

Ballerina Justice and the Bro-bots of Peace

by Michael Broh

1. Environment and Background

The story starts out with the usual environmental stuff. There are flying cars, lots of things that start with “vid”, like vid-phones and vid-screens, and a bunch of other stuff like that, so you know you’re in the future — and soon enough you know you’re on another planet. But it’s science fiction, not fantasy, so it’s, like, Mars or Vega 12 or something, and the living conditions suck because everyone lives in dome house things and has crappy jobs like miners or civil service administrators, and who more than anything wish they could be back on Earth, but there’s just not enough room. Or the pollution was out of control, and they dream of a place like old Earth. Or they dream of going back to Earth and destroying the robots once and for all. It doesn’t really matter which, at least not yet.

Anyway, by this point you are painfully aware that the story takes place in a sort of dystopian near future on another planet reasonably similar to Earth. Fortunately, you haven’t been subjected to lots of made-up words like Esnibni and Qurto’in that you have to fight though to figure out what anything means, although you have been subjected to lots of technobabble, such as the aforementioned vid-words, and phrases like gravimetric sensors and disruption field generators.

That’s the setting for the story, more or less. Jerry and Baker are sitting on the couch in Jerry’s house dome thing drinking the 22nd century equivalent of alcohol and enjoying the deleterious effects of what appears to be a cross between chewing tobacco and opium.

“Jerry, this place is a wreck. Why don’t you clean it up?”

“Tell it to my wife.”

This is a joke. Jerry doesn't have a wife and is making a snide reference to former state of marital bliss in which he had a good job and a clean house on a pleasant planet and was, of course, entirely miserable.

Baker next said, “Garbage day is only a week away. Are you gonna make it?”

To which Jerry replied, “Nah. Maybe next year”

Here, Jerry and Baker are off-handedly discussing the natural results of Jerry's fortunes, or more specifically the lack thereof, namely that he can't afford weekly garbage pickups and has to rely on the annual waste disposal service provided free of charge by the planetary government.

Garbage will soon become a major theme. The tenuous plot will rest on the notion that unscrupulous characters are using the garbage industry to destroy the world. We will discuss disposal techniques, watch it be collected and disposed of, and even take a ride on a garbage scowl. No doubt we will at some point wish this piece of tripe itself was collected with our own garbage, rather than just about it, and on its way to the dump where we could forget about it forever.

No such luck.

Dr. Jerry Strohman's dome was crowded at best. The place had only one room, although there was a nook for the kitchen unit, such as it was – an outdated piece of equipment that propagated the idea that painfully tasteless food was better than no food at all.

The couch was covered in dirty clothes, the coffee table in dirty dishes, the ashtrays with cigarette butts, and the floor, well, let's just say there wasn't much of it left to see. Facing the table and couch, almost against the opposite wall, was an armchair covered in fake leather with cigarette burns and rips on the arms and back. It blocked the Murphy bed from coming down, which was just as well, as Jerry always slept on the couch anyway.

Dr. Caldonium Baker made himself comfortable in the armchair holding his half full glass of tuber-rye, with Jerry facing him from across the room, his mind a galaxy away. Jerry's hand held a portion of a green leaf, brown around the edges, which had begun its night the size of a banana frond. He was ripping it into strips and putting them into a bowl of what looked like dirty water. Next to the bowl laid another, this one filled with chewed and discarded pieces similar in size to the ones Jerry was now preparing. The dirty water would occasionally bubble, but mostly it just sat and thickened around the fresh supply of leaf cuts.

Tuber-rye is in many ways definitive of space language. In this case, the goal is to make us feel at home and other worldly at the same time, so we get a familiar alcoholic beverage for these gentlemen to drink with a strange and other-worldly flavor. The beverage is made from a locally grown tuber, the name of which we have been fortunately spared from learning. After all, we can only remember so many things, and there is still much story ahead of us.

Also local are the as yet, but not indefinitely to remain, unnamed leaves Jerry and Baker are chewing. It helps to, as they say, "pass the time".

Facing the couch was a large vid-screen that covered most of the wall. There was a movie showing, a western, with the sound turned down low. Every once in a while the shooting would start, and Jerry would look up. Mostly, though, he just ignored it. Baker, facing away from the vid, thumbed through an old scientific journal looking for something, anything, that might not have caught his interest the first hundred times he had read it. These nights were often tedious for Baker. He had never held Jerry's capacity to just tune out the world, except on rare occasions. Mostly, he just sat up with Jerry, nursed a drink and a couple of leaves over the course of the night, and looked for minor interests to occupy his mind. Tonight he had found a decades old article about a new life form discovered on Persephone 6 that ingested heat and expelled various gasses. He wondered if any useful applications had been found for it in the last 12 years, and was working through some of the implications in his mind when Jerry threw his unbreakable glass at the vid, spewing tuber-rye across the room.

For the briefest of moments, Baker looked up at Jerry. Then, inevitably, he turned back to the journal. Over the years, he had become used to these outbursts to the point that they barely registered with him anymore. The remnants of Jerry's drink dripped slowly down the wall, creating a new layer of stalagmites that joined the old ones, gradually building up a syrupy distortion to the vids behind them. The vid-screen had so many layers of Jerry's outbursts stuck to it that it was a wonder they could watch a vid at all.

The glass bounced around a bit and came to a stop on an old sock.

"I used to be a stinkin' scientist, Baker. I used to do something with my life. And look at me now."

Baker, of course, did not reply. Jerry dragged himself out of his chair, walked over, grabbed Baker's arms, stood him up, shook him, and shouted, "LOOK AT ME! I'm washed up stoner a billion

miles from home, mining someone else's land on this hell hole of a planet, and for what?" He shook him again. "FOR WHAT!"

"Lay off, Doctor," Baker said as he shook himself free and sat back in the chair. He took a cigarette from Jerry's half-empty pack on the table, lit it, and took a light drag. "You know why you're here."

Jerry, dispirited as usual, dragged himself back to the couch where he finished ripping up the leaf, spit the one in his mouth into the second bowl, and took another from the first. After a short while, he began to shake his head back and forth, looked up at Baker, and spoke quietly but distinctly. "No. I don't. Really. Tell me."

Baker stared back. "Are we really doing this? Again? Tonight?"

Jerry, silent, waited without taking his eyes off him. Then, with mild resolution, got up, walked to the vid-screen control on the wall next to it, and turned it off.

He turned to face Baker and said, "Yes. We are. We are doing this tonight. Tell me what the hell I did to deserve this?"

Baker, back in his chair, met as much of Jerry's eyes as he could behind Jerry's overgrown mop of curly hair, but without rising up. He waited for Jerry to back down and return to his usual spot, a spot on the couch so worn with Jerry's presence that it held a permanent curve, custom shaped for Jerry's body. Instead, Jerry walked to the kitchen unit in the nook and made himself another drink.

Baker saw his opportunity.

"Jerry, when you walked into the Old Man's office and told him his business was destroying the universe as we know it, when you told him the only way for him to avoid destroying the world was to give up everything, give up his money, his power, and let's not forget his darling little girl, when you played your last

worthless card and told him to roll over and play dead, WHAT DID YOU THINK WAS GOING TO HAPPEN?”

Jerry turned from the nook, full glass in his hand, and drank nearly half at one go. Still standing, he spoke in a voice that showed just how much he had lost over the last 12 years, how much he had given up. The pride was gone. The surety was gone. Everything that had made him what he formerly would have called a man had faded away, only to be replaced by a weary acceptance of what he now thought of as his fate. He was resigned, and it showed in his voice.

“But he *is* destroying the universe as we know it, right?”

“Yes, Jerry,” Baker replied, also resolved, but with perhaps a little more natural strength, “I suppose he is.”

Much of the exposition in this story is dragged out in brutally long conversations so obviously designed to wedge it in that we can barely wade our way through. Unfortunately, without the background, the story makes even less sense, so exposition we must have, if only in a truncated form.

It turns out that Jerry was a staff scientist at a mega-business within the aforementioned waste disposal industry, and, in clear violation of his best interests, spoke truth to power. We will learn more about that later. For now, it is enough to know that, as a result of his lapse in judgment, he was exiled to a distant planet where the only mode of survival is a sort of involuntary servitude to the local mining industry.

The sophisticated reader, if she were to bother with this story at all, might ask what mineral it was that Jerry involuntarily spent his days trying to unearth, or in this case un-whatever-planet-he's-actually-on, but such a reader would be disappointed. While he is

mining some sort of space stuff that undoubtedly matters to someone, that stuff is, fortunately for us, irrelevant to the story. What does matter is that each day for Jerry is very much like the last, and today is no exception. Soon, of course, adventure will be thrust upon him and carry him to the ends of the universe. Soon, but not just yet. Today is background, environment, mood. We have learned that Jerry was formerly a scientist and is now rotting away on a distant planet for an error in judgment 12 years ago. That is as about as much as we can expect to learn on our first day.

The story has three or four characters we might care about more than the rest, if in fact we care about any at all. We've met Jerry, and will spend a great deal more time with him as we move along. We have also, of course, met Baker, but he is just one of many supporting characters, his presence mostly serving to give Jerry someone to talk to as the author sneaks in exposition. Although he will ultimately have some impact on the climax to the story, his character traits will prove to be irrelevant, and will therefore be left behind with the rest of the supporting cast. Later on, we'll meet Ball, Jerry's ex-wife, whom we might also refer to as our heroine. I don't know if it is because so many science fiction authors are divorced, or just that they hate women, but our heroes always seem to be divorced, and Jerry is no exception. She is the third of our lead characters, and we will meet her by and by. Presently, however, our story takes us back to Earth, where we will meet the second character of any importance, the Old Man.

The Old Man shouted into his vid-com: "Miss Dixon, get the Domo in here."

He looked to be about sixty, with a full head of hair turned respectably gray. He sat at a large desk with his back to one of three 6 meter high windows, which in spite of the potential for so much

light, were prevented from sharing their bounty with the office by electric shades that held the sunlight at bay. On the wall opposite the desk, the only wall without a window, was a mammoth vid-screen which at had a sort of stock ticker running across the bottom section, but which was otherwise dark. A vague glow from an imperceptible source kept the room in a perpetual state of gloom.

A short distance from the desk, near an adjacent wall, stood a moderately sized round table with no chairs. On the remaining wall was a secretary. The office was otherwise devoid of furniture.

On the Old Man's desk were a variety of papers and notes, his vid-com, and a desktop humidior containing the necessary articles for his favorite pastime. Behind the desk was seated the Old Man himself, his hand on the button of the vid-com. As usual, his finger had not yet left the button before the gentleman in question had been notified, lifted, and whisked down the hallway at unimaginable speed. Such efficiency notwithstanding, the Old Man's patience was challenged.

"Miss Dixon, what hell is taking him so long?" he bellowed. His secretary knew better than to answer. She knew the requested party would arrive before she could make her answer, and she wasn't programmed to give a reply in a situation that would, by its very existence, make her reply moot.

True to form, the requested party presented himself several meters from the Old Man's desk, with the expected greeting, "Good morning, Sir." He was good looking, with a well cut suit and both arrogance and deference in all the right places. He could easily have been mistaken for a young professional man of 30 or so, but professional man he was not. Like the Old Man's secretary in the next room, he was not a man at all, but one of a growing population of mechanical men, commonly referred to as robots. He could walk and talk like a man when the situation called for it, which it seldom did, and perform much better when necessary,

which it usually was. On his trip to the Old Man's office, for example, he had been virtually flying down the corridors, in some cases locked into electric tracks that carried him at speeds nearly impossible for an organic man to imagine, let alone achieve.

This robot, whom the Old Man referred to as the Domo, was programmed for deference and duty. He served the Old Man faithfully, arranged his appointments, managed much of the programming for his staff, and kept the day-to-day operations of the business running smoothly. In spite of his importance, however, his personality was strictly in accordance with his programming, and rather than exuding confidence, he came off as an obsequious sycophant, if not downright spineless. Had he been human, he might have been referred to as sniveling. As a programmable machine however, such an epithet would be as misleading as it was misplaced. He was as close to the type of assistant the Old Man wanted as was possible to produce, which made him near perfect instead.

The Domo arrived, pen in hand, ready to serve.

So, at long last we learn that we're in a robot book. It is not clear yet whether or not the robots are in charge, and in fact, judging only from the scene before us we might well assume that they are not. We would, however, be wrong. We need look no further than the great history of space and robot stories to see why. In the world our story hails from, robots are expected to follow one of two storylines:

- 1. Robots have taken over the world*
- 2. Robots have not taken over the world. Yet.*

This story follows the first.

We'll learn more about the relationship between the robots and men later in the story. For now, we will have a brief preview, so we can move forward with a basic understanding, rather than wander the proverbial desert of environmental clues waiting for the universe of the story to bother taking focus.

Robots are in charge and more or less benevolent. They have little use for men, but tolerate them and, when it serves their self-interest, reward certain men with wealth and power. The Old Man is such a one. For reasons as yet unknown, he is in control of a business staffed primarily by robots with the occasional human for creative thought work.

He is, it turns out, a kind of half-man, half-machine, Darth Vader-ish thing, although without the cape, helmet, and creepy voice. Nevertheless, inside, many of his parts are mechanical, which have increased his lifespan significantly while decreasing his ability to connect on an emotional level. We expect that he answers to the robots at some level, though not to the robots he surrounds himself with.

His adventure, too, is about to be thrust upon him, although, as the story's chief villain, he is far less likely to avoid tragedy.

2. The Plot Begins

“What the hell is this, Dixon,” the Old Man shouted as he held up a daily log dated three days prior. It was riddled with notes, half of which were illegible.

“It looks like a log, Sir.”

“Looks like a log, looks like a log. Don’t you think I can see it looks like a goddamn log?” The Old Man was having a bad day. He had woken up with a malfunctioning servo in his wrist and spent two hours getting his pinky finger to move again. The damn thing had been acting up more and more lately, and he was on the verge of replacing it altogether. Of course, he could always just call in a repair-bot, but even the thought of it made him sick to what was left of his stomach. He always did his own repairs, regardless of the cost. He just could never bring himself to really trust the robots – not with his body. In fact, he could barely stand to have them touch him at all.

He looked the Domo in the eye and calmed himself down to a quiet angry state. “What I’ve never understood about you ‘bots was why you’re so goddamned insufferable. You’ve got more brain than a human could ever dream of, more strength, no pain, and when it comes right down to it you can do practically anything you want. Yet with all that, you choose to be completely, devastatingly, and utterly insufferable.”

“Yes, sir. Insufferable, sir.” The Domo was programmed to know his place.

“Alright, Dixon. Have it your way.”

The Old Man leaned forward and pulled a hand rolled Don Pepin Garcia from the humidor, and cut and lit it himself. The

humidor was of course capable of rendering this service for him, but the Old Man preferred the pleasure of performing it himself.

This is one of those clichés in space stories that we can't seem to get enough of. Although it is the future, and we can have anything we want, there is a sort of pride in doing things the old-fashioned way. The reader can't help but note that 200 years in the future, the old ones are still the best ones. It could have gone the other way, of course. The cigar could have just as easily been one of the rare, but incomparable cigars custom rolled by the great cigar-bots of Herodotus 9, or whatever, but that would give us someone who looks forward into a future of technology, rather than backward into a past of real people making things by hand.

This is a man, or half-man, who, like so many people in this story, holds onto the past as a better age. He embraces old things that were made from hard work, and he likes to do hard work himself. He isn't going to let any machine tell him what to do. At least not anymore.

The Old Man sat back in his chair and enjoyed a few puffs. As expected, the cigar calmed him down a bit, and he felt his grip on the log relax a little. These little remnants of the early days, before the wars, usually brought him back down to earth. Today was no exception, although he was, perhaps, a bit more nostalgic than usual. He looked at this robot, this Majordomo who had served him for over fifty years, and thought about the time, so long ago now, when he had traded his heart for his life, when he had finally given up on that last shred of hope, of humanity, of love, to do the one thing more human than any other: survive. Like the Domo, the Old Man would probably live to be 400 if he serviced his parts regularly. But at what cost?

It had been a bad morning.

“What I want to know, Dixon, is just what in God’s name is going on in sector 47b?”

“Sector 47b?”

“Yes, Dixon. 47b.”

The Domo, of course, knew exactly what the Old Man wanted to know. The information on the log was input in standard form, the anomalies clear to anyone well versed in it, and the conclusions, for the Domo, obvious. The Old Man, however, was still part human, and like so many humans, had a great contempt for anyone that appeared the least bit condescending by knowing an answer before he did, especially a robot. So, the Domo acted upon his programming, stating facts without drawing conclusions, allowing the Old Man to come to the appropriate conclusions himself.

“Well, sir, it looks like sector 47b is experiencing an abnormal number of anomalies in the transdimensional flux, which appears to be increasing the severance factor between our space-time fabric and the asynchronous inner film of the Sedgwick Universe, which in turn is most likely creating a gap which the crews in that sector have been unable to close. Sir.”

“In English, Dixon.”

“Yes, Sir,” the Domo responded with the same cold and unemotional style that separated him from humans, while at the same time making him virtually indistinguishable from other robots of the same series. “Although we don’t have enough information to conclude with certainty, the crews in sector 47b seem to have created a hole to the other-verse which they cannot close.”

“Ah for Christ’s sake.” The Old Man leaned forward again and pushed a button on his vid-com. “Miss Dixon!”

“Yes, Mr. Rieder.”

“Send somebody down from science.”

“Right away, Mr. Rieder.”

Miss Dixon knew that bringing a human down to the Old Man’s office would take some time, significantly more time than bringing down a robot. This allowed her the rare opportunity to say a few words in response to the Old Man, which she took full advantage of, such as it was, with the following statement: “I have contacted the science department and requested your senior scientist to come to your office. He is currently in transit and should be arriving shortly.” If it were possible for her to feel smug upon the conclusion of this statement, she would undoubtedly have done so.

