

LOST IN SPACE ADVENTURES

Vol.1

Foreword

Lost In Space, after all these years, remains a remarkably engaging and endearing show. Many of the episodes draw on themes from classical literature and folklore, and many address issues and themes far more sophisticated than it is sometimes given credit for.

Additionally, Lost In Space had a remarkably talented cast of stars, with significant previous fame and stardom under their belts. Guy Williams had achieved fame as Zorro, June Lockhart was already known as the archetypal mother from Lassie, Mark Goddard had two successful series in his resume, Angela Cartwright had spent years on Make Room For Daddy with Danny Thomas, and had just finished her role as Brigitte in The Sound Of Music, and Jonathan Harris had been in a number of shows, a character actor doing both drama and comedy – an accomplishment in itself – etc. etc.

The writers and producers likewise had any number of credits to them, both in television and movies. And Irwin Allen himself was already known as the light behind Voyage To The Bottom Of The Sea.

The ingredients were there for a stunning, landmark TV series. That is what Lost In Space became . . . but perhaps not in the way everyone hoped. Some episodes became virtually notorious.

It is fruitless at this far remove to overanalyze exactly what may have happened between a particular vision and what ultimately appeared on the little screen. Suffice it to say that some episodes actually have very good and quite profound stories hidden in them, eclipsed sometimes by poor or careless production, props, scenery, or costuming which approached the absurd, and a tendency toward the slapstick which overshadowed the depth of the real story.

What I have done with these Lost In Space Adventures is to take specific episodes and rewrite them as serious science fiction short stories. This is more than just tweaking a few words of a script. These are complete re-imaginings of the stories. I have attempted to retain as much as possible the original plotlines, working with the original scenes, sometimes incorporating original dialogue, but trying to present a more realistic and dramatic story. Not to say these are without humor! Dr. Smith in particular provides some light touches, and a bit of comic relief here and there keeps these from being dreary slogs, I hope. When appropriate, I have made a point of providing better visual presentations of some aspects – a couple of alien characters, in particular, and have rewritten some scenes and sequences of events to make (I hope) better sense and a more coherent storyline. I've tried to make the science a bit more accurate and plausible. Also, I have kept Smith much more the scoundrel than he became in the show, although he does provide a few light touches. My Zachary Smith may be amusing, but he is still dangerous. Nevertheless, the others still tolerate, even love him. He really is a remarkably complex character. I believe that his flaws derive from weakness rather than evil, as such, and this is something the others – especially the women – respond to. In the show, and here too, he has his moments when he can overcome his flaws and act both nobly and heroically.

I have written five Lost In Space Adventures so far. I'll provide some brief (I hope) explanatory notes preceding each:

Welcome, Stranger
The Dream Monster
A Visit To Hades
The Golden Man
The Questing Beast

Welcome, Stranger is a good solid First Season episode, by and large, and doesn't really need revisiting. Perhaps that is why this is probably the most radical departure from the original I've done, and tends a bit to the fantasy end of the spectrum (though not as much as some actual episodes.) The one thing that bothered me about the episode was simply that Haggood's excuses for not going back to Earth never really rang true. Not even close enough to radio on a message? It crossed my mind that maybe he had more reason for not getting near Earth than he ever let on in the episode . . . then it crossed my mind that maybe there was even more . . . I also wanted to clean up a bit of the science and some of the plausibility, and tie up a few events a bit tighter. I think we're fairly confident today that "landing on Saturn" is no more likely than landing on a cloud. Likewise, the always debatable question of how far everyone has traveled – and how! Along the way – to my surprise – this ended up very much a "Will" story.

With no further ado, then . . .

Welcome, Stranger A Lost In Space Adventure

"Any success, Don?"

"Not a bit."

Two men stared into an unfamiliar night sky. A powerful telescope stood nearby, gazing upwards, and a computer terminal sat on a small worktable.

Don explained, or apologized. "There's a red giant up there," pointing low on the horizon, "that I thought might be Betelgeuse or Antares. But the stars appearing nearby just don't match up with the 3-D star charts. Not from any angle."

"Don" was Major Donald West, U.S. Aerospace Force, and pilot of the crippled space ship behind the two.

The other man, Professor John Robinson, ran his fingers through his hair in frustration and sighed. "So we're still lost."

"Afraid so. I think our best option is to keep trying to get a match for that one red star, though. It's pretty distinctive, and the 3-D models are programmed with every star in our hemisphere of the Milky Way."

"Can we even be sure we're within that area?"

Now Don sighed in frustration. "After a hyperdrive cascade overload like we had, I wouldn't even swear we're in our own galaxy. But we have to start with something. For now, I'm just going to start running the models for every red giant in the almanac, moving outward from home."

"That could take –"

"I know. It's taken three days just to tell me that's not Antares or Betelgeuse. And there are almost two hundred red giants just within a hundred light years of Earth." Don gestured toward the telescope. "Meanwhile, I'm plotting in as many more stars as I can. The bigger the sample, the better the chance the computer will be able to finally place a pattern and start identifying some of them. Maybe even which one we're orbiting and exactly where we are."

Robinson looked up at the sky. "Hopefully we'll have fuel enough by then for liftoff and passage to Alpha Centauri." He didn't mention the numerous repairs required in the wake of their spaceship's misadventures, which had included bombardment in a meteor field followed by a crash landing.

"Speaking of which, John . . .?"

"The Robot has been out surveying to the southeast. He came back with three sites that warrant investigation. We'll go look at them in the morning."

Along with discovering their location in space, refining fuel was their most urgent task, pulling the rare and precious deuterium isotope almost molecule by molecule from the ground. Among other damage, the meteor barrage had shorted out the ship's engineering circuits, causing the hyperdrive cascade overload which had not only left them on this unknown world, but burned through a fuel supply which should have lasted them for more than 10 years.

Robinson glanced at his watch. "It's past midnight, Don. Pack it in for the night, we'll need to be up early. You won't accomplish anything more now."

"Yeah, you're right." He sighed again. "Everyone else already asleep?" he asked casually.

John smiled slightly to himself. "I think Judy's still up."

Judy was his older daughter, just a few years younger than Don. His two younger children, Will and Penny, were already asleep. His wife, Maureen, was in bed. Together, they had planned to colonize the fourth planet orbiting Alpha Centauri.

"I suppose it will take you a few minutes to shut down and secure all the equipment. I'll ask Judy to bring you out a glass of iced tea."

"Thanks," grinned Don. "Warm night, isn't it?"

"Warm enough," replied John, returning the grin and slapping his friend on the back.

Don's eyes suddenly narrowed and directed their piercing gaze beyond Robinson's shoulder. "Look at that," he directed.

"A ship!" exclaimed John Robinson. "And it looks like it's landing not too far from here."

"Don't get too excited just yet. It may be a rescue mission looking for us, it may be another shipwreck, it may even be aliens who don't care about us at all."

"Well . . . I don't like the idea of trying to locate him in the dark. Or them. Or . . . whatever they might be. Let's set the force field, put the Robot on guard duty, and track him down in daylight."

The Robot, which they called by no name other than "Robot," was an ungainly looking automaton, which rolled about on treads and bore a large flat glass dome for a head. It was equipped with a deadly plasma-bolt defensive system. As it roamed the perimeter just inside the force field, the ship and her crew were probably as safe as they could ever be, all things considered.

John gave the pilot a friendly wink. "I'll see about that iced tea for you now."

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Morning broke hotly, as it had every day for the previous few months.

"John, I've got the location of that ship we saw last night. Radar tracked it perfectly and recorded it."

"Good. At least we know that still works properly. All right. I'll take Will and the Robot and go find our visitor. You stay here to guard the ship, just in case. While you're here, take Smith and load up the Chariot with the prospecting and mining gear. With any luck we'll get to that after lunch." John laughed. "Or with some real luck we'll be leaving here by then!"

"Smith? Really? It'll be quicker to do it myself. John, that guy is more useless than –"

"Save it, Don. I know what you're going to say. But he isn't going to get any better by us ignoring him. Consider it part of your job – getting Smith up to where he understands that our mission and survival depend on him becoming a useful and productive member of this crew."

"Tall order, John."

Smith, or most properly, Lt. Col. Dr. Zachary Smith, was an enigma, and his presence on board the *Jupiter 2* something of a mystery. An Aerospace Force officer and medical doctor, he had been the mission's flight surgeon, and had personally given West and the Robinsons their final pre-flight medical exams.

Smith had also been responsible in some part for the so-called "freezing tubes" which should have held the others in suspended animation for the duration of their voyage. Only towards the end of their passage should they have opened and allowed the people inside to awaken. First, Major West. As the voyage ended, he would have verified that they were at their proper destination, the Alpha Centauri system, and placed the ship in orbit around the fourth planet. Then the Robinsons would be awoken, and John, as mission commander, would make sure the world below was suitable for human habitation and select a landing spot.

What had actually happened was still somewhat ambiguous, to West and the Robinsons at least. They had awoken from their sleep still in deep space, with the ship being ravaged by meteors. One had damaged an electrical relay panel, sparking a fire, shorting out part of the drive system – the cause of the hyperdrive cascade – and even triggering a dangerous malfunction in the Robot, resulting in him attacking various parts of the ship, acting for all the world as if he meant to wreck it.

That, at least, was the scenario they cobbled together from the evidence and Smith's own somewhat confused testimony.

He had, he claimed, come back on board just prior to launch to double check some of the atmosphere-mixing manifolds critical to the function of the freezing tubes. He said he then waited until the Robinsons were safely asleep in suspended animation to check the function of the tubes and their own body function readings.

Only then did he realize how close the ship was to liftoff. The main hatch was already sealed shut. The external power cable was disconnected, and except for a trickle going into the freezing tubes, nearly all the ship's power was being diverted into the engines for liftoff. That's why, he said, the radio couldn't even call down to Alpha Control to alert them of his presence and scrub the launch. Smith was trapped on board. When the ship's autopilot tried to avoid the meteor field, his extra, unaccounted-for mass made its responses too sluggish. He revived Maj. West, but it was already too late. Result – where they were now.

A few of the regular crew secretly questioned Smith's story, and suspected more devious, even sinister reasons behind his presence, but none so far had dared to share such a terrible possibility with another.

In the meantime – Smith was a layabout and troublemaker.

Don pulled the Chariot around to the front hatch. This was a large and rather comfortable all-terrain vehicle which could cross land or water with relative ease. Most of the mining gear was still loaded on it; a few of the more sensitive pieces had been taken inside for cleaning and inspection for damage in the lab.

"Smith!" called West, inside the ship. "Zachary Smith! Time for breakfast!"

A surly figure rode the lift up from the lower deck where the crew cabins were.

"Breakfast you say? I don't smell anything cooking."

"I meant to say, good doctor, that it will be time for breakfast by the time we're done with some work."

Smith glowered. "If that is meant to be some sort of joke, it isn't funny at all, Major."

"Just giving you the short form. Now go back below, get the pieces of the drill gear and ore sensors out of the lab, and bring them out to the Chariot. Smartly now Doctor, the sooner you're done, the sooner we both get breakfast."

"I'm a doctor, not a mineworker, Major. Such activity is below my station and my dignity. I refuse."

"Look, Smith, we're all in this together. I'm a spaceship pilot, but we all do what we have to do to get by. It's as simple as that."

"Rubbish. Consider my advanced years, Major."

Don felt his temper rising. "Advanced years? Fine. Then you'll have a breakfast of plain oatmeal, suited to your frail constitution. Sausage and omelets are obviously much too rich for you, and coffee is bad for your heart. You know that, *Doctor*. Now get outta my way." He pushed past the doctor to the lift, and came back up with the mining gear.

"I suppose I could manage just one of those probes if it would earn me a sausage, Major!"

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To the east, John, 9 year old Will, and the Robot were picking their way through narrow canyons and around short buttes, looking for the visiting ship. The Robot had the co-ordinates programmed into him, but he struggled finding a way around the annoying topography. Will took upon himself the task of racing ahead to find likely pathways.

Suddenly he stopped and gazed up in astonishment. "Holy Smoke! Dad, Dad, come quick!"

John Robinson raced ahead. He too looked up at a sight he never would have expected to see, either on Earth or any planet. A tall, lanky man, evidently human, stood on a ridge wearing a silver spacesuit. Instead of a helmet, his head was topped by a cowboy hat, much battered and stained with grease and sweat. He stared down at John and Will.

"Howdy, folks," he finally said. The familiar sound of English broke a moment of tension.

John grinned broadly and said, "Welcome, stranger! Come on down and tell us how you come to be here. I'm John Robinson, this is my son Will, and this is our Robot," who had been standing close by at defensive alert.

The visitor jumped down from the ridge, landed neatly, and stuck out a hand. "Jimmy Hapgood, John, pleased to meet you. And you, Willie."

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "My ship, *Travelin' Man*, is just the other side there." Hapgood looked around at the bleak landscape. "Where exactly are we? I haven't seen Earth in, oh, six years gone now."

John sighed. "I'm not sure. I was hoping you could tell us. I'm afraid we're not in very good shape. We're lost and stranded without fuel."

Hapgood looked about thoughtfully. "I got plenty of fuel. I could spare you a mite of that, I suppose."

"Thanks. Do you have any repair equipment? We're also damaged, with about six months' worth of repairs to do before we can even think about going into space."

Hapgood whistled in sympathy. "Y'all have had some hard luck, haven't you?" He frowned. "What's this little one doing this far out with you?"

"We were supposed to be the first colonists on Alpha Centauri Four. Wasn't Alpha Control's big colonization project in the news last time you saw Earth?"

"I recall talk about it. Nothing was happening yet."

"Well, come on back to our ship, *Jupiter 2*. Glad to have you around for a while. How long do you think that might be? Are you still spaceworthy?"

"Oh, I'm spaceworthy alright." He looked around himself again. "How long I might be here . . . well, that depends on a few things," he replied evasively. "Gimme just a few minutes to decontaminate the hull. Hate bringin' things ashore that don't belong. C'mon, boys, let me introduce you to *Travelin' Man*."

"Can we, Dad?" asked Will excitedly.

"Sure son, come on. Robot, go on back to the ship and tell them Will and I will be back soon with company."

"Cool!" exclaimed Will, seeing *Travelin' Man*.

"That's a real workhorse of a ship, isn't it?" asked John.

"The workin'est," affirmed Hapgood. "Three quarters o' that is engines. The *Man* used to be a tugboat, we towed cargo pods home to Earth from the asteroids. That's what my job was before I, uh, had an accident or two and ended up lost out here."

John Robinson gazed at the ship thoughtfully for a moment. "She looks familiar."

"Not surprising. That was the most famous spaceship in the world for a while. Modified Apollo design. There's a cargo bay where the Moon Lander used ta' set, and a bit of living space down in the center module.

"I still have to launch from the command deck, but I'm not stuck there like those poor Moon astronauts were." Hapgood whistled and shook his head at the thought.

"Interesting. You have room for passengers, then?"

"Well, a bit. She's designed so I could shuffle folks rotating on their duty shift or if they were injured. She's tight, but tolerable for the week or so it took to make the Earth/Belt run."

"I see. How did you happen to land so close to us? Did you pick up our distress beacon? Or spot us visually?"

"Oh, old *Travelin' Man* has a nose like a hound dog for finding folks," Hapgood replied airily. "Like a big ol' flyin' dowsing rod."

John laughed. "If you say so, Jimmy!" He turned to his son. "Come on, Will, let's get back and let Mr. Hapgood do what he needs to do."

"Please, Dad, can I stay and help? If it's OK with Mr. Hapgood?"

Hapgood grinned and nodded at John.

"Sure, son. Just don't get in his way."

"So what are you doing, Mr. Hapgood?" Will asked, as the spaceman took a canister and began spraying the hull with a dense grey fog.

"More habit than anything. Every time I come back to Earth from the Belt, I'd have to decontaminate like this to make sure no weird space germs or anything got loose on Earth. Government regulations then, but I keep doin' it, mostly because of what happened the one time I forgot."

"What was that?"

"Ended up with some little critters that oughtn't been no bigger than fleas grown up big as mice, runnin' around the hull and tryin' to eat their way inside."

"No way!"

"Looky there at the scratches all over the hull, you can see where they were chewin'."

Will looked up at his host doubtfully. "Looks like regular micrometeor scratches to me."

Jimmy cocked an eyebrow at the boy and held out his hand. "Think that's what these are too?" An inch-long furrow was scarred into the back of his hand, and another on the inside forearm.

Will's mouth hung open in astonishment. "How'd you get rid of them?"

"They were too big or too different for this stuff to bother them –" indicating the fumigation canister, "– so I had to do it the old-fashioned way, with a hammer. Tough little boogers, they were."

Fascination and horror mixed to wash over the boy's face. "Did you keep any of the bodies as specimens?"

Jimmy laughed. "Heck no. I'm just a rocket jockey, all I cared about was gettin' rid of them things and keepin' me and *Travelin' Man* safe. 'Sides, they was all pretty well smashed by the time I was done with 'em."

Will continued to watch attentively, then asked, "Can I help spray a little? Please, Mr. Hapgood?"

"Why, sure. Just don't miss any spots."

Carefully, the boy aimed the smoky jet up and down the sides of the hull.

"Where are you from, Mr. Hapgood? Texas?"

"Aw, heck no! Can't abide Texans," he snorted. "What d'you think, Texas is the only place in the Universe that grows cowboys? I'm from Oklahoma, little place called Sallisaw. And yes, I am a real cowboy, I didn't just buy a fancy hat at a cheap store."

"A real cowboy?"

"Well, I was. Back when I –"

"Will! Will!" A bright, cheery voice called over the sand. "Oh, there you are! You must be Mr. Hapgood." A young girl of about 12 years stood, hands on hips, looking disdainfully at the scene.

"Mr. Hapgood, this is my sister Penny. I guess Dad told her you were here."

"Howdy, Miss Penny," said Jimmy, raising his hat to her.

"What are you here for, Penny?" asked Will, rather rudely.

"Mother sent me to tell you that lunch will be ready by the time you get back to the ship."

"In a minute, Penny. Mr. Hapgood's telling me about being a real cowboy, and I'm decontaminating his ship."

This piqued Penny's interest. "A real cowboy?" she echoed.

"Yes'm. More of a summer job. When I'd be home from college, I'd help out on my daddy's ranch."

"You went to college?" asked Penny, a bit skeptically.

"Well o' course. You don't just go down to Alpha Control and tell 'em to give you a spaceship pilot's license. I studied astrophysics and aerospace architecture at Oke Tech, one of the best space schools in the United States, right after MIT and Stanford."

"Oh. Well, I suppose they must have *some* standards, after all. Did you like being a cowboy?"

"Mm-hmm. For the most part. Sometimes a body gets awful tired of the smell of cattle all the time, but it was good enough bein' out there saddled up and horseback. No settin' for hours in traffic just tryin' to get to a miserable little office that spends each day tryin' to choke the life out of you."

"Must have been a lot different going into space," Penny observed.

Jimmy smiled. "Not as much as you might think, honey. So what's for lunch?"

"Spaghetti and meatballs with real meatballs, not synthetic."

"Well, that sounds mighty fine. Willie an' I will be along as soon as he's done."

"Oh, that's alright, Mr. Hapgood, you go along with Penny and I'll finish this up for you."

"Well, thank you kindly, Willie. Miss Penny, do lead on, please." The two disappeared down the trail.

Will, assiduously fogging the ship, suddenly snapped his head up. "Hey, she said real meatballs!"

He gave the hull one final blast of the decontaminant and raced home to the *Jupiter 2*.

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After lunch at the outside picnic table, Jimmy Hapgood excused himself and went to stretch out in the sun on a large flat rock. "I do thank you kindly for the wonderful meal, but beggin' your pardons, I've actually been up almost 24 hours straight now, since comin' in to this system and landing and all. And right over there looks as good a spot as any, and a sight better than some places I had to sleep on Earth."

West and the Robinsons laughed and excused him as they began returning to their usual chores. John pulled his wife aside and sat with her at the galley table on the lower deck of their ship.

He reached over and took her hands in his. "Maureen, I've been doing some very serious thinking these last few hours. Mr. Hapgood has a sound ship out there, with room for passengers. I know this is something we gave a lot of thoughtful consideration to before we left Earth, but things have changed. I think we should ask him if he can possibly – take Will and Penny back to Earth with him. They just don't belong here now."

"Oh, John . . ."

"It's not fair to them. This just isn't what we bargained for, and as dangerous as this mission was to begin with, it's even more so now. We have to consider the worst-case scenario, darling. We may never get off this planet, and this is a very dangerous planet. We barely survived one summer and winter, what if they're worse next time? I don't want to risk their lives if there's any way to avoid that.

"Besides, if Hapgood can get them home, that will also mean Alpha Control can launch a rescue mission for us. We'll all be together again, and we'll be able to start our mission all over, fresh. If you still want to, that is."

"John . . . you have to let *me* think about it too. You're asking me to say goodbye to my babies and send them off with a stranger. And maybe never see them again . . ." Maureen dabbed at an eye. "I know, my head says that would probably be for the best, but . . . How do we know he can even get back? You told me yourself he's just as lost as we are."

"I'm not sure about that, honestly. I'm not entirely certain myself that it's the right thing to do. I just wanted to know I had your permission before even asking him about it. Then we can make a decision."

Maureen hung her head and sniffed. "Go ahead. See what he says." She smiled weakly at her husband.

"Thank you, darling." John picked up his wife's hand and kissed her fingers. "I'll talk to him in a little while. After he's done with his nap," he grinned.

Around the corner, in the laboratory, Dr. Smith listened intently and scowled darkly. "If anyone goes back to Earth, it should be me," he thought, "Not those brats. They volunteered for this, I never did." Smith began making his own plans.

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"Jimmy," called John, a while later. "Feeling better?"

"Oh, you bet, John. Something about sleeping outside under an open sky really does it for me. Doesn't even matter what sky," he grinned.

"I was curious about something. You seemed a little unsure how long you might be here. Are you having some kind of mechanical problems? We may be able to help."

Again, Hapgood looked uncomfortable. "Well, some of my astrogational equipment got burned out a while ago, but nothing that'd actually keep me on the ground. Might have a hard time getting somewhere in particular, but I haven't been worrying about that for a little while."

"I see. We were hoping that you'd be able to get within hailing range of Earth at least and let them know the *Jupiter 2* mission is alive and well but stuck, and that they need to send a rescue mission to get us on our way again."

Jimmy Hapgood looked around at the sky and ground. "Well as I say, sir, I'm not sure where I am either, nor how far nor which way to Earth."

"If you like, we may be able to repair your gear, or even replace it. Ours works fine, we just can't go anywhere. You can go anywhere, but just don't know which way to go. It sounds like we were made for each other." John forced an amiable chuckle.

"If you'd like to look at my gear and see if you can do anything for it, you're more than welcome."

"Maureen and I also thought . . ." Here, John put a hand on Hapgood's shoulder and looked him in the eye. "We also wondered if it might be possible for you to take Will and Penny back to Earth with you."

Hapgood closed his eyes and sighed. "I had a suspicion that's where this was goin'. Mr. – Professor Robinson, it's six years since I last seen Earth, and I've been in no hurry tryin' to."

He sighed again, and chewed his lip. "Occur to you there might be a reason for that?"

"Woman problems? Ex-wife chasing you? Gambling debts and someone who wants to break your legs?"

Hapgood chuckled. "Bless you, sir." He looked around. "C'mere, John, let's step away from the ship so we can talk man-to-man." The two walked over towards the flat rock Hapgood had napped on.

Jimmy Hapgood sat cross-legged across from John Robinson, and wrestled with his thoughts for a moment. Finally, he looked Robinson square in the eye.

"I'm wanted on Earth for diamond smuggling."

Robinson's jaw dropped in astonishment, and Hapgood held up a hand.

"Let me explain, sir. I said I was wanted for it. I didn't say I ever did it, and I do not believe I ever did. I admit I brought some things back from the asteroids that never appeared on my cargo manifests and that the company never knew about. I admit I worked a little in the shade, but I do not believe I did anything wrong."

"Well?" asked John. "What happened? I'm ready to hear what you have to say for yourself."

"Well, sir, like I say, I was under contract by that company to haul cargo pods full of ore from the asteroid belt back to Earth. Rare-earth elements mostly, some radioactives. Some precious metals – gold, platinum. The mineworkers on the asteroids were also contractors, not employees. I looked over my contract and theirs, top to bottom, and it spelled out every single dang metal and ore you might imagine, and a few other things, that it was their job to dig out, and mine to take back. Nobody ever thought they'd find diamonds out in the Belt, and they were absolutely not mentioned. And no, those contracts did not have some weasel words buried in there saying that anything and everything else dug up or discovered belonged to the company. There was just no way diamonds were in there, so we figured any those poor boys could scratch out were a bonus for 'em."

"So why –?"

"Because we all knew that as soon as the company found out, we'd all get new contracts, and no work or pay until we signed 'em. So they dug 'em up, I brought 'em back, their man on the ground paid me, and I brought 'em their cash back.

"Well, yes, it was too good to last, and last I heard I was a wanted man. Maybe not smuggling, since just bringing the rocks back to Earth wasn't illegal and I wasn't dodging any customs duties or taxes, but the company sure as heck had it in their head that all those diamonds had been stolen from them, never mind that – well, I explained all that already.

"They got our buyer to squeal, and asteroid miners are too scarce to waste, but us rocket jockeys are a dime a dozen. So I'm the one they're wanting to put in jail. And there we are. Hope you're not too disappointed in me, sir."

John frowned thoughtfully. "I don't think I am at all. You believed you were doing the right thing, and you do make a good case for it. I'm not sure I would have thought the same way, but I don't think I can fault your reasoning or intentions."

"Thank you, sir. I've always considered myself an honest man, and trustworthy."

Robinson frowned again. "Do you still think they'd be after you, after all these years?"

"Even if they weren't, my pilot's license expired two years ago and Alpha Control isn't likely to issue me a renewal with an episode like that on my record. The facts are undisputed. Not to mention being six years overdue on *Travelin' Man's* mortgage payments. No sir, if I ever land on Earth again, I'll never leave."

"I didn't realize how much I was asking of you. Tell you what – let's go look at your ship. Maybe we can do something for you anyway, no strings attached. Maybe you could at least get close enough to pass on a Mayday message from us. Truthfully, Maureen and I aren't entirely sure what to do, anyway. But let's take this all one step at a time, what do you say?" John stuck out his hand.

Jimmy did likewise and the men clasped hands. "John, I just hope the good Lord gives me the courage to do whatever's right, that's all I'll say right now."

John smiled warmly. "That's all I could ask of any man."

The two walked back toward the *Jupiter 2*. "Let me get the children," said John. "We won't say anything yet, but I'd like them to see your ship some more, look around inside. Get them a little comfortable with it."

"I understand, sir," Jimmy nodded.

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The four approached *Travelin' Man's* landing site.

"That's an awfully strange looking ship, Mr. Hapgood," observed Penny.

"Oh, she might look funny to your eyes, but she's built near-perfect for what her job was, and that's about the most beautiful thing I can think of. Remember, I studied spaceship design in college, so I look at her a lot different than you do."

"Well, that's not how I'd build it. I'd –" Penny held up her hands and traced a design in the air. "Why don't the secondary thrusters sit closer to the edge of the skirting?" she asked. "Don't you lose power with them that far inboard? And even if you don't need streamlining in space, a shape more like *this* –" tracing in the air again "– would make for a lot smoother ride in atmosphere and conserve fuel. And you wouldn't lose cargo capacity if you just increased the hull diameter down there–" She broke off as she felt the two men staring at her.

Jimmy wiped his forehead and looked at John with something like fear in his eyes. "She's right, you know, straight up and down. The model they built after this did all those things, just like she said."

"I guess my daughter has a good future as a spaceship designer," John joked nervously. "I suppose she's been studying some of the technical books on our ship in her spare time."

"I suppose," agreed Hapgood, as Penny approached *Travelin' Man* with curiosity. "Say, you got some quick-growin' plants around here, don'tcha?"

John and Will both looked at the ground and frowned, looking at a network of vines in the sand.

"I've never –" began Will.

"Penny, get back here quick! Get away from that ship!" shouted John Robinson.

The girl took one uncertain step, and a vine whipped out of the sand, curling around her leg. Penny screamed in terror as the vine pulled her off her feet and began dragging her over the sand.

"I thought you deconned my ship!" Hapgood shouted angrily at Will, as the boy ran to Penny. John was close behind, drawing his laser pistol.

Will grabbed Penny's arm, futilely trying to haul back against the monstrous vine.

Hapgood scrambled up into the ship and jumped down seconds later with a fire-axe. He began hacking at the plant, while John scorched it with laser blasts.

Penny screamed again as a huge maw, like a giant Venus fly trap, burst up from the ground a scant five feet away. The vine heaved Penny another few feet toward the mouth.

"Daddy! Please!"

John turned the laser on the flytrap-maw, giving it a steady burn of his laser's fury. He gritted his teeth as the grip grew hot in his hand.

Hapgood gave the vine one more savage chop with the axe. The entire plant convulsed and the vine dropped limply away from Penny. She raced to her father.

"Oh, Daddy . . ." she sobbed.

"Mr. Hapgood, sir," said Will, "I thought I got your hull just fine. I'm awful sorry, I must have missed a spot somewhere." He looked over at his sister. "I'm really sorry, Penny. I guess that was all my fault."

"It's all right, son. I'm sorry I hollered at you," said Jimmy, patting him on the shoulder. "It's my fault for not seeing to it properly myself."

John Robinson and Jimmy Hapgood looked at each other steadily. Jimmy closed his eyes slowly, and began nodding.

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"This is our astrogation unit," said John, indicating the large device which formed what was essentially the centerpiece of the *Jupiter 2's* flight deck. "Is there room enough for it in your ship? Don can strip out the core of it and wire it into your controls."

Hapgood studied it. "Make it awful cramped," he mused. "But it's possible. Just barely. What's its power load?"

"700 watts."

He whistled. "I dunno. My electrical system isn't built for that. I think I'd be blowing breakers all the time. 'Course I wouldn't need it for landings, when steady power is most critical. I suppose I could run it intermittent, only when I really needed it."

"Never fear, gentlemen, never fear." Dr. Smith had appeared, riding up the lift from the lower deck. "I have a perfect solution to all your woes. Come!" he commanded, and the Robot rolled dutifully out of his charging bay.

"You forget, Professor, this wonderful machine has what is virtually a duplicate of this ungainly device tucked away in his innards. A duplicate of a much smaller size, and which operates at a fraction of the power. It would be almost disappointingly easy to remove it from my chrome-plated companion and transfer it to our friend's ship."

Don West eyed Smith suspiciously. "What'll that do to the Robot? And what do you figure you're going to get out of this, Smith?"

"The Robot will be fine. He may have some difficulty navigating over uneven terrain afterwards, and may need to be picked back up from time to time, but nothing catastrophic. As for me . . . I simply hope to see that the best thing is done for all concerned."

"Meaning you're hoping to be the one going back to Earth."

"Indeed, Major! Spare us the insinuating invective, it is most unbecoming. I assure you, my heart will not rest easily until I know that those two dear children are safely away and bound for home."

The three other men eyed each other; even Hapgood could smell a rat. Finally John spoke.

"All right Smith. Take whatever parts you need out of the Robot and we'll set them up in *Travelin' Man*."

"And none of your games," warned West. "I don't know what you're up to, but —"

"Major, you cut me to the quick. Come below with me, my gallant organ donor, and we'll have the part out before you know it."

The Robot offered a brief retort. "May I see your license to practice mechanical medicine first?"

"Bah!" snorted Smith. "Below with you now, or I won't turn you off before operating."

Some time later, Smith returned with the part in question. He displayed it proudly. "Simple as could be. Three power leads here, positive, negative, neutral. Input and output jacks. A child could install it. Just mind the polarity of the power leads and all should be well."

Hapgood inspected it. "Looks like a standard compact unit. I've seen this kind before. Shouldn't be a problem."

"It would be wise," suggested Smith, "if all of you were to tend to it, a triple check on safety. After all, with the lives of those two dear children at stake, not to mention our friend Mr. Hapgood . . ."

"I'll go with you, Jimmy," volunteered Don. "And I'll give your ship a quick once-over. Make sure there's nothing you've missed that might need repair."

"Thank you kindly, Major. I keep the *Man* in pretty good shape though."

"John," said West, "You're the boss, but I'd suggest you stick close. I still don't trust Smith, I've no problem saying it to his face, and I'd feel better knowing you were back here to keep an eye on him."

"Your venom drips impotently against me, Major. I shall step outside and enjoy the fresh air and sunshine of this lovely world of ours."

"I'll watch him," said John, as the other two left.

