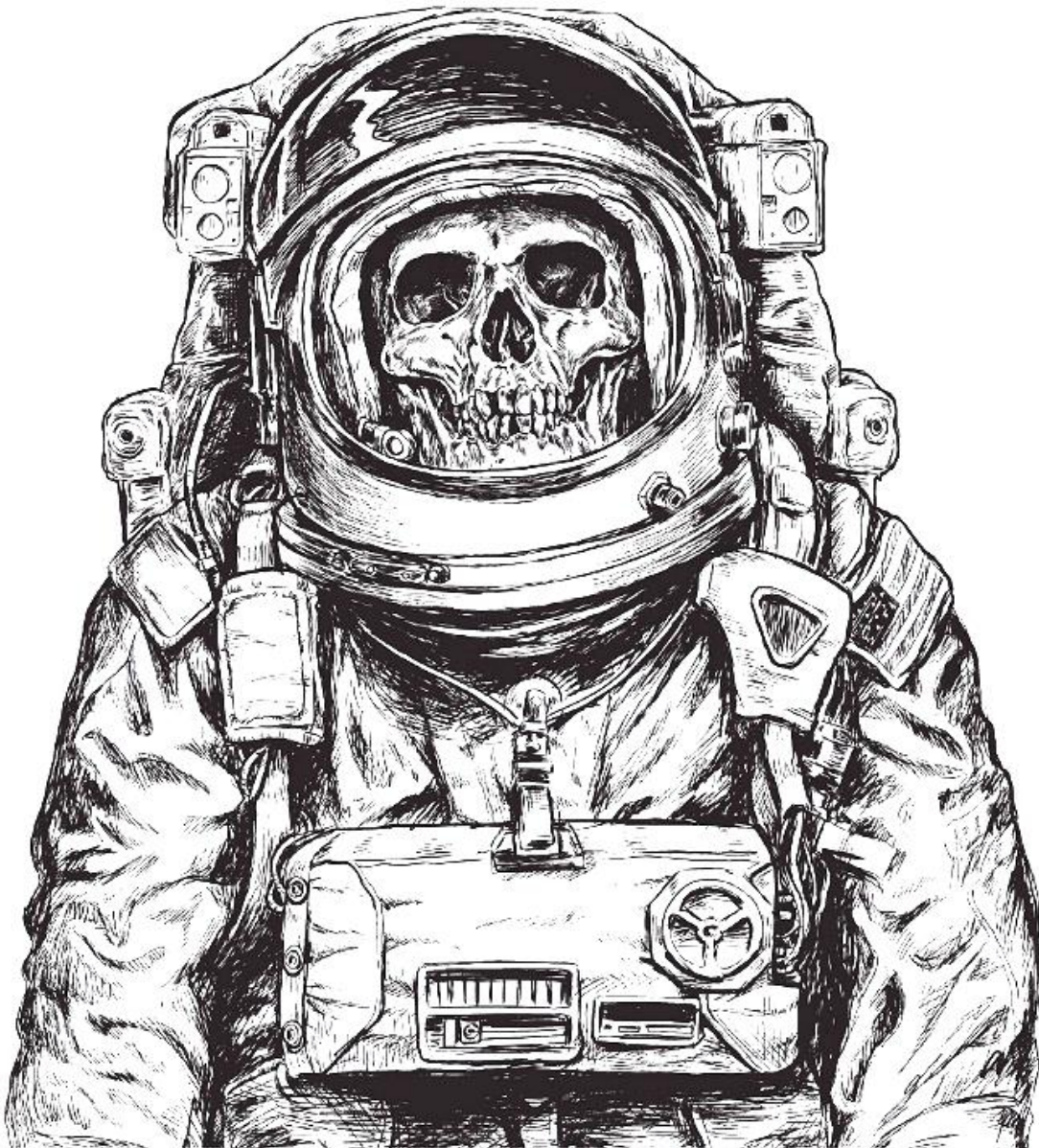
"I'm sorry sir, why are you in a spacesuit?" Jimmy asked, looking around quickly to make sure he hadn't entered a hazard zone.

He moved around the front, Meles walking around the other side. Together they stood as they saw the cracked faceplate and the skeleton within.

Jimmy looked around in shock, seeing a few more figures who had died at their posts.

"Who knows when we're going to get to our new home?" Jimmy asked, his voice sounding small in the large space.

“Maybe you are home,” Meles replied.



Mission: Restore

A Story from Metamorphosis Alpha™

Aboard the Warden – Deck 10

by Craig Martelle

STATUS: “Bridge Access Authorized. Welcome Back, First Officer Binnatz”

“Maybe we’ll just go and find out. And no, you can’t stop me from coming, because this is really interesting!” Meles said, excitement creeping into his telepathic voice.

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“Maybe you are home,” Meles replied.

Jimmy flopped to the deck, holding his head in his hands, his shoulders heaving as he wept.

“Now, now,” the badger tried to soothe the distraught human. Meles whistled through his teeth until he found something else to do.

As a badger, he was constantly in search of food. The work stations and equipment throughout the bridge area of Deck 10 smelled stale without any organic matter. He dropped to all fours and sniffed the deck around the consoles. He sneezed and ruffled his whiskers but continued his exploration.

“I don’t like it here, maybe we should return home,” Meles suggested.

“Home,” Jimmy replied, saying it as if it were a question more than a statement. “What does that mean? I thought we lived according to a master plan. At the end of our journey, we

settle on a new planet. Everything in between was maintenance. That's what I do. I fix things. I live to do the maintenance for a dead crew."

"You live to do the maintenance for a living ship and its inhabitants. People will always die, but the ship still travels through space, does it not?" Meles wondered as he continued his fruitless search.

"I have a badger for a friend and a fellow maintenance tech who is probably wondering what has happened to me. Do you think he can track me this far from our command center?"

"How would I know? I'm a badger."

"The computer would know." Jimmy activated the comm link on his powered armor. "Jimmy six five reporting. Computer, are you there?"

"Of course, Jimmy. Where else would I be?" the computer replied.

"I can't answer that." Jimmy looked around, unsure of what he wanted to say before settling for the truth. "I'm on the bridge and the command crew appears to have died a long, long time ago. Can you please update me on the ship's status and estimated arrival at the colony planet?"

"I cannot. I do not have access to that data. You should not be on the bridge, Jimmy six five. That is a restricted area," the computer replied in her pleasant voice.

Jimmy felt an edge in what the computer was saying. He hoped that she wouldn't summon security bots.

"We shall return immediately to Deck 11, computer. Mission report is that the command band was successfully recovered and is in my possession. It will be returned to main tech storage as directed. End report."

"When?" the computer prompted.

"Soon," Jimmy deflected.