“Yes, Miss Dixon, thank you,” replied the Old Man, a little exasperated at this unexpected outburst. Turning his focus back to the Domo, he sat back in his chair and stared. Then, with a wave of his hand, he said, “Get out of here, you make me nervous,” and like that, the Domo was gone.

A bit too long for good taste, or for that matter any taste, the Old Man ruminates about his condition. There is a fair amount, if not too much, talk about the difference between humans and machines, what makes a man a man, a machine a machine, the difference between man and the animals, between the animals and machines, and, well, pretty much more philosophical thought than we are likely to care about unless, perhaps, we find ourselves in a position to decide between life as a half-human half-machine thingy, and death by torture. This device is a sneaky, if not wholly obvious attempt to make us feel the passage of time. If we are meant to feel that this time period in fact feels interminable, then it may well be said to have worked.

Suffice it to say that the Old Man considers his existence for what, in his world of instant gratification, is an immeasurably long wait

for the guy from science to trudge his way down the hall the old-fashioned way. With or without this convention, however, the guy from science does at long last arrive in the Old Man's outer office, where he is announced by the Old Man's secretary.

"Mr. Rieder?"

"Yes, Miss Dixon."

"Mr. Elbert from Science has arrived."

"Send him in".

Life hadn't been good to Dr. Peter Elbert. In a world where so many humans had been engineered for health and beauty, he was more like a mistake, a stale and slightly green potato chip in an otherwise perfect bag. The pear shape to which his body had formed at a young age had never quite gone away. Similar was his acne, remnants of which remained with him to this day. What had left him, inevitably, was most of the hair on his head, although he attempted to disguise this loss by growing what was left of it a little longer and combing it over his pate in a style that had stubbornly ignored the scorn of generations.

None of this should have mattered, of course. There had been a long history of great men and women, scientists like himself, who had made their mark on the world not with their beauty, but with their brains. And he had the brains, there was no question about that.

For all that, however, Dr. Peter Elbert carried himself the way he looked. He was a worn down man inside and out, and showed it with every ounce of his being. He lacked even that false sense of confidence that would have allowed him at least to bully people that lacked his own innate intelligence. Rather, he let everyone he met run roughshod over him, and had the tire tracks to prove it.

Basically, this guy is stereotypical of the guy no man wants to be, and a transparent attempt to set us up for the flashbacks, impending no doubt, that explain how he stole his current job from the much cooler, younger, and smarter scientist whom we met earlier on that planet with the house dome thingies and the mines.

Among other things, this character is here to teach us that playing it safe in our world of science fiction is the cardinal sin and leads to a life of boredom and regret. One look at this man and we know that exile and poverty, not to mention more painful punishments, will always be superior to such a life. In our world, cowardice is always rewarded with regret, bravery with adventure. And adventure, of course, is what it's all about.

He has now arrived and stands several meters from the Old Man's desk in this room without a chair. It's an old device, but does allow us to quickly grasp the attitude of the Old Man toward everyone he comes into contact with. A human standing before a man in a chair shows deference by his very posture. Robots, of course, show deference if they are programmed to, and in any case, have no need to sit.

“What do you think I'm running, a time school? What took you so long?”

This is foreshadowing. Both time and time schools will become prominent themes as the story develops.

“I'm... um...sorry, sir. I didn't...uh..know this was urgent.”

“Urgent?!” the Old Man screamed, “Urgent?! Everything you do for me is urgent! When garbage is piling up on Gamma Alpha 5, do we take our sweet time and get there when we feel like it while

your brothers rot in a jungle of filth? When the retro rockets fail on a continental dump, do we just wait it out, maybe get a coffee and a donut and check it out after our break while it destroys half a planet because its reactor imploded on the surface? Christ, if there is anything I hate worse than a robot it's a human."

"I'm sorry sir. It...uh...won't happen again."

"You're damn right it won't, or I'll have your lazy ass dragged to New Siberia where you will spend the rest of your life cutting frozen ammonia for the Cryogenic Storage Consortium." The Old Man stared down Elbert, then slowly sat back and put the cigar to his mouth. He dragged slowly, leaned his whole chair back and exhaled toward the ceiling. With his feet on the desk, he took a moment to enjoy the uncomfortable position of this sad excuse for a man standing in front of him.

Few things gave the Old Man as much joy as tormenting humans. The robots had no sense of humor of course, let alone righteousness. If you tried to torment a robot with words, all you got was a face full of "I don't get it, but if you say so, it must be true" in return. With a human, at least, you got a little squirming. You could actually watch them get a little smaller, and then work them up and down the emotional ladder in a way that offered no small amount of satisfaction.

The Old Man lived for such satisfaction and breathed it in, flavored as it was with the smoke of this particularly good cigar. Then, the moment properly savored, he allowed the spell to be broken with the words, "Alright, relax. I brought you down here for a reason," and he was down to business.

Elbert, of course, did not relax. He continued to stand, uncomfortably, shifting his weight from foot to foot, waiting for the other shoe to drop, which it always did, eventually. The Old Man had been tormenting him for 12 years, ever since he came to be in charge of the science department, and Elbert had come to dread

these face to face meetings. It wasn't so much the bullying. He could stand that. He had, in fact, lived with bullying from one person or another for his whole life. It was more that the Old Man was utterly unpredictable. Meeting with him was like waiting for your execution behind a blindfold. You knew it was coming, but you didn't know when, and the waiting was almost worse than the dreaded moment itself.

Maybe today would be different.

"I want you to look at this log from sector 47b. Either we have the kind of mistake upon which empires rise and fall, in which case the poor trash-bot who certified it is about to be dismantled piece by piece, or there is crack in the universe that our guys can't fix."

The Old Man held the paper in his hand, but did not actually offer it to the human facing his desk. He just sat there, taking in the moment. In this office, the Old Man moved for no one but himself. He took another slow drag and blew his smoke directly toward the scientist. "Since we know a trash-bot could never make that kind of mistake, what I want you to tell me, Dixon, is how we close the damn crack."

Elbert moved forward to take the document from the Old Man's hand. Once he had it in his possession, he stepped back the requisite three meters and studied it. At first, he saw nothing special. Just another log from another dump. Maybe this one was a bit larger than usual, but it was the right time of year for that. He began to panic. He knew there was something here he was supposed to see, something that would explain why he got called down here, but he didn't see it. He could hear the firing squad cocking their rifles and prepared himself for the worst.

Then he saw it.

He stood dumbfounded and stared at it like he was struggling with a foreign language he was only casually acquainted with. He moved over to another part of the office with better light, but the

more he could see, the more confused he became. His usual lack of self-confidence faded away as he studied the paper and lost himself in the problem taking shape before him.

“This must be a mistake, sir. I’ve run the numbers on this sector myself. In fact, I was just looking at them this morning. If this is accurate, then...”

The two of them stared at each other. When it became clear that his scientist had lost his power of speech, Old Man stood up and walked over to him. When he was barely half a meter away he said, quietly, in almost a fatherly voice, “Then what?”

“Then...”

“For God’s sake, man, what is it?”

“Oh dear God. It can’t...” and he looked back at the log.

The Old Man grabbed him by the shoulders. “What is it?”

And the guy from science looked up, looked the Old Man straight in the eye and said, “Were doomed.”

Not that our villain would put much stock in a paranoid statement like that from a shlub like Elbert, but it is a nice opportunity for cliffhanger-like escape from the dark and oppressive world of the machines and into the dark and slightly less oppressive world of the humans.

Teasing us with the imminent destruction of the universe, of course, has a not entirely unreasonable chance of keeping us engaged through what is turning out to be a less than successful, if not downright tedious work. Perhaps the device will work, and the repeated mention of the impending doom will keep us holding on, wanting to learn more. On the other hand, if we are foolish enough to keep reading, it is just as likely that we are too stubborn to put the book down before we’ve really given it a chance, and rather

than continuing because of this less than subtle technique, continue in spite of it.

Regardless of the reason, continue we do. And with the slightly stale aftertaste of the Old Man on our palate, we go back for a second helping of our hero, whom we last left preparing tomorrow's hangover.

3. The Puzzle

Jerry was asleep on the couch in front of his vid-wall. The last remnants of a glass of tuber-rye were on the coffee table, and both bowls of leaf strips had turned a deep brown. He was snoring, one of a long list of faults that Ball was glad to leave behind when she left him once and for all, but which in this case was not disturbing as there was no one in the dome to be disturbed. The wall had gone silent for the night and was now showing a silent test pattern. The lights were still on, and the dome windows showed simulated night.

It turns out that on this part of the planet there is always daylight, and the dome window things help keep humans on a reasonable sleep schedule. We spend an unfair amount of time here learning about biological clocks and how humans had a hard time adjusting to the different patterns of day and night on other planets. Finally, we discover, humans learned to fake it by building dome things that could keep our internal clocks sane by simulating day and night while indoors.

This is part of an ongoing attempt to create a scientifically based and justifiable world – to prove that this world could, under the right conditions, come to be. We are, after all, a suspicious lot, and although we are generally anxious to believe in the highly improbable, we need at least a modicum of science to justify our beliefs. Unfortunately, although such a trickle of science would be welcome, it is not to be, and rather, the waters rise until we are in the

midst of a flood that leaves nothing but a devastated barren wasteland in its wake.

Nevertheless, we do ultimately dig ourselves out, and, the justification complete, we accept the repercussions of a world without darkness, after which we are at long last allowed to fall back into the story.

The vid-wall began flashing on and off with a bright red light accompanied by an alarm. The light and sound permeated the dome and turned it into the inside of a pinball machine following a double bonus and multi-ball. No reasonable person could continue to sleep through such cacophony, but as we are about to find out, Jerry was not, at present, a reasonable person. The substances he had ingested earlier that evening in a misguided attempt to numb his emotional pain had worked with a vengeance, and it was going to take more than a vid alarm to bring him out of his stupor. He rolled over, which cut the noise down by the amount of snoring he had previously been producing, but which left the alarm otherwise unimpeded. In the morning, when he really *would* have to get up, the couch would physically shake him out of bed with a mechanical alarm of his own devise. The communication alarm, however, was not so sophisticated, and this hurricane of noise and glare was the best it could do.

Now even the strongest and most stubborn men, among whom Jerry often counted himself, are eventually worn down by persistence, and the alarm was nothing if not persistent. Eventually Jerry started to awaken, barely realizing what was happening, and instinctually avoiding the moment where asleep becomes awake, took the pillow from under his head and put it over his ears in the vain hope of diminishing the waking effect of the alarm.

To Jerry's immense relief, the noise of the alarm was soon replaced with silence, and he put the pillow back under his head. He gently allowed himself to float back into some semblance of the dream from which he had been so rudely ripped, and felt himself slipping back into nocturnal bliss. No good thing, however, can last forever, and what had formerly been an alarm now became the voice of an old acquaintance.

"Jerry, you there?"

Jerry remained sloth-like, but could now feel the dreaded awake creeping up on him.

"Jerry, wake up!"

This time, we know Jerry heard something because he took his pillow from under his head and placed it back over his head, squeezing down hard upon his ears. "Go away! I don't want any," he eked out. Jerry had intended for this to be a scream, but he did not yet have the energy he imagined. What energy he did have was absorbed by the pillow.

"Jerry, it's me. Wake up. I don't have much time."

"Aw, leave me alone, will you?" And then it happened. Jerry was awake, pretending to be asleep, instead of experiencing the real thing. Intellectually, he wasn't yet ready to give in, but physically, the waking had come.

"Jerry, I'm serious. Do you think I'd risk my job to call you if it wasn't important?"

"Go to hell."

"Jerry," and here Peter Elbert paused, either for effect or out of sheer terror at what he was about to say. "It's Fisher's paradox."

And Jerry awoke in earnest. He sat up, rubbed his eyes and stared at Elbert's oversized image on the screen. Then he sat back, drank what was left of his final cocktail of the night before, and heaved a deep sigh.

Peter Elbert had changed over the last 12 years, Jerry thought. He had lost most of his hair and grown bags under his eyes. Jerry remembered Elbert as a sort of lost puppy, but now he looked more like a beaten down dog. He tried to suppress the thought of how *he* might look to *Elbert*, but it hounded him. There are times when looking into the face of an old friend can be more revealing than looking into a mirror, and Jerry saw himself more clearly than he had in years. It was not a pretty sight, though at least he had the excuse of being woken in the middle of the night. He wondered what the time would be on Earth right now, looking around to see if his charts were within reach.

We'll learn all about how time differences work in this world later on. Or maybe we'll skip it. All that really matters is that they exist, and they are very complicated.

As the fog cleared from his head, he remembered something important. Something this guy he barely recognized had just said. What was it? Something about a paradox. On the vid-wall, this giant old person version of Elbert gave no indication that he was going to repeat himself.

Paradox. Paradox. He willed himself fully awake. Fisher's paradox?

"Well," Jerry managed to say at last, "we knew it would happen eventually." The sound of his voice surprised him, and he had to clear his throat a few times to feel normal. Water. Water would be good.

"Jerry, did you hear what I said? Fisher's paradox. It's happening. Right now, in sector 47b. A crack the size of Penteus 2, and growing."

"I heard you, Pete." He cleared his throat again, and then coughed in earnest. "If that's all you've got to say, you might as well

go back to work and let me get some sleep. My shift starts in 4 hours, and I still need about 6 more hours of sleep.” Jerry dragged himself up and walked to the wall to shut it off for the night. *No. Water was not worth the effort. Sleep was more important.*

Elbert saw him coming toward the camera and became desperate.

“There must be something we can do.”

Jerry bristled. *Of all the nerve. To wake me up in the middle of the night, to use your security clearance to force communications without my permission, to demand my help for the one problem you had refused to solve when you had the chance, after all that you have done...* It was more than he could bear. He sat back down on the couch and slouched deeply. With his head tilted back, he looked up at the artificially black windows in the dome.

“No, Pete, there isn’t. We’re doomed.” Suddenly Jerry came to his senses. He was talking with a man who had at one time held in his hands the power to save his career, his marriage, his life. This man, this shell of a man had utterly destroyed him with his cowardice. His lack of action, lack of solidarity when it was needed most, had sealed Jerry’s fate, and Jerry’s memory of that brought a swell of anger in him. He went for the water after all.

As he returned from the kitchen unit, he finished his thought. “But you’ve known that all along, Pete. You knew when he promoted you. You knew before he sent me to this hellhole. Before I lost the only thing that ever mattered to me. When there was still something we could do about it. Before it was too late. You could’ve backed me up when it mattered, Pete, but you didn’t, and now it’s *your* mess.” Then Jerry did the same thing he always did when his anger got the better of him. He took his half full glass of water and hurled it at the vid. Elbert flinched and jumped back. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to get some sleep.”

Whatever courage Elbert had come in with was visibly diminished by Jerry's act of violence, though not yet enough to stop him. This vid-call was the boldest thing Elbert had done in 12 years, maybe in his entire life, and he forced himself to move forward. "That's, uh, not how it was...and...well...I think maybe you know it. When you discovered Fisher's paradox it...it was nothing more than an exercise in mathematics."

"An exercise?!"

"Well...I mean...um...basically yeah. You didn't really have...um...any y'know... proof, and you...well...you expected the Old Man to shut down the whole...well... operation." Elbert was well up into his high voice and clearly nervous about confronting his former colleague, especially when he needed his help. But after all these years, Elbert too had something on his mind, and needed to clear the air.

Elbert continued, "He would have lost everything he had built and worse, because...well..." At this point Elbert looked over his shoulder, then back at the camera and lowered his voice. "I mean...he doesn't really have any friends, does he? Without the power of RTI he's just a...a freak in a human shell. You knew he was never going to accept it, regardless of the consequences. You could have, well, I guess... taken your time, y'know... worked on the math with me, brought me in," Elbert seemed to grow some resolve. "But you didn't, you...you rushed in and...damn it, you sealed your own fate. And for what? A theory. A bunch of numbers on paper that... barely added up."

"Barely added up? Barely added up?" Jerry was furious in a way he usually hated himself for later, and tried to calm himself down. Instead he picked an empty glass up off the floor and hurled it at Elbert. This time, however, Elbert saw it coming and didn't even flinch, which had a profound effect on Jerry. He sat back down on the couch and sighed. "Ok, they barely added up," he at

last conceded, “but they *did* add up. What does *barely* have to do with it?”

“You had no proof!”

Jerry and Elbert stared at each other through their vid-walls awhile.

There was a time when Elbert had looked up to Jerry as a mentor even though he was Jerry’s senior, and Jerry had encouraged the relationship. They had been close, worked together on tough problems, brainstorming together and bonding the way only scientists working together on tough problems could. It was, above all else, what made the betrayal so damning.

Meet the flashback. As a device for getting out exposition, it is unparalleled. Of course, like most common devices, this one will be overused, but it does allow the story to move forward while giving us a bit of background at the same time. The jump back in time admittedly comes abruptly, and for that reason feels a bit jarring. Nevertheless, the payoff is that we actually get to see what happens, rather than just hearing about it.

So back in time we go, to the time known everywhere as “Before the story begins.”

The time was roughly 12 years ago, and Jerry was working at a chalkboard in the lab he shared with Baker and Elbert. The chalkboard was covered with mathematical symbols, with some areas dense with chalk dust where formulas had been erased and rewritten dozens of times since the last washing. Jerry had just erased one of these areas, and was changing it once again.

The room had a scattered look about it. Messy piles of paper adorned almost every horizontal surface, along with dozens of cups half filled with cold coffee. Many of these surfaces had built

in terminals with vid-screens. The rest looked more like lunch tables than anything else. One corner of the room appeared to be dedicated to electronic work, with radio kits, in various states of disarray, connected to unusual devices never used in their current configuration before. A section of the room on the opposite wall had a long table with sinks and burners, and what appeared to be a chemical experiment in process. In short, the room looked like a high school science lab abandoned to the students.