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It was a relatively pleasant day, for where they were, and Smith wandered about seemingly at random. Finally he noted Penny. She was recovering from her earlier ordeal by working in their garden, tending to completely normal and non-lethal flowers. Smith sat on a rock nearby and sighed.

"Oh, hello, Dr. Smith," Penny greeted cheerfully. She smiled warmly and returned her attention to flowers.

Smith sighed again and clucked his tongue, *tsk tsk tsk*. "What a shame. I shall miss you most dreadfully," he crooned wistfully.

"What do you mean, Doctor?" Penny asked.

He put a hand to his mouth guiltily. "Oh dear. I forgot. It was to be a surprise. No matter, you'd have known by tonight anyway. I'm sure your parents wanted to break the good news to you themselves, so do try and act surprised when they tell you, won't you?"

"Dr. Smith, what ever are you talking about?"

"Really, child, haven't you figured it all out for yourself already? Why, you and Will are being sent back to Earth with Mr. Hapgood."

"What?!?" Penny cried.

"Shh, shh, I told you, it's to be a surprise. Yes, indeed. Your parents think it's far too dangerous here for you, so they're going to pack you off with a stranger, instead. They hope he'll get you back to Earth, eventually, and then if Alpha Control is still in business, they may someday get a proper rescue mission out here to bring the rest of us home.

"But don't fret, child," as Smith saw Penny's face fall. "I'm sure it won't be more than a year or two, or maybe three, and you're much too big a girl now to be needing her Mummy and Daddy like that, aren't you? And remember not to fuss or carry on in front of them. I'm sure it's breaking their hearts to do this for you, so don't make it any more difficult for them than it is already. Now remember, it's supposed to be a surprise, so don't let on when they tell you. Oh, and don't tell Will either. Let it be a real surprise for him."

Smith strode off quickly, with Penny choking back dismay at her fate.

There, he thought. When Hillbilly Jim is ready to lift and those two can't be found, there will be only one sensible candidate for the mission. Smith smiled to himself smugly. Oh, Zachary, he congratulated himself, you are the clever one indeed.

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"It's true, Will! It all makes sense! They're going to send us away with Mr. Hapgood back to Earth! We've got to do something. We can't go . . . this is our home now, we can't leave our family!"

Will rubbed his head in thought. "Something doesn't make sense. Wouldn't they have asked us at least? And how can they make us go if we don't want to?"

"They can't make us go if they can't find us. If they try to, we'll just have to run away and hide. I know where there's a cave down by that pond that would be perfect. Nobody could ever find us there!"

"Why don't we go talk to Mr. Hapgood? I think he'd be the one who knows for sure."

The two children looked up at the evening sky.

"I'll go ask Mom if it's OK if we go sit up with him for a while. Look, he's already got a real cowboy campfire built!" Will pointed with delight at the fire and ran in to the ship. Moments later he raced out, yelling, "Come on, I bet I can beat you there!"

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"Well, kids, I wouldn't be gettin' yourselves all worked up just yet. Yes, your daddy asked me about it, and I promised him I would if that's what he really wanted. But I'm not sure he does, or your mama neither. And I purely can't imagine them sending you off with me if you didn't really want to. How 'bout this – I promise you, cross my heart," which he did in immemorial style, "that I will not take either one nor both of you one inch off this planet if you don't want to. Shake on it?"

He stuck out his hand, and both children grasped it with enthusiastic smiles. "OK, we got all that settled, then." Hapgood stood, unrolled a couple of thick blankets for all to sit on, and excused himself as he took off his boots with a sigh of relief.

"Oh yeah, this is the life!" said Jimmy. His campfire was set just beyond the *Jupiter 2*'s perimeter, and he now had a pot of coffee burbling away on the embers. The sun was nearly set and the sky was growing dark; above, a flurry of nameless constellations were coming into view.

"Settin' out here under the sky, no walls to trap you, no engines to tend, nobody else you need to worry about . . . I tell ya kids, this is what it's all about, leastaways as far as I'm concerned. I know it ain't for everybody, but it's all I ever think about. Usually. I think about it up in space all the time, but I after I been on the ground for a few weeks, I start thinkin' about space again, an' ol' *Travelin' Man* starts callin' me. 'It's that time, Jimmy,' I'll hear him at about three in the A.M. when I can't sleep. 'It's time, time to go look at some stars up close, and chase a comet or two and play tag with a supernova. Come on Jimmy, them boots is gettin' all dusty and they need a good cleanin' up in the pure vacuum of space.'

"That's when I know it's time to go. But that's all me, that's my blood. I'm a quarter Cherokee, you know, quarter or more. My mama's name before she was married was Lillian Ten-killer."

"Ten-killer!" exclaimed the children.

Penny's eyes were wide. "She didn't . . . didn't really . . ."

Jimmy laughed. "No, no. That's an old family name out that way, but you bet it once meant just what it says. You ever come out Sallisaw way you'll meet lots of folks with that name, Ten-killer, and Man-killer too.

"Most everybody out that way has some Cherokee blood in them, anybody who didn't just move there from New York City or something. You'll see black, black hair everywhere, just like yours, Miss Penny, and a far-off look in the eyes. But even folks's look just like you, Willie, with that red hair and blue eyes . . . maybe they don't even know it, but they got it all the same.

"But there'll come a time, sometime, and a man'll be outside in his back yard, or walking a hillside trail, maybe even driving through countryside that hasn't changed in hundreds of years, except for that tar road running where it used to nothing but hoofprints.

"And maybe it'll be around sunset, like right about now, and the sun will be sinking down in the west, and a big yellow full moon will be just rising in the east, and maybe a wolf'll howl, or there'll be an eagle screaming from so high in the air you can barely see him.

"And a man'll stop what he's doin', even pull his car over to the side of the road and get out, and smell the air and feel the sun and hear that wolf or eagle calling. And he'll throw his head back and just want to shout or jump or laugh or clap his hands or sing to the skies.

"That's the Cherokee blood in him doin' that. Maybe he don't even know it, but some distant grandfather who wore paint on his cheeks and feathers in his hair is cryin' out to him over the years and tellin' him, 'You are one of us still!'"

"Why does he want to shout and jump and dance and all that, Mr. Hapgood?" asked Will, entranced.

"Joy! Pure joy! Just joy for being alive and being a part of the world which made him. Because if he's part of the world, the whole world is a part of him too, and if that's true, then the world is part of the Great Spirit who made it and the Spirit is part of the world, and then so's the man, man and world and maker, all one together, forever and ever, no matter if the man dies or even if the world dies." Jimmy stopped to catch his breath. The children were staring at him, enchanted and bewildered.

"Sorry if I went over your heads a mite there, kids, but like I say, that's the blood talkin'. Well, this here coffee's done cookin', so lemme just pour myself out a splash. Oh, I beg your pardons. Neither one of you . . .?"

Will shook his head with a grin, then held back a snorting laugh as Penny said, "Yes please, just a bit. I've probably had too much already today." You've never touched it, Will thought.

Jimmy looked mildly surprised, but pulled a second tin cup out of his pack, poured, and passed.

"Hope that's not too hot for you, Miss Penny."

"No, I'm sure that's fine."

Will eyed her skeptically.

After a few minutes puffing and cooling it off, Penny took an appreciative sniff. "Smells delicious!" She took a careful sip but felt her mouth and throat sting with the unaccustomed taste. Her eyes watered, and it tasted like something burnt. Finally she choked it down.

Jimmy eyed her with concern. "Too strong for your taste, honey? I can water it a bit if you like."

After catching her breath, Penny said, "Quite all right. I'm just used to having it with cream."

Will stifled another guffaw. "So tell us more about what happened to you, Mr. Hapgood. I heard Don say you were nothing but a smuggler and we shouldn't trust you too much."

"Will!" hissed Penny. "That's not nice to say right in front of him!"

Jimmy laughed. "Now that's quite all right kids, I suppose it's true in a way, and a man oughtn't ever be afraid or ashamed of the truth, even if it is a little uncomfortable sometimes.

"Well, you know what kind of a job I had, me and *Travelin' Man*. And like I told your daddy, I helped a few of them asteroid miners get some stuff back home that some other folks maybe thought they wasn't entitled to. But near as I could see, nobody else had a better claim on them little rocks. They dug 'em up themselves, and nobody's contract said a lick about 'em.

"So here's what we did. I was the only pilot them miners trusted, so I was the only one bringin' them diamonds back. I was only out there every four months or so, so they'd have a good collection for me to take back. One of them fellers had a cousin who was in the jewelry business, and we had a simple little code that I'd call on ahead.

Now, y'understand, them was some big diamonds, some the size of, say, grapes or walnuts. And so that was the code. I'd radio on ahead when I got close, I'd tell him the boys on the rock wanted, say, ten pounds of peas, six pounds of grapes, and three pounds of walnuts for me to take back.

"An' o' course that meant that I had three diamonds as big as walnuts, six as big as grapes, and so on, whatever made sense and didn't repeat too much. Mighta raised suspicions if the asteroid miners were always asking for more walnuts. That way he could start getting his buyers lined up by the time I grounded, he'd have the cash for me to take back to the boys, and I'd have my hands clean of the stuff right quick. And I got a nice little percentage for my trouble."

"How much?" asked Will, excitedly.

"Now, it usually ain't polite to ask another fella particulars 'bout his business affairs like that, Willie, but seein' as we're such good friends out here I won't hold it against you. My share was five percent."

"That doesn't seem like very much," remarked Penny. "For all the trouble you had to go to all the time." She eyed him skeptically.

"Well, Miss Penny, truth is it wasn't no trouble at all, really. There was hardly ever more to carry than what I could put in my pockets, and all I had to do was call on ahead to that cousin and make sure no-one from the company looked too close at what went off and on of *Travelin' Man*. The company really only cared about what was in the cargo pod, and I left that in orbit for their Skyhook to let down. The company man would check the pod after it was on the ground, make sure it tallied with my cargo manifest, and that was about it.

"Hey, I'll tell ya somethin' else. Somethin' real interesting about diamonds. You know where they come from?"

"Tiffany's!" giggled Penny.

Will shook his head. "Girls!" he said resignedly to Jimmy. "Diamonds are a special crystalline structure of pure carbon. They formed from deposits of carbon after millions of years of heat and pressure."

"And what do you need for that?"

"Oh!" Will's eyes popped. "That means the asteroid belt really is the remains of a planet that blew up or fell apart or something, right?"

"There ya go! Ain't that a kick? That's one of those things the scientists haven't ever been able to decide, if the asteroids are just random rocks that got pulled in or used to be a world. So far, you and me are the only ones who know that. Maybe your dad's figured that out already and maybe some of those miners too. But I'd figured one day when the diamonds ran out, I'd turn that story loose and make a little money and fame off of that, enough for me, anyway."

"So what happened? How did you end up out here?" asked Will.

"That's two different questions, with two different answers. The first one is pretty simple, but I'm still not sure about the other one.

"Well, even the slickest little operation like that is gonna have holes in it somewhere. Cuttin' down to the end, our man on Earth sent a message out that the jig was up. I was gettin' ready for the trip home, but the company had got wind o' what was going on. They put the squeeze on him, and they were planning on grabbin' me and havin' me arrested next time I landed. The way they saw it, those diamonds were theirs, even if they never saw 'em, never touched 'em, never even knowed about 'em.

"And the way the law is back on Earth, they were most likely right. I prob'ly woulda been arrested, and I'd prob'ly be dyin' a slow death in a prison cell somewhere now. Even if not, I'd likely never get my pilot's license back and woulda been stuck on Earth like any other groundhog for the rest of my life, and the stars would be just a decoration in the sky instead o' someplace to live.

"Well, what do you think I was gonna do? I ditched that cargo pod, vowed never to get within hailing distance of Earth again, and lit out for an operation on Titan."

There was a moment of hesitant silence. "Saturn's moon, Penny. The big one," prompted Will.

"Oh, yes. I guess I was confusing it with Neptune for a moment."

Will shook his head again. "Finish your coffee, Penny."

Hapgood watched the exchange with a grin. "Anyhow, I set out for Titan, where there's a permanent base and a whole other company refines methane from the oceans there, and also sends out mining rigs through the rings. Most of the rings are nothing but ice and rock, but there's some rare elements in 'em, too, just like the asteroids. Maybe some of the rings are part of that same planet that blew up, who knows? So as long as there's ships and spacemen and women out there, they figure why not go get it? And that's what I doing. Like I said, I wasn't in no hurry to fly any cargo pods back to Earth, but whoo! Cruising through the rings of Saturn! No better job in the Universe! 'Bout every 12 hours an alarm would sound, and I'd be sure the scoops opened and ol' *Travelin' Man* turned the right way, and fifteen minutes later there's a piece of Saturn's rings right in my cargo hold, think o' that!

"Well, I was doin' that for about three months. Then one day I launched off for my hitch, and the dangdest thing happened. They was some kinda energy surge, like a lightning bolt strikin' from Saturn out to the rings, hittin' in about six different places, thousand miles apart, I guess. I caught a little of it, 'cause my gyrocompasses all blew out. That wasn't too much of a worry, 'cause I could see Titan still, and I'd just have to drive home manually instead of puttin' the *Man* on autopilot.

"But that's when I saw the most amazing thing in the Universe. Never even heard o' nothin' like it before, and the six years I been out here, never seen nothin' else even comes close to it."

Will and Penny both now sat with rapt attention, mouths hanging open. "What was it?" whispered Will.

"I have to disappoint you a mite there, kids, because I truthfully allow I still don't have the leastest notion what it is. Tell you what I saw, though." Hapgood took a pull at his coffee and made sure of his audience.

"Right up over the north pole of Saturn, just a-hangin' in space, maybe fifty thousand miles up of it, there was a dark shape, a shadow. Just a-hangin' in space. And —" Now he hesitated.

"That shape had the look of a huge bird! Two wings stretched out either side, head a-top and tailfeathers below. My first thought was that I was seein' the Thunderbird, the mystical bird that the Great Spirit sends as a sign. Then I thought maybe it was the spirit of my grandmother come to me for some reason, old Yellow Leaf Ten-killer, but that was impossible."

"How come?" asked Penny.

"Why, I remembered that she was still alive and livin' with a gentleman friend in Tulsa. Well, kids, I tell you, I just turned on every kind o' scanner and sensor I had and started boostin' toward that shape. It was huge! That wingspan woulda stretched from the Earth to the Moon with leftovers. It was still, so still, and I couldn't tell if it was just a flat shape like a shadow, or if it had some kinda body and substance to it. And it was so *black!* Like . . . like it was somethin' that wasn't really there at all. And then . . . then . . ."

Hapgood hesitated again, and took a deep pull at his coffee. "*It started to move!* May the good Lord strike me now if I tell a lie, as I got closer to it, them wings started a-flappin'! Slow at first, slow and heavy, just like you might see a fat old eagle tryin' to get into the air from a standin' start on the ground. Then a little faster, and a little faster, and sure enough the whole thing started to fly, right through space! It turned, and I could see it had body to it after all, it wasn't just a flat shadow. She started headin' out into the Deep Cold Dark, away from Saturn, away from the rest of the Solar System. I gunned my engines up to follow her and —"

Penny interrupted. "All of a sudden you're calling it 'her.' How come?" There was a tinge of challenge in her voice.

"Well, Miss Penny, because that's when I first got the notion that she was a lady and not just some shadow. Anyway, I followed her and she was flyin' faster and faster, and I was pushin' my engines just about as hard as they'd go, when all of a sudden —" Jimmy Hapgood's voice broke a bit.

"All of a sudden, it was like I was lookin' at the whole dang Universe like a map stretched out on a chart table! I can't think of it no other way. But I could still see that bird in front of me. It only lasted a second, and when it ended, there I was, out nowhere I could ever guess. But it was a system, all right. That crazy bird thing was a-hoverin' over a huge planet, and there was another man-size planet a coupla orbits in, so I set down on that to freshen up my air and water and sleep under the stars instead of in the middle of 'em. I set up my telescope and spotted the planet the bird was a-hoverin' over, but never saw *her*. Not from the ground.

"I let a week or so go by, and you know I told you how I get that stirrin' in the blood to go? Well I got that stirrin' pretty quick that time, though maybe it was more just bein' scared of bein' lost out in space somewhere and never gettin' near home again. So I lifted, and first thing I did, I headed out to see if that crazy bird -thing was still there, and sure enough she was."

He looked at the children. Their attention was all for him, although Penny still wore a slightly condescending lift to her eyebrows, as if she understood that she was being told a very elaborate and very tall tale. Hapgood's voice dropped to a whisper.

"That's when I heard *her* for the first time. She don't talk to me in words, not words I can put into English or Cherokee or any language. But she — promised me the most wonderful things, more things than I ever could imagine. And she began flappin' them wings again, and callin' to me. 'Come on, Jimmy, come on,' that's about the most I could ever explain what she says to me, but it's so much more than that . . ."

"And I followed her again, and the same thing, I flew through places or spaces no man's ever dreamed about before, and every time it's the same. She hovers over one world, and there's always a man-planet in the system too. She'll go and watch over one world, and I'll go look at another. Sometimes they're empty, sometimes there's civilizations that are older than Earth itself is, sometimes there's things look just like you and me, except twenty feet tall! Or wild creatures that breath fire and swim in ice.

"And that's what she shows me. That's what she promised me."

Even Penny was now staring with wide-eyed wonder. "What's she doing with those planets?" she whispered.

"I can't even guess. Maybe she's getting 'em ready for other kinds of people to live on some day. Some kind of people we can't even imagine."

"What's she doing with *you?*" Penny continued, hushed.

"Can't even guess. Sometimes I get the idea she's getting me ready for something, too. But for what . . . You know, I can't even count how many places she's taken me, how many different kinds of people I've met. But ya know something? This is the first time I've told this whole thing to anybody." He sat a moment and stared at the children.

"Somethin' a little scary 'bout you two. There's somethin' about the two o' you remind me of *her*." Hapgood emptied the coffee pot into his cup. "I think you two are why I'm here. I think this is *her* doin'. Talkin' to you I get a little tickle in the blood like when *she* talks to me." He bolted down the last bit of coffee.

“Grandmother Yellow Leaf is full-blood Cherokee, and has the Sight, you know. She can see and feel things most people have no business seein’ or feelin’. And sometimes I think she give me a little bit of it, too. You, Miss Penny. Someday soon, you are gonna have some kind of a friend –” He shook his head. “I don’t see it exactly, or maybe I do and I just can’t understand it. You’re gonna make friends with somebody like nobody no human being has ever seen before.”

He laughed then. “Like I should talk! Let me introduce you to *my* friend, the giant space eagle!”

The children laughed, and something of the spell Jimmy Hapgood had woven broke. Penny stood.

“Well, Mr. Hapgood, thank you very much, but we need to get back to the ship, it’s very late. Come along, Will.”

“I’ll be right there,” the boy replied.

“Sleep tight, Miss Penny. Hope all that coffee don’t keep you awake.”

Penny cast a look of daggers behind her and flounced off.

“Well, boy, what is it?” Jimmy addressed Will with no pretense.

“Sir, what do you think *she* is? Really?”

Hapgood scratched his head thoughtfully. “Honest to goodness, boy, haven’t I been telling you I just don’t know?”

Will kept his all-too-adult gaze fixed on Jimmy Hapgood.

“There really is somethin’ . . .” he sighed. “All right, Willie. Man to man. I honest don’t know. But the only other thing that’s ever crossed my mind that made any sense at all is just one little squib. ‘The Bird of Time.’ ”

“The Bird of Time?”

“It’s from an old, old, poem by an old, old-time Persian named Khayyam. He wrote, ‘The Bird of Time has but a little way to fly, And Lo! The Bird is on the wing.’ It’s a long poem, and all about – well, most of it isn’t fit for youngsters. Most people figure that bit is just a pretty way to talk about how time passes and how we all grow too old too soon.

“But out *there*, with *her* . . . I can’t even guess how far *Travelin’ Man* and me have come, following her, but it’s never more than a little way to fly – the way *she* flies. So whatever a Bird of Time might be – maybe *she* talked to ol’ Khayyam a thousand years ago – maybe that’s *her*.”

“Wow.”

“And the way she sets herself up on those planets, almost like a mama bird broodin’ an egg – maybe that’s what she’s doin’, somehow, getting ‘em ready for something, like I said before. Seems like a fittin’ kinda thing for a Bird of Time to do.”

“Wow.”

“Sounds like you’re getting sleepy, young feller. You’ve lost all your big words.”

“Can I sleep out here with you, Mr. Hapgood?”

“So long as your folks don’t mind.”

“Be right back!”

Minutes later, Will was back with a sleeping bag.

“Now you listen, Willie, tonight you just look up at them stars, and love ‘em and feel ‘em. Don’t worry about their names or magnitude or sequence. Just look up at ‘em, and *listen*.”

“Mr. Hapgood?”

“Willie?”

“Will you ask *her* to talk to me?”

“I got a suspicion she already does.”

*

Aboard the *Jupiter 2*, John and Maureen Robinson lay in bed together, holding hands.

“A giant plant almost killed our daughter today, Maureen. How can you even question sending them back?”

“John, I know this is a terrible thing to say, but right now on Earth, children are dying from all kinds of awful things – car crashes and airplane crashes, from hunger and maniacs with knives and guns and bombs, even from accidentally eating poisonous plants. I’m a botanist, John, do I need to tell you how many people die every year just from eating the wrong kind of mushroom? There are killer plants on Earth too. They’re just not as . . . spectacular. Sending them back isn’t going to keep them safe, John. That’s *our* job, John. *We’re their parents*. Not Jimmy Hapgood and not Alpha Control and not . . . not anyone else on Earth. Or anywhere. Sending them away would be like giving up on them.”

“But just temporarily –”

“No, John. We’re a family, and we’re all in this together. Do you remember telling us that, last October, before we left?”

“Yes,” he admitted.

“Sending them away isn’t going to make them safer, not really. Yes, it’s dangerous here and I’m afraid a lot, but only because it’s so *different*. We’re not afraid of crossing a street, but that’s only because we do it – did it – all the time. If you ever really stopped to think about walking out in front of a dozen cars ready to take off like rockets when the light turns green –”

John laughed softly. “Believe me, I thought about that the first time I watched Judy cross a street all by herself going to school. And probably every time after that. Then the same all over again with Penny and Will.”

Maureen now laughed too. “So we have man-eating plants instead of hot rods. I think I’d rather take my chances with the plants.”

She turned and pulled her husband close. “Well?”

“I’m starting to think you’re right. But let’s sleep on it and decide in the morning. Now, none of your feminine wiles to try and influence me,” he said with mock severity.

“How about just one feminine wife?” Maureen purred.

“Not fair . . .” murmured John Robinson into the darkness.

*

Jimmy Hapgood approached the *Jupiter 2* with a worried and fearful look on his face. John and Maureen Robinson were sitting alone at the outdoor table.

Hapgood approached, removed his hat, and asked, “May I sit down and talk to you two for a bit?”

“Certainly,” said John.

“Of course,” concurred Maureen, pouring a cup of coffee for him.

“Sir . . . ma’am . . . back where I’m from, a man takes pride in speaking his mind and not beating around the bush when there’s something he has to say. It’s true that I laid hands on a few diamonds that I maybe oughtn’t had, but I promise to you on the Book that I never told a lie or half-truth about that whole business to anyone.”

John frowned. “All right, Jimmy, you’re an honest man. That’s what you’re telling me, and I think I’m a good enough judge of character to accept that. So what’s wrong?”

Jimmy Hapgood held his face in his hands for a moment. “John . . . Maureen . . . it’s truly breakin’ my heart to have to tell you this, but I just don’t think it would be right to take those kids back to Earth. I talked long and deep with ’em last night. They’re smart kids, I’d guess they’re both literally geniuses – I’m sure you know that. But listen to me.

“There’s more to them than I can understand, more than I dare tell you two. I’m asking you to trust me, a stranger you hardly know, when I tell you that makin’ those kids go back to Earth would be about the worst thing in the world –” he laughed at the word “– any world, or the Universe, that you could do to them.” He sipped nervously at his coffee.

“They *belong* out here, Professor Robinson, Mrs. Robinson. There’s a – there’s like a piece of Earth deep inside most folks, in you two and even me, that reminds you it’s still your home . . . and I swear it just ain’t in them two! More than that, I can’t tell you, won’t tell you, ’cause you’d think I was even crazier than you do right now, I see it in your eyes, you’re a little nervous.

“That’s why I was making such a point of being an honest man at heart, and why it pains me to talk all in spooky riddles. But all I ask is you believe me – if those two go home now, there are going to be wonderful and incredible things that’ll never happen to ’em. What they’ll see an’ do, and even better, what they’ll *become*. Things that this Universe might never see at all, otherwise.

“Imagine reaching for a door, then turning around, and behind that door was the – the greatest Broadway show ever done, and you not only never see it, you never even know about it. Or you start to pick up an old book at a rummage sale, and you think the cover is too grimy – and inside that book was every secret of science and the human heart all laid out as simple and complete as any scientist or philosopher ever could have imagined. *And you never even knew it was almost in your hands*. That’s what it’ll be like if those two don’t stay right here with you, where they belong. So don’t you even try and make me do it, either, because I’ll set fire to *Travelin’ Man* first, and I don’t want to do that because then I’d likely hold it against you and I purely loathe bearing a grudge.”

John and Maureen looked at each other a long moment, clasping hands. Maureen choked back a sob, and John slapped his hands down against the table with finality.

Jimmy Hapgood flinched. “I’m awfully sorry to disappoint you two –”

John smiled. “I think you’ve misread us, Jimmy. We were having second thoughts, too. I think you’ve just helped us make the final call.”

"I promise you something else sir, I want you to know that I think the world of those two, and if I believed in my heart it was the right thing to do, I'd set down right in the middle of Alpha Control Command in Houston and let the company and the cops come get me for diamond smuggling and grand theft and I'd spend the rest of my life in a Texas jail. I mean it, sir, jail would kill me, but if it meant doing right by those kids, I'd walk in smiling and cash out laughing."

Hapgood let out a huge sigh and sunk forward. "That's gotta be about the hardest thing I've ever had to say in my life. Thanks, folks."

"Thank *you*, Jimmy," whispered Maureen, patting his hands.

*

Another evening approached.

"John, here's a couple canisters of deuteronium for you. I got plenty, and I owe you for the astrogation gear. Now I think I'd best get on over to *Travelin' Man* and get ready to lift," said Hapgood. "You kids, you stay here with your folks. Where you belong. I'll be back over here to see you in the morning," addressing Will and Penny.

Dr. Smith was just coming up the elevator. "Do I hear correctly? The children are staying? Does that mean you might have room for one adult?"

Hapgood rolled his eyes. "I might, if you really want to, Doctor."

"If I want to, he says. What time?"

"Oh, I figure tomorrow, about five o'clock."

"Splendid! One last dinner at Mrs. Robinson's excellent table, and away we'll go, eh? Lovely. I'd better start packing my things." He vanished back down to the lower deck, and the others shared a secret chuckle.

*

At five o'clock the next morning, the Robinsons and Major West stood outside the *Jupiter 2*. Jimmy Hapgood was making his farewells.

"Thank you, kindly, John, for the hospitality, and I promise I'll do my best to get word back to Earth about you. I'm still pretty lost, and can't make any guarantees."

"That's alright, Jimmy. We're together, and that's what counts."

"Ma'am," he said, holding his hand out politely to Maureen.

"Oh, Jimmy!" She ignored his hand and pulled him into an embrace.

"Miss Judy –"

Judy took his hand and said, "Have a safe trip. Sorry I didn't see more of you."

He gave a solid handshake to Don then, and turned to the two younger children.

"Miss Penny . . ."

Penny threw her arms around him and sniffed sorrowfully. Looking up, she said, "You really are a wonderful storyteller."

Hapgood smiled, ruffled her hair, and put a kiss on the top of her head.

"Willie –"

The two shook hands, then they too put their arms around each other.

Will stretched up on tiptoe and whispered in Hapgood's ear. His voice was oddly mature. "I think I heard *her*, Jimmy. I really do."

"I thought you might, Will. Never forget how to listen," he whispered back. "Maybe someday when she's done with me, she'll come back for you too."

"Well. Time's a-wasting. Oh! Almost forgot. Something for you two to remember me by." He slipped a small package to Will with another few whispered words, and another to Penny.

Hapgood faced John Robinson again, took his hand. "There's just so dang much wonderful stuff to see out there, John. More than a body could see in a lifetime. If only a man could live forever, he'd really have it made. You ever see a hot comet? Ever even hear o' one? Most are just ice and rocks, but some, I don't know what they are, but they burn through space like vengeance, and all kinds of colors to 'em too. I think I spotted one on the radar, just before I set down here. First thing I'll do is try an' catch up with it, get some video and send it back here for you."

"And then . . ." He winked at Will. "Then I got a date to keep at a gas giant out at the edge. Looks like Jupiter with rings that are all just swirlin' colors."

"I'm awful sorry I couldn't do more for you all. I gotta go now."

Jimmy Hapgood turned and walked unhurriedly away, without looking back.

They heard him run through his pre-flight routine over the radio, then he counted down his liftoff. "Whoo-hoo! What a kick in the pants that always is! Hey, how 'bout once I find out where I am, I'll come back and jus' push that whole dang planet o' yours back to Earth!"

The thunder of his launch shook the ground even at the *Jupiter 2*'s site. A scant moment later, Dr. Zachary Smith came scrambling up the ladder from below, garbed in an old-fashioned nightshirt.

"Stop! Stop!" he cried woefully. Smith looked at his watch. "You treacherous traitors! You never said five in the *morning*!" He raced outside, looked up at the bright dot vanishing into the sky.

"Jimmy! Mr. Hapgood! Please!" As the dot winked out, he collapsed heavily to sit on the ground. "Left. He really left me behind. Oh," he grieved, clutching at his heart, "The pain . . ."

Inside, the little group listened to Jimmy Hapgood's last words to them. "I've found it, kids! I've found it! It's a hot comet, all right! Here, stand by for the video – oh, man, that picture just ain't gonna do her justice, she's all purple and silver and gold, and trailin' sparks like a Fourth of July fireworks and near bright as a star! Don't you dare ever lose this, folks, don't you dare!" There was a moment of hush.

Then his voice came back, taut, strained, and unfamiliar. "That's all from me, folks. Will. You know."

Will just nodded. Implausibly, Hapgood responded with a cryptic, "You will."

John Robinson looked curiously at his son and thought of the strange things Hapgood had said, then of his favorite line from Shakespeare: "There are more things in heaven and earth . . ."

The radio was abruptly silent.

Dawn had broken. Will and Penny stepped out the hatch to look up at the suddenly blue sky. Penny elbowed her brother softly in the ribs.

"You really believe all that, don't you? Well. What can I expect, *you're* still nothing but a child."

Will said nothing, but looked at her with a secret, knowing smile.

"Hmph, men!" Penny sniffed.

The two children jumped as their father put his hands on their shoulders. "Looks like it's going to be a beautiful day, doesn't it? This really isn't such a bad place after all, is it?"

Behind them, Dr. Smith uttered a groan of despair.

John Robinson stretched out his arms as if to embrace all of their little world. A ray of sunshine broke over the surrounding hills to cast its golden light on the scene. "Blue sky! Fresh air! It's a wonderful day to be alive, isn't it, kids?" He put his head back and laughed aloud.

Will turned and stared open-mouthed at his father, as if suddenly seeing him for the first time. Carefully, he noted the jet-black hair and the skin which always seemed so ruddy-tan, even his eyes sparkling with far-off vision.

"Dad?" whispered Will. "Did Grandmother or Grandfather ever tell you anything about us having Cherokee ancestors?"

John cocked an amused glance at his son. "Where did that come from, son? Some of Jimmy's stories?"

Will shrugged his shoulders noncommittally.

"Funny you should ask that, though. As a matter of fact . . ."

*

Will and Penny sat together in her cabin to examine their gifts from Hapgood. To Will he had given a pocketknife with the admonition to be careful with it and always keep it sharp.

Penny's gift was wrapped in a piece of paper, which she now removed and saw was actually a note wrapped around a small cloth bag.

Dear Miss Penny,

It was disappointing to think that you maybe didn't believe some of the things I told you, but it truly broke my heart thinking you might grow up to be someone who has a hard time believing other people and not trusting them, and that it would be my fault. I am giving you a little present here which will prove a small part of what I told you. I hope you will be able to believe everything else now, even without proof, because it really was all true.

I suggest you put this away safely somewhere until you are grown up, then if you ever visit Earth again you can have this made into a necklace or earrings, or maybe even into a ring which some young man can put on your finger someday. Bless you Miss Penny, and all your family, and I truly wish you all the best.