"You've left Willie alone for far too long. He gets into trouble without you there."

Jimmy leaned back to look in disbelief at the comm device strapped to his wrist. He contemplated answering, but hadn't heard a question, so he tapped the device to turn it off.

"The computer doesn't want me up here, Meles. What do you think about that?"

"I don't want me up here," the badger shot back telepathically.

"It's hiding something." There was no revelation. Jimmy had known all along that he was never supposed to go to the bridge. His world was constrained within his main tech work area and wherever on Deck 11 the computer deemed it safe for him to go.

The computer controlled his life, but now it was no longer in control. It wanted him back.

Jimmy stood, sure that he didn't want to see only what the computer wanted him to see. There was a bigger world out there. An entire universe. He looked at the screens that showed the view outside the ship. He put his helmet in the captain's lap.

"Don't go anywhere with that. I'll be back," he told the dead man. "Meles! Let's see what there is to see."

"Why do you have to yell? Are humans deaf by nature or did you come to that condition by your own loud misdeeds?" the badger asked.

"My loud misdeeds?" Jimmy wondered, trying to speak softly. "I'm pretty sure that's not it. Maybe your furry ears are too sensitive? In deference to my new partner, I shall endeavor to not offend your badgerly sensibilities."

"You don't need to run your pie hole at all," Meles told Jimmy.

"But it seems so unnatural," he replied using just his mind.

"Maybe your way is unnatural." The badger stood upright and sneezed again. *"There's nothing to eat up here but dust, which I seem to have ingested far too much of already. Let's leave this place."*

"Don't you want to know?" Jimmy asked, gesturing with a broad sweep of his arm to take in the entirety of the bridge, much of which disappeared into the darkness behind the elevator.

"Where are we going and when will we get there?" he asked aloud.

"Computing," a voice responded from a workstation nearby.

Jimmy jumped back and crouched, his heart pounded in his chest. *"Hello?"* he ventured.

"Computing," the voice reiterated.

Jimmy inched forward. *"I wish there was more light in here,"* he said.

The illumination came up slowly, showing the entirety of the space, including the area beyond the elevator.

More bodies, mummified, stacked like firewood. *"Computer,"* Jimmy said, barely above a whisper, *"what happened in here?"*

"Computing," the voice replied.

Meles moved forward, unperturbed. He strolled past the elevators using his upright, two-legged gait. He sniffed the bodies from a distance, before moving to a sidewall with numerous panels and sliding doors.

"I smell food," he said, before starting to pry at one of the door panels.

"Hold on," Jimmy called out with his mind and hurried to the badger's side. *"You don't want to break it."*

Jimmy knew exactly what the device was, but wasn't sure why it would be active if there was no one to eat what it produced.

"It's the food processing system. What would you like to try?"

"Beet soup with extra mushrooms," Meles replied without hesitation.

"Food processor, I order one bowl of beet soup with extra mushrooms, please."

"Is that how you have to do it?" Meles wondered while he sniffed as the smell from the other side of the small door changed. A red light shining above the door turned green, but then started flashing red. *"I can smell my stew! Where is it?"*

"You've jammed the door. Look out," Jimmy replied in a huff. The badger's prying claws had wedged the door against the track. Jimmy didn't have his tools so he used the next best thing. He popped it back onto the track with a swift thump using the heel of his hand.

The door slid open, and Meles shoved Jimmy out of the way to get at the bowl.

He stuffed his badger snout into it and splashed the red juice in a circle on the deck. Jimmy jumped back so it wouldn't get on his boots.

"I could use something, too. It's been a while," he mumbled. *"Maple and brown sugar oatmeal, please, in a large bowl."*

He stepped around the badger to retrieve his meal from the processor.

"More!" Meles belched. *"Much more."*

The badger stopped demanding more food after the seventh bowl.

"By all that's holy, how much can you eat?" Jimmy said. He'd finished his oatmeal long before and sat at an empty dining table, waiting on his companion.

"I can't tell you that as I've never truly eaten until I could eat no more. Wouldn't that be glorious?" he pondered.

"I don't think so," Jimmy replied, before getting up and setting out to further explore the

extensive bridge.

“We are en route to Cagulon Minor and should arrive in just under three hundred Earth-standard years,” the computer reported suddenly.

“Holy cow!” Jimmy blurted.

“*I’ve heard of cows.*” Meles stopped and looked at the ceiling, his eyes unfocused as he tried to think if he had heard of them or not. “*Maybe not.*”

“Is that where we’re going to stop and land the colonists?” Jimmy asked.

“Is that your order, First Officer?”

Jimmy pursed his lips and looked around. The command crew were almost deified in his mind, yet here they were.

Dead.

The computer thought he was one of the few who controlled the ship. “Is that what you think we should do?” Jimmy asked tentatively.

“It is not my place to advise on this issue. Are you giving the order to begin our slowdown in preparation for attaining orbit around Cagulon Minor?”

“Yes. Do that. Wait. It takes three-hundred years to slow down?” Jimmy wondered.

“It takes exactly that. We’ve already bypassed our primary, secondary, tertiary, and a number more. Cagulon Minor is the fourteenth backup colony planet.”

“Holy cow!”

“*There it is again. What is a cow?*”

“Yes. Stop at Cagulon Minor.”

The ship jerked, and Jimmy staggered. “Preparations for arrival have commenced.”

“The system locked the crew onto the bridge because of excess radioactivity within the ship. Cascading failures rendered the food and water systems inoperable. The command crew died of thirst within days of the accident.”

“They’ve been dead this whole time? That’s hundreds of years. Who have the main techs been getting their orders from or reporting to?”

“*And how does the food system work now?*” Meles interjected.

“The area computer system controls those issues.”

“I’ve been working for a box for four hundred years?”

“Hardly a box. You’ve been working for an intelligent computerized system that has sufficiently repaired the ship to allow the Warden to continue its mission. You should count yourselves lucky that you were in a protected area and that you survived. Most of the crew did not,” the computer reported.

Jimmy looked around. A galley with food. Quarters with bunks. Computer consoles with flashing lights. An entire wall that showed the universe around them. And dead bodies to remind him how fragile life was. But the ship lived on.

“Computer, how many people are performing the cryo-sleep rotations like Willie and me?”

“There are a total of two-hundred and forty technicians working the cryo-rotations. At present, twelve are awake and performing standard maintenance.”

“Twelve,” Jimmy whispered. His mouth hung slack and his breathing quickened. “There were over a million people on board. There should be tens of thousands awake and working.”

“Not anymore,” the computer replied in its cold voice.

Jimmy shuddered.

Meles belched. “*What the hell did you expect? Ask your buddy how many talking badgers*

existed when the Warden launched."