Jerry finished rewriting his equation and turned to Baker. “Does that solve your concern?”

Baker, who had been studying the equation as Jerry wrote it, chimed right in. “Well, I’m not sure I would use the word ‘solve’ in any way connected with this mess, but it definitely accounts for the anomaly.” Baker studied the board closely. “However, I think you’ve just inadvertently introduced a lateral field loop that might turn proximate carbon into plastics. I wonder if we can use that to our advantage.”

“Oh...” Jerry said as he noticed the problem. “That’s just a...oops.”

While Jerry was erasing again, Elbert entered the room, shuffling as usual. “Hey guys. What are you...uh... doin’?”

As Jerry finished rewriting the equation once again, he turned to Elbert. “Oh, hey Pete. I think I’m very close to nailing this. Have you been following?”

“Well,” Elbert said, “I spent some time staring at it before I went home last night. I think I follow the basic premise, but...”

Jerry and Baker exchanged glances. They knew what was coming, but it was traditional to let Elbert speak it for himself. It was part of a confidence building routine, and they knew if they spoke Elbert’s concerns for him, which they always dismissed in the end, Elbert would continue to sink into a spiral of low self-confidence. It was not that they took him seriously – they didn’t. But

they knew that he would never rise to his potential if they shut him down without giving him a chance. At least Jerry did.

“But?” Jerry asked.

“But the whole thing is sort of sloppy. I mean, I know you guys hate to hear this and everything, but none of the potential for noise in the system is accounted for.”

No surprises there. Elbert’s response was exactly the one Jerry and Baker had been expecting. Jerry looked down at his cold coffee and answered patiently, “Ok. You’re right, Pete. Introducing a series of expressions to account for that potential would certainly make the argument stronger. But before I take up that kind of space, before I confuse the issues with formulas that will grow this equation tenfold, before I do that kind of work, I have to ask myself, *is it worth it?*” Jerry tried to gauge Pete’s reaction. Would he go along, or continue to affirm his pedantic integrity?

As much as he wanted Elbert to learn to stand up for himself, what he wanted most of all was for him to stop bogging them all down in detail, and move forward with them as a team. Elbert, of course, not at all unexpectedly, let him down.

“Of course it’s worth it. Why don’t you let me do it, if you think it’s a waste of time? I don’t mind.”

Jerry sighed. “I’ll think about it, Pete. But you and I know it could add as much as two years to this project. I’m just not sure we have that kind of time. Besides, you’ve got your own work to do. You’re making good progress with your calculations on the mass modeling, but you’ve got a long way to go. From what I can tell, the Old Man’s chomping at the bit.”

Baker jumped in to lighten the mood. “Sounds like something your wife would say.” And indeed, they all laughed. Elbert got the coffee.

Here we get a description of the problem in detail, but in the interest of not bringing ourselves to a level of tedium beyond which we won't bother to continue reading, we'll sum up.

It turns out that if you could push certain particles at certain speeds through certain areas of space, you would create a temporary hole into another universe. This had been known for some time, and the Old Man had taken advantage of this bit of science to create the galaxy's largest waste disposal conglomerate: Robo-Trash Incorporated, better known as RTI. He trucked garbage off planets, created these temporary holes, and dumped as much garbage through as he could before they closed. Cheap, efficient, and lucrative. There were other benefits as well, unknown to the public at large, which we shall hear about later in the story.

Our heroes, while employed at this organization as scientists, were working a problem to do with these holes, and the tendency they had to close at slower and slower rates of speed under certain conditions. Followed through to its natural conclusion, Jerry discovered something he called Fisher's paradox, named for his goldfish, in which rather than closing up, a hole continued to open instead, eventually creating a vacuum through which our entire universe would be pulled through, putting an end to life as we know it.

All three scientists agreed on the premise, but science without proof is mere philosophy. Their arguments with each other involved the quality of that proof.

With the purpose of the flashback served, namely a slightly improved understanding of the relationship between Jerry and Elbert as well as of the basic scientific problem that forms the central core of the story, we move back to the present, where Jerry, a little

groggy but at least half vertical is still arguing with the image of his former colleague on the vid-wall thing.

“And now?” Jerry asked derisively.

“Now,” Elbert sighed, “you have your proof.” Elbert held a copy of the log up to the camera so Jerry could see it.

The log now covered the entire vid-wall, and, if not for the layers of dried tuber-rye splashes on the wall and the overgrown hair falling in front of his eyes, Jerry would have seen it in every detail. He forced himself to move past his emotions, his tiredness, and everything but the one thing that could actually bring his mind into focus: the science.

“Ok, ok. Tell me what I’m looking at.”

Here, Jerry’s former student dives in. He reminds Jerry of the basic layout of the logs, and spends a lot of time explaining how they have changed over the last twelve years, which only serves to once again push our patience to the limit. He talks about a sort of high-resolution telescope thingy that has changed everything over the last few years, and how the data from the thingy was laid out in the log.

Once again, there seems to be more interest in trying to show an understanding of the science and its implications than actually getting on with the plot. It is, perhaps, a disease reserved for space stories like this one, the need to over-explain the reasoning behind nearly everything in a misguided attempt to defend the plausibility of it. It is as if the plausibility is some requirement which, if not provided, will make the book unreadable, rather than the other way around.

After stumbling through yet more techno babble, we finally discover that the log shows a sort of gravity problem which could only be produced by the crack hole thing they've been talking about. Namely, the Fisher paradox.

"I don't know what to say, Pete. It looks like RTI has been exploiting the same sector since before I was even there. I can't believe this thing hasn't been growing for at least three years. Have they evacuated, yet?"

"I have no idea, Jerry. You know the Old Man would never share something like that with me."

"No. I suppose he keeps his business as close to his chest as ever. I don't know why I'm wasting my time with you, Pete. The last time I..." Jerry stared at the screen with his mouth open, while his empty glass fell to the floor and bounced. "What in God's name?"

"Jerry, what is it?"

"Pete. I can't...what the...I don't..."

"Jerry, what are you talking about?"

Jerry walked right up to the vid-wall, looking at a particular section of the log, now about five feet off of the ground and on the far right side of the wall. He touched his hands to the wall and traced some of the figures, then skirted over to the left side where he looked at another set. As he moved back and forth between the two, he said, "Why is the log all out of order?"

"Out of order? What do you...Oh Christ, someone's coming."

And like that, the screen was a test pattern once more. Jerry went to his table, found some paper and started writing. He wrote fast and furiously, terrified he had missed something, or worse yet, seen it but forgotten. Before the artificial morning came, Jerry had covered five pages, front and back, with reproductions of the log,

variations of sections he was not sure about, and notes. Mostly notes.

This business about the log being out of order is another small taste of the time travel themes that will inundate the story shortly. It doesn't seem to matter that anyone of serious scientific background considers time travel to be impossible. Almost any science story can be aided by time travel, which not only solves a lot of storytelling problems, but yields great fodder for philosophical discussion, something which our story has an unusually high propensity for.

When the time comes, we will be tempted to put down the book forever, regardless of our now more significant investment in the story, with a six page diatribe on the dangers of time-travel and the effect it was bound to have on the modern man of the future. To avoid this temptation, we will skip that section altogether in favor of mildly more interesting plot development.

For now, we will dive headlong into the pool of time themes, and acclimate ourselves to this world where time travel is not only possible, but institutionalized.

We also come to another milestone in the book, something we've been waiting for since we first met Jerry: the introduction of our heroine, Jerry's ex-wife.

Interlude: In the Classroom

Ball Strohman, teacher of various grades at Time Academy, and one-time wife of Dr. Jerry Strohman, worked hard to focus her energy. She was behind the desk at the front of a fourth grade classroom, and as usual her students were acting up. The classroom was typical for the Academy. The children sat at individual desks, facing front, and there were windows on the outside wall letting the bright New Zealand sunlight fill the room. The other walls were covered with educational posters extolling the power of positive thought and hard work, as well as a variety of summarized basic lessons in time theory.

Ball hated teaching. She had been doing so full-time at the Academy for over nine years. In all that time her work had never blossomed into anything more than a job, and a frustrating one at that. Students interrupted constantly, played pranks, hurt each other, and were, to put it mildly, generally disrespectful, all of which would have been fine had they only bothered to absorb some small portion of her lessons. As it was, however, she was swimming upstream in a futile attempt to keep them from drowning in their own ignorance, something which she had no hope of achieving.

The funny thing was how much she had loved the Academy as a child. She remembered working hard, late night study sessions, thoughtful conversations with her teachers. Sure, she had snuck out her dorm a few times to watch the sunrise, or smoked the odd cigarette when no one was looking. But that was the point: she sneaked. She couldn't imagine herself showing the outright

disrespect to teachers the way these kids did. When things had fallen apart with Jerry, this was the first place she thought of. The one place she remembered being truly happy. Sadly, you can't go home again, and she wasn't sure if she could ever really be happy in this place that had changed so much.

Maybe she had been more unruly than she thought, back then, and she was just getting back a little of her own. Still, she couldn't possibly have deserved this much. In any case, it didn't matter because those days were gone. No matter how much she idealized that time with nostalgia, she was stuck with students who could never live up to her ideal of who she thought she used to be.

And it wasn't just the fourth graders. They were all like that. Arrogant little snot nosed kids who couldn't pay attention to save their lives and dismissed any attempt at instruction as pointless. Born know-it-alls who couldn't be bothered with formal teaching. No. She wasn't like this as a student. It was the world that had changed.

"Kids. Kids! Settle down! Don't touch that! Jimmy, sit down this instant! Lisa, please. Ok. Quiet down everyone. Ok, thank you." Ball took a deep breath and put her hands on the desk. Today's lesson was traditionally the toughest one of the year, certainly for fourth grade, and she wasn't quite up to it today. She hadn't slept well and was still plagued by the vague memory of a disturbing dream involving her father. He was overbearing enough in person, but this barely memorable hallucinatory phantom was worse for its larger than life dominance. She still felt that he was watching her in judgment long after she had woken up. She tried to shake the feeling and bulldoze herself into the lesson plan, but instinctively she knew it would end in chaos.

"Now this is our first real day of time travel. We have the potential for huge amounts of confusion and miscommunication. So, I am begging you. Seriously *begging* you to please focus, and

not to play with your remotes.” A hand went up, and Ball knew she had already lost the room. “Yes, Jennifer.”

“Mrs. Strohman? Will we finally get to move through time today?”

“Yes, Jennifer. At long last, the day you have been waiting for has arrived.” Against her better judgment, she was about to dive into her lesson plan when yet another hand went up. “Well,” she thought, “at least they’re raising their hands.”

“Yes, Colby?”

“Which button do we press?”

“Don’t push ANYTHING!” Ball Strohman took a deep breath, stood up, and put her hands on her desk. “Ok. Hands in your laps.” She paused to make sure the room of ten-year-olds complied, which took longer than she would have liked, but which was ultimately successful. “Now we’ve been talking about the elements of time travel for the last month, and I know you are all anxious to try a little for yourselves. As long as you behave, you will all have an opportunity to at long last dip your toes into the river of time.” Ball heard tittering in the back but ignored it for the time being.

“We’re just going to travel back and forth within our class period today, but to start, we’ll need a buffer of about ten minutes. At the end of that time, we’ll enter two codes,” she continued to say as she wrote the code on the blackboard, “that will move us forward and backward within that ten minute period.”

Another hand. “Yes, Cornish.”

“We already did that.”

“Cornish, didn’t I ask you not to touch anything?”

“I didn’t.” Cornish looked away from his teacher, and down at his desk, the guilt written clearly on his face.

“Of course you did. While the rest of us have been sitting here, patiently awaiting our turns to at long last experience the

wonders of time travel, you dove in, punched this code into your remote," she said while pointing to the chalkboard, "and traveled ten minutes into the future."

"No, I didn't, Mrs. Strohman. I swear," Cornish protested, his guilt more obvious by the minute.

"Yes, Cornish, you did. And when you did so, the Cornish of ten minutes into the future, the Cornish presently sitting in front of me, traveled back ten minutes to take your place. So although you remember only innocently sitting through the ten minute waiting period, your naughtier self did not, and dragged you back here to sit with us. Undoubtedly, you will not be able to bear sitting through this again and will travel back to the end of the wait period, dragging naughty Mr. Cornish back here to wait his turn. Yes?"

Cornish, caught and called out, broke. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Strohman."

"And he's back. Now nobody touch ANYTHING!" She took another deep breath. Nothing had visibly happened during the Cornish incident, so the students didn't really know that he had moved forward and back in time, only that their teacher believed he had. In fact, even Cornish didn't really know he had moved in time. All he really knew was that he had intended to. Ball, however, her senses honed after years of training, knew immediately. She felt the world change when Cornish moved, and studied the rest of the students to see if any of them had felt it as well. She was disappointed.

And before she could move on, she felt it again, just before the kid everyone called Slappy raised his hand.

"Yes, Slappy."

"Ok, this is bizarre. Nobody has called me Slappy since...whoa...am I dreaming this? Or was prison the dream... Jeez, is this fourth grade? This must be the..." Slappy looked

around the room and took it all in. Then he looked back at Ball. “I used to have a huge crush on you, Mrs. Strohman.”

Ball, her frustration rising, focused her energy. She looked at Slappy, this little kid that had so much potential, and thought, “He doesn’t know.” Unexpectedly, she felt washed in sadness for his fate. Whether he really was in prison or not didn’t much bother her, but the thought that this kid, this kid with so much potential would lose any instincts he had developed for time was devastating. She usually told herself that all the trouble of teaching, all the disrespect she felt from her students, was worth enduring to train the next generation of Time People. That the world, and in particular, her people, would be better for her suffering. The thought that she might be going through all of this for nothing, or worse, that she herself might be ruining these kids’ chances of living up to their natural potentials tore her apart. The students all looked at her in rare silence, waiting for her to speak. She reminded herself of her mantra: “Only the Present. Only the Present,” and marshaled her strength as she waited for Slappy to leave his future behind forever.

“Ok, Slappy. It sounds like things may not be working out so well for you, but I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do about that. I need to send you back or we might lose *little* Slappy forever. Do you understand?”

Slappy looked confused, like he had just awoken from a very real dream but couldn’t remember the details.

Ball walked over to Slappy’s desk, and punched some numbers into his remote. “You know, I had high hopes for you. I’m sorry about the way things turn out.”

“What was the question again?” Slappy asked, hopefully.

Ball knew he was now in the present, and had lost all memory of his future. The poor child version of Slappy was at this moment coming to in the future, probably in a prison cell, losing touch with

all memory of his childhood, thrust away with the touch of a button. She was running out of time.

“Goodbye, Slappy,” she said, and pushed one more button on his remote. “Remember, the future can be yours.”

Suddenly the expression on Slappy’s face transformed. Ball felt the change in the time flow, a sort of indescribable sensation that flowed through her inside and out. She looked around the room again. Still no sign that anyone else felt it. Well, they were young. It would come in time.

“Well, Slappy? Are you proud of yourself?”

“Whoa. Where am I? What just happened?”

Ball let her anger start to rise up again. “What just happened was that you violated my only rule, and instead of paying attention you nearly destroyed any chance you had at a decent life. You had no idea what you were doing, and you are very, very lucky we were able to get you back.”

Slappy stared and Ball glared. She would have to redouble her efforts with this one. Just the thought was exhausting. Worn out, Ball relented.

“Don’t give up, Slappy. The future can be yours.” She walked back to her desk. “And I have a message for you from the future,” she said with no little condescension. “You are here because you have a gift. Don’t be afraid to use it.”

She was proud of that thought and reveled in it for a moment. Then, struck by sudden panic she added, “BUT ONLY WHEN I SAY SO!”

Ball used the next ten minutes to go over the lesson plan, and against her better judgment, took her students on their first time ride. With few exceptions, the day, like most, continued to get worse until she left for the day, tired, embittered, and worn out, her better self buried in job she just wasn’t built for, in a place she no longer recognized.

And so it went for Ball, who gave up science for teaching, gave up adventure for stability, and will soon trade them back, only to be caught back up in the whirlwind of time.

And so it goes for our three main characters. Jerry is frustrated with his life on the as yet unnamed planet, a life full of regret. Ball is frustrated with her life back on Earth, similarly living a life of regret. And the Old Man, well, let's just say that soon enough we will discover that he too is living a frustrated existence, full of regret. It would appear we are stumbling upon our first major theme.

We can, of course, be comforted by the fact that cathartic change is, in most stories, predictably inevitable, and before we are through with our heroes they will no doubt shed their frustrations and regrets, ultimately finding the happiness they seek. Who knows, perhaps our villain will as well. With or without our villain, however, the cathartic change for our heroes is utterly predictable, as is the route for that catharsis, which we are to set up for in the following scene.

4. The Backstory

Baker had been awake for about 20 minutes and was just beginning his daily rituals. He was a slow mover in the morning, slow but methodical, and had barely got around to brushing his teeth when his vid-wall switched from the morning news to communication mode, with the usual flashing and beeping. He moved over to the wall and responded.

“Yeah, this is Baker. What do you want?”

It was Jerry. “I need to talk to you. Come right over. We can have breakfast here.”

Baker nearly fainted in shock. Hearing Jerry speak before lunchtime was rare, let alone before breakfast. Usually, Jerry slept until the last possible minute and kept silent for his first few hours of consciousness, waiting for the hangover to die a natural death. It was typically everything he could do to get vertical at all in time for work. To hear Jerry’s voice two hours before morning work call was not just unusual. It was unheard of.

“Since when do you eat breakfast? Come to think of it, since when do you get up more than 10 minutes before morning call?”

“I’m serious, Baker, I need to see you. Now.”

“And I’m in the midst of my...private time. Can’t it wait?”

“Baker, just shut up and get your ass over here.”