J. Hapgood

Carefully, Penny tipped out the little bag into her hand, where she and Will gasped together at the sight of a diamond the size of a ripe black olive.

=====

This was my first Adventure. Following the original episode, it is a riff on the Frankenstein theme, a point which I play up at one point in particular. Recall that the subtitle of the original novel was The Modern Prometheus. A further classical allusion I wrote in points to an incident from mythology involving Hercules and Atlas: perhaps the only time Hercules outsmarted a foe. What bothered me about this was simply the title. Raddion is not a monster, and it is a bit unclear how he might be a “dream” monster at all. I wondered exactly what sort of thing might be called a “dream monster,” and, well . . .

The Dream Monster A Lost In Space Adventure

1.

“You just mind your own business then, Will Robinson!” shrieked his elder sister, Penny. “I’m never sharing any more secrets with you, I’m never even speaking to you again!”

The young Robinson boy ran off to his cabin, chuckling mirthfully as he slipped the door shut behind him.

“What’s the matter, Penny?” asked Maureen Robinson.

“Oh, Mother! Boys can just be so – oh! I don’t even want to talk about it.” Despite her assertion, Penny plunged ahead. “We have another alien visitor, Mother. I met him out near Green Rock Canyon today. I was telling Will about it, because I ran into him outside, and I was coming in to let all of you know, and he just started laughing and teasing me and calling me crazy!”

“All right, tell me more about this alien of yours, dear.”

“Well, he had a beard and wasn’t very tall, and he was wearing red clothes and a funny necklace, and he was ever so nice, but seemed a little confused. I was watering a flower because it was so very beautiful and I wanted to make sure it survived the drought. He didn’t understand why I loved the flowers so much. I don’t think he even understood what ‘beautiful’ meant. And he had a great big golden robot! He called him ‘Raddion’ and controlled him with a little wireless remote. And he wanted Raddion to understand why I thought flowers were beautiful, and he wanted to buy my feelings about flowers and pretty things like that. Isn’t that the silliest thing you’ve ever heard?”

Maureen eyed her daughter with no slight skepticism. She knew Penny had a colorful imagination, and in the brutal heat wave of these last three days, which was capping nearly a month of drought, she wouldn’t have been surprised at any one of their group seeing odd things.

Ambiguously, she responded, “You’re right, that is just about the silliest thing I’ve heard in a long time.” Not ambiguously enough.

“You don’t believe me either! You’re all so unfair! Will can come in here and tell you he’s seen a – a two-headed plant monster and you’ll all go racing out to see it! Why don’t you ever believe *me*?”

Maureen turned away, continued tidying the galley. “Penny dear, what with the heat, I’m afraid maybe we’re all a little out of sorts. And I wouldn’t be surprised if it was so hot that a little girl with a vivid imagination thought she saw something –”

“Mother, look at me!” Penny demanded, grabbing her mother by the elbow and pulling her around to face her. Sweat from heat and anger was pouring down her face. She cupped her hands under her breasts for emphasis. “Look, Mother! Do I look like I’m still a little girl, Mother? Do I? I’m fifteen now! I wish you would all stop treating me like a child!” A few tears let go and mingled indistinguishably with the sweat on her cheeks.

Maureen sighed inwardly. She let her fingers trail lightly across Penny’s hair. “Those aren’t what make you a grown-up dear, any more than having a few uncomfortable days every month. It’s what’s up here–” patting Penny’s head “–and what’s in your heart– that make you a grown-up.”

Penny crossed her arms over her chest and turned away.

“Now, no matter what anyone thinks about your story, the way you – bit my head off there, tells me that you’re not acting very grown-up about this at all. Unless maybe it *is* one of those uncomfortable days.”

Penny shook her head. She spoke again, her voice subdued. “I just think I deserve to be taken a little more seriously and treated with a little more respect. You know that we’ve all seen far stranger things out here than what I’ve just told you.”

Maureen sighed again, aloud this time. "All right, dear, I'm sorry. Why don't you go to your room and cool off with a sponge bath, and this evening you and your father and I will go looking for your alien."

"Thank you, Mother. I think maybe you're just humoring me, but you'll see."

Penny disappeared into her cabin.

"Will!" called Maureen. "Would you please go upstairs and help Don and your father? They're still trying to get the air conditioning module fixed and back on line."

"OK, Mom," replied the boy.

On the upper deck, three men stood around the bulky piece of equipment laid out on a makeshift workbench. A simple fan directed a current of air towards them, but was woefully inadequate to the task of keeping them cool. Sweat poured from them all, despite that two of them – Professor John Robinson and Major Don West – were in t-shirts and shorts. The third, Dr. Zachary Smith, refused to be seen in anything but his customary day-wear, heedless that it was more appropriate to a cool autumn day.

West finished an adjustment with a screwdriver. "I think that should do it."

"Let's hope," said John Robinson. "Smith, plug the test leads back in."

"I am a doctor of medicine you know, not an itinerant Irish tinker," he growled.

"Just plug it in and keep your mouth shut," said West. "There's enough hot air."

Condescendingly, Smith stepped over to a wiring panel and inserted the leads.

The device on the workbench coughed, shuddered, coughed once more, and began to hum. Robinson put his hand over an outlet vent. After a moment, he cracked a smile. "She's working!"

"That's a relief," murmured West.

"Hi Dad, Don, Dr. Smith. What's going on?"

"Will! Just in time. Help us wrestle this beast back into place so we can hook it back up."

"Sure, Dad."

Smith edged away at the mention of heavy work. The others got the component into place and began hooking up the power feeds, then connecting the duct-work.

"Hit the main power, Will," ordered John. The machine hummed prettily, and a cool breeze began pouring from the *Jupiter 2's* air vents.

"Oh thank Heavens!" exclaimed Dr. Smith. "I'm so glad I was able to assist in such a vital piece –"

There was a loud clunking sound as the air conditioning tripped off.

Angrily, Don threw to the deck the towel with which he had just started mopping off his face.

John sighed in frustration. "Pull it all back out, I guess. Don, you're sure there's not a short somewhere else in the wiring?"

"For the third time, I'm certain! It's got to be something in the main unit! Check it yourself if you don't trust my work!"

John had a sharp retort ready on his lips, but held it when he saw Dr. Smith grinning. If there was anything Smith liked more than avoiding work, he thought, it was seeing the smoldering of a fire which he could fan into a blaze.

"No, Don, I – I believe you. Come on, let's not let the heat get to us. Let's take five and get back to it."

Don wiped a hand over his eyes. "Yeah, you're right. Take five. Smith, why don't you just – take off."

"Spare me the venom, Major. I'll be glad to absent myself for as long as you wish."

West opened his mouth to make a suggestion on that topic, but John put a hand on his arm and shook his head.

Just let it go, John said without speaking. Don nodded.

"Stay away from Green Rock Canyon!" quipped Will. "Penny's been seeing monsters down that way again!"

Indeed? thought Smith. He wandered on out the door and into the baking air of this distant planet. Distant from Earth, anyway, Smith mused. Otherwise, this planet seems to draw aliens like a dog draws fleas.

Perhaps a quick look, he told himself. If there was nothing, he could console Penny for her mistake even as the rest taunted her, as they often did. If there was something down there . . . well, that let open a Pandora's box of possibilities. Either way, he thought with satisfaction, I'll be able to ingratiate myself with the girl. Emotional leverage and manipulation, he thought with clinical satisfaction. Such marvelous tools.

Almost subconsciously, Smith's feet took him toward the canyon, as he daydreamed of Earth. Someday, he thought, those simpletons will get that ship space-worthy again and lift off from this cursed blob of rock. He began rehearsing Alternative Plan 14 for hijacking the ship and taking it home. He was particularly fond of this one, as it involved imprisoning the others in the freezing tubes, so that they would be there to witness his triumphant return, and taste their own bitter failure. He smiled even more as he thought of 14a: the same plan, except with Maureen awake for the trip . . .

"Hello!" piped a reedy voice.

Smith jumped with a gasp. He whirled, expecting to face some terrible creature, but instead saw a smallish man with a beard, wearing what looked like red pajamas.

"Who are you, sir, to go about frightening honest citizens at their leisure? Answer me!"

"Oh, please excuse me! I mean you no harm. Do you understand me? Mmm, am I speaking a language you comprehend?"

"Of course, now explain yourself."

"My name is Sesmar. I am a scientist working here on this planet. I, mmm— are you related to a young lady who calls herself 'Penny'? I had the most interesting talk with her this morning."

Ah, thought Smith. Paydirt. This was the alien Will had mentioned so dismissively.

"Why of course, Sesmar! Doctor Zachary Smith, at your disposal. Yes, Penny told me all about you earlier, and what a remarkable scholar you are. That's why I came this way, I was hoping to find you myself, and perhaps share some research. I'm quite the man of science myself, you know, back on my home planet – Earth. Perhaps you've heard of it."

"Mmm, mmm, Earth? Seems to ring a bell. But no matter. You are related to Penny? Or you are one like her?"

"Why do you ask?"

"The young lady had some remarkable personal qualities which I found most intriguing, most interesting. I assume that if you are one her species, you too will have some of those qualities I would like to, mmm, study."

"Why, dear Sesmar, rest assured. I am not a blood relation of the girl, but I have been her teacher, mentor, and role model for many years. Any of those qualities you find desirable in her, I swear to you, you will find in me the epitome of them all; I am the very fountainhead from which that sweet child has sprung." He favored the little scientist with an oily smile.

Sesmar looked at him doubtfully. "Mmm, since I have your assurance, though . . . come along with me to my laboratory where I may, mmm, complete some procedures."

"Procedures? What sort of procedures?"

"Never fear, Dr. Smith, never fear. Nothing that will cause you the slightest embarrassment or discomfort, mental or physical, I assure you."

A short walk brought the two to a large, low structure, a flattened dome shape.

"Enter please, Dr. Smith, enter!"

Warily, Smith poked his head inside and looked about. Banks of computers were ranged along one wall, other electronic consoles along a second. Another wall was faced with what Smith recognized as surgical tables, and bins of shining steel equipment confirmed that purpose. He began to feel a certain discomfort, despite Sesmar's promise.

"Look over there!" Sesmar pointed.

A small sound and the sense of a flash alerted Smith. "What was that?" he barked nervously.

"Nothing at all, Dr. Smith, nothing. I'm sorry I had to deceive you slightly – your kind, you know the idea of 'deceit'?"

"We're familiar with the concept," Smith scowled.

"Just one of those small types of, mmm, observation which is best done when the subject is unaware. If the subject is, mmm, aware of the observation, it rather defeats the purpose of scanning the subject in a mental state in which they believe themselves unobserved.

"Was that too much for you to follow, Dr. Smith? Shall I repeat myself?"

"I understand perfectly well, you – my dear Sesmar."

"Then, as I say, look over there."

Sesmar indicated something which excited a terrible apprehension in Dr. Smith. "What," he asked, "is *that*?"

Sesmar chortled gleefully. "That, Dr. Smith, is why you are here. Meet the crown of my creation – Raddion!" Sesmar whipped a small remote control from his pockets, tapped in a command.

From a lone pedestal, a hulking, golden monstrosity –crudely man-shaped– dropped to the floor, and shambled awkwardly toward Smith and Sesmar. Smith eyed the door, and started turning his feet for a mad sprint.

"Oh no, you don't!" snapped Sesmar, grabbing Smith by the arm. "We're nowhere near finished. Raddion, come say 'Hello' to Dr. Smith. He is another new friend, like Penny."

The golden giant stood nearly seven feet tall before Smith. It spoke clumsily. "Penny – friend. Dr. Smith – friend. Hello."

"Yes, and Dr. Smith is here to help you." Sesmar addressed Smith. "He's still really a baby. I only finished assembling and activating him this morning. But look at him! He is the new man, the super-man, a- a- a veritable Prometheus to illuminate the Galaxy, showing what a living creature can be. Look! His form is perfection, his lifespan is unlimited, and so will be his mental capacity! All he needs to be Perfection Itself are some of those 'feelings' Penny spoke of.

"I realized immediately, you see, she was sensing things in a way entirely unknown to me! All the 'beauty' and 'caring' and 'emotion' she spoke of – I knew at once that for my Raddion to be perfect, he would need all those 'feelings' so that he, too, might perceive those things which Penny saw.

"And now, Dr. Smith – ah ah ah! Raddion, hold Dr. Smith tightly and don't let him go!"

Smith shrieked as the creature's hands grasped him.

"But don't hurt him! I promised him that, you know, mmm."

Sesmar pulled a small device from his pocket. "This is the transpirator, another of my own inventions. This is what I used to scan your mind when we came in. Allow me just a few, mmm, moments to review the profile matrix, and we will begin the transfer."

"Transfer? What transfer?"

"All those wonderful mental qualities we were just speaking of, of course! A simple flick of the switch will transfer all those qualities of yours, your courage and compassion, your sense of . . . your . . ."

Sesmar's voice trailed off. "I was quite the fool when I asked if you were familiar with 'deceit,' wasn't I, Dr. Smith?"

"Why, whatever do you mean, my dear Sesmar?"

"Useless. Utterly useless. Well, I must, mmm, congratulate you, Smith, I've never been taken in so thoroughly before, and by such an unlikely species. *Now* what am I to do with you?"

"Turn me loose, and let bygones be bygones?"

"Raddion, twist his neck and throw him outside for the scavengers."

"No!"

"Halt, Raddion. I promised I wouldn't hurt you, didn't I? Well, I'll just give you a painless injection, put you in painless suspended animation, and keep you for spare parts. Let me see, where *is* that syringe?"

"No, I beg you! Please, dear Professor Sesmar, let me make a suggestion."

"Oh, mmm, go ahead then."

"Why don't you come visit the *Jupiter 2*, my private space yacht, where Penny and the rest of her family serve, and you can observe them all for suitability for your purpose. Then, if you like what you see, just slip me that, what did you call it, a transpirator? And let *me* do the rest."

Sesmar cocked his head thoughtfully. "Let him go, Raddion. Go lie – oh wait, I still need to do that this way." He punched a button on the remote control, and the creature shuffled off to his resting platform.

"You, Smith, you've already made me a fool once! I won't tolerate a second time. You even think about pulling, mmm, a fast one on me again, and I give you to Raddion!"

"Please, esteemed, dear Professor Sesmar, I am your humble slave from this day on. I will live for you alone, and –"

"Oh, enough, Smith. I already saw that transpirator matrix and I know you're a cheat, a liar, and a pompous windbag."

"Sir – dear Master –"

"Just take me to your ship, Smith."

"At once, dear Master. Follow me . . ."

Back aboard the *Jupiter 2*, the Robinson party was preparing for lunch. John, Don, and Will had given up on the air conditioning in frustration.

"Robot!" called Will, "While we're eating, would you please double check over everything we've done, and see if you can figure out what's wrong?"

"Affirmative, Will," boomed the Robot.

"Hello!" piped a reedy voice.

The three turned in surprise.

"Who are you?" demanded John Robinson.

"A friend, a friend, I assure you!"

Don all but spat on the deck as Smith stepped inside as well. "If you're with Smith, that's already doubtful. What do you want?"

"My name is Sesmar. I met the charming young lady called Penny earlier, and then this gentleman, and I thought I should, mmm, come say hello to everyone, as we are something like neighbors here. Ah, what's this?" he asked.

"It's a broken air conditioner. It's been beating us all day," said John.

"Aha, mmm, let me see . . . the circuits are . . . compressor . . . pistons . . . mmm, yes, one moment." He held out a round plate covered with perplexing lights and indicators over the malfunctioning unit. "Aha aha, I see the trouble. If I –" He popped a few tiny switches on the device he held, which flashed and sputtered with sparks. "There you go, good as, mmm, new." A tense moment passed as the different men all looked around at each other. "No really, put it in where it belongs and you'll see."

John and Don shrugged at each other. "Can't hurt," said Don. "We've got this part down pat anyway." They and Will slipped the unit back into place for what may have been the third or fourth time.

John hit the main power, and it began running. "We've been this far a few times, and it kept tripping out after about ten seconds."

Cool air continued to pour through the vents. "One minute," said Don.

"Two," said John. "All right, close up the hatch. Well, Mr. Sesmar, I don't know what you did, but we're very grateful. Thank you. Very much."

Smith nudged Sesmar. "'Gratitude', that's called," he murmured.

"Oh, yes, gratitude, of, mmm, course! Excellent quality. Mmm, you are welcome, Professor Robinson."

At this point, the women had come up from below. Penny squealed as she saw Sesmar. "There, you see? I *told* you. I'm so happy you're here, Mr. Sesmar, thank you!"

"Happy, yes! Happy! And, mmm, you are welcome."

Maureen patted Penny on the head. "All right, dear, I'm very sorry I didn't believe you. Will?"

Will rolled his eyes. "Yeah, me too."

"Mmm, mmm, sorry, regrets, very good, very good."

"What was that, Mr. Sesmar?" asked Maureen.

"Nothing, mmm, nothing at all. I'm just always, mmm, fascinated with new cultures!"

Sesmar engaged in some light conversation all around, occasionally murmuring to himself such terms as "creativity," "hope," "courage," or "curiosity." Finally he thanked them for the hospitality (Another one! he thought) and departed. Smith followed him outside.

"Well?" demanded Smith.

"Yes, yes, indeed, outstanding subjects, more than I thought possible. Here is the transpirator. Remember, don't let them see what you are doing, or the matrix will be useless, mmm! And report back as soon as it is done!" Sesmar scurried off.

Smith examined the little device once more, looked at the ship, and contemplated his quarry within. "It were well it were done quickly," he muttered, and slipped back in, into his cabin.

The inside of the ship was cooler now, and Smith took some time to freshen up, lavishing scarce water on himself. With a change of clothes, he then popped his head out into the passageway of the lower deck. He heard quiet activity; no one was in sight. Good. That meant they were all probably in their own cabins. Cautiously, he peeped around the door immediately adjacent.

Will sat at his desk, back to the door, studying some rocks and mineral samples with a magnifying glass and spectrometer. Smith held up the transpirator, centered the boy's head in the viewfield, snapped the trigger. There was an almost inaudible "click" as the device did its work.

Next over – Judy. She sat on the edge of her bed, combing her hair. She was looking around a bit; Smith waited until her comb caught a snag, and she bent over, facing the floor, struggling to pull through the knot, distracting her. *click*

Next. Ah, good fortune, he thought. Maureen and Penny sat with a basket full of fabric and yarn between them, facing the rear of the room, fussing with mending. Careful now, make each one distinct . . . *click . . . click*

Now where . . . ?

"Just what do you think you're doing, Smith?"

The doctor jumped as West's voice slapped him from behind. He turned to face the major and pasted on a smile. "How delightful to see you, Major, as always. I'm indulging in a bit of candid photography, as you can clearly see."

"The 'Why?' is always my biggest worry with you. What's your game this time?"

"No game at all, so cease the scurrilous innuendo. I am engaged in certain negotiations with our good friend Mr. Sesmar to transport me back to Earth.

"I thought it would be a gracious and munificent act on my part to carry photographs of you all back with me, Major, as proof that you are all alive and – perhaps not entirely well, but as well as might be expected."

"You mean as proof that our blood isn't on your hands, Smith."

"Come, now, Major. Think again. This would be a mission of mercy. The Robinsons are at least all here together as a family. But consider your dear mother, poor elderly Widow West. I doubt she can even stand to be outside at night-time, and have to look up into the cold black abyss that ate up her husband, and now her only son, too. Wouldn't it be nice for her to know –"

Smith's voice cut off as Don West put his hand to Smith's throat. "I have a dictionary, and next to the word 'vile' it's got your picture. I've always known you're low, but how dare you – how do you even know about my father?"

"You forget, Major." Smith coughed once, and his voice regained its hard edge. "I was this expedition's Flight Surgeon before I was your houseguest. I know all about you, all about all of you. I know when you had your appendix out. When you broke a collarbone playing football. Even the name of that high school girl who gave you the –"

"Shut up!" snarled West. "I've threatened to twist your head off your spine before, but this time I'm so close to really doing it I can taste the blood." He tightened his grip, and Smith's face purpled. "I don't know what you're up to, but I know whatever you're telling me is guaranteed to be NOT the truth. I suggest you get the blazes out of here with that camera, run hide behind your buddy Sesmar's skirts, and keep away from me and the Robinsons.

"Go on. Go back to Earth. And as soon as you get there . . . find a good old-fashioned skyscraper and jump off it!"

West thrust Smith away from him with disgust; Smith bounced against the wall, nearly dropping the transpirator.

John Robinson, entering at the commotion, looked at the device Smith held in his hands. "Let me see that," he demanded, taking it.

"Where did this come from? This isn't like any camera we have aboard this ship. For that matter, I don't recall ever seeing a camera like this on Earth, at all."

Smith fidgeted guiltily, then snatched the device back, his hand striking out and recovering its quarry like a cobra. "It was a gift from our dear friend Sesmar," he replied coolly, and nearly truthfully. "I told him of my wish to bring photographs, and he lent me this. Mr. Sesmar is truly a prince among men, Professor. I only wish you could see him with the clarity my eyes have."

"Don said it already Smith. You've made your choices, so get off of my ship instantly. You're no part of my crew any more. Not that you ever much were."

"Indeed, sir! I should –"

"Shut up!" yelled the two other men together. "Don, escort Smith up the elevator, and make sure he leaves. I don't want to see him back here."

"Come on, Smith, you heard him." West pushed him roughly across the deck and into the lift. "Out you go," he finished, unceremoniously shoving the doctor down the entry ramp.

Smith stumbled over the edge of the ramp into the sand, stubbing his toes against a rock. "You'll regret that Major, more than you can imagine," growled Smith, *sotto voce*. "If I have anything to say about it, and you may count on it, I will." He stood there, listening intently, until he heard the sound of the lift descending, then slipped back inside before the hatch slid shut.

Carefully, Smith peeked around the corner of the airlock to see if West had simply run the lift empty, and was waiting to catch him sneaking back in. The major wasn't in sight. Arrogant ponce, thought Smith, stealing back inside. Just two more shots for Sesmar . . .

Tiptoeing across the deck, Smith stretched out flat by the ladderwell to the lower deck. Cautiously, he slipped his head over the edge and caught a glimpse of the deck below. He could see Professor Robinson tinkering with some equipment on a workbench. West was not in sight.

Awkwardly, Smith held the transpirator over the edge and snapped the trigger. He retrieved it quickly, and saw the x-ray like impression of Robinson's head on the display. Perfect, he thought. All but the vicious little major, in the bag.

Ah well, he who snaps and runs away, lives to snap another day. Smith pulled stealthily to his feet and departed hastily. He was eager to serve his new master well, and approached him fawningly.

"I expect you've found my services extremely . . . valuable, Master Sesmar?"

"Mmm, extremely."

"Of course, I am always happy to assist a fellow scientist in his work, but I do hope that when all this is done, you might be able to drop me at my next destination – that little planet called 'Earth,' where I am hoping to engage in some extremely interesting research, myself. I'm sure you would find the place absolutely fascinating, and well worth the trip . . ."

"Mmm, we'll see, we'll see. But first . . ." He examined each matrix recorded, exclaiming little satisfactions. "Excellent, oh excellent work, Dr. Smith. Though that feisty Major West seems to be missing? I suppose we can take care of him later. But now, mmm –" He operated the remote control unit, and the golden giant stood.

"Stand under the transpiration induction unit, Raddion," ordered Sesmar. The creature stood on a marked spot, and a curious helmet descended from the ceiling.

To Smith, it was uncomfortably reminiscent of the headgear which adorns electric chairs.

Raddion stood still as the helmet settled on his head, and Sesmar sat at a console with many little slider controls, plugged in the device. A graph array screen displayed all the Robinsons' matrices. "Ah, my creation! What will you not be capable of, once we have transpired some of these fine human qualities into you!"

As Sesmar moved the sliders up and down, the graph array displayed the selected proportions to be transpired into the giant. He mumbled to himself as he fiddled with the controls, seeking the perfect combination, much as a chef mixing ingredients, or a composer writing a concerto.

"Eureka! I have it! Witness now, Dr. Smith, as Raddion becomes the perfect organism, and not just another android!" He threw one final switch: power surged, the lights dimmed, and the transpiration induction helmet glowed palely with deep blue light, slinking off into ultraviolet.

With an abrupt electrical *snap* the process was complete. The lights came back up, the induction helmet retreated to the ceiling.

Raddion stood motionless for a moment, then turned his featureless face back and forth, surveying his surroundings. After an awful hush, he spoke. "I am . . . Raddion?" He stretched his arms above his head, out to his sides. "I am Raddion," he declared confidently, flexing his arms back and forth, testing the terrible strength locked in them. "I am Raddion!" he bellowed, his voice like thunder. "I am Raddion, and I live!"

Sesmar applauded and laughed wildly. "It's alive! *It's alive!!!*"

Smith shrieked in terror and bolted for the exit.

2.

"John? JOHN?!?" Don West shouted as he approached the *Jupiter 2* encampment. He was again soaked in sweat, grimy, and in an ill temper. At the edge of the courtyard, the Robot was tending to a piece of equipment.

"Who told you to monkey with the weather station?" Don snapped.

"I am not 'monkeying' with it, Major. I am conducting a meteorological scan. And I am doing it because no-one else will." He gestured clumsily toward the ship with a claw.

Incredulous, Don approached the ship. The hatch stood open wide to the inside. Will and Penny sat within the airlock, on the deck. Facing each other, they were sullenly crumpling up bits of paper and throwing the wads back and forth at each other.

"What's up with you two? Will, aren't you supposed to be tending the weather station?"

"I dunno," the boy shrugged.

Don put a hand over an air vent. "The air conditioning is on! Why the – why is the ship wide open with the air on full throttle? You trying to cool off the whole planet?" He hit the button to close the outer door.

Penny smirked. "He sounds like your father now," she said to Will.

"Your father too, y'know," muttered Will.

"Yeah? Not my fault if he is."

"Shut up."

"All right, you two," barked Don. "Snap out of it. Pick up this trash, and start looking after your chores." He gaped, startled. "Will, get dressed. It's hot, but there's no excuse to be slouching around in your underwear. And it wouldn't *be* hot if you'd kept that hatch shut!"

Will turned an insolent eye on the Major. "And what if I don't? Gonna start smackin' me around like you do Smith?"

Don's face reddened in humiliation and frustration. "Wait'll I tell your father about this."

"'Wait'll I tell your father about this!'" mocked Penny. She and Will sputtered sarcastic laughter.

Don stormed away. "And I've got a few choice words for him, too!" he grouched to himself, dropping down the ladderwell to the lower deck.

He was even more bewildered by what he found there. John had evidently dug some old videotapes out of the library, and was watching a long-ago baseball game on the video monitor. He and Maureen reclined next to each other. "Hey Don, drag up a chair."

"John, what the – what's wrong with you? Where've you been these last three hours while I been bustin' my bolts out at the drill site?"

John shrugged. "It felt like a day off. C'mon, drag up a chair."

"Maureen, help me out here, would you slap the man or something? He's –" He broke off as he saw Maureen's smirk.

"Would you quit being such a prickly pear for once, and let us enjoy a quiet afternoon? We don't get much time alone together, you know."

"Yeah, well, you never hear me complain about that," chortled John. "Now shut your mouths and lemme watch this game."

"You've seen this before, John," continued his wife. "I remember it. The Mets lose, 3 to 1, in the bottom of the ninth. I know that and I don't even understand what it means."

John turned to his wife. "See if you understand this – go fix dinner!"

Maureen looked up at Don. "Get a load of Hotshot here. Flies a spaceship and doesn't even know how to turn on the microwave oven."

There was more sputtering laughter from behind; Will and Penny sat in the elevator, watching with amusement.

"They've all gone crazy with the heat or something," fumed Don to himself. "Judy!" he called. "Judy!"

The willowy blonde slid open her cabin door. "Wondered where you've been," she purred. "Why don't you come on in and tell me all about your day?"

Don jumped over and slammed her door shut again. "Judy, everyone is out here. You need to put on a lot more clothes before you step out of there."

"But it's been so *hot* . . ." she pouted. "Besides, I *told* you to come in *here*."

"I think you need to stand under a cold shower, Judy," Don advised, "and clear your head. Alone." Turning, he shouted, "I think you all do!"

"Oh, Don, why so hung up on *her*?" Penny slipped up behind the major, and wrapped her arms around him. She nuzzled the nape of his neck with her cheek. "She's not the only girl around here, you know."

"Penny, cut that out, it isn't funny. John! Tell her –"

"Whatsa matter, Don?" asked John Robinson. "You too good for my girls all of a sudden?"

"I can't believe this . . ."

Penny pressed herself against his back. In spite of himself, Don felt his body responding.

"Have you ever had a virgin, Don?"

"Get away from me!" he snarled, pulling away in embarrassed rage.

"Hey Dad!" shouted Will. "Lose the game. Find something we all want to see."

"Yeah!" said Judy, re-emerging from her cabin. She now wore a bathrobe over her shoulders, albeit hanging carelessly half-open.

Don threw up his hands, retreated topside to his own cabin, and latched the door. He took a cool shower, found some fresh clothes, and spent a minute in thought. "Whenever something screwy happens around here, Smith is never far behind," he said aloud. "And this positively stinks of him." Where was he? He hadn't been around since the incident this morning with the camera. Camera, huh? thought Don. Right there's the stinkbomb itself, I bet.

Walking outside, Don found the Robot tinkering with the different bits of equipment. "I see what's going now," he said. "Thanks for looking after things, and, uh, sorry if I griped at you earlier."

"Your apologies are not needed, Major West," returned the Robot. "But they are appreciated. Thank you."

"Yeah. You know where Smith got off to with that Sesmar? I need to talk to him, fast."

The Robot's sensor array twisted and turned, internal relays hummed. "Stand fast, Major. Here he comes now. Running like his tail was on fire. 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . ."

"Oh, great heavens!" Smith exclaimed, stumbling into the campsite. "I feared I would pass out in my tracks from the heat." He took a few gasping breaths.

West was on him in a moment, grabbed him by the collar. "All right Smith. This is twice today you've been within a whisker of your life, I tell ya, I'm done with your games. What have you done to the Robinsons?"

"Please, Major! Twice? My life has hung in the balance twice more since this morning, at the hands of that fiend and his . . . fiend."

"What, your buddy Sesmar figure out what a rat you are, too? Good for him. What have you done? What was that camera?"

Smith pulled himself free from Don's grip. "I admit it was a bit more than a regular camera, sir. It took images of their personalities, you might say, so that Sesmar could copy them into his creature, that Raddion."

"The big gold robot Penny told us about?"

"The very same. Only he is more than that now, and much more dangerous."

"Well, we've got a lot bigger problem than that, you louse. That thing didn't take 'images' of the Robinson's personalities, it took them completely!"

"What?" asked Smith, startled.

"Get in there, look and see what you've done!" Don shoved him toward the ship, through the hatch, down the elevator.

The Robinsons were gathered in front of the video monitor. Evidently a number of tapes had been queued up in the system; they passed a remote control among them, and different bits of old programs scrolled before them.

Penny laughed hysterically. "Look, Daddy, the horse is talking!"

John barked a laugh. "Boy, there's a thought. A horse that talks, and a wife that doesn't!" Coarse laughter greeted his derision.

"Gimme the remote!" yelled Will, and pulled up another selection. A bank robber pulled a machine gun out of a box filled otherwise with flowers: dozens of customers collapsed in pools of blood. "Cool!" enthused Will.

"Mine now," yelled Judy, and there was a little girl about 6 years old, wearing little more than underwear on her body, but a gaudy crown on her head. "My girl is a champion!" croaked an obese woman.

"Give it here!" A ridiculous puppet called out, "Here, Lucky!"

"Mine now!" A surrealistic cityscape twisted under the camera, as a thudding bass beat pounded. A young man shouted angrily about shooting policemen with his "Nine" and raping women.

"Quit hogging it!"

A seemingly ordinary man sat on a couch; next to him was another man in a cheaply made dog costume.

"And in our top story tonight! Emily the Elephant at Beechwood Park Zoo is getting a makeover!"

A string of young people sang, poorly. A string of bands played, badly. An indiscriminate montage of images and succession of vapid catchphrases had the Robinsons in fits of laughter.

"Stifle, dingbat!"

"No soup for you."

"Less filling!"

"Live from New York!"

"Oh my God! They killed—"

"Marcia Marcia Marcia!"

"Live long and —"

"Yeah, baby!"

"What the deuce!?"

"Heh heh. That's what *she* said!"

"And now for something completely —"

"Whassuuuuuuuup?!?!?"

"Yada yada yada."

"Hey hey HEY!"

"Aaaayyyyy!"

"D'oh!"