"How many life forms are currently on the Warden?" Jimmy asked instead.

"Computing."

Meles and Jimmy looked at each other. "I guess we have some time to keep exploring."

The badger didn't bother waiting he made a beeline for the quarters. Jimmy followed him, having no intention of entering and digging through the crew's personal effects.

"*Mine,*" Meles called out after only a few moments. Jimmy leaned around the corner wondering what the badger had found. Meles was sprawled on a low bed. He pulled a blanket over himself.

"*Tell it to cool the room.*"

"You need me, is that what I just heard? And if you want food, you need me for that, too."

"*For manual labor, nothing more, stupid human. You know that I'm the brains of this outfit.*"

"Computer, cool these quarters by five degrees please," Jimmy requested. He couldn't hear the system respond, but he knew that it had once a cool breeze appeared as if from nowhere. Jimmy looked to the corpses. He found the closest one, removed the command access badge and returned to the sleeping quarters. He put it on Meles' foreleg, so he could enter and exit the room at his convenience.

When Jimmy walked out, the door swished closed behind him.

It's not a lie, but it's not real, he thought. He walked back to the captain's chair, stood for a moment, then lifted the body out, carrying it to stack with the others. He removed the remainder of the crew from their positions, leaving the bridge empty except for the flashing lights.

And an entire universe of stars wrapped three quarters of the way around the command area of the bridge. Jimmy turned to the left and then to the right. Stars and nebulae and shades of black in between. He propped himself up in the captain's chair and tried to take it all in.

"We're alone out here. One hundred and sixty of the original crew remain. Out of millions. I doubt they planned for that," he wondered aloud. His voice didn't echo within the bridge. It had been designed to prevent that sort of thing.

It had been designed where it didn't need humans at all.

Almost. A human had to tell it to stop, otherwise the Warden would journey through the universe for the rest of days.

Jimmy accessed the communication system, bypassing the bridge's computer. "Call William four seven, please."

"Jimmy, is that you?" the disembodied voice asked.

"It's me. I'm on the bridge, and you'll never believe what I found."

"You're not supposed to be up there! Did you use that command band you recovered? That was a recovery mission and not for your personal use and abuse. Man! You are in trouble. Are you in shackles? Is this your one phone call?" Willie joked.

"The computer has been running the ship the whole time. There's no one alive up here. I think I'll stay for a while as the computer works through some questions I've asked."

"I could use your help, Jimmy. The repair tickets are coming fast and furious. I'm not sure I can keep up."

"Do your best," Jimmy replied with a wry smile. He had done most of the work when they

were awake. Willie was okay not completing any tickets himself. “I’ll be back when I get back.”

He signed off before Willie could make an impassioned plea for Jimmy to return to main tech duties.

Jimmy walked throughout the bridge, checking the work stations, having only a cursory knowledge of what each would do, because he had received the initial brief, a long time before. He was maintenance. His knowledge was a mile wide and an inch deep. He only needed to know how to ask the computer for instructions to fix things and an advanced understanding of mechanics to best tear things down and put them back together.

He stopped at the food processor. “A cup of Kona coffee, please, hot.” The processor complied.

Jimmy returned to the captain’s chair and sat down.

“There are over a million life forms on board the Warden,” the computer reported.

“Sounds good, computer. Thank you.” Jimmy didn’t have any more questions. He wanted to sit in peace and contemplate life.

That took a total of five minutes. “Computer. Bring up the schematic of the Warden and show it on the main screen.”

The stars disappeared as a massive ship appeared with a cutaway view showing main decks, sub-decks, maintenance access ways, between deck corridors, and a massive city. “Zoom in on the city, please.” Jimmy stood and walked forward until he was fully immersed in the image.

“Come on, Meles. Wake your lazy self up. Would you look at this ship? With these,” he raised an arm and shook his command band, *“we can go anywhere we want.”*



Mission: Stem The Tide

A Story from Metamorphosis Alpha™
Aboard the Warden – Command Deck
by Craig Martelle

STATUS: “COMMAND BADGE AUTHORIZED. ACCESSING YOUR INFORMATION REQUEST, FIRST OFFICER BINNATZ”

Jimmy, a lowly maintenance tech, had been freed from the confines of routine maintenance when he found a command badge. He didn’t return it as ordered when it helped him learn the truth about the *Warden*. A telepathic badger called Meles invited himself on Jimmy’s travels. The two had become reluctant friends, allies in exploring new regions of the ship.

That was a revelation to the badger.

“A ship?” Meles shook his head, having no idea what a ship was.

“Hush, I’m trying to listen.” Jimmy cast an angry glance in the badger’s direction. They had made it to the command deck only to find it populated by the dead.

“There are over a million lifeforms on board the *Warden*,” the computer reported.

“Sounds good, computer. Thank you.” Jimmy didn’t have any more questions. He wanted to sit in peace and contemplate life. Meles laid down next to the captain’s chair and was quickly asleep, snoring softly.

The young man tried to clear his mind, but the command deck had unlimited potential for distractions. A world at his fingertips. “Computer. Bring up the schematic of the *Warden* and show it on the main screen.”

The stars disappeared as a massive ship took their place within a three-dimensional image hanging in the air, sporting a cutaway view showing main decks, sub-decks, maintenance access ways, between deck corridors, and an immense city. “Zoom in on the city, please.” Jimmy stood and walked forward until he was fully immersed in the map.

He touched the image where he studied the details of a world in miniature, one he knew was large enough that he couldn’t see in its entirety unless he reduced the size of the image, blurring most of the detail. When he was satisfied, he backed out of the holographic display. Looking down, he tapped the sleeping badger with the toe of his boot.

“Come on, Meles. Wake your lazy self up.” Jimmy nudged him a second time. When Meles opened one eye, Jimmy continued. “Would you look at this ship? With this—” He raised an arm and shook his command band. “—we can go anywhere we want.”

“Huh? Who’s where?”

“Us. There.” Jimmy pointed at the urban sprawl floating in the air. “Epsilon City.”

“Hang on, human. Your lips are moving but only nonsense is coming out. We’ve got it pretty good up here, but you want to leave? Is that what I thought I heard? Because it can’t be right.”

“Hang on, badger,” Jimmy replied in the same sarcastic tone using Meles’ own words. “Look at the death! I want to check out the rest of the ship. There’s nothing up here for us.” He swept his arms around the command deck, chopping a hand at each of the spacesuits, a dead crewman in each.

“To do what?” Meles countered.

“Haven’t you ever climbed a mountain just because it was there?” Jimmy jammed his fists

against his hips and set his feet wide. "I'm putting on my suit because we have a ship to explore."