“Alright, alright. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Caldonium Baker was a particular person, and the particular nature of his morning rituals were central to making his existence tolerable. He needed fully two hours to patiently wake up, groom, meditate, exercise, eat, and generally prepare himself for the day

in privacy. When allowed to perform these rituals, he was a reasonably strong person who could well withstand the tedium of the workday, and, following that, the nightly bombardments of Jerry's outbursts when the tuber-rye got the better of him. On the rare occasion that something interfered with his morning, however, the tedium of the day drove him mad and turned him into a mean, angry, and generally unhappy person with about as much patience as an belligerent drunk looking for a fight. The only thing that could save him at that point would be some kind of brain work, something requiring scientific rigor or creative problem solving, something to distract him from his loss, which Baker knew a day in the mines would never offer. His sometime evening hobby of working quietly on his inventions would help, but he would be so far gone at that point that he would have difficulty focusing, give up, and go over to Jerry's early, where the night would undoubtedly end in argument and physical violence.

Jerry's morning ritual, on the other hand, was a little less complicated. About 10 minutes before the morning work call his homemade alarm would roust him by dumping him off the couch. He would grab the cup of coffee the kitchen unit had made for him in advance, light up a cigarette, and drag himself to work.

So, we know our hero works in a sort of mine thing on an unnamed planet somewhere in the outskirts, or the colonies, or something vaguely out of the way like that. We have heard that the work is tedious, if we are to believe that Jerry and Baker do the same type of work, and no doubt it is dangerous and depressing. Most likely dark. Because it is the future, they are not actually using picks and shovels, and are instead using laser things to selectively pull out the precious alien minerals, or they are pushing buttons on machines that somehow get the metals out, or they use

special tube sucking things to draw the gas out of fissures in the rock. It doesn't really matter.

What does matter is that Jerry and Baker spend ten hours a day doing tedious, although not physically taxing work, a job less like grave digging than working the line, a job which is on some level compulsory due to circumstances of which we have not yet been made aware.

After work, they probably go home separately, where Jerry makes some sort of futuristic but still crappy frozen dinner provided by the company and starts drinking. Sometime late in the evening Baker stops by, and they enjoy some of the local narcotics, drink some more, and sort of loaf around until they can't stay awake. Baker trudges home and Jerry falls asleep on the couch.

The next morning, they start all over again.

Today, of course, is different. Two hours after his middle of the night rousting from Pete Elbert, Jerry is still awake, with two more hours to kill before morning work call. He has been waiting for this moment, the moment he knows Baker will finally be up, because he needs someone to talk to that properly understands the physics.

Baker walked through the door with a cup of coffee in his hand, looking like hell.

“Baker, you look like hell.”

“Don't start with me, Jerry. I need a good two hours in the morning to find peace and come to terms with my miserable existence on this so called planet. I have not had those two hours my old friend, and, I warn you, I am most definitely not at peace.”

Baker sat down at the kitchen table and blew into his coffee, watching the steam rise. “So, what is it Jerry? What is it that not only makes you vertical at this unprecedented hour, but requires that you disturb me during the one time of day you know I prefer to be left alone?”

“Baker. Two hours ago, I got a vid from Pete Elbert.”

Baker stared in silence. Then he let himself laugh.

“The twitch?”

Where Jerry had been Elbert’s mentor, Baker had been more of an amused observer. Jerry had worked hard to make Elbert comfortable and build his confidence. Baker had not. Instead, he sat back and watched this overaged kid struggle, and reveled in the fact that he had grown out of his own confidence issues decades before, putting them well behind him with the rest of his adolescence. Elbert sensed Baker’s attitude and became extremely nervous around him if Jerry wasn’t nearby for support. When Jerry wasn’t around, Elbert acquired a nervous tick that Baker came to know very well.

Jerry had been protective of Elbert, and never liked hearing him referred to as “the twitch.” A lot had happened since those days, however, and Jerry felt a lot less generous toward his former student now than he had then.

Baker continued, “He still at RTI?”

“Yeah.”

“And he called you from, what, the lab? I suppose two hours ago it was just after lunch on Earth.”

Here we might easily get distracted and delve into a meandering primer about time zones in the galactic future. We would discuss the nature of planets spinning at different speeds, and how our brothers in the future contend with constantly moving time zones, depending on the time of year. We might include some examples,

such as lunchtime on Jerry's planet, which might line up with lunchtime on Earth every 14 months or so, due to his time zone's traveling cycle. Not only would this be endlessly confusing, but takes so long to explain, and so much effort to understand, that we would be sure to lose track of the story while we try to work out exactly what time it is on Earth.

Of course, this level of detail is not worth our time, so as we suspected earlier, we will skip it altogether. It is sufficient to understand that, in the future, time zones have special rules that the people of the future either understand, or don't care about.

He breathed a heavy sigh and thought about the old days. "Lunch on Earth. Even a light lunch. Maybe a BLT. Remember bacon, Jerry? God what I wouldn't give for a slice of real bacon." He sipped his coffee.

Jerry, too, had his moments of nostalgia, but had little use for it this early in the morning. He attempted to diffuse Baker's day-dreaming. "I used to have a hard-boiled egg for lunch. Cold. No salt."

"Even a hard-boiled egg, Jerry. From a real chicken." He gave another long sigh. "But I preferred hot corned beef on rye. Fresh rye with a little crunch on the crust. Or the patty melt at George's. Remember that, Jerry? With the cheese dripping all over the grilled onions, and..." Baker broke off. "We've been on this hell-hole too long, Jerry. Too long."

Jerry and Baker stared at each other, a stare of still being half in the coma of sleep, or in Jerry's case, of having been up most of the night. In this state, they were extremely susceptible to this bout of nostalgia, and Jerry knew from experience that they could easily go on for hours. There was no end of the things they missed about living on earth in relative freedom. When they got on the nostalgia

track, especially if they were talking about food, they would spiral themselves into a frenzy that would only make the longings worse. During the workday, it wasn't so bad, because at least it took their minds off their work. At night it was painful because it would completely take them over, and they would have no recourse but to sit and stare at the kitchen unit wishing for what could never be. Just now, however, they did not have the time.

"Get a hold of yourself, Baker," he snapped.

Baker came to.

"Sure. Alright. Yeah." Baker looked at Jerry for clues. "So, what was Elbert doing calling you from the Old Man's place? Either things are getting pretty lax around there, or he was taking a big risk. Frankly, I have trouble believing either one."

"I think the latter. He cut out quick when he saw someone coming. And I think before he'd finished telling me what he really wanted to say."

"Which was?"

"Fisher's paradox."

The air quality control system hummed quietly as Jerry and Baker let this idea sink into the empty space between them.

"He found proof?"

"It's happened, Baker. Is happening. Right now in...wait for it..." Jerry flipped through several pieces of scrap paper covered in notes, "...sector 47b."

"Holy cow."

"You said it, friend."

The implications of the situation rapidly filled Baker's head. It had been years since he had talked about this problem, but it had never really left him. It even haunted his nightmares from time to time.

Cautiously, he asked, "How fast is it growing?"

“That’s what I can’t figure out.” Jerry put out his cigarette and stood up. He paced a bit and said, “After I got over the shock of waking up, seeing Pete, and, well, the whole situation, I tried to get down to work. I started staring at the log he was holding up, but couldn’t wrap my head around what I was looking at. They’ve completely changed the layout of the things, Baker. It’s better, but it takes some getting used to. It took me a little time to understand what I was looking at, but I think I picked it up pretty fast. I had just located the time codes and was trying to analyze them when Pete cut out.”

“Well, that won’t make this any easier. Did you see much before he cut out?”

“I wrote down everything I could remember and have been going over it for the last two hours. I think the growth is relatively slow, but...” Jerry was still unsure of himself, of what he thought he had seen. It was so absurd that he hardly believed it himself. Would Baker?

“But what, Jerry?”

“But either the trash-bots in the field are completely incompetent in making their logs...”

“You can count that theory out right away.”

“My thought exactly. Since we know a t-bot could never make that kind of mistake, the log must be correct. But I’m telling you, Baker, it doesn’t make sense.”

“What doesn’t make sense?”

Jerry hesitated.

“The time codes. Nothing adds up. None of the basic formulas come out right. I tried the Miranda sequence in my head while Pete was still on the line, and a dozen times since then. It comes out completely upside down.” Jerry flipped through his notes again. “After he cut out, I tried every sequence and formula I could think of, and it’s like everything I ever learned was gibberish.”

And just as things are getting going, as we are on the verge of diving into the puzzle that forms the heart of any decent science story, we are grabbed by the back of our shirts and slowed down from a run to a trot, from a trot to a walk, and from a walk to a dead stop, as if the road we were driving down slowly became filled with water, and then mud, and finally became so thick we could barely move.

The reason is a detour into what we will call time codes, different, we note with exasperation, than the time zones we discussed earlier, as well as how the robots in the field keep their logs. If the diatribe on the morals of time travel was brutal, this is closer akin to torture. At least the morals of time travel had the pretense of teaching us something about ourselves. This one is nothing more than environmental detail that purports to help us understand the puzzle better, but in actuality just distracts us. As the torture concludes, and we find ourselves shifting back out of first gear, we realize that we have learned almost nothing, save the fact that the robots have a way of tracking time from place to place on their jobs, and a certain way of marking it on their logs. While it is possible that some might actually care whether or not this time tracking system is viable, they will have to suffer a loss in favor of the more reasonable majority.

“Wait a minute, Jerry, “ Baker interrupted, “maybe we’re looking at this the wrong way. What if we invert the anti-polaric fusion constant and reintegrate the Gerhsom function to...”

And back down to first gear we go. This time to watch Jerry and Baker get absorbed in techno-babble. It can be a great way to build tension, to make us think we’re on our way to making a great

discovery, although always at the risk of scaring us away with too much language we don't understand. If we can pronounce it, and it has some semblance of basic math involved however, then we can sometimes follow the techno-babble just enough to move along with the plot, and maybe even feel a little smarter.

Here, no surprise, the babble is just babble, and instead of feeling smarter, we actually feel less so. Even those of us who are reasonably intelligent (and have nevertheless dismissed this intelligence in favor of reading this far into the story) cannot possibly follow this ridiculous gibberish, and will undoubtedly skim through to get to the conclusion, a place at which we fortunately now find ourselves.

“So what you’re saying, Baker, is that time is slowing down in the vicinity of this expanding rip?”

“Yeah. I think that’s it, Jerry. And the bigger the rip gets, the slower time moves in that area. But I don’t think it’s just that area. I think the time anomaly spreads as it dissapates. It’s pretty weird, I admit, but I think the farther away you get from the rip, the faster time moves, until you’re far enough away that it gets back up to normal.”

“Like a ripple.”

“A what?”

“Like a ripple in the water. You throw a stone in the water, and you get this big wave, right? But as it moves outward, it gets smaller and smaller until it is completely gone.”

“Sure. I think that’s pretty dead on, Jerry. The energy of the ripple slowly gets absorbed by friction as it moves outward and eventually dies. To follow your analogy, yes, I think what we’re seeing is a sort of time ripple. I’m not sure what’s absorbing it, what’s playing the part of friction, but it is definitely getting less intense as it moves outward.” Baker felt pretty pleased with

himself and was starting to think this day might not turn out so badly after all. There was nothing like a working on a puzzle to make him feel right with the world, especially if it was difficult, which this one was turning out to be.

Diving a little deeper into the puzzle, he continued, “Unfortunately, the analogy doesn’t quite fit the situation.”

“How so?”

“Alright, Jerry. In the case of the water ripple, you throw one big rock in the water, and it makes a big ripple that slowly dies out, right?”

“Right.”

“Instead, imagine you make the ripple by pointing a jet of water into the pond. And then imagine that the jet slowly gets more intense. That’s more like what you have here. The ripples still die out, but at the same time, they keep getting more and more intense at the source, which means they will eventually spread further and further before they die out. In other words, the ripples have a limited distance, but that distance is growing.”

Baker allowed his words to sink in before he continued.

“Jerry, I think the expansion of the rip is letting something in that is not only causing this time ripple, but is getting more intense all the time. Does the Fisher paradox predict this?”

Jerry did not even stop to consider. “No. Not at all. I had it all wrong”

“All wrong?”

“I can’t figure it, Baker, but it must be completely wrong”

Baker and Jerry stared at each other, this time with energy, excitement, and no small amount of fear. They were thinking the same thing, but were afraid to say it: Maybe they were both wrong. Maybe they had been all along.

Conveniently, we now go back in time with another flashback, so we can see first-hand the moment when Jerry shared his equation with the Old Man. The time is roughly twelve years previous, not long after our last flashback. Jerry had decided he had the proof he needed and, against the advice of his colleagues, went to see the Old Man. The equation was not much on its own, but when applied to the risky business of creating those hole-rip-crack things, spelled apparent doom for the universe.

Funny thing about space stories – dire consequences abound and always seem to spell certain doom for the universe, or for mankind, or something too big to imagine. Fortunately for us, heroes abound as well.

Jerry walked down to the Old Man's office and entered, unannounced. He had walked right past the secretary with a little wink, and she let him cross into the office without incident. He knew this would anger the Old Man, but he didn't really care.

This one is admittedly a little confusing. There's no good reason why our hero should be able to get past the secretary-bot thing without permission and subsequent announcement. She's a robot, so the flirting thing doesn't work. Our villain is a stickler for protocol, so he would never program her to let anyone violate his rules. And although our hero has a special relationship with our villain, which we shall learn more about soon, this relationship does not earn him any special favors, least of all with his trusted secretary.

The only feasible answer is that our hero is sneaky and skillful, and has found a way to circumvent many rules without ever having to

explain himself. His ability to get past the secretary is his secret, and unfortunately for us, shall remain so.

Jerry had known the Old Man for close to four years, since just before he married Ball, and in all that time he had never really taken the Old Man seriously. It had been Ball, of course, that had introduced them to each other. The Old Man had always played the role of Ball's father, and she had brought Jerry home to meet him and have their engagement sanctioned. Ball's relationship with the Old Man was complicated in part by the fact that he was more than 100 years her senior, and though she carried many of his genes, she was far from his natural daughter. Jerry had taken this all in stride, of course. Tech babies were rare but not unheard of, and he thought she deserved a family, even if it meant a self-absorbed ego-maniacal half-man half-machine with a heart of evil. Besides, he needed a job and the Old Man had been in a position to give him one. It didn't mean he had to take him seriously.

"Dad."

The Old Man, sitting at his desk, was taken by surprise. "Don't do that. Go back and get yourself announced. And don't call me that. I'm not your father. You will call me *Sir*, like everyone else."

"Dad, this is no time to be petty. We've got a big problem."

"Petty? Petty?! Get out!" the Old Man screamed. He had a habit of holding back his anger with quiet but firm tones. He believed that shouting showed weakness, while grace under fire showed strength and class. As usual, Jerry got the better of him.

Jerry heaved a sigh of exasperation and left the office. He had known he wouldn't get away with it from the beginning, but he never could resist an opportunity to throw the Old Man off balance. It made the Old Man look ridiculous while giving Jerry a

sense of power and satisfaction. It was self-destructive, of course, but he supposed all the best things in life usually were.

He went back to the secretary's office to get his official permission to enter, and because he didn't close the door behind him, the Old Man could see Jerry in the outer office bent over the secretary's desk. They appeared to be arguing, but the Old Man couldn't quite make out what was going on. He pushed the button on his vid-com. "Miss Dixon, what's going on in there?"

"I'm sorry sir. Your senior scientist is here and asking to see you."

"Does he have a request form?"

And Jerry, his patience gone, charged back in, with the secretary screaming after him, "Sir, you can't go in there!"

"Alright, Dad. Take it easy. I don't have a form and I don't have permission to see you. But I have some bad news that I think you'll want to hear."

The Old Man leaned back and lit a cigar. He had found his calm again and felt in control of the situation. He leaned into his vid-com and told his secretary to leave it alone, then looked up at Jerry. "Alright, let's have it and get it over with. I suppose you're here to talk about the gravity drives again? Why I continue to let you work here, I'll never know."

"I think we both know the answer to that one," Jerry said with a smile.

"Well, I am a sucker for a pretty face."

And at last, they both laughed. A laugh was rare from the Old Man, but the thought of his daughter always loosened him up a bit. Contrary to everything the Old Man thought about his daughter's husband, Jerry was no fool, and regularly took advantage of this.

"The thing is, I've been running some number games with Dr. Baker."

“Games?”

“Well, we call them games. Basically, we’re just running scenarios and trying to find some order in the chaos. Looking for formulas that could help us control the rips.”

“The rips. Your bad news is about the rips?”

Jerry realized, for the first time since he had left his lab to come down to this office, that he was in way over his head. He knew what the bad news was, but he hadn’t actually thought through how to say it. Now that he saw the intense look in the Old Man’s eyes, he was stumbling.

“I don’t know quite how to say this, so...um... I guess I’ll just come right out with it.” Jerry took a deep breath. “Dr. Baker and I have recreated, mathematically that is, the creation and demise of the rips, and they’re...well...they’re not stable.”

The Old Man, thinking he knew where Jerry was going, settled down. He still had a few secrets even Jerry wasn’t aware of. “Oh relax. That’s impossible. I’ve seen the math myself. The energy created exactly equals the energy expended.”

“That’s true...”

Jerry and the Old Man stared at each other.

“...for a virgin rip.”

The Old Man, sensing something new, tensed up. “A *virgin* rip?”

“Technically, only the very first rip ever created could really be called a virgin, but we tend to think of the first rip in any distinct area of space as virginal as well. Ever since the initial rip, minuscule amounts of energy have been escaping from the other-verse. The good news is that as long as we keep finding new and distinct dumps, the amount of energy should never add up, which is a very good thing. Now, if we didn’t, if we made repeated rips in the same area of space, enough lost energy would collect in that area that one day one of those rips would fail to close on its own.”

The Old Man seemed to move into an almost dreamlike state.
“Not close.”

“That’s right. Just keep on opening until...”

“Until the whole universe was absorbed.”