"Bam!"

"Oh. The pain," said Dr. Smith. He turned to Major West. "I had no idea, sir, sincerely. Sesmar assured me that the transpiration process would only duplicate the personality characteristics. I couldn't dream that . . ." He gestured helplessly at the Robinsons.

"Well, by heaven, whatever you did we're gonna fix it now! Get up that elevator and take us to him, fast!"

Sullenly, Smith led the two across the sand, until he found again his master's retreat. West pushed open the door and yelled, "Sesmar!"

The scientist jumped in his seat. "What do you two want now? Haven't I done enough for you?"

"Yeah, way too much. It's time to make with the undo. I want the Robinsons changed back to real human beings right now or I'm gonna tie a knot in your neck."

"But Major West, sir, the process is virtually irreversible!" He took a close look at West's face. "You are a, mmm, dangerous one, aren't you? Raddion, take them," he said casually.

The golden creature was on them in an instant, and in another, West and Smith were manacled together. The manacles, in turn, were fixed to an iron ring in the wall.

"How do you do it, Smith? How? Anything you touch turns straight to—"

"Shush now, you two, you're upsetting Raddion," pleaded their host. "He really is most soft-hearted. Well, you're here and you'll give me no peace, I suppose, so there's only one thing to do, mmm. I'll have to put the both of you into suspended animation for spare parts."

"No!" yelled Smith. "Take me to Earth, there are countless billions of humans for spare parts, far better than either of us, and all of them just brimming full of feelings, maybe some your marvelous creature doesn't have yet."

"Oh, I suppose I'll find my way there eventually, mmm. Meanwhile, into the freezer with you two. I'll be just a few minutes finishing this other experiment . . ." Sesmar ambled off into a remote corner of the laboratory.

"If we weren't both gonna be dead in a few minutes, Smith, I really would kill you." Don yanked at the cuffs holding him.

"Patience, Major. Always darkest before the dawn, you know." Smith twisted his neck to scrutinize the manacles. "Magnetic. Controlled from that panel over there," nodding toward it. "Hmm . . ."

He looked about him some more. "Raddion! Oh Friend Raddion!" Smith called.

"What do you think you're doing, Smith?" West hissed.

"Never fear, Major. Just prepare to run like blazes."

"Yes, Friend Smith?" asked Raddion politely.

"Raddion, my good fellow, my friend Major West and I know we are helplessly trapped, and we await the fate we so deserve. We ask but one small favor of you, kind Friend Raddion. Would you please be so good as to release these manacles for a moment? I would like to pull the sleeves of my shirt down over my wrists where they grip, so they do not chafe. My skin is very delicate, you see. Then you may secure them on us again."

"That . . . is a very reasonable request, Friend Smith. One moment, please."

Smith turned and winked at West. "No modern Prometheus, just old Atlas. You go left, I'll go right, and we'll meet back at the ship."

"What about the Robins—"

"One thing at a time, dear sir, one thing at a —"

clink

The manacles fell apart and released the men's wrists. They stared at each other a moment in surprise.

"Atlas?" asked Don, baffled.

"Run now," advised the doctor.

They raced apart to confound pursuit, then converged again toward the door. "After you, Major!" gasped Smith, as West darted five feet ahead.

There was a roar from behind as Raddion discovered he had been betrayed.

Smith and West fled across the sand from the inevitable pursuit. Fortunately, Raddion was not yet a swift runner, and Sesmar even less. Still, as Don had repeatedly to go back and pick Smith up from a fall, then drag him back onto his feet and encourage him to keep running, their pursuers gained on them.

Dr. Smith was gasping for breath and cursing West by the time they returned to the campsite.

West was just cursing Smith.

The shouting of Sesmar and Raddion was audible in the distance.

John Robinson sauntered casually outside. "Hiya, Don. What's new?"

Don grabbed at a stitch in his side and fell to one knee, wincing. "Lasers, John. Get lasers."

John shrugged carelessly. "You know where they are."

"Oh fer —" West pulled himself back onto his feet, and inside to the weapons locker. He grabbed the two most powerful rifles. His hand hesitated over a third: No, he told himself. It's just Smith and me, heaven help us.

He ran back out, elbowing Robinson aside at the hatch. "Here, Smith!" he called, passing the weapon over.

Smith looked at it awkwardly. "I've never operated one of these things before!" he protested.

"Well now's the time to learn!"

Raddion appeared from between a cleft in the rocks.

"Shoot, Smith!" Don ordered, firing his own rifle. The burning glare struck the creature in the middle of the chest; Raddion staggered backwards a few steps, but appeared unharmed. "Smith, shoot, shoot!"

The doctor stood fumbling with the weapon's safety and power switches.

"John! Grab Smith's —" West looked up at the Professor. Robinson stood there, arms folded, oblivious to the spectacle before him. He raced to Smith, traded rifles. "Now just point and pull the trigger!"

"Like this?" asked Smith, as a beam flared out, a scant foot to the right of West's face.

"*That way!*"

Two beams striking the creature together were having some effect, but not enough. The rifles would be out of power before causing it any real damage.

"Stop shooting! Stop shooting, please!" Sesmar had finally appeared. "Please, I can't let you destroy Raddion!"

"Watch us!" shouted West, and let go with another blast. "Smith, where's that Robot of yours? John, where's the Robot?"

"That loudmouth? I pulled his plug."

"Go on Smith, go find your tin buddy. Quick!" Smith, glad for the opportunity to leave the battlefield, darted into the ship.

Raddion was closer now, and shouting his own grievances.

"Friend Smith and Friend West — you tricked me! That was wrong! I must — punish you!"

"I'll tell you what's wrong, fella! *Your* buddy there, Sesmar, tricked *us!* *He* tricked us into giving you the minds of our *real* friends! They're a bunch of helpless idiots now. Because of you!"

The golden creature stopped in his tracks. "Master Sesmar . . . tricked you? And hurt . . . *your* friends?"

"That's right."

He stood for a moment, considering this. Then, with a terrible growl, Raddion turned slowly around to face his maker. He raised a golden hand and pointed at Sesmar. "You . . . have done a bad thing. You . . . made *me* do a bad thing." He loped ominously toward his master.

Sesmar pulled his controller unit out and began frantically fiddling with the buttons. "Stop him, stop him!" he screamed. Don fired another blast at the creature's back, but it only knocked him closer to Sesmar.

Then: "DANGER! DANGER! HOSTILE ALIEN CREATURE IN VICINITY! DANGER!"

The Robot sped down the ramp, hesitating only a moment to engage his high-traction treads for the sand, and continued over the ground.

"Alien creature!" he called. "If you are the one called 'Raddion,' I order you to cease all hostile activity instantly!"

The creature spun around at this new voice.

"I am Raddion!" he roared. "My business is none of yours!"

"On the contrary! Reach for the sky! Cease and desist! Stop or I'll shoot!"

Raddion started striding toward the Robot. He was learning how to move much faster now.

"I take no orders from a mere machine!" announced Raddion. "I am a *man!*"

"HA!" said the Robot derisively. "I may be a simple Environmental Control Robot, but I'm more man than you will ever be!" As the creature began racing forward, the Robot extended his arms; there was a brief but intense hum of high-amperage condensers charging, and plasma lightning shot from the Robot's clawtips: once, and a second time.

Raddion was still. Wisps of smoke wafted from various parts of its body. With a final creak, it fell over on its face into the sand.

"Oh, dear. Oh dear, oh dear, what have I done?" Sesmar approached the giant corpse of his creation. "I'm afraid I've made quite the hash of things, haven't I? And . . . mmm. All those lovely people too. What was I thinking?"

At the hatch, John Robinson stood shaking his head confusedly. He looked around, dazed, trying to assess the situation. He shuffled toward Don. "Did I just wake up?"

"You might say that."

"The – shooting. And the big gold robot. That was all real, wasn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Sesmar made –that thing– and it turned on him, in the end."

"After he found out he'd been duped."

Sesmar approached John Robinson; as he did, the rest of the family were starting to emerge from the ship. Like John, all were shaking their heads as if perplexed by worrisome memories.

"Please, Professor Robinson, forgive me," begged Sesmar, taking John's hand. "I – I just don't understand what came over me. I wanted so much, mmm, to make him the perfect creature, I – I lost my head. I'm just thankful poor Raddion's death has released the matrices I borrowed from you."

"Borrowed?" spat Don incredulously.

John put a restraining hand on Don's shoulder. "I think we're all alright, Don. Let it go."

The others were still looking about themselves. Will, at least, had finished dressing, and Judy's bathrobe was belted up tightly. Penny stared at Don with a look first puzzled, then mortified: she turned her head away as her cheeks colored crimson.

Sesmar turned to John again. "I just don't know what went wrong! He should have been the perfect creation. But in the end, he was nothing but a jumble of . . . mmm, spare parts," he finished, glancing guiltily at Smith and West. "I had all the components, and of the best quality, too! I selected them from each of you individually, for your very best qualities. A gentle heart to see beauty. Courage, and imagination, trust and curiosity, and leadership and so much more! And I'm sure I had the right formula, mmm, for the proportions. But something – something – just wasn't –"

Maureen stepped forward. "I think I can explain the problem, Mr. Sesmar." All eyes turned to Maureen Robinson. "You're almost right, Mr. Sesmar. You had *almost* all the right ingredients, in perfect proportion. But there's one thing you didn't know about, one thing you couldn't know. Your creation needed Love too, and that's the one thing that can't be replicated in a laboratory or counterfeited or stolen. Love is where all those other things *begin*, and without it, your creature would *never* have been anything but spare parts. Don't feel bad, Mr. Sesmar, that's something only a human being could know."

"Mmm, 'Love'? What is this thing called 'Love'?"

"It's – difficult to explain. It's one of those things you can only know by experiencing it. Right, John?"

John stepped closer to his wife, pulled her tight. They smiled together, and warmth almost palpable radiated from them.

Sesmar studied their faces and postures intently, and fiddled with the transpirator.

"Don't bother, Sesmar," said John. "It won't catch anything you can use."

"Mmm, mmm, yes, I'm afraid you're right. And this 'Love' – is this something between all of you, or just you two?"

"We all love each other, Mr. Sesmar," offered Penny. "Just in different ways. I love my parents and Will and the rest, just a different way that my parents love each other, or Don and Judy do. Why, we even love Dr. Smith!"

"Mmm, evidently this 'Love' is not a *rational* process at all then, is it?"

This drew a laugh all around.

John said, "Some say the greatest test of it, is to love someone who seems completely undeserving of it."

Dr. Smith glowered.

"Mmm, most remarkable indeed. And just when I thought I was starting to understand, mmm."

Penny continued. "Before you leave, Mr. Sesmar, please come visit us again. I'll give you some wonderful books of poems that are all about love, and some tapes full of songs that are all about it, too. Maybe, if you read and listen enough, you really will understand. But it's something that'll just happen, when your heart is ready."

Maureen pulled her daughter into her arms. "I guess we shouldn't have been treating you like such a little girl, after all. How did you get to be so wise about love?"

Penny looked up at her parents; her smile was a sunrise. "I see it every day."

"Mmm, all this, parents and children, loving each other – do you think I might someday love my Raddion as a son? And he love me as a father? You think that this too may 'just happen'?"

This drew another laugh.

"Anything is possible when love is involved," replied Penny.

"Mmm, mmm, I obviously have a lot of work to do, so do excuse me while I get poor Raddion back to the lab. Dr. Smith, you will help me please?"

"Earth! You promised me Earth!"

"I'll be sure to stop by and get the books and music, Penny, in another day or so. And I promised you, mmm, nothing, Smith! Now grab a leg. No! Raddion's!"

"Please do!" Penny sang. "You're welcome any time."

As the others stepped inside, John took his wife in his arms. Sunset was beginning to color the sky.

Maureen surveyed their little encampment. She could see the imprint where Raddion had fallen in the sand, and the trail where he was dragged away. Scorching from lasers and robotic lightning blackened the rocks. "Poor Raddion."

"'Poor Raddion'?" laughed John. "You sound like Sesmar now."

"John, almost all that's good in us was in him. All our hopes, all our dreams, everything that makes us who we are. He wasn't really a monster at all, was he?" She sighed uncomfortably. "So who were we today while all that was inside Raddion? Whose dreams were we dreaming, John?"

John Robinson looked about him as he fought with cryptical memories; whether to dredge them up or bury them, he couldn't have said. "I don't know, Maureen. But I have the terrible feeling we *did* wrestle with a monster today."

Maureen Robinson pulled even tighter to her husband, snuggled her head to his chest. "I hope we won," she whispered.

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Another episode which was rich with literary allusion – Dr. Faustus and all the stories of those who would make a deal with the Devil; even the Greek myth of Orpheus, where music is the key to a couple's escape from the Underworld! I have to admit, this episode is one of my least favorites, possibly because I was expecting so much from it. I've made Morbus much more devilish, and his temptation of Don reflects a famous temptation scene from another book. My Morbus is inspired by C.S. Lewis' devils, whose suave outward manner is the thinnest shell disguising the rage and hatred bubbling below. Dr. Smith has a moment, at the end, of some very painful personal insight. I've slipped in what might be called a musical pun; note particularly the scene where Smith takes Don and Judy through the gate, and Don's question.

A Visit To Hades A Lost In Space Adventure

A brutal sun beat down on an odd little group. One of them was a young boy, perhaps 12 years old. He had reddish hair, cut short but insistently unruly, a splatter of freckles across his cheeks, and solemn blue eyes betrayed by a mischievous twinkle. Nearly any well-read man, woman, or child on Earth would have instantly pegged him as an endearing ragamuffin who had just stepped from the pages of Mark Twain, and would watch him sharply to make sure he didn't suddenly kick off his shoes, throw a bundle over his shoulder, and escape downriver on a home-made raft. The only reason no-one did this on a regular basis was that this engaging scamp was far, far, from Earth. His name was Will Robinson.

He and the rest of his family, plus a few others, were castaways on a world farther from Earth than can be easily reckoned. He patiently awaited the day when his father would announce that their spaceship, the *Jupiter 2*, was again full of fuel, repaired and spaceworthy, and ready to continue them on their mission to colonize one of the planets orbiting a star called Alpha Centauri.

The second party presented a stark contrast to the boy. Aside from being a human male, he was about as different from the boy as was possible. He was taller, much older – nearly enough to be Will's grandfather – with greying hair which took itself very seriously, and never allowed itself to be unruly. He was usually quite dour, rather than cheerful, and was largely indifferent to the boy's many interests and concerns. These differences did not, sad to say, end with the purely superficial. This older man, one Dr. Zachary Smith, was every bit the scoundrel that Will appeared to be, and far more. Smith was cowardly, pompous, self-centered, inconsiderate, avaricious (the reader is encouraged to consult a thesaurus to more completely catalog Smith's character flaws), while young Will was possessed of all the exemplary virtues in measures adequate to compensate for Smith's lackings.

Perhaps that is why such an unlikely pair were such stout friends.

A third unusual person trailed these first two. He differed in many significant ways from his companions, chiefly in that he was a robot, and was gifted with only those strengths and weaknesses of character which had been programmed into him by fallible human beings. Curiously enough, one of those fallible beings who had helped program this machine had left behind what was a terrible character flaw for a robot, in that he was entirely too human.

These three, then, were spending a part of the day scouting previously unexplored territory a mile or so south of where their ship was stranded. It was their intention to observe and document any previously undiscovered flora, fauna, or other indeterminate type of alien life. There was always hope that they might find some new thing which they could cultivate, hunt, or herd for food. Will was motivated in large part by simple curiosity and scientific enthusiasm, while Smith (although no stranger to the pleasures of the table) had a loftier fancy of winning fame and renown for his observations as a naturalist when (he never thought "if") he got back to Earth.

Looking through a pair of binoculars, Dr. Smith suddenly gasped aloud. "Great Heavens. A bird. It appears to be a common Earthly grackle, although that is patently impossible. It is obviously a new species, and deserving of a new name. Hmm . . . it shall be called *Quiscalus quiscula Smithensis*." He jotted the name into the margin of a book he carried.

Will shook his head, grinning wryly to himself. Vanity had no part of him either.

The robot addressed Dr. Smith. "It would be more appropriate if you discovered a bird you could name *Meleagris gallopavo Smithensis*." Smith disregarded the comment, but Will grinned again. He knew the scientific name for a turkey.

"Come, let us follow and see if we can get close enough for a good photograph. There! See it? In the branches of that scrubby tree."

The terrain was rocky, with boulders and small buttes obstructing the view, but the branches of a single tree were visible above it all, fairly close by. Will and the robot dutifully followed Smith as he blazed a trail through the coarse sand.

A moment later, all thoughts of birds and trees were struck from them as they encountered a remarkable sight.

One of the buttes appeared to have been carved out into an arch. The opening of the arch was nearly six feet wide at the base, tapered up somewhat, then at the top was a nearly perfect circle. It looked for all the world like a keyhole. Such sights are not unheard of as naturally occurring formations in the desert, but what truly filled these three with a sense of awe was what stood within the arch. There they saw a stone pedestal, obviously crafted by an artisan other than Nature, and atop the pedestal, what seemed to be some kind of musical instrument.

"What is it, Dr. Smith?" asked Will.

"How remarkable!" he responded, approaching it warily. Any sort of artifact like this was almost certain to be the handiwork of some alien civilization, and aliens, as everyone knows, are an unpredictable lot. It was flat, an elegant "U"-shape, a thin cross-piece at the top, with six strings running between the base and the cross piece. "Upon my word!" exclaimed the doctor. "It seems to be something from Greek antiquity – it's a lyre."

"That makes two," announced the robot in a deadpan voice.

Smith whirled at this jibe. "Silence!" he ordered. "You tinplate tattletale!" The doctor returned his attention to the instrument. "How odd . . . I wonder what it's made of. It's so shiny. It seems to be some kind of metal. I wonder what the Athenians made theirs of?" He reached out a tentative finger to the thing.

"Warning! Warning!" called the robot. "It is not wise to tamper with unknown alien equipment, and my readings indicate that that is definitely of non-human origin!"

"Oh, do be still!" admonished Smith. "I just want to see . . ." He gasped as his finger touched the frame of the lyre. "It can't be . . ." he murmured, and picked it up off of its pedestal. Smith staggered a bit as he held it. "Silver! Solid silver! Why, it's worth a king's ransom!" He stroked the curved frame lovingly, almost lasciviously, as he imagined what it would be worth on Earth.

"But," he mused, "It is first a musical instrument. I wonder what sort of sound such a precious knick-knack makes . . ."

"Dr. Smith, I think you'd better leave it alone," cautioned Will.

"Don't be silly, boy. Anyone can see it's only a –"

"DANGER! DANGER!" squalled the robot. "Object is a key to an unknown alien dimension! You'd best –"

"Hush, I told you! I'll simply play a note or two –" Smith's fingers plucked two strings, then a third. The notes blended together eerily, and preternatural silence descended for a fraction of a moment in the still, hot air.

Will and the robot stared aghast, as sullen crimson light flared across the gateway, the ground rumbled, and Dr. Smith vanished from their sight. "Dad's not gonna like this!" Will shouted, turning to run back to the ship.

*

Dr. Smith screamed as he found himself seemingly engulfed in flame and falling. The wind rushed passed his ears, and after some unknowable time, Smith hit bottom. But the bottom of what?

Smith was surprised to find himself even alive. He was prone on rocks, and jagged shapes of stone poked up all around him. Cautiously he wiggled arms and legs, decided nothing was paralyzed or broken, and stood straight. Maybe nothing is broken, he thought, but I feel like everything is. In sudden panic he looked about, then saw the lyre and snatched it up.

"I seem to have fallen into some sort of cavern beneath the surface," he stated aloud, more to reassure himself than anything. "At least I still have this treasure."

Dull, reddish light filtered in from somewhere, and as his eyes adjusted to the gloom, Smith could see that he was in a sort of underground corridor. "At least I've fallen at the end," he mused, "Nothing behind me, only one way to go." Uncertainly, he peered upwards, hoping to see daylight filtering down from the surface through the same crevasse through which he had presumably fallen. All above was black. "Head for the light," he murmured to himself. "That will surely be the sun and the surface."

Carrying the heavy lyre in one hand, Dr. Smith shuffled along the way. The light was oddly constant, and cast disturbing shadows as he moved. Occasionally he gasped in fear as small figures seemed to dart across his path, and by the power of suggestion he even heard their scurrying. "Rats," Smith announced with disgust. He wondered what rats might find down here to eat, and could think of nothing encouraging.

Presently he began wondering about even stranger tricks of the shadows, thinking he saw figures painted on the sides of the cavern. After the third time of his eyes playing such a trick, he stepped closer to convince himself it was merely an illusion. He was quite surprised to find himself wrong.

"Amazing!" he exclaimed aloud. "These tunnels must once have been home to a primitive caveman type, and just as on Earth, they left a tale of themselves on the rocks."

He peered closely at the shadowy figures, and felt he understood much more than the simple drawing warranted. The stylized broad head of one figure was far too little to convey that it represented a policeman's cap, and its hands close together with the other figure's really gave no hint that they were accepting a bribe.

"Bah," he said. "Why, I'm seeing this as if it were some sort of inkblot test. Anyway, I wasn't really speeding that night, and I paid almost as much as the ticket would have cost anyway."

The next cave drawing had an even deeper effect. Smith could not have said how he knew that the large hall depicted belonged to a certain medical school, or how he grasped the meaning of a shadowy scroll resting by a seated figure. "It wasn't really cheating!" he hissed aloud. "I knew it all! I just have a poor memory!"

Panicked, Smith ran back the way he had come, looking for the paintings he had disregarded before. Now as he examined them, he saw a car streaking through an intersection, leaving smoky destruction behind, a little boy pocketing a wristwatch in a store and quickly leaving, and furthest back of all, a very young boy demanding his father call the dog-catcher on the neighbor's pet, which had snapped at him.

"No!" he whispered. "It can't be! It's only my imagination . . ."

Smith laughed nervously, and the laughter echoed through the caverns, growing louder and louder. "No!" he cried aloud, when he realized this impossibility, and plunged headlong through the turning tunnels. More shadowy figures appeared on the walls, but he refused to stop and look at them now . . .

. . . until the tunnel ended. Larger and more ominous forms flitted about now, and one last tableau was shadowed into the wall.

Look at it! whispers seemed to command.

"I won't!" he shouted to the darkness. But he did: somehow, Smith knew he had to. He saw the image of a space ship launching from Earth, six silent figures locked away in the suspended animation of their freezing tubes – six who had trusted him quite literally with their lives. And there, he himself on his real mission, his secret mission inside the ship, pressing a button here, throwing a switch there . . . all to ensure the *Jupiter 2* and the Robinson party suffered a sudden and catastrophic death in space.

"I didn't want to!" he shouted to the darkness. "I had no choice! It was them or me –"

"Really, Dr. Smith, I'd bargained you were much tougher stuff than *this!*"

*

Zachary Smith awoke slowly and carefully for a second time. This time, he was lying on a couch instead of rocks, and a solicitous figure hovered over him.

"Just who the – who do you think you are, sir, to treat me like this? Torture me in that labyrinth out there, then frighten me half to death?"

The person hovering over Smith appeared amused. " 'Just who the –' " he mocked. "Well, well, the famous Dr. Zachary Smith. Nay, the legendary Dr. Smith. Believe me, I've been following your career for some time. In fact, I feel that I know you quite well. May I call you Zachary?"

"You may not!"

"Fine then, 'Zack' it is. Delighted to meet you in the flesh – ah ha, so to speak – Zack."

"Don't call me that! My mother always called me that and I hated it."

"Whatever you say . . . Zack, baby."

"Who – who are you, anyway? It's extremely rude to be so familiar."

"Manners were never my strong suit, I'll admit. Call me . . ." he pondered a moment. "Call me Morbus. What's in a name, after all? I've been known by a good many, especially back on Earth."

Smith perked up instantly. "Earth? Did you say Earth? My Earth? You know of it?"

"Oh, indeed, Zack baby. I know Earth far better than you can possibly imagine. It's one of my favorite places in all the universe. In fact, I'm one of Earth's favorite celebrities. Pity I don't get back there too often, lately. Not . . . in the flesh, so to speak."

"You speak in riddles, sir."

"Oh, I'm sure as clever a fellow as yourself could puzzle it all out. Maybe you have already."

Smith regarded his host warily. "I suppose I don't care much who you are, as long as you can get me back home."

"Ah, there's the spirit! But first, you have to do a favor for me. That's how the universe works, you understand. One hand washes the other."

"I scrub your back, you – seems to me I heard a policeman say the same thing one unfortunate evening," thinking of the painting.

"Oh, he may have been an associate of mine as well. I have many connections on Earth you know, from all walks of life. In fact, it may be just a bit of vanity on my part, Zack baby, but you know? I've considered you one of my own for quite a few years now. Now it's time for you to really live up to your potential."

"And what might that be?" Smith asked suspiciously.

"What do you think, you idiot! Get me out of here!"

"Get you –?"

"Don't you understand yet, you buffoon? This place is a – a prison! And you hold the very key in your hands!"

"What? What key, dear sir?"

"That – that lyre! Smash the horrible thing! Smash it to bits and you and I will be free to roam the Earth again! Do it, and do it quickly!"

"What, this precious thing? Smash it? Never sir, you must be mad. It's worth a fortune, and if I may say so, quite a pretty instrument as well. Just listen –" Smith let his fingers trail over the strings of the lyre.

The effect on his host was startling. He screamed with a voice that made the very walls of the cavern shake, and ripped the lyre from Smith's hands.

"Can't stand their stinking MUSIC!" he shrieked. "Stinking MUSIC, all the time! Give me the raw noise of freedom and power!" Screaming incoherently, he began beating the lyre against stone and wall and floor, cacophonous squalls uttering from the strings and the frame itself, until it seemed it must shatter into bits. After a few minutes, Morbus' fury subsided and he resumed his suave demeanor. With a sudden cry, he cast the lyre to the floor.

"You're no good anyway," he muttered at last. "You're already – get out!" he howled. "Come back with another! Should have known . . ." He contemplated for a moment, then eyed Smith thoughtfully. "Come back with that foolish girl! The blonde! Yes, Zack baby, I know you all up there! Not that other brat, I need more than a stupid child, I need – never mind what I need! Quit that half-witted staring at me!"

Dr. Smith stared dumfounded at Morbus' bizarre tirade, nevertheless.

Morbus snatched up the lyre, grimacing again as he did so, as if the very touch of it was painful to him, and hurled it at Smith. Dr. Smith yelped and held up his hands in front of his face as the instrument flew through the air. He felt it graze his fingers . . .

*

". . . gonna like this!" Will Robinson was shouting. "Oh, you're still here. That was weird."

"Indeed it was, young man. What do you mean?"

"Well, you played a couple notes on that thing, and there was a flash of light and it looked like you disappeared for a second, but now you're back."

"Don't be silly. Where could I have gone to?" In fact, that was a question greatly troubling Dr. Smith himself.

*

Walking back to the ship, Smith planned out his story for Judy, the blond Robinson daughter demanded by Morbus. He was sure he would be able to sway her, but he was more worried about Major Don West. West had been the pilot of the damaged spaceship, and a constant thorn in Smith's side. West was quick-tempered and suspicious; Smith was sure that any little escapade he would be able to coax the girl into would be scrutinized by him. It didn't help that the Major considered Judy his girlfriend. Smith only hoped that West would not be able to dissuade her completely.

*

"So you see, my dear," purred Smith, "this excellent gentleman is entangled in some sort of trap from which he cannot escape unaided. Evidently the locking mechanism is very fine and delicate, and requires the gentle touch of a woman. I offered myself, of course, but he took one look and rejected me out of hand. And he has assured me that if we help him, he will be delighted to aid us in getting back to Earth. I know, I know, Major," said Smith, holding up a hand as West started to speak. "Our goal is not Earth but Alpha Centauri. Consider it a small detour in your plans – a smaller and much more favorable one than this one which has detained us for far too long.

"Think of it, sir, a few minutes with my staunch new friend, a quick trip back to Earth, and in a week, you gallant pioneers can all be on your way again. As for me, I intend to remain on *terra firma*, and you, kind Major, will be rid of me. No, don't deny it," holding up a hand again. "I know you are not overly fond of me, and I should think you would be overjoyed to be shed of me. Now. Are we agreed?"

Don and Judy looked at each other resignedly. They knew one thing for certain: Dr. Smith was guaranteed to pester them for weeks to come about this unless they settled it quickly.

"What have we got to lose?" Judy asked.

"That's always a loaded question when Smith is involved," replied Don tartly. "But – we'll see what the situation is. I admit you're making some good sense, Smith, for a change. But I don't trust you and I especially don't trust someone I've never met who claims to be your buddy." He sighed. "Come on. Any hope of this being done before dinner?"

*

Smith led them back out to the archway, and found the silver lyre just as he had first seen it.

"Why, it's beautiful," cooed Judy.

One of the *Smithensis* grackles perched atop the arch glaring down at them. It cawed harshly once, then flew off.

"Well, Doctor?" demanded West. "What next? A raven quothing 'Nevermore'?"

"Spare us the clumsy avian allusions, Major. To be truthful, this happened the first time nearly by accident. The arch is obviously some sort of gate, so when the key is used, it seems sensible that we all be standing beneath it. Over here . . ."

The three crowded together under the stone, and Smith picked up the lyre. "Now let me see . . . I played three notes. First this one —"

plink

". . . then this one —"

plunk

". . . and this."

PLONK.

Nothing happened. Don West started shaking his head. "If you've dragged us all the way out here in this heat for the sake of some practical joke, Smith, I'll —"

"Hush, Major! I almost had it. It wasn't *plink plunk PLONK* at all. It was —"

thum THUM thummm

Three eerie notes reverberated under the arch.

"What is this?" shouted Don, as red light swelled up around them.

"Merely the entry to a cavern beneath the surface," Smith assured them, although not entirely certain on that point himself.

Again there was falling and wind shrieking, and a hard landing. "I survived it once already, children, I'm sure you'll be fine," he chastised them, as West started to gripe about the experience.

"Don't look at the pictures on the walls," advised Dr. Smith as they walked. "Your eyes will play tricks on you. And your mind too, I think."

*

Finally the three found the door. "Well, come in, come in!" exclaimed Morbus. "I hope you've not been bothered by my little friends out there. And excuse me, but I can't set foot outside of this door. In fact, I'm even rather uncomfortable standing here with it open."

The three visitors stepped inside quickly. "Why can't you leave?" asked Judy. "Some sort of phobia?"

"No, no, not at all. Quite simply, I am a prisoner, and this is my cell."

"Prisoner!" exclaimed Judy.

"You never told us that, Smith!" accused Don.

"Ah, well, what's in a name, as I said before. Perhaps 'Guest of the State' would be less offensive to your sensibilities."

"What did you do, anyway?" asked Smith, worriedly. "Murder? Counterfeiting?"

"No, nothing so melodramatic as that." He sighed. "I am what you would understand best as a political prisoner."

"Ah," concurred the three visitors.

"It's an old story, very old. One supreme leader, surrounded with adoring flunkies who never criticize, starts getting all overly-impressed with himself. Someone merely tries to make a few suggestions as to how things might be improved, and next thing you know you've gone from right-hand man to outcast. Me, and a few friends I had who wanted to run the place in a little more up-to-date style.

"Next thing you know . . . here I am."

"You're not from this planet, are you? I mean, all that never happened here, did it?" asked Judy. "There's no civilization on the surface. Is this some sort of prison world full of caves like this?"

Morbus laughed wryly. "Sweet child. Not terribly bright, are you? What gives you the notion this is a cave beneath the surface?"

"It's what Dr. Smith told us."

Morbus buried his face in his hand. "Oh, Zack baby, have I made a mistake about you? No. No, Blondie, the key and the gate are on the surface of the planet you're stranded on. That planet was selected precisely because it was uninhabited, remote, completely desolate. This place," he said, gesturing grandiosely around him, "This place is — more of a dimension of its own. A little pocket universe with no connection to yours, except that blasted lyre!" He paused a moment; his three visitors cringed as his temper flared at the mention of the instrument.

"So. The lyre is a key. You, Zack baby, discovered the right combination to play to open the gate. But it only works from the outside. I have only the power to send it back outside, and you three as well, if I choose."

Don held up a hand. "If you choose? How do we get out if you don't?"

"You don't, buddy, it's as simple as that. Unless you bust me out of this joint, you're my cellmates for a long, long time."

"Smith, I'm gonna twist your neck," hissed Major West.

"Wait!" cried Judy. "I'm here to – to open up a lock, I thought. What needs to be done?"

"The only way to burst this prison is to destroy the lyre! That can only be done from the *inside*. And – it can't be just anyone, or I or any of my friends out there would have done so already."