"I don't know why you took it off if you weren't going to stay," the badger replied. Wrinkling his nose at the unpleasant mustiness of the command deck, he meandered toward the dining area and the functional food processor. *"Come. I need your one talent. I don't know what a mountain is, but if I did, you can guarantee I'd climb it like it has never been climbed before, unless there was work involved, and then I'd reconsider. I am a badger, after all."*

"I didn't know the extent of the ship before, Meles, you furry slacker." Jimmy followed his friend, without knowing why. "You and Willie should be partners so you can see who can do more of nothing all day."

"Is Willie a joke to you?" The badger stopped and turned to stare at Jimmy before chuckling, making his whole body shake. *"I would like to try doing nothing all day. I think I would be exceptional at it. We can do that if we stay up here. Out there—"* Meles pointed toward the main elevator with his tapered snout. *"—is hunger, pain, and nothing good. We're already in heaven."*

"I see a graveyard, not nirvana."

"You believe in nirvana?" Meles asked.

"Of course. It is the place that my people aspire to attain through devotion to *the* Jamus Wardenhofer and become one with the ship's engineering. I think of a perfect repair job as nirvana, when everything fits and works like it is supposed to. Ahh! Isn't that glorious?"

"You're screwed up in the head. This is nirvana. Searching for it elsewhere is a waste of time."

"But if we search elsewhere and don't find it, then it will have been here all along, and this command band will always be able to bring us back. Heaven and hell, existing together, a vacation from each other."

"Whatever you're drinking, I want some of it. Is there a fermented fruit you've been sucking on?"

"Come on, Meles, you lazy fleabag. The whole ship is ours. You saw the map. Command band and a map. We have everything we need and can go wherever we want."

"It's dangerous out there, and I could use a nap," Meles argued.

"How much can you sleep?"

"I'm a badger. I think the correct answer is to infinity and beyond."

Jimmy ordered two plates of lasagna for his friend. He figured he would need the energy. He sniffed the small dining area. The air had cleared. Jimmy ordered a large container of water for himself. Water was life. He had learned that when trapped within his suit.

"When I'm dressed and armed, we're leaving." Jimmy started to gear up, carefully, layer after layer to make himself nearly invulnerable to the natives' weapons. He checked his ammunition, most of it non-lethal. The powered armor created a faint energy shield.

Jimmy carried a bandolier of extra power cells, shot shells that fired small nets, a machete to hack down the vigorously-growing weeds, and a power toolkit.

He wore all the regulation gear except for his boots and gloves. Those were a gift four sleeps back when the main techs could still be seen by the natives. The boots and gloves were made specifically for him, so they fit like a second skin, and they'd held up well after forty years of

active use. He couldn't imagine wearing anything else.

He slapped the first power pack into his slug thrower, loaded a net round in one chamber and a rubber bullet in the other, and then slung it combat style, under his arm, barrel forward, and ready to fire.

He dipped and twisted as he flexed his muscles and made sure that his armor moved in sync with him, augmenting his strength. He whirled and kicked at the air. He jumped to the ceiling, slapped his free hand against it, and dropped back to the floor, landing softly as the armor absorbed most of the deceleration force.

Jimmy looked for his friend. The badger had inhaled the food and was curled up under one of the dining room tables, sound asleep. He picked Meles up, his powered armor making the heavy creature seem light. "Time to go, little friend."

Jimmy stepped carefully to the main elevator. With one last glance over his shoulder at the tomb that had been the command deck, he waved his wristband in front of the access panel and the doors slid open. Once inside, he stated where he wanted to go. "Epsilon City."

The elevator doors opened within a magnificent cathedral, overgrown by vines and greenery.

"Is this the right level?" Meles wondered, watching the world from Jimmy's arms. The maintenance tech looked down at the badger, wondering why he was still carrying the creature if he was awake. *"I thought we were going to a city."*

"This is the city level. We're supposed to be in the middle of some park. We'll walk toward the buildings and see what there is to see, if I remember the map correctly."

"Wolfoids," Meles replied, his nose wrinkling while he sniffed, the movement growing more agitated with each step. Through the heavy vines and greenery, a faint backdrop painted a city in ruins, shells of buildings overgrown by nature.

"Why am I still carrying you?" Jimmy asked, before putting the badger down. "I'll need my hands free if we're going to run into wolfoids. Can you tell how many?"

"This place stinks of wolfoid. I think there are too many." Meles crept forward through the atrium-like area, finally clearing the canopy and breaking into the open. He stopped and crouched, sniffing and watching.

"What do you see?"

"I see the need for you to be quiet," Meles shot back telepathically. He didn't know why Jimmy would say his words out loud instead of simply in his mind. *"Humans are dumb."*

Jimmy refused to validate the badger's point by saying something. Jimmy moved to the edge of the foliage tracing the elevator atrium's entrance. A vine snaked over his shoulder and tried to wrap around his throat. With a well-practiced move, he pulled a vibroblade and sliced it off, putting the blade back in a thigh compartment before the severed floral appendage hit the ground.

The rank smell of wet dog was more powerful in the open area. The badger's ears perked up. He adjusted his head until he could focus on the direction it was coming from. Faint, but unmistakable.

"There's a fight."

“Let’s take a look,” Jimmy whispered and bolted across the open ground, throwing himself against the first tree he came to. He waved at Meles to join him.

“You are insane. I think I’ll wait here for you to come back. And don’t you dare get killed. You’re my meal ticket.”

Jimmy waved once more and stopped mid-wave. Voices intruded into his mind. Loud and persistent. Meles dropped to the ground and tried to cover his ears with his paws, but the riot of silent noise was deafening within his mind.

We are The Tide. As the tide ebbs and flows, so do we. Through space we travel, seeking to survive. We flow to distance shores whereupon we wash. As the tide cleans the sands of life, we roll ashore, stake our claim, and recede when there is nothing left. We are The Tide.

The warmbloods don’t understand. We need them, but they need us. Strength flows from the force of our wills into their bodies.

If they would only let us in. We can help them.

If they would have only talked with us, the warmbloods. But they didn’t respond when we asked our question. They didn’t talk with us. They didn’t want to discuss their place in our existence. And now, there can be no compromise.

The warmbloods can no longer hold back The Tide.

Meles popped to his feet and ran like the hounds of hell were on his heels. From the atrium emerged a blanket of tiny machines. Individual, yet moving as one, moving like a river’s tide.

Meles dodged back and forth until a machine flew from his tail. He ran past Jimmy and kept going. Jimmy jumped forward, grabbed the tiny machine, and tucked it away before following wherever his panicked friend was headed.