“Well...yes.” Jerry was shocked. Could the Old Man have seen this coming? He knew the Old Man had an advanced level of understanding of the physics involved. Was Jerry wasting his time?

“But as I’m sure you know,” the Old Man came back with, “each dump *is* distinct, and there are enough distinct areas of space within our reach that it would take millions of years for us to run out of new dumping grounds.”

“Agreed.” There was something the Old Man wasn’t telling him. Something critical. Could he really be hiding something this dangerous?

“So why am I still talking to you, Dixon?”

“It’s Jerry, Dad, Jerry. J-E-double-R-Y, Jerry. And you know why you’re still talking to me.”

“I do not.” The Old Man had hardened and was ready to end the interview.

It was at that time Jerry that said the one thing that could have grabbed the Old Man’s interest, the only thing that would keep him from being summarily sent back to his lab without any new information. “What’s going on in sector 47b?”

The Old Man sat up and looked Jerry dead in the eye. Then he slipped away into a dream world and molted the chitinous shell he had grown during the meeting. He leaned back again in his chair looking at his half-smoked cigar, stared at the smoke as it rose toward the ceiling, and closed his eyes.

The Old Man looked like he had given up. Like he had been running from something so hard and for so long that he finally just gave in and let it catch him. He had held onto secrets, terrible

secrets, for so long he was not sure that he could ever share them, but he was running out of the strength he needed to hold them in. Even still, he likely would have held onto them forever had something terrifying and wonderful not intervened.

A change had happened. A terrifying and wonderful change. It was as if a presence had flown through his circuits and forced those secrets to the surface. The Old Man had never felt anything like it before, and was powerless against it.

Jerry got scared. He thought the Old Man was about to collapse on him, or explode, or something equally terrible. He was not sure he wanted to be in the room when it happened. Then, quietly, unexpectedly, the Old Man appeared to be at peace. He sat down, as if whatever demon had possessed him had gone, leaving him only with an inner calm.

“Sit down, Jerry. I have a story to tell you.”

Jerry sat on the floor.

We now move into a sort of flashback within a flashback in the form of the Old Man’s story. Confusing, yes, but unfortunately necessary. The Old Man will now share with us a brief history of his personal universe and how it came to be. It is a bit out of character for him to open up like this, but as we shall find out further on, he is not always fully in control of himself. It is also surprisingly convenient for getting out some backstory necessary for the latter part of the story. Once complete, we will make the long climb back to the present (or in this case the future), where we may have no small difficulty re-acclimating ourselves not only to time and place, but to the story itself, which we will have no doubt lost track of.

Nevertheless, lost in the flashback desert we are, and there we shall stay for just a bit longer.

The Old Man took a deep breath. “Ball never told you about her mother.”

“Mother? I thought Ball was a tech baby.”

“Not quite.”

Jerry nodded, as if to say, “go on...”

And we digress. Apparently, a tech baby is a sort of test tube baby thing that seldom involves actual parents for more than a little DNA. We, of course, exploit this opportunity to digress into a philosophical discussion, this time of natural babies, and the scary future of clones and robots. We imagine a world where babies are made and raised in factories, and consider the cultural ramifications of such a world. We trudge through a fairly didactic essay glorifying the natural over the artificial, while any semblance of story has long since deserted us. Lost in this morass of philosophy, we seek our way out, and at last move ahead with the knowledge that, according to the conventions of this world, Ball was not quite a tech baby.

Jerry felt a nausea in the pit of his stomach. Something was very wrong with the Old Man, and by doing nothing, he felt as if he was exploiting him. The Old Man, in contrast, had never felt better in his life. He was suffused with something close akin to nostalgia, or perhaps even love, and was so unused to these feelings that he didn't quite know what to do with them. They were a strange pair, the two of them. The Old Man was so consumed with these strange new feelings that he was oblivious to their appearance. He relaxed, smiled, glowed. Poor Jerry, on the other hand, felt like he was abdicating some higher responsibility by failing to call attention to them. He shrunk, cowered, winced.

The Old Man's path unfettered, he continued.

“Ballerina Justice was a scientist, like her daughter. Beautiful, too. Sometimes I can’t even bear to look at that little girl for all the painful memories she brings up, just with her smile. I know you wouldn’t think of it to look at me now, but there was a time...oh, yes, there was a time when I was...well...human, with all of the human failings. And I was in love with Ballerina Justice.

“This was well over a seventy years ago, before the wars, and I was still...whole. I was working as a lieutenant on a medical ship out of Cassius Prime, and Ballerina was working on her thesis. It was a great time for us, seeing the galaxy, meeting new races, and saving lives into the bargain. And the best part?” Here the Old Man winked. He actually winked. “We had a cabin to ourselves.”

Jerry was soaking it in, but all the time thinking he was about to get taken, get slammed. This attitude was completely out of character for the Old Man to the point where Jerry suspected some of his circuits had gone awry, maybe even insane. Any minute, Jerry was sure, the Old Man would turn on him and attack. It was as if he was laying a trap, lulling Jerry into a false sense of security so that when he did pounce, it was at the least expected moment. Jerry knew he would be a fool to let his guard down, but yet...yet...it just wasn’t the Old Man’s style to lay a trap. It was too sneaky. The Old Man was a lot of things, but sneaky wasn’t one of them. Whatever the reason, the Old Man was telling the truth, and it scared the hell out of Jerry. He knew he would pay for it soon enough.

“She was working on a theory of multiple universes and how to bridge the gap between them. She was obsessed. I know that now. But it made her happy, and what made her happy, made me happy. Three years I served on that ship, and I tell you they were the happiest years of my life.”

He got up and walked to the window, unshaded a small area with his finger, just enough to peek into the afternoon light outside. “Happiest years of my life.” He turned back to Jerry, dragged

from what was left of his cigar, and put it out on his desk. “It’s funny, but...I almost feel her presence again. As if she were listening to me right now, as if...” He stared off into space for a few moments, lost in thought.

“After I got my own ship, things started to deteriorate a bit. I got busier than I wanted to be, and I never seemed to have enough time for Ballerina. It killed me, but I told myself I was working for her. For us. I felt sure we would soon build a family, and I wanted to be able to support us.”

Jerry watched the Old Man sink further and further into memory, as if it were consuming him, taking him over. He began to feel that perhaps the Old Man did not really want to open up to him like this at all. That, like a drunk man telling tales out of school, he would soon come to and regret his openness. If that were true, if the Old Man felt Jerry had taken advantage of him in a weakened state, Jerry would be lucky if he lived to regret it. Yet, he couldn’t stop himself from listening.

“Ballerina finished her thesis and started to do experimental work on her own. She built and collected all kinds of stuff, a phase inverter, a neutrino gun, even a gravimetric conversion tool, and started messing around with them. She would spend days on end in the ship’s lab, not even coming up for meals. I should have been worried about her, should have seen what was coming, but I was so preoccupied with my own work that I hardly even noticed.

“Then, one day, she came to me and told me she had found it – the secret to the universes. At that time my science background was pretty minimal, just what I had learned in Basic, and I could not really talk on her level. But as I said, I was feeling pretty guilty about not spending enough time with her, so I sat down with her and let her teach me all about it. I have to say I did not really understand much at the time, but when she got around to asking me to take my ship out to the edge of the system so she could run some

experiments, I thought, finally, finally a way to make up for letting my work come between us. I even thought it might serve as a short vacation. A second honeymoon. Just the two of us, alone in space. If only I'd known how dangerous it would be..."

The Old Man went back to the window and gazed at the traffic outside. Jerry held his breath. Silence hung in the air. Jerry knew the Old Man was deep into his reverie, and he didn't dare disturb it. He knew that when the reverie broke he would be in for a rude awakening, but now that he was so far into it, he was anxious to hear as much of the story as he could before all hell broke loose.

"Anyway, I did not know. I could not know. I was just not smart enough." He turned back to Jerry and continued. "So, we piled all of her equipment into my ship and headed out to the edge of the system. In those days it was a bit of a trek, and it took us almost half a day. While we flew, she explained again what she was trying to do. She believed she had discovered how to create what she called 'an eye' from our universe to another. She intended to create one, then fly up close in one of the pods and take some readings. I was to stay back in the ship in case anything went wrong, and pull her back in if necessary.

"When we arrived, the plan seemed to work perfectly. We checked and calibrated her instruments, I watched her fly the pod a short distance from our ship, that...that crazy blue light appeared, and...and suddenly I was looking at my first rip. Ballerina's Eye. I'm used to it now. In fact, I would say that these days I barely notice it. But at the time? At the time I thought it was the most wonderful thing I had ever seen."

He smiled at Jerry, which would have been touching if it hadn't been so out of character. As it was, it came off more creepy than sincere, and made Jerry think once again that maybe the Old Man had gone insane.

“Have you ever seen one, Jerry?” the Old Man asked. It seemed like an ordinary question, but to Jerry, it was a large red flashing sign shouting, Warning! Warning! Danger Ahead! It was in fact the first time the Old Man had called him by his name. Something was definitely wrong.

“No. Not in person,” was all Jerry could say as he gauged the Old Man suspiciously.

“I’ve come to hate that color,” the Old Man said after a little more thought.

“About an hour later, I saw the pod start to move away from me. I called Ballerina on the radio, and she said she was going in for a closer look. I told her she was too close already, but she had become convinced that she could cross the threshold and explore the universe on the other side. She refused to listen.”

Jerry looked up knowingly at the Old Man. “But surely she must have known...”

“Nobody knew anything back then. This was the first one. The *virgin*, as you call it. It hadn’t even closed yet. Still, I was suspicious. I told her it was crazy, begged her to come back, but there was no stopping her. No. That’s a lie. I could have stopped her.

“I had the power, and I had the tools. I just didn’t have the confidence that I was right. I did not understand the science, Jerry, and I trusted her to do the right thing. And I think I knew, deep down, that if I pulled her out before she was ready, she would never forgive me.

“So, she went in.” The Old Man said, as if concluding the story.

“And?”

“And nothing. She exploded and the rip closed. The same thing that always happens. It just so happened it was the first time.” The Old Man went back to his desk and lit another cigar.

But he wasn’t done. Not yet.

“Like I said, that was before the wars. But not long before. Soon enough I found myself impressed into the Planetary Space Force, captain of another medical ship, this time on the front lines. I fought three wars in 22 years. I thought it would help me to forget. But even 22 years later, Ballerina Justice still occupied my thoughts.

“After the massacre at New Tulsa, they found me, barely alive, buried under a pile of basalt, suffocating to death. A few more minutes and I would have been dead. I remember wondering if I would finally see my beloved Ballerina again, or if the line that divided our universe and the next would divide she and I for eternity.

“The robots kept me alive so they could torture me, and torture me they did. I will not make excuses for what I did next. I was weak. I know that now. But I say it is a rare man that would not have broken after what they put me through. When I look back, I think the only reason no one else betrayed the human race is that no one else had anything to betray the human race with. No one had knowledge the robots did not have already. No one except myself.

“They tortured me for what felt like weeks. Physical and mental tortures you cannot possibly imagine. And the drugs. The drugs.” He stared out the window again, lost in thought. Jerry waited through the silence for the rest of the story.

“And yet...and yet, after all I had been through, after all I had seen, I could still think only of Ballerina. And through the pain, through the fog, I hatched a plan. I told my captors I knew of something no one else in the universe knew. I thought, if they believed me, they would either make an experiment of me, and I would go the way she had, and we would finally be together again in that other world, or they would see the value in my information and protect me from further harm. Either way, I knew anything

would be better than the living hell they were putting me through. I do not say I am proud of what I did, but I do say it was with purpose.

“I allowed the thoughts that had been festering in my mind to take focus. I became angry and bitter. Jealous. The universe next door had stolen my wife. I knew I could never get her back, but I would be revenged. I would fill that world with refuse. With dirt and muck and excrement. With rotting vegetables and molding meat. With flies and maggots and unspeakable filth. Soon my thoughts of revenge overshadowed my desire to reunite with my love and became all consuming. The robots, as you know, can recognize anger and hate far more easily than love and kindness. Their ears pricked up at my thoughts.

“They saw this image in my mind, and for their own, far more sinister purposes, made my revenge dream come true. I got what I wanted, and they got...well...they got something in return. When they finally developed the unstoppable, the war was over within a week. Meanwhile, I was put in charge of this project as some sort of perverse reward for my treachery, and I began my new life, wading through filth, preparing vengeance on my true enemy.

“And once a year, on the anniversary of her disappearance, I collected a mother-load of the most disgusting, putrid, unbearable rot I could find, and spit it into the eye of the beast that ate my wife.”

“The eye?”

“The very spot where she had been taken from me all those years ago.”

“Sector 47b.”

“Yes, Jerry. 47b.”

Jerry had been listening intently, but was only just beginning to realize the implications of the history. The Old Man, driven mad by guilt, pushed over the edge by torture, was revenging

himself on the entire universe. And he actually had a chance of succeeding. The only problem was that, in order to win, he needed to destroy every man, woman, and child in the universe, along with everything else. The Old Man had gone insane after all.

Yet there was something else. Something Jerry still couldn't wrap his head around.

"And Ball? How was it that you were able to build her from a woman who disappeared more than 70 years ago?"

There was a thoughtful silence here while Jerry waited the Old Man out. Finally, he said, "Let's just say the robots have been good to me."

And that was going to have to be enough for Jerry.

Our story within a story is now at an end, and although the characters in our flashback never left this scene of the past, the reader may well have. For those of us less adept and jumping back and forth through time, we remember that Jerry had apparently discovered a certain area of space which appeared to be having some difficulty holding itself together – an area both Jerry and the Old Man have identified as sector 47b.

Then, without warning, the Old Man changed. He crumpled up and tensed every muscle and circuit in his body. "No!" he screamed. "Don't leave me!" And he fell to the floor and pounded his fists. "Please!"

Jerry sat stock still. He knew he should go for help, knew that would be the right thing to do, the responsible thing, but he was completely paralyzed by the bizarre situation. He had expected the Old Man to come out of the trance sooner or later, and while he had hoped it would be later, he was prepared for some sort of backlash. What he saw, however, was totally beyond anything he had imagined. He watched the Old Man squirm and tried to think

through his options. The situation was so unusual and unexpected, however, he didn't know where to start. Tentatively he asked, "Are you alright?"

The Old Man rose up and smashed his head against the desk. Over and over. He stared at the desk and screamed, "Come back!" He smashed his head again, and created a crater, slowly increasing in depth with each blow.

Whatever miracle had pushed aside the Old Man's usual vitriol in favor of thoughtful, one might even say insightful, reminiscences had now transformed him into an extreme version of his usual more choleric self. Jerry's worst fear of the Old Man regretting a night of drunken weakness was realized, and, as expected, Jerry would now pay the price. The Old Man was crushing his artificial face against the desk, viscous substances flowing from the damage and bloody wires coming exposed as his artificial skin tore away from his face. Then, after one particularly intense smash erased the separation between the desktop and the drawer below, he stopped. He laid with his face on the desk in a puddle of his natural and artificial juices intermingling on the desk.

The fit subsiding, he raised his head and stared at Jerry. The semblance of human that had bubbled to the surface and finally exploded in self-destruction was now pushed back into his inner depths, leaving only the hard shell of the half-man, half-machine Jerry had come to know so well. The miracle was over, and there would be hell to pay.

He stared long and hard at Jerry, his anger growing in direct proportion to Jerry's fear.

"And after all I've been through, all I've sacrificed, you walk in here and try to shut me down because of a theory? You? The deadbeat? The filthy human who stole my daughter? No. I won't have it. It's over. Get out." He leaned over his desk and hit the vid-com. "Miss Dixon, will you get me a towel?"

Jerry put on his game face and pushed his fear away. With a shell of his own firmly in place, he said, “It doesn’t matter. This business is crumbling down around you. I have no interest in sharing your secrets, but if you don’t stop this obsession with revenging yourself upon the universe, you’ll destroy everything. Literally everything. I can’t let you do that.”

The Old Man wiped off his face. “You’re playing hardball with me?” He laughed. This time, though, it wasn’t joy that he felt, but power. He had been wanting to do this from the day Ball had introduced them, but hadn’t for her sake. Today, at last, he would have his way. “Alright. Fine. Hardball it is. As of this moment I am calling in your debts. I would estimate you have ten hours before the debt police are knocking at your door, and you find yourself on a one way trip to the colonies. Let’s see what she thinks of you when you’re unemployed, destitute, and halfway across the galaxy. Think she’ll stick by you then?”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I just did.”

“You’re a monster.”

“Now there’s an insult I can live with, Dixon.” The Old Man leaned forward and engaged his vid-com. “Miss Dixon, get the rest of the science team down here.”

“Right away, sir.”

A look of panic came across Jerry’s face as he began to realize just what the Old Man was capable of. He knew he had been risking his own skin by coming down here, and figured he had some amount of protection from his family status. But his team. “What...do you want my team here for?”

“Dixon, you have shot your mouth off at me for the last time. I let my girl marry you because it made her happy. I let you work here because it made her happy. But you’ve pushed me to my limits, and there’s only so far I’m willing to go for her. What do I want

your team here for? Listen. I am about to give them a chance to save themselves from you. They will take it, mark my words, and they will disavow you and your theories. You are alone, Dixon, and there is no one left to help you.”

“You may understand the ‘bots, Dad, but you’ve completely lost touch with men.”

“We’ll see, Dixon. We’ll see.”

At that moment, the Old Man’s secretary announced over the vid-com, “Doctors Baker and Elbert to see you, sir.”

The Old Man told her to send them in, and greeted them as they crossed the threshold into his office. “Ah, Dixons, please come in.”

They looked uncomfortably at Jerry, and then at each other. The Old Man, either out of shrewdness, or because he was actually oblivious to such subtle human behaviors, ignored this, and said, “It appears you have a rogue element among you. This human claims that our scientifically based work of goodwill is causing irreparable harm to the galaxy. He claims, in fact, that we hold in our humble hands the power to destroy the universe, and are doing so with every step.”