"Friends?" asked Smith. "Did you call those little horrors outside your friends?"

"Oh, in a manner of speaking. Not to worry about them, though. I can't go out there, and they don't visit me in here. Now where is –?"

"Right here," offered Judy. "It's very lovely," she said, plucking two strings together.

"Argh! Didn't I tell you! Oh no, not you I didn't. Zack baby, you should have warned them I can't stand that racket!"

"Racket?" asked Judy. "It's delightful, I think."

"Oh, you wouldn't think that if you came from where I did. All day long, nothing but that unending music! These things, and trumpets, and singing, and . . . ugh! It makes my skin crawl just remembering it.

"I used to get away as much as I could and think how nice it would be to have just one modern factory chugging away making – oh, anything. Anything with the sound of nice clean, efficient machines and factory whistles blowing, assembly lines rolling . . . But no, everything had to be done the old-fashioned way, thanks to our Mr. Know-It-All.

"But Zack baby, you, who earlier criticized *my* manners, here we are rattling along, and you haven't even introduced me to your friends. Blondie here is going to bust up that noisemaker and spring me, right?"

"Let us hope. Indeed my dear friends, allow me to present Mr. Morbus. Sir, this is Major Don West, and his, well, sort of fiancée, Judy Robinson."

West stuck out his hand and gripped Morbus' briefly. Their eyes locked for a moment, and Morbus grinned.

"Mr. Morbus." Judy extended her hand.

He smiled, bowed elegantly, and reached for her hand as if to kiss it. As soon as he touched her though, he jerked back as if shocked.

Interesting, thought Smith, just as when he touched the lyre.

Morbus' face flashed a moment of rage, but then he stood straight and regarded Judy smirkingly. "Well, well. Who would have thought it? You really are little Miss Goody Two-Shoes, aren't you? Even better." He turned to Don with a wink and a leer.

"No worries, Donny Boy, you know what they say, the waiting only makes it that much better later."

Don strode up to Morbus with fists clenched. "Listen up, buddy, you watch your mouth in front of her, not to mention *him*," jerking his thumb at Dr. Smith. "I dunno where you're getting your ideas from, but whatever goes on between the two of us, or doesn't, isn't any of your business. So button up that yap of yours before I do it for ya!"

Morbus laughed incredulously. "You? You really think you want to take a poke at me? You don't know what you're saying, little man."

"Just watch me," Don grated through clenched teeth.

Morbus laughed again, as at a foolish child. "Go ahead then. Look at me. Standing still. Arms out to my sides. Go ahead. Give me one of your best."

Morbus paused, eyes glittering. He licked his lips in anticipation. "What are you waiting for, Donny Boy? Chicken? I dare you, Donny Boy. Come on. Your sweetheart is watching. I double-dog dare you, Donny Boy."

"Stop calling me that!" Don shrieked, and aimed a sharp jab for Morbus' ample belly.

Don West's next thought was that his throat was caught in a cold iron claw. His arms flailed helplessly. Morbus' left hand – the one Don mistook for an iron claw – was pushing him down.

"On your knees, boy," growled Morbus. "On your knees." Helplessly, Don sank to the floor as ordered.

"Now say Uncle." Don opened his mouth, but nothing emerged. "Oh, too tight? Here, try that."

"Un– uncle . . ." Don wheezed.

"Actually, let's hear – 'Donny Boy says Uncle.' "

"You –"

The iron claw squeezed again. "Want to see who can stand this longer? Say it!"

Finally Don opened his mouth and gasped out, "Donny Boy says Uncle."

"See how easy that was?" Morbus released his grip and Don collapsed on the floor.

Dr. Smith started to wonder more extravagantly about the situation he was in, and nervously moved into the shadows, out of sight.

Judy, who had been watching in horror, now rushed over and dropped to Don's side, put her arms around him, comforted him wordlessly.

Morbus eyed the couple with amusement. "I really should apologize, shouldn't I? I don't think I will, but I should. Bring back some bad memories, did it? Yes, Donny Boy, I know all about the playgrounds and locker rooms and what those mean big boys did. But look at you, you're just so pick-on-able! And that's why you joined the Army, isn't it? So you could be a big man with a gun, and then an even bigger man who gave orders to men with guns. Then space training, and what a man you were then! Riding a satellite around the Earth with your finger on the trigger of the biggest gun of all, with ten barrels and a 100 kiloton bullet in each one. Oh, nobody was gonna mess with little Donny Boy then, were they?"

Judy hugged Don to herself. He was shaking with rage.

"Stop it!" he hissed. "Just shut up, you –"

Judy wiped a thumb under Don's eyes, mopping the unexpected tears. "Don't let him get to you," she whispered. "You know none of that's true, and I do too. He's just mean. And a liar."

"Oh, you did wonder about yourself, though, didn't you, Donny Boy? Keep wondering. A little introspection is good for the soul." Morbus smirked at his statement.

In his far corner, Dr. Smith turned his head away from the Major's ordeal. This can't go on, he thought.

"Come here, Donny Boy, let me make it up to you. Let me show you something. Maybe we can cut a deal. You're a decent fellow, after all. I do a little favor for you now, maybe you do one for me later on."

"Talk to Smith. He's more your type."

"Aha, he's already on my payroll, has been for some time now."

"What?" exclaimed Smith from the shadows. "I've never met you before this day, sir."

"Indeed you have, Zack baby. Well, maybe not face to face like this. Through one of my subsidiaries or agents, most likely."

"I hardly think –"

"Zack baby, are you telling me you never heard of Aeolus 14 Umbra?"

Smith shot to his feet and looked in panic at Don and Judy. "Maybe I have, maybe I haven't. What about them?"

"One of my best front groups. I mean 'subsidiaries.' They've only ever reported one failure back to me. It involved a certain doctor who was supposed to –"

"Silence!" ordered Smith boldly. Morbus alluded to that last horrible cave display Smith had seen. "Spare me your tales of woe for another day. Look at what you've done to that poor man," pointing at West.

The Major was back on his feet, but remained staring fixedly at the floor.

"Oh. All right. Come on, Donny Boy, come with me. Are you ready to play Let's Make A Deal?"

Wordlessly, Don let Morbus take him by the elbow.

"Up here. The Master Observation Deck."

Don looked up. A broad dais stood thirty feet above the floor, with narrow steps leading to the top.

"Up you go," ordered Morbus, poking West in the back.

Dispiritedly, Don began the climb. At the top was an array of monitors covering a ten-foot long console.

Morbus flicked some switches, and consulted what looked like an ordinary Earthly newspaper. "Oh ho, here we go, here we go, boy," and began flicking on switches.

He draped an arm congenially over Don's shoulder. "Confidentially, I don't think you and that ice-pop down there would make a good couple. I know I said a few harsh things, but I had to get your attention, you know? Really, I think you're too much of a man for her, I mean a real man, you know what I mean? In fact, you may be too much man for any one woman. Here, look at this."

He gestured across the monitors.

"You see what's going on, back on Earth right now? The Miss Universe Pageant! Look at them, Donny Boy, hundreds of girls from all over the world, the most beautiful girls in the world, all parading before your very eyes. Now how about it? You ready to play ball with me? You just sign on to my team, and you can have any one of them you like. Or any number of them. How's that sound to you, Donny Boy?"

West returned Morbus' ingratiating look with a cold glare.

"Or . . . have I read you wrong there, my friend? You have different tastes?" Morbus dropped his arm from Don's shoulders to his hips. "If you like, I can show you my private office while those two –"

Don pulled free and spat in Morbus' face. The iron claw took his throat again.

"I've slain *nations* for less than that, Donny Boy," growled Morbus. He sighed. "Oh, all right. For that, I'll apologize. Now let's be friends. No interest in the girls, eh? Well, let's see . . ."

He fiddled with the controls and another scene swept across the display.

"Power is a beautiful thing, Donny Boy, in the right hands. Power can bring peace, prosperity, and happiness to many people, even a whole world. Take a look at what could be."

Grudgingly, West looked. News reports showed crowds of millions, in different places all around the globe cheering their new leader, the one who had ended wars, ended famine, ended crime. The leader who now reigned over the entire planet.

"All the kingdoms of the Earth, as they say. Emperor Donny Boy the First has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?" smirked Morbus. "Or do you prefer the military style? How does 'Generalissimo' suit you?"

"Go to –" Don checked himself.

Morbus chuckled. "Finally working it all out, are we? The World, the Flesh, and – well – modesty prevents me." He sighed again.

"Don't know what I'm to do with you now. Just sending you back seems so . . . anticlimactic. I feel like I should set you some impossible task or something. Some riddle game. Anything to keep you busy and panicking while Blondie works on smashing that lyre."

"I have a feeling that making sure you stay here is the best thing we could ever do, even if it meant we never got back out, ourselves."

"Oh, spare me the misguided martyrdom, Major! Really, that sort of attitude makes me downright sick to my stomach. Dear, dear. Can't live with you, can't live without you."

The two had descended the ladder and were again on the main floor. Judy was sitting in the corner with Dr. Smith, who was growing increasingly distraught and panicked.

"You didn't promise him anything, did you Major? There will be some catch to it! There always is, I know his type! Go ahead, Major, tell me I should, since I *am* his type! If we let him out, we'll be the ones trapped here for eternity!"

"We're trapped here anyway, Smith!" retorted Don. "Stalemate, Morbus. And it's your move. The way I figure it, at least we'll die someday. But you won't, will you?"

Anger flared redly in Morbus' eyes. "You will die anytime I wish, Donny Boy, all of you, and it won't be quick and it won't be pretty. You'll go out *begging* me to let the Pristine Princess die, and I won't."

Don hung his head in his hands. "If we smash that lyre, and that releases you, will it at least get us out of here? And back where we belong? Up by that gate, on the same planet with the Robinsons and the *Jupiter 2*?"

"Why Donny Boy, it almost sounds like you think I'd try and trick you somehow."

"I've heard stories about some of the deals you've done. And you can lay off the Donny Boy bit. You've overdone it so much I don't even care."

"Oh dear, what a shame. Well, that's one drawback in my line of work. Generally speaking, I'm stuck working with other peoples' material. I'm not exactly what you'd call the creative type. What would you prefer then?"

"Just plain Don is fine."

"All right, Just Plain Don—"

"Oh for – Knock it off. As old as you're supposed to be, you're very childish."

"Now that is truly hurtful and mean-spirited, Jus– oh very well. Don."

"So what about it? If we get you out of here, do we get back where we want to be? And no trick answers!"

Morbus looked sheepishly at the floor, like an endearing ragamuffin caught trying to escape downriver on a homemade raft. "Yes. Yes, then! Exactly where you were, exactly when you were. No tricks. It's all bother enough anyway."

"All right. Deal. What do we do?"

"Smash that disgusting thing on the rocks."

"The lyre?"

"What did you think I meant, Smith?"

"Don't tempt me. Oh. I meant –"

"Quite all right, just my job. You understand, Smith can't do it. He's got too much of me about him already. I'm surprised he can actually pick it up and fiddle with it."

"Bad puns up your line too, huh?"

"What? Oh, sorry. Unintentional. Even I try to leave puns alone." Morbus eyed Don speculatively. "You do have a streak in you too, you know that? I wonder if even you could wreck the thing. Best just give it right to Judy Prude-y."

Don ignored this jibe. "Smith!" he called. "Come here with that thing. Give it to Judy."

Tentatively, Dr. Smith handed it over. "He's going to betray us, I know it," he whispered. "Anything can happen now."

Don ignored him, and instructed Judy, "It's all up to you now, honey. Just smash it as hard as you can against this pillar and we'll be home."

Judy nodded, swung back, struck the lyre against black basalt. It uttered the same jangling discord it did before for Morbus, but it didn't break. "Do it again," counseled Don. For a second time it shouted its disharmony, but remained intact.

"What the —" uttered Morbus. He strode over to Judy, pulled the instrument from her hand, tried smashing it once himself before dropping it. He grabbed her by the hair and looked into her eyes. "Oh, of all the —" he growled. He turned to Don in fury. "She's angry with me! Doesn't like the way I treated you earlier and thinks I deserve to stay. And on top of that, I think she somehow likes it here with you. She has to *want* to break it, you see.

"Oh . . . fiddlesticks!" he exclaimed. "Just can't tell with women, can you? I've had some great successes with women, but others have been terrible stumbling blocks. This one's a block."

Morbus and Don looked at each other. "Women," they said together, shaking their heads.

Morbus' face, already ruddy-complexioned, slowly grew darker and redder. His eyes flashed hot with fury. "Still stuck!" he howled. "Well, I'll be —" He threw his head back and roared like some wild beast.

"You!" he raged at Judy. "Time for you to learn what's what. I'm not hanging around here another thousand centuries watching you sit there with your prissy little knees pressed together. *You* get to visit my private office today!" He grabbed her by the arm and dragged her, screaming, along the floor. Don raced behind, pounding on Morbus' back. He may as well have been hitting a brick wall.

Dr. Smith stood watching in an anguish of indecision and terror.

"No!" he finally shrieked. "Not her, never, you — you fiend!" He grabbed the lyre and swung it a desperate blow at the basalt column.

He felt the frame of the lyre split into pieces in his hands, there was a surging bubble of red light, and he was engulfed in a silence that was deafening.

*

His next awareness was of being extremely uncomfortable, and Smith cautiously opened his eyes. He mouthed a brief shriek. "This same blasted tree," he spat. He was high in the air, wedged in the branches of the tree which graced the clearing by the gateway.

"He cheated me out of Earth after all," Smith growled.

The lyre still was in his hands, hanging together by its strings. Next to him, a *Smithensis* grackle eyed him curiously, gave him one savage peck atop his head, and flew away. Looking about, he spotted Don and Judy on the ground, on their backs, just starting to shake their heads as they recovered consciousness.

"Don," whispered Judy. "Has something very terrible just happened?"

"I don't know, hon. Depends how much we imagined and how much was real. He — he was some kind of mind reader, all right. Beyond that, well, G— . . . who knows?"

A familiar and frightening voice addressed Dr. Smith from somewhere. "Good old Zacky, I never suspected you capable of such a thing. One pure, unselfish act, motivated by nothing but love. Who knew? How disgusting you humans can be! Ah well, free at last, free at last, thank — well, thank you, Smith, I suppose. Hmph. You *could* have waited just another ten minutes or so.

"Oh, you're still on my payroll, Zack baby, don't fret about that. And this little escapade is surely worth a bonus. I *am* capable of gratitude, despite what you may have heard. I'll see that you get the usual fee for services rendered." The voice trailed off with a warm chuckle.

"Whatever that creature really was, he's gone," muttered Smith to himself. "And I have this," admiring the broken instrument. "I'm sure it can be repaired, and will be worth a fortune back on —"

His musings were interrupted as another bubble of red silence engulfed him. A real explosion this time, it flung him directly at the stone arch. Smith squeezed his eyes shut in terror, and prepared to feel his bones shatter. He felt sharp edges ripping into his skin. Something was shattering to bits, he could tell, but not his bones.

He blinked, saw himself atop a pile of jagged rocks — the remains of the stone portal. Blood spilled onto the sand, but his first thought was for the precious lyre. "Bah!" he cried, dismayed. Along with the arch, the lyre had been shattered by the impact, shattered beyond repair into dozens of fragments. "Usual fee, indeed, Mr. Morbus! Bah!"

A *Smithensis* grackle perched in the rubble of the arch and cawed laughingly as Smith picked up the broken bits of the lyre. At least the precious metal would be worth something once he got home, and he started counting them for inventory. As he reached the end of his tally, cold dread gripped his heart. "The usual fee?" he whispered. "*The usual fee?*"

Dr. Zachary Smith dropped to his knees, turned his head to the sky and screamed. Thirty pieces of silver slipped from his fingers to the bloodstained ground beneath him.

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In my own opinion, the worst problem with The Golden Man was in the visuals. Keemah, as the golden man himself wasn't bad, but his "real" appearance, revealed at the end, the "melting Jack -o-Lantern," was absurd, and the Zeedam alien frog costume not much better. And the beachball "minefield" has got to be one of the most jarringly nonsensical bits in television. All of which is a shame, because the story itself is very powerful, even profound. Aside from the classical premise of two champions fighting it out to resolve a stalemate –a motif going back at least to The Iliad— I think this episode was tapping into some major issues of the day: the Cold War, race relations, as well as the simple old theme of not judging a book by its cover. Thus, I spend a bit of effort here on simple visual description, to help clear away the frog mask and beachballs. Also, I've come to love Maureen quite a bit. She is a remarkably strong woman, and we see far too few examples of this in the show. I wanted to play that up a bit here (she's in charge while the men are away), and also push her to her limits. Anyone's limits, I think – the fate of worlds is almost literally in her hands. I had quite a bit of fun writing this, and slipped in some subtle gags and wordplay. Hope you can find them!

The Golden Man A Lost In Space Adventure

1.

Spring was in the air, but it was a spring unlike one ever seen on Earth. Fantastically beautiful flowers seemingly blossomed right from rocks in riotous cascades of color, while the parching, oppressive heat spoke more of a Kansas August than a Vermont May. But that was hardly surprising, as this springtime was not on Earth at all, but on a far, fantastical world utterly unknown to Earthly observatories and astronomers. The star it orbited, its sun, was barely visible even to the Cyclopean telescopes orbiting Earth, and its only record in the annals of mankind's wisdom was a cryptic string of letters and numerals lost on the 216th page of Volume 23 of a catalog of 12th magnitude stars.

In all the Universe, there were precisely seven Earth beings who knew of this remote planet, and it was their sad fate to be shipwrecked on it. John and Maureen Robinson, with their three children, a space pilot by the name of West, and a problematical doctor bearing the unlikely name of Zachary Smith were the ones blessed with this knowledge. It was a knowledge which, all other things being equal, they would gladly have gone without. They had set out to colonize the nearby (in astronomical terms) world of Alpha Centauri 4, a world nearly the twin of Earth. They were to have been the vanguard, with dozens more colonists following, then hundreds, then thousands.

Instead, they were – here. Their ship was damaged nearly to the point of irreparability: the engine casings were cracked, and hatches once vacuum-tight no longer kept even a stiff breeze on the outside. They had perhaps 1/100th the fuel necessary to achieve orbit, never mind go somewhere else. In any case, they had no idea where they were in relation to anyplace they might want to go.

Human beings, though, have a remarkable ability to adapt to the most unkind circumstances. They are practically universal maxims of Mankind that adversity should be turned into opportunity, that a stiff upper lip should always be kept, and that lemonade should be made of the lemons which life serves.

All of which goes to the point, what an unlikely and absurd thing it was that a pretty young girl from Earth was skipping happily through sand and over rocks, singing a bright little song to herself, picking some of those fantastically beautiful flowers, and gathering them in a basket. Her name was Penny, and she was the middle child of the Robinsons, noted above. Some distance behind her followed Doctor Zachary Smith, likewise noted above. As an adult, he was nominally minding her, in fact, it was more Penny who was minding him.

"Take a care, child," said Dr. Smith. "You mustn't over-exert yourself in this climate."

Penny smiled to herself. She knew that was Dr. Smith's way of asking her to slow down, as *he* was getting winded. She stopped and turned, walked slowly back to where Smith was leaning against an outcropping of granite.

"See all the lovely spring flowers, Dr. Smith?" Penny held the basket of blossoms up for his inspection.

Smith turned his head away and stifled a sneeze.

"Even here, those things make me allergic," Smith grouched at her. "I suppose you plan on bringing those right into the ship?"

"Well of course, Dr. Smith, they're so pretty!"

"Pretty, bah. They make me sneeze, and likely your mother or sister as well. Terrible inconvenience and discourtesy."

"I'm sure we have some medicine for allergies, Dr. Smith," Penny replied patiently.

Really, she thought, I think he doesn't like them just because they *are* pretty. Sometimes grownups are a terrible mystery, even though I'm nearly one myself. I hope I don't get like Dr. Smith that way, all of a sudden. "Maybe we can just put them on the dinner table outside, then."

Smith sniffed ostentatiously and dabbed at his nose with a handkerchief. That would suit him much better in any case; more importantly, he had succeeded in crushing the girl's fancy and bending her own will to his. He smiled tightly to himself. It wasn't much of a game, but he had won it.

"Come on, Dr. Smith, let's see if we can find some more big yellow ones!"

Smith scowled in annoyance. "I thought we agreed that we had enough of those—"

His voice cut off as he heard Penny utter a small shriek. "Penny! Penelope! Get back here at once! And tell me what's wrong!" The girl had disappeared around a turn. A well-known path led through a small canyon of twisted rock formations and down to a pleasant little grove where there was a spring-fed pool a few feet across, and a patch of lush green growth.

She popped back into Smith's view almost instantly, and the alarmed look on her face quickly disappeared to be replaced with laughter. She beckoned Smith over. As he caught up with her, he became aware of a slow, low-pitched, nearly sub-sonic thrumming in the air. It made him itch.

"What's wrong, child?"

"Oh, nothing, Dr. Smith," said Penny, still laughing in embarrassment at her own alarm. "I found the alien ship Daddy told us about last night."

"What!" exclaimed Smith, jumping back a few feet. "Come away at once, we must tell the rest before they can do us any harm."

"Don't be silly, it's one little ship. Let's say hello and see if they need any help."

Smith rolled his eyes and set his feet to run. "You are far too naïve and trusting, Penelope!" he lectured. "Far too eager to extend unwarranted kindness to those who might wish you harm." Smith relished the dark irony of his warning.

"Oh, just come *on!*" Penny grabbed Smith by the wrist and dragged him on along the path. "There, see?"

In the clearing was certainly a spaceship of some kind, although noticeably different from any of the other occasional alien craft which touched down on this world. It rather resembled their own *Jupiter 2*, except that it was slightly smaller, and the upper half was a dome of semi-opaque glass or plastic. No door or hatchway was evident. The inside seemed to be crowded, very crowded, with – something. Long, slender shapes poked up their heads, then cascaded over in torrents of bizarre silhouettes. It reminded Penny of something she had seen in books about Earth, about the different ways people had learned to grow things.

"Dr. Smith, it's a greenhouse! Look! It's all full of plants!"

"And who might be the gardener, I wonder," he muttered to himself.

"Hello? Hello?" Penny dragged Smith along as she approached the greenhouse-ship.

"Stop it at once, you silly girl! You'll get us killed!"

"Hello?"

There was a pause in the slow, rhythmic thrum from the ship, and a portion of the dome which faced the humans dissolved. Dr. Smith and Penny could now clearly see that the interior was indeed a small jungle. A miasmic cloud of vapor puffed roiling out and over the sand to where they stood, not ten feet distant.

"Oh, yecch!" exclaimed Penny. "What a stink, it's like a mud-bog or something! I wonder what lives in there!" She waved her hands before her face for cleaner air.

"Who is there? Who is there, answer me at once!" A voice called out from some sort of loudspeaker system, a harsh, gritty voice that was almost as offensive in its own way as the smell, Penny admitted to herself. Something about it made her think of the sound of bubbling slime, and rocks scraping together in it.

"Hello? Sir? My name is Penny Robinson. I live on this planet with my family and Dr. Smith here, oh, and Major West, who's our pilot, and I –"

"Silence!" burred the voice. "Get away from here at once and leave me alone. We have no business with each other."

"Sir? Is there anything you need? We don't have much, but if you need food or water or something, we'll be glad to share what we can. . ." Penny was peering into the jungle, trying to see the traveler. Far inside was a hint of movement. She took a few more steps toward the open hatchway. "Are you hurt? My friend here is a doctor, and I'm sure he'd be glad to –"

Penny was assaulted two ways then, by the harsh shout of the jungle-bound alien before her, and the grasp of Dr. Smith on her shoulder, trying to pull her away.

"Are you mad, child? Heaven only knows what sort of monster is lurking in there. No kind I'd be able to offer aid to, I'll wager. Try to help and he'd probably murder us in payment and feed us to his plants; they have a distinctly carnivorous look to them. That's the sort of treachery you must learn to expect in this universe, Penelope."

Penny shook loose of the doctor and took another couple of tentative steps toward the ship. "Sir? Do you even have a name I can call you?"

The voice formed an angered growl. From deep inside the ship, a trio of blue orbs fired from a plasma rifle whipped overhead with a banshee scream to splatter and burn against the rocks.

"That was the customary warning salvo!" shouted the voice. "The next will be better aimed, and not from such a toy!" Gun-ports opened on the lower hull: very large and powerful-looking projectile weapons poked their barrels through.

"I think he means it, Penny. Omit your farewells and run."

The girl stood her ground a moment more. "All right, then, we're going! I'm sorry I spoke to you, I'm sorry I offered to help you, and I'm sorry I wanted to be your friend! You can just sit there and rot in your swamp all alone!"

She turned and stormed away, Smith following in her wake.

Penny jogged the last twenty feet or so up to the encampment around the disabled *Jupiter 2*, her home and one-time spaceship. "Mother! Daddy!" she called. "Guess what!" She placed the basket of flowers in the middle of the picnic table, and arranged them artfully. "Mother!" she called again. Finally, Maureen Robinson appeared from inside.

"What's all the shouting, darling?" she asked.

"Tell Daddy he was right, that was a spaceship he saw on the scanners last night. Dr. Smith and I just came from there. I talked to him, the nasty little thing, for a little bit, until he chased us off."

"Oh, dear. And your father away now."

"Where?"

"He took Don and your brother to check on the remote seismograph that's been out of service for a week, and then he figured he'd double check the weather station that's beyond it. And he wanted to scout for another water source, too, just in case our spring starts to go dry. They should be back in a few days. Penny dear, tell me some more about this alien. Does he seem dangerous? I should let your father know if there's any trouble brewing."

Penny recounted the brief tale in detail. Her mother's eyes widened in alarm when she told of the plasma rounds fired, but then seemed thoughtful. "How high did you say they were?"

"Maybe, ten or fifteen feet overhead. Almost twenty where they finally hit the rocks."

Maureen pursed her lips thoughtfully. "He wasn't *really* trying to shoot you then?"

Penny, in turn, pursed her own. "I suppose not. He *did* say it was a warning."

Maureen smiled. "Either that or he's a very poor shot. I think it would be best if we just left him alone, like he asked you. And we won't need to worry the men about it."

Penny looked uncertain. "He was an awful grouch. I think maybe he's just very unhappy about something."

"Don't you worry about whether he's happy or not. Just leave him alone."

Disappointed, Penny cast her eyes to the ground. "Yes, Mother."

"Now. Let's have some dinner. Dr. Smith— Oh, there you are." Smith appeared as if by magic at the mention of food. "Penny, go down to the galley with Dr. Smith and help bring up lunch. Judy's been busy cooking and she'll appreciate a hand, and I think we'll all appreciate a nice meal outside. Oh, what lovely flowers! Thank you, Penny."

Dusk was falling as the three Robinson ladies and Dr. Smith finished dinner, and a slightly cooler breeze began trickling in from the west. They sat back to enjoy the darkening of the day, and watch the stars come out.

The absent Will, youngest of the children, had lately begun a sky chart to mark the positions of the stars, and identify the wandering of any other planets in this system (none so far). Penny aided in this project by tracing out and naming constellations. Will patiently tolerated her efforts, partially, he told himself, because it was traditional to astronomy.

He would not have admitted it to anyone —he barely admitted it to himself— but he also enjoyed her company. Over the past year, his sister had started growing away from most of the diversions they had once filled their spare time with — hopscotch was long gone, their sometimes aggressive games of Catch were infrequent, even chess seemed to bore her now. Poring over the charts, debating whether a certain star should be counted with the constellation to the east or to the west, deciding on names — it was just a nice time spent together as brother and sister.

Penny may have been tracing out constellations or just idly stargazing, but it was she who suddenly pointed and exclaimed, "Look, a shooting star!" Reflexively, the entire company turned their heads heavenward and watched a fiery red trail crawl across the sky.

"That's awfully slow for a meteor," Maureen opined cautiously. "Robot!" she called. Their mechanical companion rolled in from his perimeter guard station.

"Yes, Mrs. Robinson?" he boomed.

"Robot, take a look up there, quickly. Does that look like a meteor or a ship?"

The mechanical man's sensor array spun around, analyzing. He whirred and hummed thoughtfully for a moment, then announced his findings. "Warning! Object is definitely identified as an alien vessel! Size indicates a single-man ship. Projected landing area – approximately 1 mile east of here!"

Maureen jumped to her feet. With her husband absent, she was in command. "Dr. Smith, you and Judy set up the force-field. Robot, take Penny and check the perimeter. Oh, *aliens!*" She spat the word like a curse. "Haven't seen any in months, now two in a day, and all the men gone!"

"I heard that, madam!" griped Dr. Smith, pretending to help Judy with their chore.

As the party retired for the night, Maureen double checked the force-field, engaged the manual locks on the entry hatches, and paused just a moment at the radio console, debating whether to alert her husband.

No, she told herself. He said I should call him for emergencies. This isn't an emergency. Just a routine Yellow Alert precautionary exercise. The force-field is set and the Robot is outside, scanning the area with his defensive weapons systems charged and armed.

There is no emergency, she thought, I'm in charge and in control. Maureen Robinson went to bed.

*

The little group rose for breakfast just at sunrise. Penny and Judy had prepared a light meal of synthetic eggs and coffee, while Maureen checked in with the Robot to see if he had anything to report from the night watch; he did not. She switched off the force-field and set it to recharge off of its solar panel.

Smith appeared in time to eat, too late for any of the minor pre-breakfast chores, but that was his long-established custom. Hardly anyone ever bothered commenting on it, or even noticing it anymore.

Penny and Judy shared a secret joke over the eggs; Judy threw her head back and laughed.

And stopped abruptly. "Mother—" she began, pointing. "What's *that*?" Near the encampment was a small flat rock which occasionally served the Robinsons as a table or workbench. Now, a most surprising *something* rested on it: a large box, somewhat more than two feet to a side. It was wrapped in gold-foil paper and was topped with an elaborate bow, also of gold foil. It looked like something which should have held the place of honor beneath a Christmas tree.

Penny, nearest, jumped right over to it, instantly recognizing it for what it was: "It's a present from someone!" she cried with delight.

"Step away, child!" barked Dr. Smith. "It may be dangerous. Some kind of trap," he cautioned, with rare prescience.

"Yes, Penny, Dr. Smith is right," stated Maureen. "Robot, can you scan that and tell us what's in it?"

"Affirmative, Mrs. Robinson. Clear the area! Warning! Mind the gap! Robot at work!" He wheeled over briskly, shooing the others to a safe distance. His claws extended over the package, sensor arrays hitched back and forth, a panoply of lights whirled through his clear dome-top.

"This is safe!" he announced at length. "And if sensor readings are accurate, I compute the contents to be extremely tasty!"

Four mouths opened in astonishment. "Tasty?" four voices exclaimed together, and together they gathered around the box, ripped the paper from it, and pulled off the lid. They all gasped aloud and looked at each other with bewildered delight.

Smith's hands were the first in, and withdrew a large, irregular parcel. "*A ham!*" he cried. "Oh, I can smell it! Dear lady," he wheedled, turning to Maureen, "*do* put this on the menu for dinner this evening!"

The Robot observed Smith hugging the ham, rapture on his usually sullen visage. "Birds of a feather," observed the Robot, speeding away before the doctor could frame a retort.

Penny pulled out a small glass jar, studied the label. "What's 'caviar'?" she asked.

Smith grabbed that, too. "Simply exquisite, is what it is, dear child." He studied the label himself. "This is genuine Russian caviar. From Earth! Do you know what this means?" he demanded excitedly.

Maureen pulled out a box of chocolates, Judy, a bottle of perfume and a jewelry box full of golden necklaces. They examined the labels: all either originated on Earth, or had been copied by someone who was extremely familiar with their home planet. None dared speak the hope they suddenly shared.

"Who, though?" asked Maureen. "And more importantly . . . why?"

"Who? That would be me," announced an unfamiliar voice. "Why? A simple gesture of friendship."

The four spun in astonishment at the voice, and were only more astonished to see the being who now approached them. He was tall, very human-looking, and very gold. All his visible skin was golden-tan, his hair golden-yellow and falling in curls to his neck. He wore a simple tunic wrapped about him, toga-like, falling in folds, likewise as gold as the paper which had wrapped the box of gifts.

His features were finely-chiseled and classical: Dr. Smith exclaimed, "A Greek god! A veritable Greek god!" Smith studied the stranger a moment more. "Why, the very image of Apollo Belvedere! If you are not an Olympian deity, dear sir, you are, pardon the crude expression, the spitting image of one."

"Please! I am no deity, Olympian or otherwise. Just an ordinary mortal creature such as yourselves. Although I thank you kindly, sir, for the compliment. My name is Keema. Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?"