The intermittent trees gave way to heavy foliage and undergrowth, almost jungle dense. Jimmy used the power of his suit to force his way through while Meles, although huge, was still able to wriggle through openings closer to the ground. Jimmy made a power-assisted leap to get in front of the badger, grabbing him when he emerged. After two more jumps, they found themselves in a small open area with a single bench. Jimmy put Meles down.

They could better see the decaying buildings through small gaps in the greenery.

“What were those things?” Jimmy asked.

Meles twisted himself so he could lick the blood from his stubby tail. *“This is your fault.”*

Jimmy ignored his friend. He carefully removed the small bot from his work pouch. It flexed pincers at four points on its small, boxy body. On the bottom side, it had a scoop with ridges. Six legs rhythmically moved as if not understanding that it wasn’t on the ground. No bigger than a single finger, Jimmy needed his helmet’s magnification capabilities to see the tiny sensors on each of the surfaces.

Visual, maybe other wavelengths, too. Jimmy ripped the legs off the thing and dropped it, where he ground it beneath the heel of one of his custom soft-pleather boots.

“We better get going. They know where we are.”

“We could have been in nirvana. But no. Big human know better than emaciated badger. Me know good thoughts. Me human.”

Meles had no desire to wait for the flood of mini-bots to prove that he was right. He started moving away from The Tide.

“We’re cut off from the elevator,” Jimmy said casually as they worked their way through the overgrown park. His eyes darted around the area and up the trees as if the mini-bots would fall from above and swarm them, like a wave over an unsuspecting shore.

“*Fight is up ahead,*” Meles said, slowing and nervously looking back while craning his furry neck to see through the bushes to the urban area beyond.

They stopped at the last shrubs where the pavement held the growth at bay. Beyond, plasma bursts and lasers arced across an open road between two buildings. The combatants were nowhere to be seen.

“Is it just me or is the fire coming from one direction? And that begs the question, what are they shooting at?” Jimmy looked over his shoulder, his skin crawling with anticipation. He grunted with the impact of the mental surge.

We are The Tide. As the tide ebbs and flows, so do we. Through space we travel, seeking to survive. We flow to distance shores whereupon we wash. As the tide cleans the sands of life, we roll ashore, stake our claim, and recede when there is nothing left. We are The Tide.

Meles rolled to his side, groaning in pain. Jimmy recovered quickly from the explosion of sound within his mind, but the telepathic badger was far more susceptible. He stilled.

Jimmy checked the creature’s neck, unsure of how to tell if a badger was alive. He thought he felt a pulse before switching to an infrared view from his helmet. The pulse showed weak but consistent.

“I’m not ready to stop putting up with your antics,” he said. He hoisted the badger to his left shoulder, leaving his right arm free to operate his weapons. He rolled the double-barreled slug thrower forward and unloaded the net round and rubber bullet. He tucked them away and loaded explosive-tipped ammunition into both breeches and locked them in place.

Even his human nose could pick up the rank smell of the wolfoids. He sealed his suit to remove the distraction, opting for filtered air.

Jimmy moved perpendicular to the firefight, trying to keep an eye in front of him, behind, and to both sides. His pulse increased with each step.

“New plan, buddy,” Jimmy whispered, knowing Meles couldn’t hear him. “We get back to the command deck any way we can, and we don’t leave. We’ll clean it up, dump the bodies, wipe the dust, maybe put out some flowers. It’ll be the nirvana you thought it was.”

The fear gnawed at him.

We are The Tide...

He could hear their name reverberating within his mind. Was it real or his imagination? He could feel every beat of his own heart.

He pushed through the bushes and stepped onto the pavement, counting on his armor to protect him from this deck’s natives. He hurried across an open plaza toward the back of the building from which the fire emanated. He needed to know. Was it The Tide? Were they out here?

The ramp! There was a hidden ramp to the next levels up and down on both sides of each deck. He looked up and oriented himself. With the park at his back, it would be straight ahead, many kilometers, but if they couldn’t get back to the elevator, the ramp offered an escape to safety.

We are The Tide...

Jimmy looked up. The building had wide ledges, facades, and vines.

He flexed his knees, deciding he needed a better look at the world around them. He jumped up as far as he could go, seeking a ledge halfway to the roof. His target landing spot had looked sturdier from the ground. He had an instant to assess its crumbling state before his boots settled. Jimmy grabbed the window frame with his right hand and leaned his head sideways to pin the unconscious badger against his shoulder so he could hold the other side of the window with his left hand.

Jimmy found that he was holding his breath. He gasped before sucking in great gulps of air. One more jump and he could pull himself onto the roof. He had already committed, and it was close.

He searched for solid footing on the ledge, testing it while holding himself firmly in place. Once he planted his feet, he wasted no time and launched himself upward once more. He flew past the roof's edge, twisting and hooking it under his right arm.

He grunted from the impact, hung there for a moment, then rolled the badger forward to deposit him onto the flat roof. Jimmy started to climb over and found a wolfoïd aiming a laser rifle at him.

Jimmy froze. His slug thrower was trapped between his body and the outer wall, and both arms were draped over the bulwark. Casually, he tried to free his right arm, but the wolfoïd surged forward.

A ten-meter drop awaited him if he let go, but he couldn't abandon his friend. The badger started to move. The wolfoïd's eyes flicked to the new threat. He changed his aim to the furry creature stirring in front of the armored human.

Jimmy pushed his weight to his left side and whipped his right around the ledge. He pulled his slug thrower up as the wolfoïd's red eyes flashed. The creature aimed and pulled the laser rifle's trigger.

The maintenance tech's armor was attenuated to the ship's laser technology. The *Warden* couldn't have maintenance techs slicing through their suits while using welding lasers. Since it was the same tech as the laser rifles, the laser didn't burn through, even though the wolfoïd's aim was true.

Jimmy's skin tingled beneath the beam, but nothing more. The maintenance technician took careful aim and fired once. The explosive microwarhead traveled the distance almost instantly, striking the wolfoïd in the chest and exploding. Wolfoïd fur, blood, and gore flew in a spray across the roof and over the other side. Jimmy pulled himself to the rooftop and checked on Meles.

"Making friends and influencing people," Meles grumbled, holding his head with one paw.

"Stay here." Jimmy petted his friend's shoulder briefly, grateful that he was okay, before hurrying to the far wall and looking over. The fire below continued unabated. Wolfoïds engaged from within the building he was on. That ruled out using the steps to get down.

He squinted, then dialed up his helmet's magnification. He saw movement inside the window into which the wolfoïds kept pouring their firepower.

The Tide.

Jimmy turned and pounded across the rooftop, scooping up Meles before vaulting over the wall and falling downward, accelerated by the artificial gravity. He gripped the badger tightly and absorbed as much of the impact with the street as he could by deeply flexing at the knees. He straightened and looked back toward the central elevators, their shafts disappearing into

the sky above. So close while being too far away.