The Old Man allowed the tone to sink in. “As I cannot tolerate rogue elements in my organization, this human has been relieved of his responsibilities and been left to fend off his debt collectors without his former protection. Do either of you have anything to say?”

Baker had always been a stand-up guy. It didn’t matter that he questioned parts of Jerry’s theory, or that he thought Jerry was too rash in coming down here. He was a stand-up guy, and that’s all there was to it.

“You can fire whom you want,” he challenged, “you can deny what you want, but you cannot change the facts. Our work is destroying the tentative hold we have on the wall between our

universe and the next, and that wall will crumble if we don't stop ripping."

The Old Man nodded. "I see." He turned to Elbert. "Dixon, do you agree?"

Although Elbert was not particularly a stand-up guy, he did have a loyalty for Jerry some would call extreme. Jerry had been the first person that had really taken him under his wing and trusted him. Elbert had never been shy in his appreciation. It was, then, a surprise to everyone when he said,

"No sir, I do not."

Jerry and Baker turned to stare at Elbert, who was speaking to his feet. "I believe there are discrepancies in the expressions which, because of this, cannot fully support the theory. I have said this to both of them, but they are convinced that my concerns are insignificant. They may be right. Nevertheless, the discrepancies are there, significant or not, and I cannot stand behind their assertions."

Jerry and Baker were floored. Elbert had spoken up for the first time in his life, and in one stroke, given both of them a life sentence. The Old Man, of course, was pleased.

"Well spoken, Dixon. You are instructed to form a new team without these men. I am sure our department of science will thrive under your new leadership. Dixons, you are dismissed."

And with that, Jerry's and Baker's lives changed forever.

What exactly happened to the Old Man to make him shed his villainous shell and tell this terrifically useful backstory is not yet clear. Whether a mechanical malfunction, however, or something less tangible, something caused him to change, and it is our great hope that we may discover this secret before the bitter end. Regardless, we are grateful for the light it has shed both on our story so far and that yet to come.

Our flashback concluded, we find ourselves armed with the information we need to better understand the story unfolding before us:

- 1. Jerry's wife, Ball, was born artificially.*
- 2. The Old Man, alive for well over 100 years, is, in ways we don't completely understand, Ball's father.*
- 3. Ballerina Justice, dead for well over 70 years, was the Old Man's wife, and in ways we don't completely understand, Ball's mother.*
- 4. The Old Man helped the robots win their war with humans.*
- 5. The Old Man's obsession with the death of Ball's mother is destroying the universe.*
- 6. Jerry lost everything by trying to stop him.*
- 7. Baker lost everything by being a stand-up guy.*
- 8. Elbert didn't.*

And with these under our belt, we are nearly ready to return to the story's present. Due to the distracting nature of flashbacks, however, we have, although better versed in the back-story, undoubtedly lost track not only of where we were, but why we moved into the flashback to begin with.

In this case, Jerry and Baker were up unusually early in the morning, discussing some new data that Jerry received in the middle of

the night from his old colleague, Elbert, whom we may now refer to as the traitor. In light of this new data, Jerry and Baker are questioning whether Jerry's theory had been wrong all along, and whether, perhaps, the traitor had been right. With the aid of the flashback, we now know what they were talking about, and are ready to resume the conversation.

“Jerry, do you still have your notes with the original functions?”

“I have them right here in my hand. I've been staring at them for the last hour.”

“Let me have a look.”

Jerry handed a pile of dog-eared papers covered in notes to Baker. The papers were covered on both sides, with notes in various colors filling in every available space. He had been working on them for two hours already this morning, and had significantly added to the already crowded margins. “Maybe you'll see something I don't, Baker. When I look at it, it still adds up. I just can't see where it could be wrong.”

Baker took a few moments to study Jerry's notes. They had always been a bit messy for Baker's taste, but there was no denying his genius. Jerry had a way of jumping from one idea to the next almost intuitively, sure that he could fill in the gaps later with scientific rigor, and it always took Baker a few moments to make the same leaps without the missing clues. As he acclimated himself, his mind went back to the days when they had last worked on the problem, leading him to go after the proverbial elephant in the room.

“What if Elbert was right, Jerry? What if the noise in the system was significant enough to diminish the effects of the paradox?”

The question had never been far from either of their minds for over a decade. Elbert had said that the minuscule amounts of energy loss, spread throughout the system, would ultimately have a significant impact. Jerry and Baker had both dismissed them as pedantic thoughts from a small-minded man – a stickler for detail that could not see the forest for the trees.

“It doesn’t matter. I still say it can’t make a difference. There’s no way the kind of noise the good Dr. Elbert was so obsessed with could possibly have such an impact on a system that large. Stare at it all you want. Nothing has changed.”

“Except the data.”

“Yes, well, except the data.” Jerry was exhausted. “How’s your coffee?”

“Could use a warm-up,” Baker said, as he handed Jerry his cup.

Jerry got up and went to the kitchen, really no more than a nook on the other side of the room. He typed in a few numbers, and a cup of coffee, made specifically to Baker’s taste, appeared. This was true not because the kitchen somehow intuited Baker’s desires, but because Baker had been coming around enough over the last 12 years that Jerry had finally gotten around to programming Baker’s coffee.

Moments later, he returned with the cup.

“Jerry, I agree with you that random noise would not result in the sort of time shifts we are seeing in the data, but what if the time shifts themselves are the ...” Baker took a sip of coffee and immediately spit it out, leaving new wall stains nearly halfway across the room. “What the hell is this? It tastes like cold carbon water.”

Jerry went back to the kitchen. “Kitchen’s on the fritz, and I haven’t had the cash for a repair-bot. I thought I could fix it myself, but...let me try again.” He tried a few buttons and got another cup.

This time he tasted it himself. “Well, it’s not your mix, but it’s not bad for Galactic Standard.” He handed the coffee to Baker.

Baker took a tentative sip. “Better. Thanks.”

Jerry prompted him to pick back up. “Now what were you saying about the time shifts themselves being the problem?”

“I mean your omega function assumes that the passage of time is constant. There is no room in the expression for that not to be true. But if it is not true...”

“Baker, the expression itself proves that time is constant.”

“Yes...” Baker got quiet and considered. Then, slowly, “Jerry, do you remember the story Professor Kingston told us about the dog in the decompression chamber?”

Analogy is a common and useful tool in science fiction, if a bit overused. Recall the ripple analogy earlier – the sort a fourth grade science teacher would use to explain waves to little pre-scientists. It is oversimplified, but as such can be surprisingly useful. It can help those of us who may not be blessed with a scientific background feel a little more involved in the puzzle solving part of the story. And as we saw before, science fiction without puzzles is not really science fiction worth speaking of.

All analogies are not equal, however, and the one we are about to explore is not only confusing, it is downright bizarre. The chance that we will come away with a better understanding of the problem as a result is about as close to nil as one could hope to get and still return intact. In fact, far more likely is the chance that we will give up on the story altogether, which might, after all, be for the best.

We will leave the analogy in because it is just too tasty to leave alone, but as an aid, will say simply that the analogy is intended to illuminate the fluid nature of time.

“Dog in a decompression chamber? Remind me.”

“It seems there’s this dog that has been scuba diving, and has risen to the surface too fast, resulting in a sort of dog version of the bends. His keeper takes him to a decompression chamber for the cure, but the dog only gets worse. The doctors try everything. They change the pressure, the rate of change, the duration of the treatments, but nothing helps. The dog continues to suffer, keeps whimpering all the time and eventually can barely walk. The doctors are about to give up hope when one of them assumes the dog is about to die. Out of compassion, the doctor gives him a piece of steak to chew on while they continue the treatments. To the doctors’ collective surprise, the treatments begin to work, and soon enough the dog is cured.”

Baker waited for Jerry’s moment of epiphany.

The moment did not come.

Jerry, as deadpan as he could manage said, “No, Baker, I don’t remember that story.”

Baker dismissed Jerry’s ignorance with a wave of his hand. “Jerry, we can’t discard the notion that time may be fluid.”

“I can.”

“I think your ex-wife would disagree.”

This was a low blow on Baker’s part, and Jerry, perhaps because he had not slept, or had lost confidence in his brain, or more likely just could not stand to let her get the last word, lost control of himself.

“Aw, leave Ball out of this,” Jerry shouted. He swept his hands across the table, and sent all the notes, a full ashtray, and Baker’s coffee flying across the room. Jerry thought, *“Man, that Baker could be frustrating. One minute you’re talking about a physics problem, and the next it’s all about how you treated your wife like crap and drove her away. How somehow she was always right and you were always wrong. How...”*

He forced his brain to suppress his emotions and get back into the game. He took a deep breath and told himself this wasn't about Ball. Not this time. In fact, it was almost never about Ball with Baker, yet somehow Jerry always managed to bring it around to her in his mind. In any case, he knew Baker was right. Ball *would* disagree. He took a deep breath and bent over to pick up his mess.

From the floor, crawling on his hands and knees and gathering back up his notes, Jerry said, "Yes, Baker. Ball would disagree. But she belongs to the Time People. When she moves through time, which I still insist is constant, it appears fluid to her. She can't distance herself from the experience, and uses that personal experience to define her world. She's like a raccoon that believes there is no day because it is only ever awake at night."

"I'm sorry, Jerry. I should not have brought her into this." He bent over to help Jerry pick up the rest of the notes. The ashtray and spilled coffee they left alone. As they picked up, Baker continued. "But take a step back for a moment. Look at the data. Allow for the possibility that she is right. Just as a thought experiment." Baker took a sip of coffee and tried to give some patience to Jerry with his presence. "What would it mean to your omega function?"

Jerry, standing up, got angry again, and stared rudely at Baker. He tore the papers out of Baker's hand, and flipped through them testily. Once he found what he was looking for, he turned his back to Baker. He moved back to the table, where a few remaining notes littered the surface along with a math machine to help with the basic calculations. He picked up a pencil, made a few more scribbles, and punched in a few numbers on the machine. While he worked, he visibly appeared to move from anger to the excitement he always felt when working on a problem. As with Baker, it was the one drug that overwhelmed everything else.

"I don't believe it."

Baker gave a small laugh, and Jerry looked at him incredulously.

“Sorry, Jerry. But I knew you would never buy it unless you worked it out on your own.”

“You knew?”

“That the omega function was inverted? Yes, Jerry. I knew”

“How long have you known?”

“Since the day we left RTI.”

Jerry stared at Baker in shock. “And you never told me?”

“What was there to tell, Jerry? That there was a minor error in six pages of formulas? It did not make a difference, or at least I did not think it could at the time. It would have been like telling Thomas Paine there was a typo in *Common Sense*. Your theory was sound, and a work of genius, by the way. Inverting that function was not going to change that. Besides, I always had the shadow of a doubt that Elbert was right about the minor fluctuations, and you can bet I sure did not want to bring that up again. You cannot possibly believe this changes anything?”

Jerry just stared at the papers in front of him. His whole world was changing before his eyes, and he took the time he needed to absorb it. He was about to leap, and needed to study his path long enough to make sure he was not heading over a cliff.

“Baker,” Jerry said at last, in a voice calm and quiet, “It does change everything. The old theory said that by continuing to disturb the same area of space, eventually we would create a rip that continues to open rather than closing upon itself. That much is still true.”

“So, what has changed?”

“You remember we thought the other-verse operated by different physical laws than our own. We thought that because of this, it converted physical objects into new ones conforming to

those laws, and in the process created that burst of energy strong enough to close the rip.”

“Is that not still true?”

“No, I don’t think so. I think that the physical laws of the other-verse are not so different from our own with one exception. Time. It’s not the objects we send through the rips that cause the energy bursts, Baker. It’s the contact between the two time paradigms that are incompatible.”

Baker stared at him in a rare expression of blank stupidity. “Well, now I am out of my league.”

“It doesn’t matter. Nothing’s changed. The cause is a little different than we thought, but the results are the same. If that hole keeps growing, our universe cannot possibly survive. We’ve got to stop him.”

Baker stepped forward and put his hands on the table. He leaned forward and looked Jerry dead in the eye. “What do you plan to do, walk into the Old Man’s office and show him your theory?”

Over drinks, these would have been fighting words. But Jerry wasn’t about to take the bait.

“No. I’m going to do what I should have done in the first place.”

Baker looked at him, waiting for him to continue.

“I’m going to see Ball.”

“Ball? See Ball? What do you mean?”

“I mean she’s the only one who can stop the Old Man, but she’ll never do it unless she experiences the anomaly for herself. Once she feels it, I won’t need to convince her to talk to the Old Man. She’ll do it on her own. It’s the only way.”

Baker looked unconvinced. “Well,” he said at last, “at least we’ll finally get off this rock.”

And our adventure gets off to a slow, if not altogether sluggish start. We do, of course, love adventure. We love one-dimensional characters, stuck either in a staid and settled life, or as in the case of our hero, at the end of his rope, up to his neck in poverty and drink, a character that has no expectation of adventure, but nevertheless manages to find it. Like the puzzle, adventure is one of our core building blocks, without which the often thinly disguised diatribes on scientific and world morality become just that, and rot on the shelves of even those with the least discriminating taste, if they ever make it to the shelves at all.

Our obligatory adventure is now about to begin. Our hero will spend the next part of the story on the run from a bunch of robot police things, meet new characters, and travel the galaxy while surviving one near miss after another. It is not an adventure our hero craves. It is, however, one he is destined for, and like all great heroes, he will look it bravely in the face, come what may.

But before we can embark on this new chapter in our hero's life, we must take another short interlude. We must, for better or ill, become a little better acquainted with his former love who is about to become the focal point of his journey. Back we go then to the campus of Time Academy, where Ball and her colleagues are training the next generation of Time People and attempting to hone their natural abilities into something they can use quite literally to change the world.

Interlude:

In the Teacher's Lounge

Etched above the main gate at Time Academy was the motto of that incomparable institution: *Tantum Nunc*, which translates roughly to: *Only the Present*. It was a tribute to the founding tenet of the school, the idea that only when you accept that there is no such thing as past or future, can you begin to understand the nature of time. Students entered the Academy at age five depending on the results of the Glowac test, and remained there until the final exam in their 20th year. They were a close-knit group with a special bond. They also tended to be a mischievous lot.

Today, the 9th graders had quite literally turned their classroom upside down. This was not a particularly difficult task requiring high levels of technical skill or even ingenuity. One simply needed the will to do so, and such a will was something in which this class had in spades. They had adjusted the gravity of the classroom to focus on the ceiling rather than the floor, so that when viewed from outside, everything but the doors and windows appeared to be upside down. Upon entering the classroom, the sucker would fall to what was formerly the ceiling, and slowly become acclimated to his new position as the pain from the fall subsided. Now the sucker would look around, and it would be the windows and doors that appeared to be upside down, including the views of the outside world beyond.

After Ball entered the classroom and fell up onto poor Jenny McCarthy's desk (as well as poor Jenny McCarthy), she cancelled class, sent the three prime suspects to the Dean's office, and tasked

the rest of the students with resetting the gravimetric determinator. Enraged and exasperated, she limped across campus to the admin building. Soon enough, she sat, worn out, in the teacher's lounge, across the table from her best friend, Amanda Kingsley.

Amanda was thirty-something, like Ball, and carried the aura, there was no other word for it, of an overgrown bohemian. She wore a colorful and loose fitting dress that hid her less than athletic figure, kept her hair long with a variety of decorations, and provided an ongoing soundtrack of jingles and jangles everywhere she went with the masses of jewelry that finished her look. She was decidedly "back to the earth."

"Manny, I'm not sure how much longer I can take this."

"Don't let them get to you, Ball. That's just what they're trying to do."

"Manny, they literally turned the classroom upside-down."

"A prank."

"How can you be so nonchalant about it?"

"Just think about how much work they put into it. Not only did they reprogram the gravity whatevers, which I imagine is quite challenging..."

"Not as hard as you think."

"Well, fair, but they did a lot more than that, didn't they? I mean that place must have been a complete mess. Upside down desks and paper and trash all over the floor."

"Ceiling."

"Fair, ceiling. But you see my point. To actually re-hang all of your posters. I mean, that actually took some work."

"Your point?"

"My point is that at least they're not lazy. You just need to find a way to channel all that energy."

Ball gave her the look. The look that said, *seriously? This is your advice? They walk all over me and I should embrace it?* with

a little, *well, I'd actually have to want to teach to do that now wouldn't I?* mixed in. Amanda knew her so well that the words were not necessary.

"You can't let it get to you. Therein lies the road to ruin."

"It's just...I've been here for 12 years, Manny. 12 years. And I feel like all of my energy has gone into managing chaos, with nothing left over for my work."

Amanda picked up Ball's mostly empty cup of tea and went to the counter to make a new cup. "You're just in a slump. You'll come out of it."

"Manny, I haven't had an original idea in six years. At the end of the school day, what little energy the rugrats haven't stolen from me goes into those ridiculous abstracts. When I finally got tenure I thought, 'This is it. Now I am really going to get back to work. Do some real science. Discover something.' But it's everything I can do just to keep up with what the rest of the scientific community is doing. This place stole my youth, Manny, and now I'm just...treading water."

"Seriously, Ball, it's just a slump. Didn't you publish that thing about the inverted wave forms whatyamacallits just a few weeks ago?"

"That tripe? There wasn't an original idea in the whole piece. I only wrote it to satisfy my teaching requirements."

Amanda was in the midst of making tea *the old fashioned way*. Distracted, she bumped the hot teapot and shouted. "Ow!"

This broke the tension a bit for Ball, and she laughed at her friend. She never could understand why Amanda disdained so many modern conveniences, although she saw this more as an endearing personality quirk than anything worth taking too seriously. She had been that way ever since she was a child, and Ball had been ribbing her about it almost as long. "Manny, why don't you just make it in the kitchen?"