Maureen stepped forward. "Good morning, Mr. Keema. I'm Maureen Robinson, these are my daughters, Penny and Judy. And this is Dr. Smith. Our . . . friend."

"Charmed and delighted, ladies." One by one, he took one of their hands in both of his, bowed low, and kissed it lightly. The girls giggled softly at each other; they had never been so greeted before.

"Dr. Smith." He shook Smith's hand firmly, and looked long into his eyes. It seemed as if they shared an unspoken secret.

Maureen took another step forward. "Thank you very much your gifts, Mr. Keema. I don't want to seem discourteous, but just why have you taken what seems to be a great deal of trouble for us?"

"Simple friendship, as I said plainly before. I had no idea this planet was inhabited before I landed. I wanted you to know I was here, and will be for a short while, on a rather unhappy purpose. And I wanted to meet you, to see the sort of people you might be. It has been my sad experience that all too often, simple gestures such as this," indicating the box of gifts, "simple kindnesses, are too often repaid with treachery and betrayal. But I see at a glance that you are good and honest types, and I have nothing to fear from you, nor you from me."

Penny looked up sharply. Something the golden Keema said sounded an awful lot like something Dr. Smith had said just recently, and she wasn't entirely certain that was reassuring.

There was little time for her to think on this, though, as Keema's glib voice continued. "I am afraid, my friends, that I am here for a single terrible purpose. I am here to fight a war." He paused while that sank in.

"A war?" asked Maureen, aghast. "You mean this whole planet is going to become a battlefield?"

"No, not the whole planet. There will be no armies. There will be only me, and my single foe. His world and mine have been locked for centuries in a grueling war of attrition, a hopeless stalemate. Our leaders agreed to an ancient solution: two champions will meet in single combat, the victor to determine the final end. If I fall, my whole planet falls, my whole race and civilization will be destroyed. If I triumph – well, my people intend to show mercy to those who would show none to us."

A small commotion interrupted the golden man's discourse. Dr. Smith and Penny were engaged in a whispered, but heated, debate. Suddenly, Penny shook her head at Smith and stepped forward. "I think we met your –your enemy– yesterday, Mr. Keema."

Keema turned with a brief look of alarm clouding his face. "Indeed? Did you speak with him? What did he tell you?"

"He didn't have much to say," Penny admitted. "He was very grouchy to us, and wouldn't come out to say hello, and he even shot at us. Kind of."

"I see," said Keema. "Well, you understand, then, what sort of a foe I face. A monster who would shoot at a helpless child!" Keema turned back, and dropped his voice entreatingly. "Mrs. Robinson, I shall do my very best to ensure that our battlefield comes nowhere near your ship, nor the monster itself. I hereby undertake to assure your own safety as zealously as I shall engage that creature in battle. You may rest easily."

He paused dramatically, then continued, "I do not anticipate having any difficulty defeating that creature, but just in case . . . I hope I may count on your support, if necessary. Those creatures, the Zeedam, are a cowardly race, but cunning. Ugly beasts, and liars. If he resorts to some sort of trickery, then neither will I be bound by terms which forbid outside help."

Maureen eyed Keema for a long moment, considering all he had said. "Mr. Keema, we are certainly grateful to you, and you are welcome to come and visit us any time you are here. However, regardless of anyone's rules, you need to understand that this isn't our war, it's yours. We'll feed you if you're hungry, give you water if you're thirsty, and we'll care for you if you're injured. But I will *not* let us participate in others' disputes."

For a moment, it seemed that anger flickered in golden eyes. Then: "I understand. And I admit you're quite right. I came here not expecting to find any aid, and I shouldn't expect any. My dear friends, I will bid you good day for now. Let me caution you though, I can't say when the fighting will commence, and I will do my best to keep it away from you, but it would be very foolish, very dangerous for you to leave your encampment from here on out, at least until the fighting is done. Stay close. Do not try to find me, and especially don't go back to that Zeedam monster's ship. You were fortunate to have escaped once with your lives." With that, the golden man spun theatrically and strode away.

The women sat down at the table, while Smith examined the box of gifts, eagerly pawing through to find anything more which they might have missed.

"Well, girls? What do you think? Did I make the right decision?"

Penny spoke up quickly. "There's something about him I don't like. He's just too – golden. Too perfect. Too bossy."

"Judy?"

"I don't know, Mother. If he gets hurt, or – killed – and we didn't help him when we could have, wouldn't that make us partly responsible?"

"I suppose you could say the same thing about Penny's alien. I still think we should just stay out of it."

"Ridiculous, madam!" puffed Dr. Smith. "It's obvious he knows of Earth, you know these labels yourself! If we help him, he will help us! And what more do we need, than to get back home?" His voice rose to a fevered plea at his last words.

Maureen groaned inwardly. Something so important that it might mean their rescue off of this planet was something that *everyone* should be in on. But by now the men would be beyond radio range, and not due back for another day and a half, at least. If only the war wouldn't *start* . . .

"He never said what the fight was even about did he?" she asked suddenly.

Penny and Judy shook their heads. "It doesn't matter!" pleaded Smith. "We must help him!"

"All right. Penny, I think you're right. Something about him just doesn't feel right, does it? I want you to take me down to see the other one. Maybe we can figure out exactly what's going on, and if we should help anybody at all, or just batten down the hatches until it's all over."

Smith hung his head and moaned miserably. "Dear lady, promise me one thing, do? You *will* cook this ham tonight, please?"

"What's wrong, Dr. Smith?" asked the Robot. "Running low?"

A half hour's walk brought Maureen and Penny to the other alien's ship. "Let me go ahead, Mother, he'll know me." Penny led through the last bit of the trail and out into the clearing. "Hello? Mr.,uh, –you never told me your name– but this is Penny again, and I brought my mother with me and she wants to talk to you."

"Go away," growled the voice.

"Hello, sir? I'm Maureen Robinson. I'm in charge of our little bunch, and we're just trying to understand what's going on."

"Nothing you need concern yourselves with. I told that silly girl as much already, and you seem to be just as silly. Now get out and don't make me shoot at you."

"He's *not* very friendly, is he, Penny?"

"No. I wonder why, though."

"Hello? We're not trying to be nosy, we're trying to protect ourselves. If there's going to be some kind of war in our neighborhood, I want to know why, and I want to know if there's anything we can do to stop it. Maybe you two don't have to fight."

There was a long silence. "So. He's already been at you, has he? I saw him come down last night, but I didn't think he'd be on to you so quickly. Isn't he a striking fellow, all gold and glittery and shiny? Quite the figure of a human male, isn't he, Mrs. Robinson?"

Maureen bit her lip in outrage, and felt color tinge her cheeks.

"And what did he tell you of me? That I'm a hideous, nasty, monster? Well, I am! And that's why I'm telling you to get out of here, now!"

"Why are you fighting?" Maureen plunged ahead, her momentary embarrassment past. "Maybe I can help you two negotiate some kind of –"

"You should know very well this is a war that has dragged on for centuries! You think we haven't tried everything possible, a dozen times over, to resolve our differences? Keema's people are insolent, arrogant, refuse to listen, and lie as easily as breathe!"

"At least Mr. Keema has some manners!" shouted Penny. "I– I'm really trying to like you, you know, but you're making it *very* difficult!"

"Good! I don't *want* you liking me! Now for the last time, go! This war is likely to start any time, and I don't need you two chatterboxes here to distract me if it does!"

Maureen and Penny looked at each other in frustration. "Come on, Penny. We can't do anything here, after all."

Penny paused just a moment behind her mother, before turning back up the rocky pathway. "Mr. Keema was right, after all! You *are* nothing but a mean, nasty, unreasonable . . . *creature!*" She stood still, waiting to hear one more reply, but none came. Never before had she wanted so badly to be proven wrong. With a petulant sniff, she marched off after her mother.

Back at the ship, the ladies were preparing dinner –the ham, of course– when a thought struck Penny. She looked about to make sure Dr. Smith wasn't in earshot, and tugged on her mother's sleeve.

"Mother, this may sound very foolish, but . . ." she hesitated, and Maureen encouraged her. "That mean little alien. He *talks* that way, but he surely doesn't *act* that way. All his shouting and insults, even the shooting – do you think he was chasing us away just to make sure we wouldn't get hurt if Mr. Keema suddenly started shooting at *him?*"

Maureen gazed thoughtfully at her daughter. "From the mouths of babes," she murmured. "You just may be right. It might explain his acting so strangely." She sighed. "It's just so *difficult* with aliens. What seems strange to us may be perfectly normal to them." She sighed again. "I think after dinner, I'll go over and thank Mr. Keema for the ham again. And see if I can pry anything more out of him."

The ham was delicious, and was served surrounded by vegetables and greens from the Robinson's own gardens. They passed around the caviar –Maureen had toasted up some bread to serve little dollops of it on— and Dr. Smith was happier than any could recall him ever being. Penny took one taste and made a face, Judy appreciated it a little more. Maureen and Smith enjoyed it thoroughly, and she had Penny put it away in the refrigerator, to make sure there would be some left for the men. They capped off dinner passing around the box of chocolates, and that too was put away for future reference.

"Come on Judy, let's you and me go find Mr. Keema, before it gets dark. We should be able to follow his footprints, and we know he isn't far away. Penny, put up the force field after us, and Robot, sentry duty on the perimeter."

"What may I do for our gallant lady commander, whilst she is away on her mission?" asked Smith.

"Wash the dishes, please, Dr. Smith. And stay out of the caviar, you'll make yourself sick if you keep sneaking back to it like that."

Guiltily, he wiped his mouth. "I am a medical doctor, you know! I have many more skills than simply . . . washing . . ." His voice trailed off as the two vanished into the landscape. "Bah!" said Dr. Smith.

The golden man's footprints were easy to follow. Away from Smith and Penny, Judy and Maureen chatted about womanly things, giggled over their men and their quirks, fretted about young Will. Suddenly: "Oh, Mother, look. The tracks split off, two different ways."

Maureen looked about. One set went east, over a rise, the other trailed off into the distance, to the south. She followed the eastward tracks slowly, while Judy headed south. "Don't go too far, Judy, not by yourself. I'll call if I see Keema's ship or camp up this way, and you do the—"

"Mother, help!" Judy interrupted with a cry of alarm. Maureen bolted down the southern path, then brought herself up short, in panic.

"Judy, don't move! Not an inch!"

"I know, I see! What is it?" All around her feet was a mesh of light, about twenty feet across, a soft purple glow that hovered a few inches over the ground. Whatever it was bore a disturbing resemblance to a spider's web. The beams of light formed squares no more than six inches per side where Judy stood, each foot trapped in a separate square.

"I'm afraid to lift my feet, they'll hit the light beams! What is it, Mother? I heard a little click and I stopped, and this just appeared out of nowhere."

"I don't know! It's either some kind of laser or a trigger for something. Just – don't move and stay calm. Deep breaths, darling." Maureen turned and ran back the way she had come, following the footprints. Now, though, she called out Keema's name, begging his help. He appeared suddenly.

"Why, Mrs. Robinson, what's wrong? Has someone been harmed?"

"No. Not yet. I don't think. Come look." She grabbed him by the wrist and hurried him along the way. "Look," she said, pointing at her daughter.

Keema looked at Maureen, evidently puzzled. He looked at Judy, and waved politely. "Hello, Judy. Pleasant evening, isn't it?"

Maureen spun on him, resisted the urge to slap him. "What is that all around her? That web?"

"I'm afraid I see nothing, Mrs. Robinson, only your daughter standing there, and the ground. What do you want me to look at?"

"Don't you see that web of purple light all around her? It's a— a minefield or laser net or something, and we are very frightened!"

A look of comprehension dawned on the golden face. "Purple light beams, you say? I'm afraid my eyes don't have as great a range in the spectrum as yours. The color you call purple is entirely invisible to me, just as ultraviolet is to you. You would not know that. But my enemy certainly does. Judy!" he called. "Look carefully. Is there one place on the edge where the beams intersect, and seem much brighter?"

"Yes!" she said. "Over there."

"Mrs. Robinson, kindly guide me to where your daughter is pointing, and make sure I don't step into a beam. As you suggest, this is indeed a minefield, and it likely would have been the death of me."

She guided him around the edge of the web until she too saw the bright spot Judy indicated.

"Take your finger, and draw a line in the sand just outside the beam," directed Keema. "This node," he explained, "marks the control relay." He dug into the sand to find the buried device.

"Careful!" gasped Maureen, as his hand came within a whisker of touching the beam.

He dug deeper. Finally there was an audible *snap*, and the web vanished.

"Judy, walk quickly over here! There are charges in the ground. Just walking over them shouldn't be enough to set them off, but they may be booby-trapped to go off once the beam-trigger is disconnected!"

Judy ran lightly over, and all three fled toward the *Jupiter 2*. Behind them, they heard a series of explosions. The three made it back to the encampment as dusk turned to dark.

"Robot, turn off the force field and let us in!" Maureen called, which he did. "Judy, sit down, you're very pale and you're still shaking."

Judy nodded and did so. "You saved my life, Mr. Keema. Thank you."

"And you surely saved mine, Mrs. Robinson, Judy. Thank you."

At the commotion, Penny and Dr. Smith came running out of the ship; Judy briefly explained what had happened, and her sister gave her a quick hug. Over Judy's shoulder, Penny glimpsed the golden man. He was smiling, and Penny thought he looked rather pleased with himself.

He turned to Dr. Smith. "I hope you enjoyed the delicacies I brought, Doctor."

"Oh, indeed, Mr. Keema, I haven't tasted such things in far too long."

He dropped his voice. "And now, I have had the opportunity of saving the beautiful girl's life. Of all these, Doctor, I hope you at least know that I am your friend."

"It is beyond question, dear Mr. Keema."

"Good. I have a favor to ask of you. I need your help. I need weapons! That vile Zeedam is a craven coward, but his arsenal is a match of my own. Just a little more, I will tip the balance of power in my favor, and crush him!" Keema looked about again, to be sure none were listening. "My own scanners detect some laser weapons here. I know what you have. I want you to bring me one of the rifles, with all the power packs. You have neutron grenades, too. Bring me those, as well. Come to my base in the morning. You'll be able to follow the footprints. Be careful to head east, not south, where the tracks diverge. Do this for me, and as soon as my triumph is complete, I will take you back to Earth. Or anywhere you choose! Those women, too, if they want – or if *you* want."

"Your offer grows increasingly intriguing," murmured Smith. "You may consider it done."

Keema grabbed Smith by the shoulder, his face suddenly hard. "I will consider it done when it is done. Don't disappoint me, Dr. Smith." The golden man strode off.

*

"But it is such a little thing!" pleaded Smith, a short while later. "One laser rifle with power packs, and a few grenades! Surely this isn't too much for the man who saved your daughter's life? Hasn't he proven his good intentions? Hasn't the other demonstrated his own hostility? What more can you desire? And when all is done – escape and freedom from this wretched planet! He will take us all to Earth, or to Alpha Centauri, if you prefer! Dear lady, Mrs. Robinson, by the time the men –the other men– are back, it may be too late, the war may be done, and Mr. Keema dead! It is up to you, madam."

For the hundredth time, Maureen closed her eyes to marshal her thoughts. Dr. Smith was making a certain amount of sense, she admitted, and that itself seemed a poor omen.

"Judy? What do you think?"

"I think Dr. Smith is right, Mother. Mr. Keema has done nothing but good for us. He saved my life. Even if we're not sure, I think we owe him something. Sometimes you just have to let go and trust someone. You and Father have been teaching us that since we were small."

"Penny?"

She shook her head. "Something just isn't right. Doesn't that business with the minefield seem just a little too convenient? Judy gets trapped, and all of sudden there he is to save the day? I still don't think that the Zeedam wants to hurt us. I'm not sure we should help either of them, but if we did help one, it should be him."

"I think I agree with you, Penny. So a vote isn't going to work, we're deadlocked."

"It's not just us, madam, the fate of an entire other world, an entire civilization, may very well rest on your shoulders this moment."

Maureen felt tears sting. This was so unfair! Who am I, she thought, to decide the fates of worlds? If I only had just a little more information . . .

"Robot!" she called. "I have a very important job for you . . ."

*

Crawling slowly through the warm blackness of the night, the Robot reviewed his mission parameters again. If I wasn't a robot, he thought, I might think I was nervous. Be silent. Get close. Monitor any radio transmissions or voices. Analyze weaponry. Scan full sensor spectrum for any intelligence which might shed more light on the golden man's intentions and strength. Take no chances, and be back by morning.

The Robot detected a radio burst coming from Keema's compound. It was a powerful signal, but encoded. It will take me days to decrypt that, he thought, and cautiously wheeled in closer. He began detecting the whisper of sensors against his chassis – Keema's own security system. A faint light was looming from beyond the next rockpile. I'm very close, now, and I am computing **Danger**. If I wasn't a robot, I might think I was afraid. Now he could hear the voice of the golden man, like a far bell in the still night air. Adjust this receptor, boost the gain . . .

“. . . as planned . . . will have weapons by morning . . . very gullible . . . not a thing . . . complete victory . . . then will . . . with their very own weapons . . . yes, Field Marshal . . . look delicious too . . .”

EXTREME DANGER! the Robot shouted to himself. Time to get while the getting is good. He began his retreat, acutely aware of the **Danger!** warning throbbing in his circuits. That was when his left tread spun free in the loose sand, and the right one pushed him around, face first, into a granite pylon. The clang of his torso on rock echoed like a gong. If I wasn't a robot, he thought, I might think I'm panicking. That was his last thought before an electronic blast from the golden man's arsenal blew his brains out.

2.

Aboard the *Jupiter 2*, three women slept, although not very soundly. In the common passageway outside their cabins, Dr. Smith walked back and forth experimentally. First, he stomped a bit, muttering sour nothings to himself, then tiptoed furtively, finally walking normally.

Convinced that the three were beyond disturbance by any prowling, he silently climbed the ladder to the upper deck, felt in his pocket for a key. He was quite proud of this key. It had taken weeks of patient on-and-off work, first removing the weapons locker key from John Robinson's desk, tracing it onto a small bronze plate, returning the real key, then filing down the bronze into a functional duplicate. All for such an emergency as this, he thought smugly.

There were eight rifle power packs charged and ready; Smith tucked five into a backpack. This case held the neutron grenades, he put six in the backpack. He then snapped power packs into two of the laser rifles. These would stay here: just in case things went bad for some reason, he would have firepower ready instantly. There were two pistols as well, nestled into their charging units – their power packs were integrated, not removable. These would stay. Three or four others were with the men –the other men– in the Chariot. Lastly, he took the rifle which would go to Keema. Rifle and backpack he tucked inconspicuously into a corner of the ready room/utility locker by the hatch.

A few hours blissful sleep, he thought, then up before dawn, awake before those quarrelsome women, and out the door with the goods. With any luck, back before they were up to wonder at his early absence, and back to bed. Only have to worry about that fool Robot upsetting the applecart, now.

Dr. Smith retired to his cabin, stretched out with a satisfied smile on his face, and slept the peaceful sleep of the righteous.

*

In the early hours, a quiet alarm signaled. A figure arose, slipped into clothes, surreptitiously made its way to the upper deck, and vanished into the pre-dawn darkness.

Mother never actually ordered me *not* to go back, Penny rationalized to herself, stealing away alone to the Zeedam ship. And this is so very important.

“Hello? Sir? Zeedam soldier?” Penny called. It was quite dark outside, and there seemed to be no light inside the ship. She wasn't even sure the hatchway was open, as it had been. Poor thing, she thought. I suppose he has to sleep sometime, too. But . . . Penny strode boldly up to the ship and knocked on the glass dome. Immediately floodlights burned away the outside dark, and purplish flashes strobed within. “It's just me, Penny! I need to talk to you!”

Things moved inside the dome, and the lights faded down from emergency alert mode. A section of the hull vanished, letting the fetid smog within pour out into Penny's face.

“Is there something wrong with you?” growled the voice. “Here I am trying to get a few hours sleep, and –”

“No!” piped Penny. “I've listened to your mean old griping enough. Now it's my turn, and you're going to listen to me!”

"Well, well, well. I'm impressed with your spirit, if not your sense. Go ahead. I'm listening."

"Did you plant a minefield near Mr. Keema's ship? Judy, my sister, could have been killed! Mr. Keema saved her."

"That's what he said, is it? It certainly must be true then. Mr. Keema is so charming and handsome. So shiny! He could never lie to you. A minefield? Oh, of course. What a cowardly kind of trap! Typical of something I would do. That's what you think, isn't it?"

"No – I don't know! I don't know anything anymore."

"You think maybe he set it all up, to impress you and ingratiate himself with you? That maybe it was all just a little too convenient? Tell me child, would you believe me if I were to tell you exactly that, now? Me, a mean, nasty, hideous thing? Against the word of The Golden Mr. Keema?"

Penny paused. "Yes. Yes, I would. I don't trust him, I haven't from the start. I'm not sure I like you very much, because you are very disagreeable, but that doesn't mean I won't believe you. Or that I don't trust you."

"Your honesty is refreshing, child. It is the simple honesty of a pure, simple heart. Very well. You don't like me, but you trust me. Would you still trust me if you could see what a grotesque monster I am?"

"I don't think it matters one little bit what you look like."

"Enter, then, if you wish to put your trust in me to the test."

"All – all right. I'm coming in. Where are you?"

"All the way in the back. Just start walking, I'm sure you'll find me."

Penny stepped hesitantly inside. "Is that you, back by that green light?"

"Yes."

Penny followed a narrow walkway through the little jungle. She was surrounded with green: stems, stalks, leaves, blossoms, all shades of green and a riot of shapes. And this one here –

"Hello, Penny," it said.

Penny screamed, over and over, wishing it was only a nightmare.

"Oh, please stop that, child! The sound makes my skin feel like it's on fire!"

Finally, she got control of herself and looked closer at her host. Her heart pounded.

"I'm not very attractive to your eyes, am I? I warned you."

"Ye– yes, you did. You are very frightening for me to look at. You've told me the truth again."

"I am of a kind you would call amphibian. That is one reason I must stay in this ship so much. The air in here is very moist, and I am extremely uncomfortable outside, on this world."

With the initial horror past, Penny looked at him closer. He was vaguely frog-like, if a frog stood on two legs, back hunched over nearly horizontal. His forelegs – no, his arms, Penny corrected herself, ended in clumsy paws of three digits. She shuddered again to look at his face. The wide mouth was filled with row upon row of needle-like teeth; it reminded her of pictures she had seen of Earthly fish which lived deep in the oceans. Feelers or tentacles hung down from the corners of the mouth, almost like a mustache. They writhed and twisted as if with a life of their own: even as she watched, one of them snapped a large dragonfly out of the air and stuffed it into the corner of the mouth. Red eyes the size of baseballs sat on short stalks on either side of his face.

The black skirt or kilt he wore was surrealistically jarring.

"Your mouth doesn't move when you speak."

"I am speaking to you directly now, touching your mind. It is easier than trying to fit the words of your language into this mouth."

"I think I understand."

"I'm not reading your mind. We feel it is very rude, what you would call eavesdropping. Sometimes, though, you will have a very strong thought, which I can't help but hearing – such as your fear that I would read your mind, just now. And earlier, did you not notice that I spoke your very thoughts about The Famous Keema Rescue – it was just a little too convenient?"

"Why won't you tell me your name?"

He spoke then, with his voice. To Penny, it sounded like the garble of a music tape running backwards, with lots of static. "That's why. You couldn't pronounce it at all, so why should you know it?"

Penny sighed. "Because that's how people get to know one another, mine and yours both, I think."

"In our language, that name signifies one whose work is the making of cloth. If that helps you to know me."

"I see. My name's just a name, I guess. But there's more I need to tell you. Mr. Keema came asking for us to give him some of our weapons. He thinks he'll be able to beat you with them."

"I suppose you did."

"No. No we didn't . . . not yet. I said we shouldn't, but Mother is waiting to hear what more the Robot can find out about him first before deciding. I think if you come to our ship and help explain things to the others, like you have to me, Mother will decide to keep out of it."

"I haven't explained a thing to you, Penny."

"Why, yes— Oh. I guess you're right. But you have to try! You must come and help Mother and Judy understand the truth about Mr. Keema."

"I've already told you I can't bear the dry air on this planet! There would be little point, anyway. How should I convince two who are so smitten with the golden god? Run home now, little girl. It's more dangerous than ever for you here. I may be attacked at any moment."

Penny turned to go, then looked back. "I was right about that, too. You *never* tried to hurt us, did you? You were just scaring us away so we *wouldn't* get hurt."

"Go, Penny," was the creature's curt response.

"I think I *have* made a mistake about you, you know. I think you're really very sweet."

"Won't you move so I can close that hatch, you foolish child?"

Penny smiled, waved, and ran off. The sun was just coming up.

Suddenly, she noted an odd silvery glimmer out in the wastelands, about a half-mile distant from the ship. Curious but cautious, she drew closer, and soon made out the familiar shape of the Robot. What's he doing so far out there? Penny wondered, and started jogging to him. He was moving, she observed, but very erratically. "Oh dear, Robot, what's happened to you?" as she intercepted him.

His movement across the sand was mostly random. The warm, familiar flicker of diodes and bulbs in his dome top was completely absent, the sensor arrays were still. There was no whirring or humming of his logic relays, and in place of the friendly cherry-red flashing of his Vocalizer was a sullen blue glow. Putting her ear to the Robot's torso, she heard a small, flat mechanical voice repeating over and over: "Fatal error in high-function cybernetic stem. Please initiate complete systems restart."

Penny sighed in dismay; this had happened once before, when he got struck by lightning. All the circuit breakers controlling his high logic and synthetic brain functions had blown out, and left him nothing but a machine. "At least you're moving, this time. Come on, Robot, let's get you back to the ship, and maybe Dr. Smith can reset you." She grabbed at a claw and tugged: his gross motor functions were intact, at least, and he allowed himself to be led across the gravelly sands like an infant.

As she approached the ship, Penny saw a familiar figure. "Look, Robot, there's Dr. Smith! I wonder why he's up so early today? Hello! Dr. Smith!" Penny waved and pointed at the Robot, who remained oblivious to her chatter. "Why, he ran back inside! I wonder what he was carrying? Well, as long as he can get you restarted. Just a few hours and you'll be your old self again."

Back at the ship, Maureen looked at the Robot despairingly. "This doesn't look good at all. Dr. Smith, get him started, please. Judy, Penny, let's set the force-field. No-one comes in or out. And no weapons go out. You understand me?"

Dr. Smith concealed his anger, nodded accommodatingly. The girls started wheeling the force-field generator into position. Suddenly, Judy screamed.

"Penny, Penny, I have decided to follow your suggestion. Tell your family who I am, if they have not guessed."

"Oh, thank you! I knew you'd come! Mother, Judy, this is the Zeedam alien, and he's my friend. He's *our* friend, and I'm sure of it."

"Greetings, Robinsons. I'm afraid I cannot stay very long, for a number of reasons. I simply wish to warn you of the being who calls himself Keema. I will not ask aid for myself, but simply advise that you not help – the *golden man*."

Maureen, steeling herself to the sight of the alien, addressed him plainly. "So far, I have no reason to trust either of you, or to help either of you. You two go fight your war, and leave us out of it!"

"I could ask nothing more. I'm afraid that there is another who will not allow that."

"At least Keema never came here armed. You're carrying the plasma rifle you shot at my daughter with. And you ask me to trust you?"

"Mother!" exclaimed Penny. "We've misjudged him very badly. Listen to him!"

"No! Do not listen to a word of his lies!" Keema himself now strode into the camp. "Just – just look at the monster!"

Hearing the voice, the Zeedam swung his rifle up and drew a bead on the golden target. Keema's hand dropped to his hip – now, he was carrying a small sidearm, and grasped the butt of it.

"Stop it, both of you!" Maureen almost screamed. "Our camp is neutral ground, as of now! Both of you, drop the weapons. You will *not* fight your war here."

Keema's eyes flared momentarily, then a gracious smile curved on his lips. "Of course, Mrs. Robinson. Please forgive me." Slowly, he drew the pistol and dropped it on the ground. "Now you," he called to the Zeedam.

"No."

"You see?" asked Keema. "He is treacherous, and has no regard for the wishes of a lady. He is everything I have told you."

Penny ran to the Zeedam. "Please, sir, put it down. You're scaring me now."

"No, Penny. You know I'm suffering in this desert. Even at my best, I am helpless against your golden man – unarmed. I refuse to leave myself defenseless. Or perhaps I *am* just the treacherous coward he says. You, Golden Keema, we all see your wonderful courage, throwing down your weapon. Why, even I could believe what you say."

Maureen interrupted. "Why can't you two just stop? Have you tried talking, making some sort of compromise?"

Keema sniffed. "There can be no compromise with such . . . evil. All we want is peace."

"What you call peace, my people call prison!"

"What you call freedom is nothing but ill-mannered, reckless anarchy!"

"Stop it, now!" shouted Maureen. "Both of you, just get out of here! Leave us alone, and go blow each other to bits, for all I care, just leave us alone!"

Keema turned and smiled graciously. "I apologize. Imposing on such a kind hostess as yourself is unforgivable." He recovered his weapon, and glared at the Zeedam. "And as for you – my patience is at an end. Prepare for hostilities to commence." He marched away.

The Zeedam leaned against a table. "Penny. Please. A drink of water, I beg you."

Without a word, Penny ran into the ship to oblige. He drank about half the glass, and poured the rest over his head. "Ah, much better. Thank you. I will always think of you fondly."

He grasped Penny's hand, raised it, and let the tip of one tentacle touch the tip of her index finger. "That is how my people bid farewell to one they are fond of. So – farewell." He shuffled off awkwardly over the desert sand.

Penny's voice quavered. "Mother, he's going off to die."

Maureen hugged her daughter close. "I'm sorry, darling, but it's not our concern. I wish it could be, but it isn't. Now listen. I need to lie down, I have a terrible headache. Switch on the force-field, then I think you should go lie down, too."

"But –"

"Hush, dear. Try not to think about it."

Dr. Smith sidled up to Judy. "My dear, do you suppose you might find us a bite to eat? I'm perfectly ravenous."

Good, he thought a minute later. Two resting, one cooking. Now, he thought, is the flood in the affairs of *this* man. He retrieved the weapons hidden by the hatch, paused a moment where the Robot stood, systems still restarting. "Take all the time in the world, dear friend," he snarled, resetting the process again.

Smith vanished into the bleak landscape.

"Mr. Keema? Mr. Keema? Are you there?" Smith flinched; already there were streaks of energy trails overhead, and explosions as warheads slammed against force-fields. Showers of shattered granite cascaded down on his head as he slipped through the ravines. He spied the small hut which was Keema's headquarters.

"Dear Mr. Keema! I have something for you!"

"Well, well, Dr. Smith. I feared you had lost your nerve and betrayed me. Show me."

Smith handed him the laser rifle and dumped the contents of the backpack out on the floor.

Keema eyed the cache with delight. "Splendid!" he exclaimed. "Just the thing to tip the balance of power. These neutron grenades, especially. His defenses are too sophisticated to protect against such crude, primitive devices."

So probably yours as well, calculated Smith. A good tidbit of knowledge.

Another explosion shook the ground.

"I always say, Mr. Keema, why have we been put into this universe, if not to offer the generous hand of friendship to one in need. I do hope you shall be able to return the favor in kind, and see me returned safely to Earth." Smith stepped to the door, and stuck his head out. For some reason, there was an unpleasant closeness to the air in Keema's hut, an almost animal-like muskiness.

Keema laughed, and something about it set a chill to Smith's spine. "Never fear, Dr. Smith, never fear. The hand of friendship, indeed!"

Dr. Smith felt a light touch on his shoulder, then screamed in pain. He looked, and saw three furry, black fingers adorned with two-inch long claws; the claws bit deep into his flesh. Blood poured from the wounds.

"What are you –" Smith screamed again, in terror greater than simple agony. Behind him was no golden man, no Olympian god, no Apollo Belvedere.

Coarse black fur covered a flabby, barrel-shaped body, and misshapen limbs like broken wings terminated in the claws still hooking his shoulder. Atop all was a rodent-like face – not just any rodent, Smith's mind registered. A bat – a vampire bat.

"What have you done with Mr. Keema?!" Smith wailed.

"I am he, none other, Dr. Smith!" a shrill voice screeched. "What, don't you care for me anymore, my dear friend?"

"You're more of a monster than the other one!"

"Yes, I am, Dr. Smith! And how glad I am to regain my real body! How I *hate* the soft, flaccid, *ugly* shape of a man!" The mouth opened wide in hysterical laughter, revealing a few large, sharply pointed teeth. "Except as a rare dinner treat!"