The foliage moved as if some great beast wallowed within.

“Don’t ever do that again,” Meles complained. The telepathic words died in the ether as he took in the sight of the mini-bots devouring the greenery across the street.

“Why are they eating the plants?” Jimmy wondered.

“Time to go?” Meles encouraged, not bothering to speculate. *“They’re on three sides. This way.”*

The badger took off, loping as he tried to manage the pain his head. They ran parallel to the lake toward the forward end of this deck. Jimmy accelerated, pushing his suit as much as he could.

The badger was faster over open ground than he was, even in his suit, fear driving them both. Jimmy fired into The Tide, the explosive shell blasting robot bodies into shards of metal and tongues of fire. The Tide flowed into the void, filling it as water does when withdrawing a hand from a bucket.

The Tide finished with the foliage, having cleared a path directly to the elevators from where they came. They stopped at the pavement and remained motionless.

“I have an idea,” Jimmy said. *“Over here.”*

He got in front of the badger and herded him toward the lake and surrounding park that dominated the middle of Epsilon City. The central elevators were located on the shore of the lake, more than a kilometer away with heavy foliage and a sea of mini-bots between.

Meles’ eyes showed the whites and his head jerked back and forth as he searched the area.

“You’re a good fighter, but you’re terrified. Those little robots scare you that much?”

“They are in my head. Even now. They drone on, peeling away layers of hope and happiness until there’s nothing left.”

Jimmy kneeled to look the badger in the eye. *“There’s everything left. You were right, my friend. Nirvana is down there, on the command deck. We’ll make it our own. All we have to do is get back there. We start by finding the control module. Every bot has one, but these are too small to have their own. They move in sync, a coordinated effort like actuators, which means that something is driving them.”*

“No one drives bees, yet they still swarm.”

“The queen drives the bees. The queen can stop them, send them somewhere else. In the case of the bots, the control module needs to be shut down.” Jimmy jacked the spent cartridges from his slug thrower and reloaded it with high-explosive shells. There was no room for non-lethal measures in Epsilon City.

“What makes you think there’s a control module?”

“I have hundreds of years of experience as a maintenance technician, a main tech. There’s a control module because that’s how this ship was built. I don’t know how they work, but I know you have to replace them when they go bad. And this one has gone bad.”

“What if those things aren’t from this ship? They said they came from space.”

“You weren’t kidding when you said those things were taking away all hope. I told you I have a plan, and I wouldn’t kid you about something like that.”

“Which means you have no plan.” Meles shook his head. *“I’m going to die thinking about*

how I failed all badgerdom.”

“Which means I have an idea that will gel into a plan. We need to get back where we can see. The Tide flowed from the elevators? I don’t think so. I believe they came from beyond the elevators. We need to check out the lake.”

Meles grumbled and lagged behind a careful Jimmy using the full complement of his suit’s sensors to search the way ahead.

“The elevators look clear. Let’s make a run for it.” Jimmy caught Meles by the scruff of his neck as he tried to dash past.

“They are there. We just can’t see them.” Jimmy dialed up his metal sensor. The area was flooded with metal structures around which the foliage had grown along with patches of infesting mini-bots.

“I would hear them if they were there. Let me go.”

“If they’re dormant? We can’t risk letting them get to another level and definitely not the level we’re going to. I don’t want to be responsible for infesting nirvana with something like The Tide. We have to clear them out before we catch our ride home.” Jimmy searched the area for any movement, any heat sources, finding nothing. He wondered if Meles was right.

The badger flopped down, putting his head between his front paws. *“Your plan is to take on the thing we ran for our lives from? I have to strongly reiterate my previous statement. Humans are dumb, but you’re learning. Home. I like the sound of that.”*

“All we have to do is to figure out what’s making these things tick and shut it off.”

“It’s a machine and I’m a badger, so you’re on your own.” Meles’ body showed the tension he kept from his telepathic voice.

“Since you need me to activate the elevator and order your food, it’s in your best interest to keep me alive, so come on. Let’s take a closer look at that lake.”

“Touché, human.”

Jimmy moved past a crumbling set of structures that smelled of decay. He hastened his stride. Through the brush, he plowed to the shore where he stopped and watched. He stood rigidly, because movement caught the eye. Many observers missed what was right in front of them because it wasn’t moving. Jimmy was hiding in the open by not moving. Meles peeked around the armored legs.

The water churned, and Jimmy brought his rifle up, aiming and ready to fire. A human head appeared and then a neck and bare chest. Curious flaps flexed on both sides of his neck. He held his hands up, wincing at the move. His lower body worked as he treaded water.

He turned slowly to reveal a bot attached to his back. Jimmy didn’t hesitate. He let his rifle slide back under his arm, and he splashed into the water, sinking over his head with the second step. He activated the buoyancy setting on his suit, swam to the surface, and kicked his way to the merman, ripping the first bot off and crushing it between his bicep and forearm, using his armor’s powered strength.

A second bot was burrowing. Not as delicately as Jimmy would have liked, since he was bobbing on the lake water, he dug his gloved fingers into the wound to grip the mini-bot and yank it free. The merman cried out and started to falter. Jimmy twisted the mini-bot between his hands, the rage giving him the strength to bend the metal and spark the power, killing it.

He dropped it and caught the merman, dragging him to the shore. Meles waited impatiently, watching the splashing that he was sure would draw unwanted attention.

Jimmy pushed the merman against the bank. His gills worked rapidly as they tried to draw air into his tortured body.

“The island,” he gasped. He turned his head part of the way as he tried to point. There was only one island Jimmy could see.

“What’s on the island? Is it The Tide?”

“The Tide...” The merman’s body shuddered and shook. His gills stopped moving. Jimmy slid him back into the water and pushed him away.

“To be reclaimed by his people,” Jimmy whispered. The body sank, and the surface calmed. In the distance, the spires of a castle stood above a forest that dominated the island. Jimmy pointed. “That’s where we need to go.”

“If The Tide has claimed the island, why would we want to go there? The Tide’s location is relative. If we ran across a wolfoid, he’d say The Tide is in the city. Me? I’d say The Tide is that way.” He stabbed his black and gray paw toward the central elevators.

“I have a hunch,” Jimmy said. “Come on. I’ll carry you.”

Meles rolled onto his back, groaning and whining. *“Who’s worse, the stupid human or the badger who goes with him?”*

“Keep me alive or there’s no food.” Jimmy leaned his back against the shore so Meles could climb on. The badger reluctantly boarded and wrapped two slender paws around Jimmy’s head and in front of his face-shield.