“Because, best friend, the kitchen is just a tool of the Consortium to make us all the same. Did you know the word kitchen used to describe a whole room where people prepared their own food by hand? Now it’s nothing more than a sophisticated vending machine. If we don’t fight back in these little ways, they win and we lose. Take for example, the vid-wall in your apartment...

And we are off into what will soon become a diatribe on the effects of mechanization and automation on society. We learn about the dangers of ease, and how modern machinery will change us into a fat, lazy, and stagnant culture. We delve, in detail, into the causes of the robot wars, and why we ultimately lost them. We learn that humans were responsible for their own downfall by creating machines to do all of their work for them. It is they who do the work, we are asked to believe, that rule the world. By delegating everything, we became useless, and once useless, expendable.

Any discussion of why, throughout human history, those that have done most of the work have tended to have no power at all, and were instead oppressed by managers and aristocrats who delegated all the real work to the lower classes, is conspicuously absent. Nevertheless, like Amanda’s aversion to machines, the argument is endearing, if only as an example of the well-meaning naïveté of so many revolutionaries. Likewise, we find ourselves sympathetic to Amanda and her little protests against the stagnation of the human race, at which time tea is served.

“Ball, why don’t you take a vacation? You’ve certainly earned enough credits, and you’re obviously overworked.”

Ball inhaled the steam coming off the hot tea and took a cautious sip. She let some of her tension go and allowed herself a

smile. “For all the hard times I’ve given you, Manny, I have to admit, you make one great cup of tea.”

“It’s worth the time, Ball. And I enjoy making it, too. But you’re avoiding the subject at hand. Now about that vacation.” Amanda was not about to be put off.

“And what am I supposed to do with Whit?”

This is Ball’s 12 year-old son whom we will get to know by and by. He is the lasting result of Ball’s union with Jerry, and the existence of whom Jerry is currently unaware. Ball is a little overprotective of this fatherless child and rarely leaves him alone. As we will learn before the story is through, however, this child can well take care of himself.

“Send him to my place. I’d love to spend some time with him.”

“Into that 20th century monument to work you call a house?”

“That monument, as you call it, is a tribute to people who actually do things for themselves. You can’t deny that a little hard work would be good for him. I could teach him how to trim the bushes, or wash the floor.”

“A regular wicked stepmother.”

“And I can certainly teach him how to make tea better than that kitchen of yours. I *know* you’d like that. Besides, he loves it at my place, and you know it. I think kids instinctively like it when they accomplish something for themselves.”

“Like washing the floor?”

“Even washing the floor.” Amanda grabbed Ball’s hands from across the table and squeezed. “Ball, I know you are not worried about my watching Whit. You’re falling apart, deep in a slump, and you desperately need a vacation. Yet, for all that, you’re making excuses to avoid taking one. What’s really keeping you?”

Ball took another sip of tea, and spoke to her cup, “I don’t know, Manny. I think if I’m really honest with myself, I feel the same way you do about the world. Like I’m just a tool in a great machine, with no control over my own destiny. Yes, I’m exhausted. But I don’t think I would mind that if it wasn’t a result spending all my energy on other people. I don’t need a break so much as a chance to do something for myself.”

“Then do that.”

“I can’t.” She looked up at Amanda. “I have my job.”

“Your job will wait.”

“I have Whit.”

“He’s older than you think.”

Ball looked up from her cup and waited for the words to force themselves out. “The truth is, Manny,” she finally managed to say, “I don’t know how.”

Amanda took her hands again and gave a small laugh. A laugh of understanding and love.

“Send Whit to my place for a couple weeks and turn in your vacation credits. Jump to the continent and stay at the manor. My father’s lab is still fully functional, if a little outdated. You could mess around. Do some experiments in peace – without pressure. Maybe something will crop up. If you latch on to something, you could apply for a sabbatical, and I could bring Whit for visits.” Amanda leaned back in her chair, and this time gave a hearty laugh. “If not, at least you could get away from the rugrats for a couple weeks.”

“Silver Maples?”

“What’s wrong with Silver Maples? It’s quiet, beautiful, and most importantly, it’s far from the Academy.”

“But it’s so....big.” Ball looked up at Amanda and laughed. Amanda was immediately infected, and they had a good laugh together. Silver Maples, Amanda’s ancestral home, was in fact

frighteningly large. It was a mansion built for dozens of servants and, since the death of Amanda's parents, completely empty.

Just as our interlude is about to wrap up, however, we are treated to an extended history of the best friend's family history, and how they came to reside in a mansion too large for the eighteenth century, let alone the twenty-second. It turns out that her grandfather came into the property through less than forthright business dealings, for which her parents tried to make up by dedicating their lives and fortunes to good works. Having spent their fortune doing so, they left naught but the mansion itself at the time of their death in some sort of hover space ship thing crash. The daughter kept the giant house in a sort of sleep mode, and only revived it when convenient.

One person, alone in that monstrosity seemed comically out of proportion.

"I'll think about it," Ball at last conceded.

Before she could finish her tea, Ball was prodded by the bell to teach her next class. She headed out of the building, took a deep breath, and prayed the kids had only undone the damage, and not created more.

5. The Adventure

Our short interlude over, we now return to the mining colony, where our hero is about to embark on his adventure. Baker and Jerry are once again engaging in techno-babble, this time regarding their imminent escape and the tools they need to achieve it. Mostly they talk about a special wave something thingy that counteracts the radiation fence thing meant to keep the miners in their village. Technically, the human miners on this planet are free, but there is a sort of “for your own protection” quality to the planetary laws, the main purpose of which is to make sure the mines have an adequate workforce.

Jerry and Baker walk back to Baker’s hovel to get the wave thingy, and they are brainstorming about how to get off the planet, when Baker reveals his bad news.

“What do you mean, you’re not coming? What could possibly keep you here?”

“Jerry, I am too old for this. I would only hold you back. Besides, I am just not cut out for this sort of thing. I assure you I would give up at the first sign of trouble. You are far better off without me.

“I’m not leaving you alone in this hellhole.”

“That is exactly what you are going to do, old friend. You have a job to do, and I would only get in the way. I think you know that. Besides, you are going to need someone to stay behind and cover for you until you can disappear.”

“But Cal...”

“Forget it, Jerry. There is only one way this is going to work, and even that has a piss poor chance of succeeding. Trust me.”

Jerry stared back at Baker, heartbroken. He knew Baker was right, but was not sure he could face the challenge alone. And Baker. Alone on that rock. Maybe a fate worse than death. Not that it changed anything. Baker was right, and Jerry would have to trust him as always. He had never let him down before.

“If you follow your shadow for what feels like about three Earth days, you should be able to sight the space port. Stay away from the roads at all costs, and do not talk to anyone. I can hold off the tru-bots for two to three days, but after that, you will be on your own.”

It turns out that a tru-bot is a sort of robot policeman thing that makes sure the miners show up to work on time, again “for their own protection.” The name is shorthand and transparent, like all good robot names, in this case describing robots who work for the various consortia and track down their truant workers. These Truancy Enforcement Robots are armed, sure of purpose, and without emotion, if a little dim. They have one goal, and that is to get you to work at all costs, living if convenient, dead if more so. They are easily deceived, but never deterred. At least not for long. Once they have a target, they will continue to hunt it until they either succeed or are deactivated.

They are used here as metaphor for the blind obedience to authority we are expected to despise, and we talk at length both about following orders and the results of a world where no one thinks for oneself. The lack of respect for all of what we might call “Authority’s Soldiers” makes these robots almost comical in their behavior, although ultimately dangerous, perhaps for the same reason.

“But how can you hold off the tru-bots?”

“I have been saving a mixture in my freezer that can make me appear dangerously sick and contagious. It will look something like Van Dreel’s disease, but a little more exotic. I have no doubt I can convince them that if they come into contact with me, they will become carriers. To protect the rest of the crew, they will have to quarantine me, and once I convince them that you are infected too, they will quarantine you without even stepping through your door. That should be good for about two days. After that, there will be mandatory vid-checks, and I am not sure how to get around that. But who knows, maybe with two days at home I can come up with something.”

“If anyone can, Cal, it’s you.”

Although Jerry was the more intelligent of the two, Baker had a way with invention that Jerry could not touch. In their twelve years working for the mine consortium he had consistently improved their lives in hundreds of little ways, and he never seemed short of ideas for more. It was not just the little things like the temperature regulators and the gravity dampeners either. He also worked on the big ideas, like the weather grid he had nearly perfected and the transporter, which was promising, if not a little immature. The fact that the Old Man ever let him leave RTI showed not just how much he wanted to hurt Jerry, but also the sacrifices he was willing to make to do so.

They arrived at Baker’s hovel where Baker dug up the Wave Field Fluctuator he had been working on and gave it to Jerry. “You had better get going. You have less than an hour before work call, and will want to be through the fence by then.”

Jerry knew he was right. When the village emptied out after morning work call, the local rodents tended to gather near the fence, trying to get in. They looked like Texas armadillos, but about twice the size and with spiked heads. The miners knew them

as sand rats, their native name being practically unpronounceable. As a rule, they stayed away from humans, but they had a tendency to creep up on you if you were sleeping or unconscious, and bite at your ankles. The robots kept them from entering the villages because they carried a plethora of local diseases, all of which were detrimental to keeping the mines running on schedule. The radiation fence, however, was a double-edged sword, and while it kept the rodents out, it also caused them to mutate, which only made them bigger and more ferocious. As an added level of protection, the radiation levels were always ramped up while the village was empty, so getting through before the morning work call not only meant an easier job cutting through the fence's radiation field, but also fewer sand rats to wade through.

"I'm gonna miss you, friend," Jerry said, and they hugged as only old friends could. Then, after a look around, added, "but I'd be lying if I said I'll miss this rock."

Baker laughed and held back a sigh. Life out here in the outskirts was just not going to be same without Jerry. Although it would admittedly be a little quieter. "Safe travels old friend. Give my love to Ball."

With that, Jerry ran out the door to pack up whatever he could carry on his back. Ten minutes later, he was on his way, with the sun at his back.

TRAVEL LOG. DAY 1.

It's been a day. I woke up half drunk in the middle of the night and feel like I've been on the run ever since. I was packed and out the door a good 40 minutes before work call, but it took me nearly an hour to get to the fence, mostly from paranoia that the

tru-bots would spot me before Baker had finished his preparations. I've got to hand it to him, though. Even at peak radiation levels, the Wave Field Fluctuator worked perfectly, and I got through the fence completely unburned. Between my laser and a little good old fashioned screaming, I was able to scare the sand rats away, though I fear a couple may have gotten through before the fence closed back up..

The log has long been a solid staple in the space story. There is something about sea adventures that lies at the heart of them, and the log helps to tie them together. Often it is used to give useful background, perhaps a little wedged in exposition. In this case, it is an opportunity to keep the voice of our hero present in the long droughts between human companionships as he crosses the desert alone.

Of course, as with every other device, we are bound to overdo it, making us wish we had never started with the log to begin with. Nevertheless, we won't let that keep us from enjoying a few quiet moments with Jerry as he crosses the planet in search of his escape. When this new device becomes exhausted, we will, like Jerry and his desert, leave it behind for more fertile ground.

I am only just now realizing that in the 12 years I've been on this rock, I had never once seen what laid beyond the village. Getting a wider view now, for the first time, I'm

disappointed to learn I wasn't actually missing anything. This place is even more desolate than I imagined. I haven't seen so much as an insect out here on the sands since I left the rats behind, though they must be out here. I can't believe this scrub would not attract at least some animal life.

The heat today was nearly unbearable, and I had to stop three times to rest in the shade of a mesa. If it hadn't been for these occasional respites, I don't think I would have gotten this far. I've already been through four of my 16 hydration pills, and I'm thirsty all the time. This desert heat just takes it out of me in a way I never dreamed possible. Back in Chicago, I used to think the summers were unbearable, where the heat stuck to you like a wool sweater full of static, and a few mere steps outside were enough to drench you in sweat. But even those miserable summer heat waves were nothing like this. I feel like I've been walking through an oven, slow roasting until I'm ready to be pulled out, at which time I will be fully cooked, if a little dry.

If Baker was right, and I can do this leg in three Earth days, I should have enough hydration pills to make it through. If not...well, tomorrow, I'll see if I can make do with less.

No sign of any 'bots or vehicles. I'm far from the road, but still feel like I'm in plain sight most of the time. I've been trying to make extra distance, but after a full "day" of travel, I've stopped to sleep in the shade.

Unlike the hydration pills, these food tablets are amazing. I've only had one in the last 24 hours and, although I'm definitely tired, I'm not the least bit hungry.

I think I may be a little off course, but I've corrected as best I can. It's funny, I thought following my shadow would be the easiest thing in the world, but I find myself distracted, and the next thing I know, I'm off course. I can't imagine how you would do this on a planet without such incredibly long solar days. On the other hand, at least you would have the nights to cool yourself down.

Still no sign of the city, though I wouldn't expect to see it for at least another day.

TRAVEL LOG. DAY 2.

Dreamed of Ball and haven't been able to get her off my mind all day. I thought I had blocked out that terrible fight, the night I made her walk out for good, but I find that it's etched in my memory. Though I've done a pretty good job obscuring it from view, beneath it all, it is as clear and permanent as ever. I saw her face fresh in my mind, heard her voice screaming, felt the wet shards of pottery on my head...

And here we go again, moving into flashback, only to return to this log following the diversion. The transition is rough, because we flow into the flashback without pausing, and it takes some time for us to get our bearings. One moment Jerry is trudging across the desert, running short of water, possibly lost, truancy robot police things soon to be on his trail, and the next he is far away, back on Earth, back on the day we keep returning to – the day our hero's life changed forever.

Jerry walked into his two-bedroom apartment and threw his bag on the floor. The place was what Jerry and Ball lovingly referred to as an organized mess. There were piles of papers everywhere, the bookshelves were overloaded with actual books laying sideways on top of others filling every available space. It was not filthy with food and grime, but it was certainly messy with strewn

about work. Ball was at the dinner table drinking coffee and playing cards with three other women. Jerry fumed.

He was wet from the rain, his hair coming down over his eyes with bags underneath. Shoulders hunched over, dripping wet, he looked haggard and worn, perhaps a bit angry. Not someone to be trifled with. In his mind, he was fighting with Ball before he even walked in the door. Now that he saw her friends, he began in earnest.

“Entertaining, are we?” Jerry opened.

“Ah, hell, Jerry. Is it going to be one of those?” Ball returned.

“I’ve had a day at work. A day. I’m dead tired, and I’m pissed off, and here you are, where you’ve been sitting around all day gossiping no doubt with those...”

“Those what, Jerry? Tinkers? Is that what you were going to say? Or perhaps you were going to say something a little less flattering?”

“Lay off, Ball. I said it’s been a day.”

“What have you got against my friends, Jerry? I’m not ashamed of the Time People. I’m not. I’m proud of who am.”

“Sure, Ball, of course you are.”

“One day, Jerry, I swear to God, one day I’m...”

“What, Ball? Go back to the Academy and teach? Well, go then. And good riddance. And...”

Here Jerry actually considered whether he could say it. This was his moment, the moment he had been thinking about since the Old Man fired him earlier that day. He had wandered around downtown for hours, from one bar to another, considering his options. The one thing he kept coming back to was that he couldn’t let Ball suffer for his own mistake. He had to shield her from what was coming, and driving her away was the only option. His gut wrenched with the thought of how it would feel, how *she* would feel, but he also knew he had no choice. The whiskey made it

easier, but not easy. Following through, he held his proverbial breath and took the plunge.

“And... take your freak friends with you.”

“Freaks?!” Ball screamed. “Freaks?!” Without hesitating, she picked up a vase full of flowers from the table and threw it at Jerry. It barely missed him, crashing against the door and breaking into a dozen pieces. Jerry felt a rose and a few shards of pottery on his head. He let the water drip down his face without wiping it away.

Her three friends watched in amazement as their party came to an abrupt end. They stood up to leave.

“We’d better go,” said the one covered in bracelets. “If he gets violent, just buzz me,” she continued, as she squeezed past Jerry in the doorway. Then, looking straight at him continued, “and I’ll send over the ‘bots.”

“Thanks, Manny, but I think I can take care of myself. I’ll call you soon,” Ball replied. And with that, the rest of her friends picked up their things and squeezed past Jerry, still standing in the doorway, remnants of the broken vase still on his head.

Ball waited for the door to close behind them before starting in. “This is it, Jerry, this is really it. We were celebrating today because...” She tried to force a smile, but it faded before it ever had a chance. “It doesn’t matter. I’m leaving, Jerry. For good.”

Jerry had predicted this, but it shook him much harder than he expected. He stood, frozen in the doorway, looking at her. He knew he could talk her down. It wouldn’t take much. She wanted to forgive him. It wouldn’t take more than a few soft words. A touch. And he wanted to. He wanted to keep things the way they were. Forever. But it was too late. Nothing could be the same now, and he would have to let her go if he really cared for her.

When Jerry didn’t say anything, Ball turned toward the bedroom. She intended to head back and pack up her things, once and for all. But she was interrupted by a sudden buzz at the door. Jerry

was tempted to ignore it, assuming it was one of her friends back for a forgotten scarf or some trinket, but when the buzzing continued, he knew it wouldn't go away until he answered it. Still in the hallway, he turned around and opened it to find three messenger-bots standing in front of him in single file. The first had "Officer of the Court" on his chest. "Gerald Strohman?"

"Yes?," Jerry replied.

"You are hereby notified that, as a result of unpaid debt, you are commanded to report to the 659th District Court Section 457 at 10:00am for deportation." The robot then handed an official summons to Jerry. The summons accepted, it exited, leaving only two.

Jerry leaned past the robot now in front of him to speak to the one walking away. "Go to hell." Then, turning his attention to the next, said, "Yes?"