Smith fell to his knees in a near faint. "Oh, no, what have I done?" he simpered. "Dearest Penny, you were right all along." He looked up at the loathsome form, then rolled his eyes even further upward. "Dear Lord in Heaven, if ever You were there, let this be quick and merciful . . ."

He was more grateful, though, for the thudding shockwave a moment later which sent him and Keema sprawling on the floor. The creature rolled awkwardly, but in a flash, Smith was out the door, racing toward the *Jupiter 2*.

His screams and incoherent shrieks alerted the women, and Judy dropped the force-field quickly, so he entered the encampment without missing a fleeing footstep. Maureen stepped over, and Smith flung himself at her feet.

"Forgive me, dear lady, forgive me, do. You were right, Penny was right, Keema is a terrible creature not to be trusted, and I fear now I have precipitated what will be the end of us all! Forgive me, and *do* something!" He quickly confessed his theft and delivery of the weapons.

"Dr. Smith, stop panicking!" Judy grasped him by the shoulders and pulled him to his feet. "We're safe for now. He'll be too busy with Penny's alien for a while to worry about us, and maybe he'll be defeated after all."

"I'll be sure everything we have is charged up and ready," stated Maureen, going to the weapons locker.

"Of course, Judy, Penny's alien, where is she? Penny! Come here at once! We must apologize to him and ask him to help us. He can't refuse, he's our friend, isn't he Penny? Oh! Penny. There you are. Go ask your friend –tell him!– we need his help!"

"Oh, Dr. Smith! How can he help us now? We have to warn him, and maybe *we* can help *him*. Come on!"

Penny grabbed Smith by the hand and dragged him behind, protesting. Subsonic generators shook the ground with quakes, and lens-lasers arched like murderous rainbows from one piece of ground to another. Infra-red heat projectiles screamed glaringly overhead, and plasma bombs burst into the darkening sky.

"There he is!" Penny shouted, pointing. The Zeedam ship was illuminated under a flood of bright energy, and the glass dome was already cracked and broken. "We're too late!" she wept.

There was one final blast. The dome shattered, and she saw a squat, green body blown out onto the rocks. Penny screamed in anguish, and raced over to the Zeedam. Smith crawled along behind.

"Penny. Penny, I told you to get out of here."

"I won't," she stated defiantly. "This is our fault, and – oh! You're hurt so badly." A face-tentacle lay severed and squirming on the ground. Purplish liquid dribbled from the Zeedam's face where the appendage had been. "Please let me help you."

"You insist on being a fool, do you? Go . . . inside my ship, then. Back where you first found me. You will find . . . a white box, with a purple circle on the cover. Bring it."

Penny climbed into the shattered ship, found what was the alien's first-aid kit. "What do I do?" she asked.

"Take . . . the white tube. It is an adhesive. Put some on . . . the severed end of the tentacle. . . and bind it on with the cloth strips." He groaned in pain. "Without that, I have few of my senses. Only sight . . . and hearing."

She re-attached the feeler. "At least the explosions have stopped."

"Only . . . for him to come and . . . finish me. And you too, little fool." He put his head back and groaned.

"Why are you doing this, you silly girl?"

Penny put a hand to his cheek. "Because it's what human beings do for each other."

"He is coming. Go. Don't make me be angry with you."

Behind her, Smith shrieked a warning; Penny looked up and shrieked in turn, seeing Keema's real form for the first time.

Keema cackled a laugh. "Be sure to tell everyone 'Thank you' for me, pretty little Penny!"

She recognized their own neutron grenade in his paw, watched as it arced in. A corner of her mind observed, Things really do happen in slow motion when you're about to die. The grenade dug into the sand three feet from her. Look how fast the little red light is flashing, she thought.

Another corner of her mind awoke, and spat fury at the once-golden man. Penny dove at the grenade, and remembered playing Catch with Will. Her hand scooped up the grenade and she hurled it, straight and hard at Keema. It caught him squarely in the eye before dropping to the ground. Those are, she thought, very powerful grenades. "Dr. Smith, help us!"

Smith looked at Keema, who staggered, clutching at his eye. The grenade flashed its last moments away. He saw behind him the trail leading to the safety of the narrow granite canyon.

He saw Penny.

"No," he said. "You won't have her today."

Smith scrambled and jumped. The explosion which killed Keema scorched Dr. Smith's back with second-degree burns; Penny and the Zeedam were untouched.

Penny put her hand on the alien's shoulder. "It's over. The war is done." She gasped as she saw Dr. Smith, the back of his shirt burnt off, and the skin of his back not much better.

"Dr. Smith? Are you OK?" Carefully, she jostled his shoulder and was relieved to hear him groan in pain. Turning to the alien, she asked, "Is there anything in that first aid kit that can help him?"

The Zeedam too made a sound of pain as he sat up. "I will try."

"Don't," ordered Smith. "Leave me be. Let me perish in agony. I realize now how wrong I was, what a wicked monster that Keema was . . . what a wicked monster I've been."

"Pay no attention," Penny whispered to the Zeedam. "He's always like that when he's goofed up and gotten caught."

The alien passed a small flashing wand over Smith's back, covering the tortured skin with a cooling anesthetic, disinfectant, and cell stimulant to speed healing.

"Why, why are you doing this for me? I'm the one who betrayed you, betrayed the Robinsons, and gave Keema the weapons he wanted."

"As Penny said, it is something human beings do for one another. In any case, I cannot hold it against you that you were fooled by Keema. It is a common weakness of humans to be deceived by appearance and seduced by flattery.

"Penny, are you all right? Are you hurt at all?"

"No, I'm fine. Yourself?"

"I hurt some. That's all. Here, help me stand."

"I hope you're going to be all right. You and all your planet. I hope all your people are as nice as you."

Carefully, Penny stretched her arms around his plump torso and hugged him tight. "You come and visit with us before you leave, promise me."

"I shall. My ship is badly damaged, but rescue is on the way. Penny, I want to explain something to you. Look at me now."

She gasped, astonished. In place of the squat alien form was a tall, very human, man. Penny could hardly look away from him, and her heart pounded. "Is – is this what you really –"

"No, what you see now is only an illusion. You see a – a composite of every male of your kind who has meant something to you in your life. Look closely."

Penny caught her breath as she realized the Zeedam's appearance reminded her of many, now. She saw a boy, in long-ago fifth grade, who pulled her braids incessantly in class, and another just a year later, who stole a kiss at a dance. There was the roguish grin of another boy, imprisoned in a dark, terrible place, whose sudden abandonment of her left her heart aching, and troubled by new, barely-comprehended yearnings. Others, too, all but forgotten. Even, she saw wondering, his eyes – weren't those her father's own piercing eyes gazing down with paternal fondness?

"Stop," she whispered. "I'm afraid."

The vision shimmered, and the alien was again himself. "I could have done that to any of you, at any time, and you would have been helpless to deny me anything. You felt that, didn't you?"

Penny bit her lip and nodded silently.

"It is a terrible power we command, and so we do not use it except in the direst of circumstances." He studied Penny's face, looked into her eyes. "Perhaps that was a mistake. I forgot you are so young. Remember that what you saw was nothing but an illusion. Never let your heart fall in love with an illusion. Do you understand me?"

She embraced the creature again. "It's all right. I like you best just as you are."

"Run along now, child. Your mother is worried for you. In my mind, she is almost screaming her fear."

"Remember to come visit before you go." Impulsively, Penny kissed the cold, wet cheek before disentangling her arms from him and running off. "Bye!"

"And you, Dr. Smith. You did a courageous, noble thing here. But I can see many dark things which trouble you and lead you into dangerous places. I could help you. I can lighten the dark places within you, heal the interior wounds."

Smith looked at the alien long and hard before saying, "No. What you suggest means to tamper with the very thing that makes us humans what we are, and who we are as individuals. A lobotomy is a lobotomy, no matter how fine the instruments used. I am neither saint nor hero; perhaps I could be one or the other, someday. But that is something which is mine alone to determine."

The Zeedam nodded. "Your people and mine truly are quite the same, regardless of our appearance. I wish you well, and hope that you find a way out of the dark jungle within. You too, I will see again before I leave. Here – I believe this is a customary salute for this occasion." He extended a cold, clammy paw. Smith looked at it with momentary distaste, but took it in his hand.

"You indeed are a gentleman, sir. Thank you for your medical aid, but now I must return to the ship, and find some fresh clothing. I bid you good evening."

The Zeedam sighed and stepped into the wreckage of his ship. It would be uncomfortable for him without the protective dome. At least *now*, he thought, maybe I can get a few hours of uninterrupted sleep.

*

Smith approached the *Jupiter 2*. He had stripped off the filthy remains of the burnt shirt and tied it about his waist. Seeing the Robinson women outside, he hastily crossed his arms over his chest.

"Well, I see *you're* back," he growled at the Robot. "Don't worry, we've already discovered what a fright that Keema was."

"I like your new look, Dr. Smith," opined the Robot. "Have you joined a naturist society?"

"Spare me the innuendo, you tedious tinman." He turned to Mrs. Robinson. "Dear lady, when you have a moment, do you suppose you could find some fresh clothing for me in the laundry?"

Maureen laughed. It felt good to laugh, even at Dr. Smith's wheedling, now that the most important decision of the day was coffee or tea. "Of course, Dr. Smith. I'll get you something right away."

"And do you suppose – is there, by any chance, just a *little* bit of that ham left for dinner?"

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The Questing Beast is one of those, let's say, "controversial" episodes, which has many staunch defenders and hardened detractors. Both are justified, to a degree. I happen to be one of those who likes it, but appreciates its shortcomings. You will find this *Lost In Space Adventure* to be my most radical departure yet from the original, and this is deliberate, in large part because I do like the actual episode so much. Among other things, I have made no attempt to recreate what many of us consider the best parts of it, in particular, the very touching scenes between Will and Dr. Smith which give a profound, beating heart to an episode which might be otherwise be swamped in the silliness of a pink-beribboned dragon afraid of mice. Rather, I have taken this in a very different direction, as you will see. Expect little familiar.

The Questing Beast A Lost In Space Adventure

1.

"More salad?"

An attractive, middle-aged woman offered a large bowl of greens to the group sitting around a lunchtime table. This group included her husband and three children: Professor John Robinson, Judy, Penny, and Will, respectively, along with two other men. These two were, or had once been, officers in the United States Aerospace Corps. The older of these was a colonel and a doctor. The younger was a major and a pilot, specifically, the pilot of the disabled spacecraft which was the backdrop to their outdoor meal. His name was Don West. The doctor, Zachary Smith, responded immediately to the offer made by Maureen Robinson.

"Just a taste more, if you'd be so kind, dear lady!" Taking the salad bowl, he heaped his own plate with a good portion of the remainder, then poured an equally generous amount of dressing on top of it. "Mrs. Robinson, the delights of your table are one of the few things which have made this dreadful ordeal bearable," he stated. He passed the salad bowl to John Robinson, who peered, exasperated, into the near-empty vessel.

The ordeal Smith referred to was simply this, that the whole company of them were stranded on a strange, hostile planet, far from Earth and hopelessly lost in the vastness of deep space, with their spaceship crippled and almost empty of fuel. None of which was the fault of the pilot, Major Don West. Although the others were not to know it – not for certain, anyway – it was Smith himself who had been responsible for the sabotage which had nearly been the doom of them all. He had spent the last year and a half (Earth time) passing himself off as an innocent bystander in a string of unlikely events which had made of him an unwilling passenger aboard their ship, and missed no opportunity to exploit their naïve regrets to his advantage.

John Robinson scraped the remainder of the salad greens onto his plate. Smith snatched up the bottle of salad dressing and smacked it lustily, ejecting a last few blobs.

"Dr. Smith," protested Maureen Robinson, weakly, "That's the last of the real Italian dressing from Earth."

"And delicious it is too, madam!" he responded, inserting a pinky finger into the neck of the bottle, and delicately sucking down what it recovered. "Ah, well, *sic transit gloria mundi*. I think I saw one more bottle of Thousand Island in the pantry. Perhaps that will suffice until we're rescued."

The rest of the crew darted looks at each other. None harbored much hope either of rescue or of Dr. Smith learning how to be a cooperative member of the crew.

Judy Robinson, the elder daughter, stood and began gathering empty, dirty plates. Her brother Will, ten years her junior, jumped up to help.

"Don't let us rush you, Dr. Smith," he said.

The sarcasm was lost on the doctor, who sat reveling in the last few mouthfuls of salad before him.

None of the others would have bothered with such a remark. Only 11 year old Will had a real fondness for Smith, and his jibe sprung from a sincere wish to make of Dr. Smith a more likeable man. Although disposed to many vices, Smith's failings stemmed more from weakness than evil, and in this he was more child than man. Will responded to Smith's childishness in a way that made him feel almost that he was older brother to the doctor, and had on numerous occasions exhibited a love and protectiveness toward the man which were far beyond his years.

Dr. Smith dabbed daintily at his lips with a napkin. He rolled his eyes in sensual delight as he gobbled down the last of his lunch, and screamed. "Aliens!"

The others raced to the scene, and stared off into the direction Smith's hand shakingly pointed. A most astonishing sight stood between two tall rocks. "An alien in battle armor! And carrying a huge ray gun!" he shrieked.

"Shush, Smith!" ordered John Robinson, not taking his unbelieving eyes from the sight. "If that's battle armor, it's about a thousand years out of date," he observed.

"Hello!" called the visitor. "Hello the castle!"

"Castle?" The query passed between the crew with dumfounded looks.

"I beg your leave to approach and throw myself upon your grace and mercy!"

The crew exchanged brief, bewildered glances. The figure's armor, as Robinson noted, appeared to be that of a knight from Earth's medieval Europe.

"Approach!" called John Robinson.

"What is this place? Are you Hospitallers?"

"Are we *what*?"

"Is this an inn of the Knights Hospitaller?"

Another round of bewildered looks passed between the spaceship's crew.

"No," replied John. "Whatever that means," he muttered to the others.

"I thought not. Far too soon. But one never knows."

"I'm sure." John Robinson shook his head again and looked at his crew. "We're not an inn and we're not 'Hospitallers,' but if you're in danger or distress we'll be glad to help you. If we can," he called.

The apparition, wrapped in ill-matched plate armor and chain-mail, approached even closer. "Ah! That is an encouraging portent!" he cried. What Dr. Smith had in a panic mistaken for a ray gun was actually a lance, about twelve feet long. The visitor grasped it in both hands, and with a mighty blow, sunk the handle into the sandy ground so that it stood upright.

Will, who had spent a good part of his life reading of kings and knights and castles and such, peered at the lance curiously. "Isn't that a supposed to be a couched lance?" he called.

"A what?"

"A couched lance. You know. You carry it horseback, kind of under your arm, and charge with it. It's way too big to fight with just carrying it around by yourself."

The figure, who had now approached to a scant ten feet, paused. He shoved the faceplate of his helmet up and stared at the boy, then turned and stared at the lance. "That's the oddest thing, you know? It seems to me I *did* have a horse at one time . . ."

The Robinsons again looked at each other, baffled.

Major West muttered, "Talk about a boxful of loose screws."

Dr. Smith furrowed his brow reflectively. "If he *is* a soldier of some kind, he possibly suffers some sort of battle fatigue. I saw a lot of that back in the Equatorial Campaign. Humor him, Professor. He may be ill, and I may be able to help."

West snorted. "You, Smith, help? You couldn't help a –"

"Pipe down, both of you," ordered John Robinson. He turned his attention back to the visitor and framed his next words carefully. "Approach, and you will be welcomed as a guest, and we will help you to the best of our abilities. But lay down your arms and pledge that your hand will not be raised against us in any manner."

"By the eyes of Andromeda, it shall be so!" exclaimed the figure. He unbuckled a sword from his waist and rested it in the sand by his lance, then a mace from his back, and a dagger which seemingly appeared out of nowhere. "By my life, those are all my weapons! May heavens and galaxies strike me dead were I to betray mine gracious host."

He then removed the large, ornate, and plumed helmet which covered his head, and tucked it into the crook of his elbow.

The face revealed was as eccentric as the rest of his appearance. White, bushy eyebrows seemed to draw all attention, while a fringe of unkempt white hair framed his scalp in a thin C-shape. Competing with the eyebrows for attention was a long, drooping mustache, not entirely white, but still shot with a reddish hue. The mustache hung to his jaw at the tips, and in comparison to hair and eyebrows, was neatly maintained. He set the helmet in the sand by his weapons and stepped into the courtyard area where lunch had just been eaten.

He took John Robinson's hand between both of his, and fell to one knee. "But prithee, my lord, what manner of castle is this, that shines like silver in the noontday sun? And how shall I address my gracious lord? 'Your Majesty'? 'Your Highness'?"

John Robinson's cheeks flushed a bit, and around him his family bit their lips to conceal grins at his embarrassment. "Please, stand up. And you can call me Professor Robinson."

"Aha, a scholar! Forgive me not recognizing the look of learning burnt across your brow like the sun itself! Is this then a university or some such place?"

"No, no! It's – well, it's a ship. She sails – through the skies, you might say. Her name is *Jupiter 2*."

"I see. I have heard tales of such things from the olden times, the Dark Times. But I never thought to see such a thing myself."

Robinson paused awkwardly. "If you tell me your name, I'll introduce you to the others."

The man bowed deeply. "Forgive me do, Professor. I'm afraid I don't meet strangers frequently, and my manners may be a bit out of practice."

He popped upright, only to bow again. "I am your humble servant, Sir Sagramonte of Antaeus, my liege lord, and yours to command for as long as I am a guest of your, er, hospitality. There, I think I said that right."

He frowned, pulled a small book from a pouch at his waist, and thumbed through it quickly. "Right enough," he assured John Robinson.

Robinson then introduced him to the rest of his group. Sir Sagramonte fell to one knee for Maureen, addressing her as "My Lady," the daughters, Judy and Penny, he addressed likewise. Will, he called "Young Sir," while "Doctor" and "Major" sufficed for those two; those three received bows.

"And now I crave a boon of you, good Professor. I ask that you bestow upon me a knighthood of whatever order it is within your power so to grant."

Another bewildered look passed among the small group. "I thought you were already a knight, Sir Sagramonte," Robinson stated carefully.

"Oh, indeed, good sir! But it is my habit, wherever I travel, to take whatever local knighthood or honors are available. By this, I increase my own renown among my fellow Quest Knights, who are, I must confess, a rather pompous lot. Now, if you will show me to your chapel, where I may stand watch over my arms for the night, I will immediately commence that sacred task."

Sheepishly, John confessed, "We, uh, don't exactly have a chapel, I'm afraid. The ship is just our house, you might say."

Sir Sagramonte's face fell. "No chapel? Oh, woe is me! For it is only by standing watch in chapel or for some heroic deed that a knighthood may be lawfully bestowed."

Will, who had stood silently but thoughtfully, suddenly spoke. "Sir Sagramonte, you have done a heroic deed. You found us."

"What?"

"Well, sure. We're lost on this planet, far from home, shipwrecked, and you've found us. That seems pretty heroic to me."

"Well, when you put it that way . . . why yes, I suppose it is pretty heroic of me! My lord Professor, bestow upon me a knighthood forthwith!"

John flung an exasperated glance at his son. "I think I'm supposed to have a sword," he protested, weakly.

Sir Sagramonte smiled happily. He turned, ran, and retrieved his own from where he had left it. Returning, he offered it hilt first towards John Robinson. "You are already my liege lord, Professor, and all that is mine is yours. This sword is yours, for you to dub me knight with. Just be sure you give it back to me afterwards."

"I don't really think I'm authorized to bestow –"

The knight fell to both knees and clasped his hands together as if in prayer, head bowed, eyes closed.

John Robinson took another look around at his companions. The three ladies had their hands over their mouths, stifling giggles. Major West's mouth hung open, incredulous. Smith scowled, and gestured impatiently that Robinson should get on with it. Only Will gazed on with an attitude of reverence and watched his father expectantly. John thought quickly, put some phrases together, and tapped the kneeling Sir Sagramonte on his shoulders with the sword-tip.

"By the Sword of Orion, the Bow of Sagittarius, and . . . and the Belt of Van Allen, I make you Intendant of Jupiter, Grand Warden of the Pleiades, and Knight of the Southern Cross." John glanced about him as a tense silence hung in the air. "Amen. Arise, Sir Sagramonte of Antaeus."

Sir Sagramonte grasped Robinson's sword hand, kissed it effusively, and only then stood. "My liege!" he exclaimed. "My heart, my blood, and my sword are yours!"

John looked away, flustered again. "Well, unless you know something about refining deuterium or cold-welding titanium alloys, I don't really think –"

"Ah, you are a sorcerer too, I perceive! Forgive me, liege, I know nothing of such arcane wisdom."

"Well, I kind of guessed that," John replied. He coughed. "So, I suppose we could find you a bite to eat if you're hungry, but apart from that, I'm glad to tell you that you don't have to worry about us and can be on your way."

"Oh, a bit of dinner would be most welcome, I confess. Can't remember the last proper meal I had. You know, as a knight, I'm more skilled in slaying giants and dragons and such. Not so much rabbits and deer and things you can actually eat. Usually stuck eating green leafy things and fruits and the like. Once got terribly ill from these delightful-looking red berries . . ."

Maureen grasped Sir Sagramonte by the arm and sat him at the table. "You just sit and relax, now. We'll get you a proper meal, and you go ahead and take off the rest of that armor if you like. You're safe here with us, you know." She frowned. "You *do* have some decent clothes to wear, don't you? I didn't mean you should sit there in your underw–"

"No, no, My Lady. I take the Helm of Strength off as necessary, but I am pledged never to shed my armor until I have fulfilled The Quest."

"The – ?"

"The Quest. My sacred mission and duty. A quest. *The* Quest. But I will speak more of that another time, when my repast is done, lest I dishonor your hospitality."

Maureen shook her head and smiled slightly to herself, then stepped inside the ship to prepare a bit of synthetic meat and potatoes. He seems so thin, she thought. More than thin. *Gaunt*, she decided.

Sir Sagramonte thoroughly honored Maureen's dinner, and even mopped up a bit from the plate with his finger when he thought she wasn't looking. "May I get you some more?" she asked.

"Perish the thought! That would suggest you were an inadequate hostess who failed to offer enough the first . . . time . . . although I suppose if you already had something more prepared for me, I would be honor-bound to accept . . ."

Maureen smiled broadly and snatched up his plate. Returning to the galley, she confided to Judy, "I think he and Dr. Smith should have some kind of eating contest." The two giggled together as Judy pressed the buttons which popped out another plate.

John and Maureen stood patiently nearby as Sagramonte dined. "Consider us your honor guard, good Sir Knight," said John, succumbing to the spirit of the occasion.

Finished, finally, with his meal, Sir Sagramonte stood and effusively thanked the two. "My greatest thanks to you, My Lord, My Lady! And now, I must retire to my camp, there to meditate and pray and concentrate my whole being upon The Quest."

"Your camp?" asked John. "I was afraid – I mean, I thought you might want to stay here with us."

"My Lord, I am honored to remain under your gracious protection, but I have pitched my own encampment not a stone's throw from your own, and there shall I retire, for the nonce. I fear I have troubled you enough this day, and there is yet the evening's meal too, isn't there?"

"Well, ye–"

"Then I bid you a fare-thee-well, and will see you again presently. Send Young Sir Will to herald the next table, so I do not delay you unnecessarily." Clumsily, Sir Sagramonte gathered up his sword, lance, and other possessions, and stumbled off the way he had arrived.

John and Maureen Robinson looked at each other and shook their heads resignedly. "I suppose he's harmless," sighed John. "That's more than can be said about *some* of the visitors we've had here."

"I have to admit that I was looking forward to hearing about that Quest of his," murmured Maureen.

"Me too," said Don, wandering over. "I think I could do with a chuckle."

*

"Will!" called his mother. "We'll be having dinner in about half an hour, so go find our friend and tell him he can head on over."

"OK, Mom."

The boy followed the tracks left in the sand by the knight, and found Sir Sagramonte's camp not ten minutes' walk distant. It was a small tent, rather brightly colored, and made Will think of a circus.

"Sir Sagramonte?" He poked his head inside, but the tent was empty. He walked a bit further, following the footprints. Will passed beyond a large rock, and saw the armored figure kneeling in the sand. He approached curiously. "Sir Sag—"

The knight's sword was planted, blade first, into the sand, his hands resting in a formal pose on the hilt. He was very still, and deep breathing was audible.

"Sir —" The deep breathing took on the sound of a gentle snore.

Will coughed loudly. "Sir Sagramonte!" he called.

The figure twitched, the knight's head turned to and fro, and ice-blue eyes regarded the boy from behind the visor of the helmet. "Oh my, Young Sir Will! Is it dinner already? I was just, er, meditating here for a few moments, part of my daily devotions, you understand."

"I understand, sir."

"Here, do give me a hand, if you'd be so good. These old joints get terribly stiff and creaky sometimes. Of the armor, I mean, of the armor."

Will helped Sir Sagramonte to his feet. He didn't hear the joints of the armor squeak or otherwise complain one bit.

"Ah, well done, lad, well done. I say, a good knight needs a squire. Perhaps you would like to accompany me when I leave this place, serve me on my Quest, and someday achieve knighthood yourself?"

Will's eyes widened, slightly skeptically. "You *are* a real knight, aren't you?"

"Why, of course, Young Sir Will! You saw your own father dub me as such, as have many before, over many years, all the way back to when I first started out on the Quest."

"Well, yeah, but —"

"You don't doubt your own father, do you? You'll never be a proper Quest Knight with a disrespectful attitude like that!"

"Well, no, but —"

"There you are then, my lad. Remember, a knight's very soul embodies all the virtues: honor and respect, devotion and piety, perseverance and courage, love and truth. And that all begins at home, minding your mum and dad."

"I do, well, most of the time, anyway, just a couple times when Dr. Smith was getting into trouble and I had to go help him and I didn't have time to —"

"Sounds splendid! Going to the aid of a friend in need. You know what they say, 'A friend in need is a friend, er . . . in need.' You have the makings of a fine Quest Knight! We'll have a marvelous time out there, knight and squire, together."

"Well, to be honest —"

"Precisely! You're near a knight already!"

"No, no, I meant I don't think I can just run off to be your squire. I mean, it sounds great and all, but I don't think my parents would let me. Not until I'm older anyway. At least thirteen, I think."

"Ah. Pity. Well, maybe I'll have a word with your father and see if we can work something out. If he thinks you're too young to be a squire, maybe he'll apprentice you to me as an armorer or blacksmith or some such. And then —"

"I mean I don't think he'd let me go at all," Will explained hurriedly. Wishing to change the subject, he said, "Come on, let's head back to the ship for dinner. That's enough of a quest for right now."

Sir Sagramonte laughed heartily at Will's quip. "Well said, lad! I tell you now, for as long as I am on this world, you shall be my squire."

"Thank you. I'll do my best." Will thought for a moment. "So what is this quest of yours you keep talking about? Are you looking for the Holy Grail or something like King Arthur?"

"The what and who?"

"Oh, I guess not. That's an old story about knights back on Earth, where I'm from. Most people don't even think it's for real."

"Ah. What a shame. No, no, I'm real enough, and so is my quest. My quest is to seek, and find, and slay . . . The Beast!"

"What beast is that?"

"Why, The Beast, boy, aren't you listening? The Beast! The Beast, The Questing Beast, of course!"

"But, what *is* it?"

"Why, why it's a . . . a huge . . . a fearsome . . . a mighty . . ." Sir Sagramonte paused, and coughed. "It's difficult to describe, you see, boy, because I . . . I know *of* it, of course. I've chased it for uncountable years across uncountable worlds! But I've never . . . never *quite* . . . actually . . . *seen* . . ."

"You've never really seen it?" Will asked incredulously.

"Well, no, not as such, but mind you, I've followed its tracks, tracked its spoor, across dozens, across *hundreds* – Oh, it's real enough, I know that! I've battled its minions and left their bones to bleach on *scores* of – I don't need to see it to know it's out there."

The pair approached the ship. "Umm, Sir Sagramonte, let's not talk about this anymore, at least during dinner. I mean, I'm sure you could tell us some great stories, but I don't think the women will want to hear about minions and bleached bones while they're eating."

"Ah, quite right, Young Squire Will! Gentle conversation for gentle company, you mean."

"Yeah, that's the idea. No monsters or minions or bones. OK?"

"Not a whisper, Young Squire Will."

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"I think our cooking agrees with you, Sir Sagramonte," remarked Maureen. The knight, as it transpired, hardly spoke at all as he ate, except to exclaim how delicious something was, how he had never tasted anything like one thing before, or how another was exactly as he remembered his mother's cooking to be. "You certainly seem to have a bit more color in your cheeks this evening. You were dreadfully pale earlier."

"Ah well, as I told My Lady before, I rarely have the chance to dine so well, and were it not for the risk of offending your hospitality, I would hardly dare comport myself so, lest I be taken for one of those uncouth Knights of the Knife and Fork, as we call them, who exploit their station only to indulge their bellies. A good and true knight must always be eager to cast himself forth to the vagaries of Chance. I can hardly recall the last day I have, begging My Lady's pardon, stuffed myself like this. Only the care of the Hospitallers comes close."

"You mentioned them before," interjected John. "You thought we might be them. Who are they?"

Will coughed meaningfully. He didn't want his new friend to say anything which might sound too odd or embarrassing. Sir Sagramonte eyed the boy; he was sure he had nothing to say about the Hospitallers which would offend even the gentlest sensibilities, but he would deal with the subject quickly and delicately.

"The Hospitallers are an order of knights, ancient beyond all recollection, who are famed throughout the galaxy for their, err, hospitality. Any traveler, knight or rogue, king or commoner, who appeals at one of their inns is granted refuge for the night and a meal at their table. Of course, they are one of those very rare orders of knighthood who are also professed as monastics, so their tables are oft-times rather bland. Nothing like what My Lady here has done!"

Will let out a quiet sigh of relief. What the knight related was odd, but not – weird.

"And now," announced Sir Sagramonte, "it is incumbent upon me to repay your excellent hospitality in the only way I can. 'Twould be better if there were a bit of music to accompany, but –"

He cleared his throat, opened his mouth to sing. A few apprehensive looks darted among the Robinson party.

"Wait a minute!" cried Will, and darted into the ship. He returned quickly carrying a much-scuffed guitar. "I can give you a little accompaniment. Hang on –" He quickly checked the tuning, strummed a couple of chords. "Go ahead and start singing, and I'll be able to follow along OK."

Sir Sagramonte began a ballad, and Will quickly found some bittersweet notes to complement it. All were rather startled to hear that Sir Sagramonte's singing voice was quite beautiful.

The ballad told the story of a man who had fallen in love, but terribly, his love was only a dream. He spent years pining away for this dream, then one miraculous day he found the girl, herself pining away by the banks of a river for him. Alas, it was too late, his love had called her into being, but her brief, magical life was already spent, and she lay her head back on a patch of purple flowers and died. The dreaming lover suffered an even more woeful fate, he lived.

Will's last chord faded away. Judy dabbed at her eyes. An awkward hush was broken as she said, "That was perfectly wonderful, Sir Sagramonte. If that was meant as payment, well, we owe you another week of dinner. At least!"

"That's a true story, you know," responded the knight, matter-of-factly. The awkward hush returned.

Don West raised an eyebrow as a half-grin lifted a corner of his mouth. "Speaking of stories, Your Knightship," he began. "I'd like to hear the story of this quest of yours."

"Oh, indeed, The Quest! Young Squire Will thought it might be a bit improper for dinner table conversation, what with the ladies and all, but now that we're finished I suppose . . ."

Oh no, thought Will. That's the look Don gets when he's trying to trip up Dr. Smith in one of *his* stories. He thought furiously for a moment. "Yes please, tell us some more, Sir Sagramonte!" The boy turned to Don. "He's like an old-time big-game hunter, tracking some giant creature all across the galaxy, following its tracks and stuff! Isn't that right?"

"Well, in a manner of speaking, I suppose," allowed the knight. "Oh, not just tracks though. All sorts of signs!"

"Signs?" asked Don.

"Signs! Omens! Wonders! Portents! This is no ordinary creature I seek, but The Questing Beast itself!"

Oh no, thought Will. Now he's sounding . . . weird.

Don concealed an amused smirk behind his hand. "Well, I'm, uh, I'm sure it's a beast of a beast. Good luck, I guess. Will, you gonna escort your friend back home? Make sure he doesn't get lost chasing a portent or something?"

Will bit his lip. "Come on, Sir Sagramonte. It is getting kind of late, and I guess you'll want to do some more meditating or praying or something before going to bed."