Jimmy activated the artificial reality screen within his helmet. The paws blocking his view disappeared, replaced by a virtual view overlaid with information from infrared and ultraviolet sensors. Jimmy added metallic objects. He expected the screen to fill with information overload, but there was very little metal in the immediate vicinity.

A submarine rested on the lake floor beneath, listing and devoid of warmblooded life. The island was too far away to deliver much information, but the shoreline was clear.

Jimmy kicked casually to minimize his wake, but he still left a v-shaped ripple behind him. Meles was not amused.

“You’re making my job impossible. I have the impossible job,” Meles lamented.

“You will be the envy of all badgerkind when we get home to the command deck. Sleeping will be the sport of kings, and speaking of kings, that castle looks like something out of one of those movies that Willie loves.”

The main tech thought about his former partner, wondering briefly how he was doing.

Jimmy’s feet touched the bottom. He started to walk, coming farther out of the water with each step. He turned and crouched once ashore so Meles could jump down. The two hurried into the trees beyond, the badger staying low.

“I’m not seeing any metal infestations on my screen.” Jimmy gingerly stepped through the underbrush, trying to make as little noise as possible. The badger moved soundlessly. He passed the armored human and stopped when he reached the edge of the forest. A castle stood before them with a sign over the portcullis. “Camelot.”

“I don’t want to go in there,” Meles said.

Jimmy scanned the area. “I don’t think we have to. Over there.” He pointed to the right of the castle’s main gate, outside the vine-covered ramparts.

He skirted the open area, keeping the castle to his left and casting furtive glances that way, but his screen told him the danger was ahead. He'd never seen a reading like the one his systems showed. Meles stood up straight, walking on two feet so he could grab his head with his paws. He started to stagger.

Jimmy could hear it faintly. "We are The Tide..."

He scooped up the badger and reversed course, running away until Meles's breathing eased and he opened his eyes. "Stay here," Jimmy told him.

After resting his friend against a tree, Jimmy turned back, his face grim. He stalked toward the spot on his screen where the metal resonated strongest. He cycled his weapons in one last system check. They used to be tools at the command of a competent maintenance technician. Now, they were weapons to make war against an enemy of the *Warden*.

Squabbles, battles, and wars had been fought on board the *Warden* since the accident, but no one had sought the extermination of all life. The Tide was different. Jimmy couldn't put it into words, but he knew he was right. He couldn't live with himself running back to the command deck while leaving The Tide to continue their takeover of Epsilon City. Jimmy didn't know what created them or where they came from, but he was determined to stop them in their tracks by burning their control module.

The only thing he had to do was find it. The problem was, he didn't know what The Tide's control module looked like.

He hoped he would figure it out before the mini-bots swarmed him. Jimmy expected they could penetrate his suit given enough time. It was safer to believe that than think he was impervious. He started to run, hurrying as if that would keep The Tide out of Meles' mind.

And his, too. He could hear them as he closed.

"All warmbloods must die," the voices chanted.

Jimmy slowed as he approached the undulating metal blanket showing on his internal screen. He changed the view from artificial to real and the screen cleared. The greens from the foliage seemed brighter and fuller than what he had seen on his display. The sounds of the mini-bots came through the unmodified audio pickups, almost like the white noise piped into the sleeping pods. He reached out and pulled aside a branch thick with leaves to reveal a monument of rough-hewn rocks titled "Stonehenge."

It and the surrounding area was covered in a blanket of vibrating metal bodies.

In between the massive stones, a bulbous and misshapen metal monster seethed with the adulation of its minions. A billion bots.

Jimmy no longer had to wonder what the control module looked like. He examined the metal beast as much as he could, cycling through his various sensors to see if an off-switch revealed itself, but nothing showed.

If only the Space Marines had survived, they could have handled this. They'd love blowing this thing up, he thought.

No explosives. Maintenance techs were never given access to or authorization for explosives. His first job was to fix things. Blowing stuff up was never a maintenance solution, but today, everything was different.

"The warmblood offers himself on the altar of our existence. The Tide will feast."

Jimmy slowly moved the branch back into place, but it was too late. The Tide was on the move. He turned and ran.

The Tide may have been an unstoppable flood of machines, but it wasn't fast. He soon left them far behind.

Jimmy found Meles as he'd left him. The human barely slowed to grab the badger. He continued through the open area until he had to turn toward the shore. He forced his way through the heavy undergrowth, protecting Meles with an armored arm.

He ran the final few steps before launching himself into the lake and kicking toward the opposite shore. Far behind, The Tide finally made it to the shore but stopped, a metal blanket over the area Jimmy and Meles had just passed through.

"Why do you think they stopped?" Jimmy asked, panting hard to get his breath.

Meles tapped Jimmy's helmet with a single paw to get the human's attention. He pointed at the opposite shore, where a metal flood flowed.

"We are The Tide..."

"I find myself disappointed that I wasn't authorized explosives," he said, treading water and stroking the badger's head. Meles groaned with the agony of The Tide in his mind. Jimmy rolled to his back and kicked casually as he swam parallel to the shore. He needed time to think. The Tide was made of metal and couldn't float. As long as Jimmy kept the depths between him and the mini-bots, he and Meles would be safe.

The Tide moved with him. "Looks like we're going to have to swim to the other side of the lake," Jimmy suggested, trying to calculate how long it would take The Tide to get there.

A massive explosion jerked Jimmy's attention back to the main shoreline. A plasma flash was punctuated by laser beams slicing back and forth across The Tide. From the island, the mini-bots were galvanized into action. They raced into the water as fast as their small legs would carry them. The splash sent a wave toward the opposite shore. The Tide flowed.

Wolfoids massed their firepower, knowing The Tide was a mortal enemy. All battles were life or death, but failure meant their extinction. Jimmy tried to calculate how long it would take the island Tide to arrive.

They had scoured the area clean along the path they'd taken to follow Jimmy. A path that would lead him straight to the control module.

Jimmy rolled to his stomach, sending Meles into the water. The badger came up sputtering and moaning. Jimmy helped him to his back as he started stroking hard for the island shore. He kicked frantically, watching for The Tide to surge from beneath him.

When he could touch his feet to the lakebed, he kept kicking. He didn't want to risk them attacking his feet. His ego to have the comfortable boots and gloves and not the armored versions was weighing on him.

Nirvana. Five decks down. The Tide was distracted, and he was swimming away from the central elevator. He didn't have enough breath to scold himself over his choice, although he knew he had no choice. As a maintenance tech, his job was to keep the ship running. This was no different. If The Tide took over, there would be no ship.

The control module. When he finally put his feet down, he high-stepped to the shore and kept going, risking a glance over his shoulder to see if he'd been followed. Not yet, but he knew they'd be coming.

He hoped The Tide would be too late.