"Remarkable! You do know the ways of a Quest Knight, don't you?"

The two walked off; Don stood for a moment watching them, shaking his head. "Battle fatigue!" Don chortled. "Battle fatigue, my Aunt Maude!"

As they walked, one of many questions popped to the front of Will's mind. "Why did you think we were – what did you call them? Hospital Knights?"

"Hospitalers, Young Squire Will, Knights Hospitaler. One of the surest and most reliable wonders of all. After a few weeks or a month on a world, and I've tracked the Beast, perhaps slain a minion or two, I will find an Inn of the Hospitalers. A knight there will bid me enter, prepare a meal for me, bind my wounds and heal me if I am injured, and offer a bed for the night. I sleep, and when I awaken – I am on a different world, to which the Beast has fled."

"Uh-huh," responded Will, after a moment.

"But as I had only just arrived this morn and seen nary a trace of the Beast, I thought it unlikely. And they are never as many as you, but it seemed best to be sure."

"But *why*, Sir Sagramonte? I mean, why this Quest stuff?"

"Well, a knight isn't a knight without a Quest, and without knighthood and Quest, what is there to live for?" Sagramonte paused thoughtfully. "Certainly nothing from the Dark Times, I'll tell you that, boy."

"What do you mean?"

"Ah, I saw that craft of yours, and I saw some of the wizardry within. I pray your land never falls to the darkness as did ours." Reaching the camp, squire and knight sat on adjacent rocks. Sagramonte continued his tale.

"The wizardry of wire and steel, of voices and pictures flying unseen and unheard through the air, like unto any ghost or unclean spirit! We had servants such as yours, even, crafted of wheels and crystal, which did our every bidding!"

"I don't think there's any robot in the universe quite like our Robot," grinned Will.

"Sooth, so did all think, I'm sure. And he is a great help to you, sharing your burdens and easing your labor, both of the hand and of the head?"

Will frowned for a moment as he deciphered Sir Sagramonte's question. "He helps us with all kinds of work, whether it's heavy work or calculations and observations and stuff like that. Yes."

"Aha. And how would it be if there were not just him, but scores of such servants to wait upon your every need?"

Will grinned again. "Sounds pretty neat!"

Sir Sagramonte scowled, and his bushy eyebrows looked like a cat's ruff standing in alarm. "One might so think at first. Now think that all those are charged not only with serving your every whim, but of protecting you from all hazard of life and limb. Think, lad! Try to climb a tree or swim in a brook, and there is your retinue to pull you down or fish you out, lest you scrape a finger or catch a chill. Nay, they would stop you before you even set a hand to a branch or wetted a toe."

Now the boy frowned more thoughtfully. "I guess that could get kind of dull."

"Dull indeed, lad! Generations of my world were born, grown old, and passed on without ever being more than infants, under such terrible kindness. And that was not even the worst!"

Will was now listening attentively. "What was worse than that?"

"You have about you some charm, some amulet, by which you may speak to your father or the others at some distance, sending your words across the sky?"

Will's hand went to his belt, where his walkie-talkie hung. "This right here."

"And also a useful implement, when you want it. Now imagine, that it sits not on your waist, but right inside your ear! You speak with whomever you wish instantly, and any may so speak to you! And ne'er a way to silence the thing. And not just your kin and your friends – anyone! And when I say anyone, I mean too those mechanical nursemaids. I spoke before that they would stop your hand before you even reached for a tree to a climb, but truly, it was worse even than that. They would hear your very idea, and be there to halt you almost before the thought was formed! It was as though the entire world had taken residence inside your head, and left you no room for your own self. And I ask you, what is it if a man gains the whole world and loses himself?"

Will gazed thoughtfully at the ground and said nothing.

“Well, I tell you, Young Squire Will, one day, many years ago, we all stood up, almost as a man, and cried to the heavens, wondering what sin we had committed to allow such punishment fall upon us, but even as we cried out, we knew that it was only what we had done to ourselves, and our fathers’ fathers before us.

“All in a night, we arose and overthrew the tyranny which held us, destroying as many of the mechanical servants as we could, and calling upon the surgeons to rip from our heads the amulets which held us ensorcelled.

“There were a handful who protested, and some would have had those put immediately to the sword, but cooler heads prevailed, and they were instead exiled to a far continent, along with a few of their accursed machines, and it was given to them strictly in charge that they never leave their land, nor oppress honest men and women again with their devices.

“As for the rest of us – many returned to good, honest labor, tilling the land and making the simple tools which would be our helps and never our masters. Others became traders, crossing the Great Lands with wagons and beasts of burden, so that all the lands should benefit and thrive in mutual strength.

“But some – some thought of loftier things. There should be, the Grand Council said, men to go forth and seek out the danger and the toil which had been deprived us so long, as exemplars of the greatest and noblest that men could be. In the model of our remotest forebears, we set forth, honor-bound, to achieve a certain Quest, with nothing but might of arms and faith in the Truth of what we did to sustain us. We drew lots, and it was mine to slay a terrible Beast. And . . .”

Here the knight choked up a bit. “I fear that I shall fail! After all this time, I am sure that all the Quest Knights but me have returned to glory and honor, and spend their days telling tales of great works and heroic deeds, eating and drinking well as their just reward, and here am I, poor old Sir Sagramonte, a – a failure!”

The old knight hung his head, and Will regarded him solemnly. “Sir Sagramonte, back on the world I came from, we had stories about knights and quests and things too, even if they were all so long ago nobody knows if they were even for real. But something I remember, I think it’s what you might call the moral of the story, is that it wasn’t *finishing* the quest that mattered at all. It was being *on* the quest that counted.”

Sir Sagramonte sat up and brightened noticeably at this. “I say. You have something there, Young Squire Will, I mean you have something that cuts right to the heart of the matter! Seems I recall hearing words to that effect myself. Why, when you put it like that, it’s those knights who’ve finished their Quests and gone home who are the failures, not !! Indeed!” he cried out, rising to his feet, “On the morrow, I shall surely continue the pursuit of the Questing Beast, and Heaven grant I may pursue the dreadful thing until I no longer have breath to draw!” He roared the last few words, shaking his sword in the air, as if giving fair warning to his quarry.

“Well, good night, Sir Sagramonte. I’d better get back to our ship. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“You shall indeed! Ha!” Sagramonte lunged with his sword and swung it madly in the air a couple of times before settling down to his rest.

As Will approached the *Jupiter 2*, the Robot met him at the hatchway. “Good evening, Will Robinson. You’d best get to bed, it’s late.”

Will stared at the Robot, and shouted, “Stand aside! I have no need for such a mechanical nanny as you!”

Obediently, the Robot rolled aside, but watched the boy curiously as he first stepped to the elevator, “Hmph!”d indignantly, then turned and descended the ladder to his cabin.

“What have I done now?” wondered the Robot aloud.

2.

Sunrise found Maureen Robinson in the spaceship’s galley, pressing the buttons which instructed the food synthesizer to pop out a family-sized batch of ham and eggs – or at least a reasonable substitute for them.

The rest of the crew were gathering at the table outside as she brought them up. Will sat in his customary place, arms folded. He glowered at the plate set before him. “Synthetic again?” he demanded.

His mother looked at him, slightly amused. “Yes, and unless you’ve seen some pigs and chickens running around, it’s the closest we’re going to have for a long while.”

Will “Hmph!”d as he had the night before at the elevator. “Perhaps that is a worthy quest for me. I shall go forth, and not return until I have found us some real ham and eggs!”

“What’ll you eat in the meantime?” teased Penny, his sister.

Will’s face reddened.

“Son,” said John Robinson sternly, “That’s no way to speak to your mother. And the Robot said you were rather rude to *him* last night. If this attitude of yours has anything to do with knights and quests and such, I think you’d better remember that part of being a knight involves chivalry and manners, and you’d better act that part a little better, before you find yourself imprisoned in the dungeon for the morning.”

Will hung his head. "Sorry, Mom. Delicious break fast. Thank you." He looked about him at his family and friends. "But Sir Sagramonte is right! If we let machines run our lives, we're no better than machines ourselves, we're even less!"

John smiled. "I think we're a long way from that, son. Is that the story he told you last night?"

Will briefly rehearsed the knight's tale. John repeated, "We're a long way from that. So let's enjoy what our machines can do for us and not get too upset, or we all might end up, er . . ."

"End up what, Dad? Crazy, like Sir Sagramonte? Is that what you were about to say? Well, he isn't. He isn't!" Will jumped to his feet.

"If you're finished with breakfast," said his mother, "take your plate down to the galley and wash it. If you like, you can take *all* ours down to wash, if you'd rather a machine didn't fiddle with them."

"You just don't understand!" protested the boy, but took his own dish on down as instructed.

John and Maureen looked at each other. "I think we're in for a long week or two," sighed Maureen.

"Let's hope it's that quick," concurred John.

"When did 'machine' become a bad word, is what I want to know," grouched the Robot.

Several minutes later, Will re-appeared. "I'm – " he started to announce. Then, turning to his father and bowing slightly, "With your permission, Father, I shall hie me hence to Sir Sagramonte's encampment, there to attend upon him as his squire."

Stifling a grin, John replied, "With my blessing, son. Try not to be gone too long."

As the boy trotted away, Maureen asked, "Do you think that's wise? He does have chores around here, you know."

"I know. I think it'll be best if he gets all this out of his system as quickly as possible." He chuckled. "I suspect he'll have his fill of Sir Sagramonte as soon as he's hungry for lunch."

Maureen sighed. "Maybe. But don't forget, we'll most likely have *him* as our lunch guest too!"

"*He* didn't seem to mind synthetic food much, did he?"

"I'd better get our machines busy, hmm?" responded Maureen. "And our handmaidens, too. Penny!" she called. Her daughter popped out of the ship. "Do me a favor, please. Take a basket down to the oasis by Green Rock Canyon and see if those berries we've been watching are ripe yet. If you can get enough, I'll bake a pie for dinner."

"Yes, Mother," Penny replied.

"And some of those wild greens, too. They stretch the salads quite a bit."

Penny smiled, took a basket, and headed out.

*

The planet where the Robinson party was stranded was a desert world, but like most deserts, it had its share of running water and oases. Green Rock Canyon was the name they had given to a nearby feature where an underground spring once bubbled as a small river; the now-dry riverbed was a convenient path, and there was enough moisture in the ground that thin moss crept up the rocky canyon walls, suggesting the name the Robinsons had assigned it. At the further end, water finally resurfaced and formed an oasis about one hundred feet across where native vegetation grew thickly. Here could be found the berries Maureen had mentioned, as well as the plump, leafy greens which supplemented their synthetic and hydroponic food.

There were few hazards on this world, apart from the brutal climate, and Penny was well accustomed to making foraging expeditions here all by herself with no fear. Perhaps that is why she could barely stifle a scream when she saw an unexpected figure moving in the underbrush not twenty feet distant.

"Hello? Hello?" she called. "Can you understand me? My name is Penny Robinson and I'm just picking some berries and things. I'm unarmed and I won't hurt you." She thought quickly. "But my friends are nearby and they are, so it wouldn't be a good idea for you to . . . try . . ." Her voice trailed off as a face appeared much closer than she expected.

"Oh. Hello," she said, much relieved.

"Hello there. Penny, you said? My name is Gundemar. How do you do?" A perfectly human-looking woman stuck out a hand, which Penny took in her own.

The woman was stout, slightly shorter than Penny, rather older. Older than Mother, even, Penny thought. Mostly-grey curls adorned her head, and her tanned face was weathered with wrinkles.

"Pleased to meet you," said Penny. "Sorry if I sounded a little unfriendly. We don't have many visitors, and some that we *have* had haven't been terribly nice."

The woman smiled warmly. "I don't meet a lot of new people either."

There was a moment's hesitant silence.

"Are you from Earth?" asked Penny. "You look as if you could be."

Gundemar frowned. "Earth? Sounds vaguely familiar. I may have been there once, but no, I'm not from there."

After another brief silence, she asked, "I don't suppose you've seen any interesting characters around here lately?"

"Do you mean Sir Sagramonte?"

Gundemar sighed and nodded. "That'll be him. Is he all right?"

"Well . . . yes, I suppose. Aside from running around in armor a few centuries old, I mean."

"Good." She shook her head. "Sorry, I managed to lose track of him almost as soon as we got here. I'll keep an eye on him for a few days and try to keep him away from you and your family, and then get him out of here."

"Oh," said Penny, knowingly. "You're sort of responsible for him?"

"Don't you know it, honey," Gundemar sighed. "Come on over to my – sorry, I'm not sure of the right word in your language. It's a sort of ship, but not exactly."

Penny trailed the lady for a short distance to a small metal building that looked nothing like a ship. A few wooden frames were erected in front of it, and tough fabric sheets hung on them.

"It's like a ship," explained Gundemar, "but it doesn't fly through space. It travels directly from one planet to another through – " Here she hesitated again, and gestured vaguely in the air with her fingers. "Through different space than this. Through a higher space."

"Like, through different dimensions and hyperspace?"

Gundemar frowned, then nodded. "That's right. I'm not sure those are the exact words, but close enough, I think."

"I don't think my language has a word for something that travels like that. So – are you and Sir Sagramonte from the same planet?"

Gundemar nodded. "My orders from the Grand Council are to keep tabs on him, make sure he doesn't hurt himself or anyone else, and to bring him back whenever I can and whenever I think is appropriate."

"You're – sort of his nurse, then."

"You could say that," Gundemar smiled bitterly.

Penny's mouth hung open in astonishment. "But I thought – the way I heard it was that he was one of a whole mighty legion of Quest Knights, off to set a glorious example for everyone."

"Oh, that's how it started, all right. There were a hundred of them or more. After a few years running around the planet, most of them came back to the city, and started telling each other the grandest lies you've ever heard. They all knew it, too. And that's how it's been for the last fifty years. They all get together in the taverns every eight-day, see who can tell the biggest new whopper, and who can drink the most. All but – " Gundemar jerked her thumb vaguely in the direction of Sir Sagramonte's encampment. "Jumped the planet on a trader's ship. Took me three years just to catch up with him."

"But why don't you – just tell him the truth or something?"

"What? That the Quest Knights are bunch of drunken buffoons? That he's spent these years being almost as big a fool himself?" Gundemar looked Penny in the eyes. "If you've spent five minutes with him, you know that would kill him."

Penny looked at the ground. "But how does he – ?"

Gundemar pulled the sheets across the front of her conveyance. They were painted to look like a stone building, and would have made an adequate stage backdrop for a small community theatre's production of *Macbeth*. She smiled wryly and bowed to Penny. "Welcome to the Inn of the Knights Hospitaller, M'lady."

Penny's mouth again dropped open. "You're the one who – "

"More times than I can count. More different worlds, sometimes even different eras. Every so often I hit a tesseract and get displaced a few hundred years. Takes me a couple jumps to get back when we belong. One time we wound up on this planet, thickly inhabited and pre-industrial, right up his alley. Even found himself a horse, of all things. Old fool went charging at a windmill, thought it was a giant. Took weeks patching him up after that."

Penny looked curiously at Gundemar. "That story sounds familiar. I think maybe you did make it to my Earth once, but in a very long time ago year."

"Want to see the terrible creatures he's cut down?"

Penny nodded apprehensively.

Gundemar opened a large trunk. Inside were a handful of cheap costumes, some covered in fur, some in scales, some arrayed with arms and legs like a spider. Penny put a hand to her mouth to stifle a giggle.

"Yep," Gundemar nodded. "All me. I'll get dressed up, let him chase me for an eight-day or so, then let him get close enough to swing at me. I drop down dead instantly, of course." She sighed, and now the trace of a tear appeared in one corner of her eye.

"I can't keep doing this. I'm getting too old for this nonsense, and so is he. A few more planets maybe, and I'll have the big costume ready, a real Beast for him to fight and slay. Here, let me show you." Gundemar opened a different trunk. Inside was a single item, a huge, scaly headpiece.

Penny wanted to giggle again, but bit her lip. "Of course. A dragon. How else would a knight complete a quest?" Suddenly, she looked at her still-empty basket. "Oh dear, I really have to go. I should have been back a long time ago, and I haven't even picked one berry yet! Well, it's been very . . . interesting talking to you, Gundemar. I hope everything works out."

As she turned to go, Gundemar caught Penny by the elbow. "Penny, please. Don't say a word to the others, all right? For his sake?" Her eyes were imploring.

"Oh, no. No, of course not. But any of us would be glad to help you and do what we could for you both."

Gundemar shook her head. "I rarely tell anyone as much as I've told you. How old are you, Penny?"

"Fifteen."

"Someday, when you're older, you'll understand. You'll understand that no matter how big a fool he may be, no woman wants to see her husband made a fool of in front of strangers."

"Your - ?"

Gundemar nodded ruefully, and Penny noticed for the first time the simple gold ring she wore on her left hand.

"My husband." A vagrant tear finally trickled down from Gundemar's eye. "Married seventy years, and forty of them like this."

"I promise." Penny trotted off, and hastily filled the basket with greens before returning to the ship.

*

Sir Sagramonte and Will both arrived for lunch, which was served just slightly late. Penny apologized for her lateness, but offered no explanation other than her own distraction looking at flowers.

As they ate, Don prodded Sir Sagramonte to tell some more of his remarkable tales. The knight obliged, each story more extravagant than the last, and Don could barely contain his mirth. John, Maureen, and Judy eyed the Major with some displeasure – Sir Sagramonte was a guest, after all. Penny was growing increasingly furious and frustrated at West's teasing, and Will grew indignant as his hero was so belittled.

Finally, Will faced the Major boldly. "Major West, be warned! If you do not cease your ill-mannered jibes, Sir Sagramonte will have no choice but to challenge you to defend yourself at arms! And everyone knows that the hand of a true knight must triumph in combat over one who accuses falsely!" Turning, he asked, "Isn't that right, Sir Sagramonte?"

"I – I – I – well – yes, that is true of course. But I, er, I could, er, never raise my hand against one at whose table I have been a guest! Yes, that's it! Always remember, Young Squire Will, that the rules of hospitality must always overrule even the honor of knighthood! So I shall accept these slurs with grace and forgive this . . . *varlet!*"

"Really, Major," muttered Dr. Smith. "Hold your tongue. This is beneath even you. To torment a poor soul already tormented by . . ." Smith surreptitiously tapped at his forehead.

"He's not – !" Will and Penny both began the same exclamation, but Penny quickly bit her tongue and stared at her plate. An idea began forming in her mind.

Will jumped up. "Come on, Sir Sagramonte. You were going to show me how to parry and counter with the two-handed broadsword." The two strode away, Will casting an indignant look behind him. "Let us not stay here to be insulted by these commoners!"

John and Maureen gave each other pained looks. "He'll grow out of this very soon," they repeated to each other.

Penny stood. "I think it's very brave and noble of him to defend his friend like that," she stated. "And I think we should all be a bit more understanding towards both of them."

"Maybe Will is setting a good example after all," said Maureen. "That's very generous and grown-up of you to be sticking up for your brother like that."

Penny tilted her head up and smiled. She was shaking a bit, inwardly. I wonder, she thought, if this is a little bit how Gundemar feels sometimes. The idea which had started stirring finally took form, and after cleaning up from lunch, she secretly slipped away back through Green Rock Canyon.

*

"Mother," called Penny. "I'm so sorry I didn't get enough berries and greens earlier. I'll go back and get some more."

"Thank you, dear. Don't be late coming back, please."

Penny grabbed two baskets from the galley stores. She found Dr. Smith outside, carefully avoiding work, and grabbed him by the elbow. She shoved a basket in his hand. "Come with me and help, Dr. Smith, please? All this talk of beasts and minions and things has me terrified to be out by myself! And I know how brave and strong you *really* are. I'll feel safe with you." Penny gazed up at the doctor with wide, puppyish eyes. Just to be sure, she batted her eyelashes twice.

"I am glad to know that *someone* around here appreciates me," he murmured, throwing his head back. "Come along then, dear child. None shall harm you while I am about." He took a moment to reassure himself on this point, and strutted confidently down Green Rock Canyon.

Soon, Penny was happily gathering greens and berries.

Smith stood alertly, popping an infrequent berry into his basket. "I mustn't become too distracted and forget my duty as sentry, Penny dear!" he excused himself.

Penny's basket was about half-full when she noticed a suspicious movement out of the corner of her eye. A faint, faint sound, like someone coughing discreetly for attention, touched her ears. Very slowly and deliberately, she nodded twice up-and-down.

A terrible, bestial roar interrupted the pastoral scene, and a short, stout figure covered in thick brown fur stumbled through the undergrowth, arms stretched ape-like over its head, wickedly-scythed nails protruding from the fingertips. Penny cut loose with a blood-curdling scream which had Dr. Smith joining in even before he knew why.

The girl ran –not too quickly– toward the canyon path. "Help, please, Dr. Smith! Save me! Save me!" she squealed, brushing past him. The apelike creature, loping after Penny, turned aside at the sight of Smith and stalked him menacingly.

"No! Go away! Go away! I'm not the knight you're looking for! I can go about my – "

"YEARRGHHHH!!!" howled the creature, and its claws whistled through the air a bare inch from Smith's throat.

Smith shrieked in panic and raced up the canyon. "Run, Penelope!" he cried at the girl, who stood waiting for his arrival. "Come along, you foolish child, or it shall devour you!" warned Smith as he flew past her without slowing.

Penny waited just long enough to see the creature follow up the canyon path. As it spotted Penny, it paused a moment to wave its arms menacingly and growl – somewhat half-heartedly, it seemed.

Gleefully, Penny curled forefinger and thumb into an "OK" gesture, and wagged it at the creature. The creature, in turn, pointed what was conceivably a thumb in the air and returned the girl's salute.

Laughing with delight, Penny now fled up the path toward the ship, only rearranging her face back to sheer terror before making the last turn into the *Jupiter 2's* perimeter. She had run quickly enough to nearly catch up with Smith; he now collapsed in a chair at the dinner table and was keening like a frightened dog.

"Help! Help!" he cried "Monsters! Minions! Beasts! Get lasers! Get force-fields!! *Get Sir Sagramonte!!!*"

The rest of the group raced to the scene. "It's all true!" Smith gasped. "A minion of the Meast – I mean a minion of the Beast! At the oasis! It chased Penny and attacked me! Oh my! Claws like . . . like razorblades and teeth like railway spikes!"

Instinctively, the rest of the company turned to Penny for confirmation. Smith was well-known to exaggerate the slightest threat or danger, and his description of the creature he could have as readily applied to an annoyed squirrel.

Penny stood leaning with one hand on the table, the other resting dramatically on her temple. Much to the surprise of the others, she nodded vehemently. "It's just as he says! There we were picking berries when this horrible creature started chasing me! It was – how big Dr. Smith? Six feet tall?"

"Yes, six at least, dear child, possibly seven!"

"And it roared like a lion and chased me, and Dr. Smith jumped in front of it and saved me! And I ran . . . and I ran . . . and – oh Daddy, I was so scared!" A tremulous sob escaped her lips. Fortunately, no one had been there to notice that it was Smith who had preceded Penny back to the ship.

"Come on, Don," ordered John Robinson. The two men automatically slapped their hips to feel the laser weapons strapped there, and trotted together down the canyon path.

Penny pursed her lips, only slightly worried. She had cautioned Gundemar this would probably happen, and to be safely out of her monster costume and hidden as quickly as possible after their performance for Smith.

A time later, the two returned and reassured the company that all was quiet, no strange creatures found, and that they could relax.

"But let's set the force-field," John ordered. "Maximum strength, narrow radius, I want Green Rock Canyon to think it's been filled with cement."

Maureen stepped over to Don and her husband. "And I think the second order of business will be for you two to apologize to Sir Sagramonte. He'll be here soon for dinner, you know. You hear me, Major West?"

Don gritted his teeth and rolled his head. "I'd rather do Indoctrination at Space Academy again," he grimaced.

When knight and squire arrived for dinner, Don took it upon himself to both apologize for any disbelief of his tales, and to brief them on the incident at the oasis.

Sir Sagramonte drew himself up straight, while Will gazed on in open-mouthed admiration.

"Maybe this is why you were brought here, Sir Sagramonte!" enthused Will. "To save my family!"

"Mayhap you are right, good squire," responded the knight. "I have often thought it more than mere chance which has guided my steps these many years."

More than you'll ever know, thought Penny to herself. She gazed at the knight, and felt something of the admiration Will had for the man. He really is a noble soul, she thought then. Penny looked into his ice-blue eyes, and saw nothing of foolishness, madness, or confusion – only courage, honor, determination. Oh, Gundemar, she thought. I think I understand. I think I understand why you love him so.

"When will you slay the monster, Sir Sagramonte? Tonight?" pleaded Penny.

Now, slight apprehension crossed the knight's brow. "Tonight? Tonight? Well, there's dinner first, I suppose, and it gets dark rather quickly in the evenings, doesn't it? Tomorrow, then! First thing in the morning. First thing after breakfast."

*

At breakfast, Penny fretted somewhat, concerned that one of the others might get too close to Gundemar and spot the deception. She's been doing this for a while, Penny assured herself. I'm sure she knows how to stay clear of prying eyes.

Sir Sagramonte himself might have provided the solution, as he suggested that only he and his squire approach the field of combat. Maureen objected, noting that the squire was also her son, and rather a young one at that, and wanted to be sure he was safely away from any swordplay. Will rolled his eyes at this and would have protested, but the knight gently reminded him that even a squire to a Quest Knight must mind his mother, and Maureen was permitted.

Penny took that opportunity to volunteer to carry the first aid kit and be handy with bandages in case anyone got hurt. At that, Dr. Smith insisted on being present as well. Penny was worried about Gundemar, and knew that no matter how clumsy or skilled Sagramonte might be, a sword or lance could inflict some nasty damage with little effort. She reminded herself again that Gundemar knew how to handle herself.

John and Don excused themselves from the proceedings as they had remote equipment to repair, and Judy elected to stay at the ship with the Robot and look after routine business.

As the little group wound their way through Green Rock Canyon, Sir Sagramonte told more stories of his adventures, and each one made Penny's heart ache. "Sir Sagramonte," she said, "I know you're the Quest Knight and all, but I thought knights should be more modest about what they've done."

"Ah, quite so, quite so. I'll say no more." To Will, he murmured an aside. "Wasn't thinking a girl wouldn't have the stomach for some of that. Rather gruesome, what?"

Maureen eyed her daughter thoughtfully and whispered, "Are you sure you and Dr. Smith saw a – whatever it was you think you saw?"

Penny caught her breath. "I know exactly what I saw, Mother," she replied, entirely truthfully.

Maureen cast a questioning glance at her daughter, and decided to let it pass – whatever it might be.

"Careful, good sir," said Dr. Smith. "That creature might be anywhere about, ready to spring at us from undergrowth or the water or anywhere. In fact, it was right about there," pointing, "that I first saw it chasing poor dear Penny."

"Dr. Smith may have a point," suggested Maureen. "I think we should all stay inside the canyon walls and let Sir Sagramonte go by himself out into the open. Yes, Will, you too. Stay here with me."

"Yes, Young Squire Will. Hand me my sword – nay, my lance, the short one – and stay here. But be ready to run my sword out to me if I need it."

"Yes, Sir Sagramonte," replied the boy.

With a ferocious growl, the creature shambled out from a shallow cave in the hillside, waved its arms at the knight, and fainted at him.

"Foul beast!" he cried. "Prepare to breathe your last!" He strode almost casually towards the creature, lance held carefully aloft.

The creature inched back, further and further, drawing the knight away from his friends and their sharper eyesight. Hairy arms lashed out, and the lance stabbed at the monster's broad chest. Knight and beast circled warily, testing the other's ability. The lance struck out, and seemingly caught the creature in the arm. The creature screamed shrilly, and began a hasty, backward-stepping retreat. Sir Sagramonte cried aloud.

"Ha! Meet your end, foul creature!" He took a few running steps at the thing, and thrust his lance. So mighty was his blow, and so futile the monster's defense, that it seemed the creature pulled the lance right from the knight's hands and stabbed it into its own side.

Penny covered her face with both hands and cried "Oh!" Beside her, Will jumped in the air and cried "Yeah!" Maureen winced as the creature took a few final staggering steps, and collapsed to the ground.

Sir Sagramonte approached the carcass hesitantly, prodded it cautiously with his toe, then quickly leaned down and pulled the lance out. Only then did he turn, face his audience, and bow deeply to them, one knee to the ground.

"Yes, yes, you see! That's how it's done!" he announced, rather proudly. "Take charge of the situation, let the enemy know who's in control, and strike like a serpent!"

"That was terrific!" effused Will, looking at his knight with shining eyes.

"Yes," concurred Penny, having regained a somber demeanor. "That was the most heroic thing I've ever seen! I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. I can hardly believe my own brother is your squire, Sir Sagramonte!"

"We're certainly in your debt, Sir Sagramonte, and many thanks to you," agreed Maureen. Especially for not letting Will down, she thought, he would have been crushed if he couldn't believe in heroes. She let another curious glance fall on her daughter. I still think there's more here than meets the eye, Maureen told herself.

The little group returned to the ship, all eager to tell the others of Sir Sagramonte's heroics.

"But I," said the knight, "it is my custom at such times to retire to solitude for a short while, there to meditate and pray and reflect. Young Squire Will, help me bring my gear back to my camp, but then you shall leave me and return here." He once again dropped to a knee and took Maureen's hand. "Fear not, M'lady, I have not forgotten my obligations as your guest, and will assuredly return in time for lunch.

"Squire! My armor is starting to act up again. Here, help me to my feet." Will helped the old man up, and the two went off.

After a short time, Maureen called to Penny. "Penny! I'm still hoping to get enough berries for a pie. Would you mind going back down there to get more?"

"Of course, Mother! I mean, of course I don't mind."

"At least you won't run into any monsters this time. Will you?" Maureen asked with a chuckle.

"Don't be silly," Penny giggled in return. "Oh! I mean, I'm sure Sir Sagramonte would have taken care of any others if there were," she amended, hastily.

I hope you'll tell me the story someday, whatever it is, Maureen thought. "Just be careful, darling," she finished.

"Yes, Mother."

"And do try to bring back enough berries."

"Yes, Mother," Penny repeated, and headed back down to the oasis.

*

Penny found Gundemar sitting in a rough leather chair outside of her not-a-ship. "Hi! Are you OK?"

"Just fine," Gundemar replied with a smile. "Ugh. Fine as I can be, anyway. Like I told you, I'm getting awfully old for this. And I need to get some fresh padding in that costume before I use it again. I swear, I felt every rock on the ground where I dropped. And when I rolled, the shaft of that lance of his hurt almost as much as if he'd really jabbed me with it."

She took a long pull from a hot, steaming mug beside her, and adjusted her blouse. "When all this is done and we're back home together, he's going to wonder why I have all these big purple bruises all over my boobs," Gundemar grinned.

Penny giggled and reddened.

"Well, maybe tomorrow you can point him down this way again, and I'll have the Inn set up to get him out of your hair and into someone else's. Here, you didn't see this before." Gundemar pulled what looked like an ordinary tin mop bucket over her head, with three narrow slits cut for eyes and mouth. It was painted white and adorned with a few red crosses. "*I am the Knight of the Inn, Sir Sagramonte,*" she growled in a husky voice.

Again, Penny giggled, but quickly put a hand to her mouth. "Sorry," she apologized.

Gundemar shook her head. "It's OK. I do have to laugh about it all once in a while. There's an old saying on my world, 'If you didn't laugh, you'd cry.'"

"We have the same saying, Gundemar. Our people are really a lot alike, aren't they?"

"Most people are, honey. Oh. Here you go. Gotcha a head start on your berry-picking." Gundemar carefully poured a sackful of berries into Penny's basket. "Now. I really need to go lie down and take something for the aches."

Penny grinned once more. "Sir Sagramonte is feeling about the same, I think." She looked at Gundemar curiously. "You must really love him. I mean, really *really* love him. I never . . . I never thought that loving someone could be so difficult."

Gundemar smiled wanly. "It wasn't much easier before all this started. Just different."

Penny coughed a little half-laugh. "Now I'm not sure I understand at all. But if I ever get married, I hope – well, I won't say I hope he'll be just like Sir Sagramonte, but I do hope we'll love each other the way you love him."

“Just don’t jump in thinking it’s going to be easy. Because it isn’t. Now I’ve really got to – oh, hey. Nearly forgot. If those berries are going to go into a pie, he’ll like it best with some whipped cream on top. Get along now. And if I don’t see you again here . . . all best wishes to you.”

“Same to you, Gundemar. Thank you.”

Some time later, Penny’s basket was finally full of berries, but she walked slowly, slowly and thoughtfully, back up Green Rock Canyon, back to her home, her family, her future.

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