Jimmy ran as he'd never run before. The badger hung on, complaining with every bump until the sound of The Tide filled his mind. He lost his hold and fell. Jimmy let him go.

The only way to help his friend was to pull the plug on the module. The Tide had left a superhighway straight to Stonehenge where the massive creature waited.

"We are the Tide. The warmbloods are an infestation and must be cleansed."

"Not today," Jimmy replied. His head throbbed with the The Tide's volume.

He slowed to a jog as he entered the clearing and rounded the stones, studying the misshapen robot—metal and mismatched parts, an abomination of design and function. With a whirring and rhythmic thump, mini-bots started spewing from a chute on one side.

The Tide.

"Where are you getting the raw materials?" Jimmy switched to his sensor-view, where he found the bot was sitting on a shaft that led into the ship's framing and structure below. The Tide was eating the Warden to make the bots that would destroy all life within. When it was finished, the ship would be nothing but an empty shell.

Jimmy leveled his slug thrower and fired into the chute. He emptied both barrels four times into the guts of the mother bot. He stomped the six-legged minis into the ground. When the ground was clear, he turned his attention back to the task at hand. He found that the big bot had already begun repairing itself. Jimmy's attack had not been final, only an inconvenience.

How could he deactivate a control module as big as a small building?

"We are the Tide, warmblood. You cannot stop us. The Tide flows across the shore to become one with us."

Jimmy knew they were coming, but when?

With a yell, more to motivate himself than intimidate The Tide, he vaulted to the top of the metal monster. He started searching frantically for an access panel, but the bot had built itself. It didn't need external access for a maintenance technician. Jimmy needed to get inside, but there was no space.

Another roar, but this one of anguish. He opened his toolkit and removed the cutting torch. He used his suit sensors to find the thinnest metal walls, and he started to cut.

He made a single cut, half a meter long, when he could hear them. The relentless flow of The Tide.

He angled to create a corner, hoping that he could twist the metal away and see something inside to cut, to destroy the entity.

A black and white furry beast ran ahead of The Tide—Meles, wearing a medieval helmet over his furry head.

"What? How?" Jimmy stammered, his eyes darting back and forth between The Tide and his friend. He couldn't hear the badger. The helmet was blocking the signals to or from his mind.

"We are The Tide..."

"Go! Go! In there, take this and cut anything that looks like a wire or circuit board."

Jimmy jammed the torch into Meles' paw. The blue flame looked harmless as the badger held it carefully. Jimmy pointed up the chute that he'd blasted. Meles nodded and squirmed inside. The maintenance technician stood on the metal creature known as The Tide and jacked the only ammunition he had into his slug thrower. A net round and a rubber round.

He fired when The Tide flowed around the stones and into the center. The pincers cut the

nets, and the rubber bullets bounced off. Jimmy pulled the slug thrower off his shoulder and reversed it, holding it like a club. He jumped off the top and stood in front of the chute. He started swinging, back and forth, sweeping the mini-bots away. The Tide flowed relentlessly.

He was caught mid-backswing, and they swarmed, their little legs running up his armored body. They attacked his joints with their pincers, digging away micro bits with each pass. He pressed his back against the chute, blocking it with his body.

A needle-like pincer penetrated his elbow joint. Jimmy grunted with the pain. His ankles and wrists were on fire. He fought until he could no longer.

The Tide flowed.

Jimmy didn't know when it stopped. He had jammed his eyes shut so he could focus on his own screams of pain. He wondered how long it had been or if he was still alive. So much anguish, his nerves protesting with each second they had to endure.

But feeling pain meant you were alive. Jimmy shut down his screens and returned to the live view. He recoiled at the sight of The Tide that had flooded Stonehenge.

But they were still. His suit told him about tapping on his back before he could feel it himself. His suit also warned him he was on fire.

He jumped up and dove forward, rolling in the lifeless mini-bot bodies. Jimmy stood when his suit reported it was back to normal, but he found standing to be too painful. He collapsed into the metal bodies.

Meles climbed from the chute and threw the cutting torch to the ground. He ripped the helmet from his head with both front paws and launched it at the human. Jimmy tried to duck, but it clanged off his shoulder and rolled away.

"Can we go home now?"

"Meles. You did it!"

The badger canted his head one way and then the other, very doglike in his response to the human stating the obvious.

"Home. Now."

Jimmy stood again and limped away from The Tide. He turned back and used his suit sensors to examine the massive bot that he had named the control module. No energy signatures. All systems dead.

Exactly like what happened when you deactivated a control module. He smiled behind his helmet's face-shield, wincing at the pain in his ankles.

The badger hopped through The Tide—"Ow. Ow."—as he bounced across the spiky mini-bots until he reached the open ground beyond the monument. *"Well?"*

"As much as it pains me to admit it, Meles... You were right, but then again, if we hadn't deactivated The Tide, they would have made their way to the command level. This thing was digging through the ship, destroying it an exponential rate." Jimmy thought for a moment and then thrust his fist in the air. "Maintenance for the win!"

"You could be the strangest creature I've ever met," Meles suggested.

"I'm hearing that from a talking badger?" Jimmy hobbled along, following the path that The Tide had cleared. "What do you say we dodge some wolfoids on our way back to the central elevators? I'm tired, hungry, out of ammo, and my armor is trashed."

"Sounds like a normal day for you," Meles shot back, holding up his paws like a small child. Jimmy picked up his friend and carried him toward the shore.

The End



The Free Trader



The Free Trader is a complete nine-book omnibus edition in a single set, with the follow-on Cygnus Space Opera series. Get it exclusively from Amazon at <https://geni.us/FTComplete>.

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Author Notes



This was a great project that we had been thinking about for quite some time. The author business has been kind, so when I approached Jim with the idea, he was all for it. We set it up so everyone could win.

What are your best memories of Metamorphosis Alpha? For me, it's dragging the 1976 original rule book all over the world. It was the one constant in my entire Marine Corps career. It's been in 20 different countries, in times of war and peace. It was always there to read through and jot notes about, but mostly to daydream of adventures on the Starship Warden.

When I finally really retired, I decided it was time to write the stories down. My first book was a survival piece based on the fact that we live in Alaska. My second and third books were Gamma World inspired – my Free Trader series. And then the third book in that series is where I take the Free Trader and his group to the colony ship orbiting the planet Cygnus VII. It was great fun.

I wrote three more in that series and the next year, I wrote the final three to finish the series ending with Free Trader 9, Return to the Traveler. They needed one more grand adventure on board the old colony ship.

With that, I wish you a fond adieu from the sub-Arctic. There are so many more stories to write, so I'm back at the computer typing madly away.

Peace, fellow humans.

<https://craigmartelle.com>