This one had "Cary Motors" upon his chest. He spoke in the same monotone voice as the first. "Gerald Strohman?"

"Go ahead," Jerry replied, again.

"You are hereby notified that your payments for one Cary Mach 2 Series Hover Sedan are overdue. Repossession is currently in progress." He handed Jerry a paper, not entirely dissimilar from the summons, and also exited. Once again, Jerry called after him. "Thank you. Really. Come back and visit anytime you walking piece of..."

The last robot had "Wilson Arms" upon his chest. "Gerald Strohman?"

"Yes, godammit, I'm Gerald Strohman. Now what the hell do *you* want?"

"You are hereby notified that payments for your lodging are no longer being accepted. You have 30 days to exit the premises before eviction proceedings begin."

“Oh for chrissake, what is it with you ‘bots? Can’t you give a guy a break? Do you really need to come all at once?” Jerry asked. But the robot had already turned his back and was halfway down the hall. Jerry closed the door and turned back to the apartment where he saw the look of incredulousness on Ball’s face.

“Like I said, it’s been a day.”

Ball’s anger appeared to grow. With a wild look in her eye, she said, “He fired you?”

Jerry walked past her to the kitchen to make a drink. Facing away from her, he said, “You get an A.”

Her mind made up, she at last went to the bedroom and started packing. From the distance she shouted, “Jerry, we’ve been married for three years, and in all that time you have done nothing. You fiddle with your equations and expect me to pay for everything with my father’s money. I finally convince him to give you a job and what do you do? You look for any way you can to sabotage it, to force him to let you go. Did you even try to keep it? Did you even try to apologize? I know how you hate to be obsequious, Jerry, but he *needs* that. It’s his fatal flaw. Can’t you even pretend?

“For God’s sake, Jerry, Have you ever really worked at anything in your life?” she went on. “Ever sacrificed your pride for anyone? It’s clear you won’t do it for me. Three years and we’re right back where we started. I thought today...that maybe...when I found out...but it’s too late.”

“Found out what?”

“It’s too late, Jerry. I’ve always had a place in my heart for you, but you have no respect for me or for yourself. I could have forgiven you for getting fired. God knows I’ve had my own fights with the man. But it’s clear to me now that you never really cared about me at all. That’s something I just can’t live with. You knew who I was when we first met, but until tonight, I guess I just wouldn’t admit to myself how you really felt. I guess I’ve never been

anything but a...*freak* to you” She walked back into the living room where Jerry was now sprawled on the couch.

“While you’re on your way to the colonies, I’ll be on my way home, back to my people, where I won’t be treated like a...god I can’t even say it.”

“Found out what?”

“It’s too late, Jerry.”

And Jerry finally made his way to the couch, whiskey in hand, marriage in shreds, life ruined, and just a little pleased with himself.

And without so much as a “meanwhile, back in the desert”, we find ourselves back in the desert, in the seemingly unbroken monologue that is Jerry’s log.

I know I didn’t have a choice. I know that, if I had told her the truth, she would have insisted on coming with me, would have followed me to the colonies. And it would have killed her. I know I did the right thing. I know it in my head. The problem is I don’t feel it in my heart. I think it’s only now, as I head back to her after 12 years of wasting my life, that I realize just how much I hurt her. I’m sure she’s never forgiven me. How could she, without ever really knowing what I gave up for her? And yet, I can’t get her off my mind. Her face haunts me with every step I take. In a strange

way, I feel that it's she that is giving me the courage to go on.

Went through another four water pills today. Half gone. This terrain was far more taxing, and I in far worse shape, than I imagined. 12 years in the mine hasn't exactly kept me in my peak condition. Yet, there was a glimmer of hope today. As the sun burned through my back, I thought I saw a reflection of light in the distance. I don't think it's the port, but with luck I may find some real shelter by tomorrow.

Heard noises during my sleep. I woke up and looked without moving, but saw nothing. It sounded like human voices, but I think it may only have been my dreams. Before the voices woke me I had been dreaming of the Old Man. He was at his desk literally taking himself apart. He was telling me he could only be free when he shed all his mechanical parts, even if it killed him. As the last part came off, he began to rot in front of me and turned to ash. I awoke with an image of Ball in mourning etched in my brain.

TRAVEL LOG. DAY 4.

I must be lost. I've been traveling for four days, and still no sign of civilization. My food supply is waning, and I'm almost out of hydro pills. Woke up to a sand rat biting my leg. I scared it away, but not before it had drawn blood. Now the wound has started to fester. The pain is manageable but growing.

Not sure if I can take this heat much longer. I'm holding off on my last two hydro pills as long as possible. Feel like a fool for taking so much on the first two days.

I think I'm hallucinating. I saw the glimmer again today and heard voices in my sleep again. Could it be trubots? How long can a man survive out here without going mad?

TRAVEL LOG. DAY 6.

I feel I'm at death's door. Already spent a full day in this oven without water and I'm not sure how much longer I can last. Haven't seen a mesa in almost two days. I'm sitting in the shade of a rock and exhausted, but the unbearable pain in my leg is keeping me awake. Why was I such a fool as to think I could do this?

TRAVEL LOG. DAY 6. CONTINUED

Hope, at last. I've stumbled across the source of the reflection. It was a short dome off my path in the distance. I cased it out carefully, and found it to be empty, so I broke in with what strength I had left and made myself at home. The kitchen was not working, but there were some expired hydros of which I ate two. I also found a stash of Coreyweed, which I rubbed on my leg and chewed a little of for good measure. It seems to be helping.

TRAVEL LOG. DAY 7.

And my adventures begin in earnest. I woke up tied to the bed with a gag in my mouth, a man and woman standing over me. He was as tall as they come, and wide as an ape. She was not what you would call pretty, definitely a bit rough around the edges, but there was an honest quality about her that gave her a beauty that seemed to shine from the inside out.

Once they were sure I wouldn't scream, they took the gag off and questioned me for about an hour. They have been holed up in this desert for years - escaped from lives they won't talk about. Apparently, they are of a revolutionary bent, and sympathetic to guys on the run like me.

After the questioning, they offered to help me with my escape.

The revolutionary couple are literally dressed up like Castro style revolutionaries, with olive drab uniforms and loaded with space weapon things and futuristic tools that look surprisingly like something out of the present day. Other than the weapons, though, the place is another one of these tributes to a 20th century sort of pre-robot society. In other words, they make their coffee by hand and don't have any vid-things or electric kitchen thingies. Like the best friend back at the time school, they are proud of their backward ways and preach about them, a subject from which we seem unable to escape.

Let us now put the log down awhile and get to know our new friends. We begin with a short jump backward to watch their meeting unfold.

The man was over two meters high and built like a house. He carried the kind of mass that could easily have been uncomfortably intimidating, if not for an oversized mop of curly blonde hair that gave him a sort of permanent boyish look. He was reminiscent of an overgrown G.I. Harpo, in his army greens and combat boots, but looks can be deceiving, and this man demanded to be taken seriously. He stood over Jerry and threw a bucket of cold and brackish water on his face. "Wake up!" he bellowed.

Jerry woke up, tied to the bed and gagged. He tried to scream. "Who are you?" the man shouted.

Jerry tried to answer, but found the gag in his mouth prohibitive and finally gave up. He was disoriented and groggy, not to mention completely baffled to find himself in this situation. The man looking down at him was attempting to look threatening, and

Jerry racked his brain to figure out what was going on. The man looked human, so it couldn't be tied to his escape from the village. And he was all dressed up in fatigues. Was there a war going on here that he didn't know about? The obvious danger notwithstanding, however, he was comforted by the cold water that now covered his face and chest. Over the last few days, as his supply of water tablets grew low alongside his tolerance for the heat, he had fantasized of a moment like this, albeit without the gag and the ropes, and perhaps with something a little more potable.

"I'm going to take this gag out of your mouth so we can ask you a few questions. If you scream, it's going right back in. Got it?" To which Jerry nodded as best he could.

The man's partner took off the gag. She was nearly half his size, maybe one point five at best. Her short black hair and tight eyes gave her a fierce look that almost complimented him in his freakishly giant boyishness. It was clear to Jerry the moment he saw her, however, that she was no one to be trifled with.

The tall one continued. "Who are you?"

Jerry coughed a few times and replied, "I might well ask you the same thing."

"I'm asking the questions here. Bite, water." And the fierce one threw another gallon of cold saltwater on Jerry. "Now let's try this again. Who are you?"

"Jerry Strohman. Miner third class."

"Why have you left your village?"

"I was looking for a hamburger stand."

She threw another gallon on him and went to refill the bucket.

"Now let's try it again. Why have you left your village?"

"I was tired of the scenery."

"Bite, put the gag back on. We're not getting anywhere today."

Jerry was not sure if it was alright to give in or not. Who were these people? Were they good guys or bad guys? Criminals? Usually, humans stuck together. But he had been out of it for a long time, and things were different out here in the outskirts. Anything could have happened in the last 12 years, especially on some remote planet on the edge of the colonies. They seemed dangerous, but what he could not figure out was if they were dangerous to him.

“Wait,” he yelled. He looked back and forth at the two of them and decided to take a chance. His problem was, unfortunately, he did not know how to say it. What he really wanted to know was whether they were the good guys or the bad guys, but he could not just come out and ask that. Or could he?

“Are...you the good guys or...the bad guys?”

Jerry’s captors looked at each other. The fierce one shrugged. The tall one laughed a little and said, “that depends whose side you’re on.”

Jerry, his toes wet, decided to jump all the way in. “I guess I’m on the side that lets humans like me walk free instead of caging them up in labor camps for their own protection.” He looked hopefully at his captors. “And you?”

“We...” the tall one looked at the short one. “We...are the good guys.” And the fierce one untied Jerry’s knots. “I’m Tilly,” the tall one said. “This here is Bite. If you’re telling us the truth, then we’re friends. Comrades. But I need to know what you’re doing in my house.”

Jerry heaved a sigh of relief. “I meant no disrespect. I’m on the run from Village-K, and trying to get back to Earth.”

“Why?”

Jerry stopped himself. What was he supposed to say? Why was he going back to Earth? To stop the Old Man? To win back his wife? To seek his vengeance? Would any of this make any sense to

them? He looked back at his captors, saw that they were both dangerous and honest, and played what he thought was his best card.

“To save the universe.”

Tilly and Bite gave each other inquisitive looks. Tilly, as usual, was the first to speak. “Alright, alright. You’ve come a long way across some very tough terrain, and to be honest, you look a little dehydrated. Bite noticed it right away, but we thought we’d hold off on fixing you up until we knew where you came from. It’s probably going to take you awhile to get your head back on straight. Bite, why don’t you get him some fresh water. In a glass.”

“No, it’s not that. I mean, thank you for fresh water, and yes, yes, a thousand times yes. What I mean to say is that my story isn’t as crazy as it sounds. There’s just more to explain than I can say in one sentence.”

Jerry took a deep breath. “It’s like this. I’m a scientist serving out a term for debt. Something has come up that made it worth the risk to escape, so I’m on the run, trying to get off the planet. But crossing the desert was more than I bargained for. Honestly, I thought I was going to die out there. If I hadn’t found this place, I’m sure I would have. You scared the hell out of me just know, but you saved my life, and as long as I live, I’ll be grateful to you.”

“Why don’t you start at the beginning?”

The next bit is basically a rehash of the story so far, a chance for the stoners to get caught up and for the rest of us to skim through a few pages of exposition we are already familiar with. In the process of telling his story, our hero also learns something about his captors. They have a pretty big backstory of their own, but the short version is that the man is an ex-ship’s captain who saved the woman from a life of forced prostitution in a mining colony. They struck out on their own to live off the land, such as it is out in this planetary desert.

We learn far too much about how they live off the land in such a desolate location, how they come to have so much water, and even a bit about their tactics as revolutionaries. Not soon enough, we finally learn their plans to overthrow first the planetary government, and ultimately the entire robot culture. At one point, they invite our hero to join them in their quest to take back the galaxy, but Jerry declines, telling them that he must first save the universe from imminent destruction, and that any distractions would be disastrous.

Naturally, his new friends have the improbable level of medical expertise to save his leg, which as it turns out is infected with a parasite on its way to devouring his entire body. The parasite destroyed, the body fed and recovered, and a new friendship forged, our hero is now ready to resume his mission. The revolutionaries offer help.

“The thing is, comrade, there are only three kinds of ships that ever leave this rock: Immigration Ships, Mineral Cargo Ships, and the Scowls, and they’re all run by the ‘bots.” Tilly had been kind of a downer ever since Jerry declined to join them in their fight. Bite had been dogging him for weeks to burst into the local government headquarters with their weapons blazing, and, as Bite put it, “take our chances.” Tilly was a little more cautious, and had hoped Jerry would be a good influence on his comrade. Once he learned Jerry would be leaving at all costs, Tilly lost interest in honestly helping.

Bite, on the other hand, saw her chance come at last. “Our weapons are just rotting here, Tilly, and our new comrade needs help.”

“So, what do you suggest, Bite?”

“I suggest we take the tunnel to the port and hijack a ship. You could pilot it to a safe haven, and we could raise an army to come back and take the planet.” At this point, Bite had worked herself into a fervor and was on the verge of packing up her weapons into the massive backpacks she had built herself and always kept at the ready.

“Alright, Bite. Good plan. But let’s take a moment to consider the details,” Tilly said, calmly, if not a little bit condescendingly. He knew Bite would hate this, but hate it or not, it always worked, so he played his cards methodically and resolutely.

Bite, on the other hand was having none of it. Tilly always spoiled her plans with his prudence, and never seemed willing to take the risk that something might work if there was even the smallest chance it would not. He would never even begin to consider a plan without three backups. He was patient and methodical. She was neither.

“Forget the details,” Bite screamed. “We have to do something. He’s already told us that the tru-bots will be on his trail. Are we just gonna wait for them to track him here? I’m not going back there, Tilly. Not ever. If those ‘bots come for our comrade and we’re still here, I’m going down fighting. No level of detail is going to talk me out of that.”

“I said, *alright*, Bite.” He gave her a hard stare. “But before we head into a port filled with law-bots, I think we should develop a plan, and no plan can succeed without the details.”

Bite fell onto the armchair, and folded her hands over her chest, as if to say, “Fine, but after you’re done talking, I’m going, no matter what.”

Tilly turned to Jerry. “It’s true that we have access to an underground passageway to the space port. It’s also true that we can most likely get to almost any bay without being spotted. The

trouble, as I see it, is the time of year. We haven't seen an immy in months."

"Sorry. Immy?"

"Immigration ship. In fact, Comrade Bite and I were just recently discussing the possibility that the mining consortium has decided this planet has maximized its potential. If that's the case, we may not see an immy for years. The cargo ships come in the fall and leave in the spring. We could stow you away in one, but I don't think you'd see the light of day for close to four and a half months. That just leaves the scowls." Tilly paused to feel the sudden tension in the room.

"Garbage ships?" Jerry asked.

"Yes. And completely manned by 'bots. Even if we could hijack such a ship, we could never control it. They're just not built to be flown by humans anymore."

"You said something before about stowing away," Jerry tried.

"Sure. On a cargo ship, nothing easier. They have both humans and 'bots on the crew, so your radiation signature wouldn't set off any alarms. And because it has humans on board, there would be food and water to pinch along the way. On a scowl, we would have to find a hold where no one would look for you, and line it with puldonium to mask your radiation. If you ever left the hold, your signature would instantly set off the security alarms, and you'd be dead on the spot. If you didn't, you would surely die of dehydration within two weeks, let alone the five it would take you to get to another port."

"Five weeks! I had no idea," replied Jerry.

Tilly, Bite, and Jerry, all slumped in their chairs, defeated. Suddenly Bite got up and started packing her weapons.

"What are you doing, Bite?" Tilly challenged.

"I'm not going to sit around here doing nothing while a comrade is in trouble. And I'm certainly not going to wait around for

the tru-bots to take us back to that hellhole. If I'm going to go, it's going to be in a blaze of glory."

"Bite!" and Tilly went off after her, trying to calm her down.

Jerry was left alone in the main room and racked his brain. He thought back to his days at RTI and tried to remember why the scowls took so long in space. Five weeks. He had vague memories of them taking days, not weeks. But maybe that was before they stopped using any humans on the crews. A lot can happen in 12 years.

"Comrade Tilly," he shouted, "why do the scowls spend so long in space?"

Tilly returned lifting his hands over his head. "I give up. When she gets like this, there's no stopping her. She just has to get it out of her system. Maybe by the time she gets packed up, I'll be able to calm her down."

Jerry studied him and realized he hadn't heard his question. "Tilly, why do the scowls spend so long in space?"

"Huh?" Tilly said distractedly. "Oh. This planet is the last real stop on the pickup schedule, and the other stops are hardly worth calling ports. By the time they've finished with the route, make their dump, and check in for maintenance, it will be at least five weeks, maybe more."

"And that's true for every garbage run?"

"What do you mean?" Tilly asked cautiously.

"Well...I mean that if I haven't lost track of time on that hellish trip through the desert, I think tomorrow is garbage day. They must take on an abnormally large load on the annual garbage haul. I was just wondering, well, if that annual run is somehow different?"

Tilly was silent. Down in the storage room, Bite had stopped crashing around and was coming up the stairs. Tilly looked sheepish as Bite appeared at the top of the stairs. She was furious. Her

look alone would have been enough to kill an army had there been one standing between them.

“You knew. I forgot, but you knew. I know you knew. You’re afraid. You coward.”

Jerry looked from one to the other, sure he was in the middle of a ten-year squabble he didn’t want anything to do with. There was an awkward silence during which Tilly was undoubtedly trying to come up with something to calm her down, and Jerry suspected whatever it was would be a lie. If he could just diffuse the situation enough to allow Tilly to save face, maybe he could still get somewhere. Desperately, he said, “I’m sure he just forgot. I mean, look at this place. It looks like you guys haven’t had a garbage pickup since you built it. You put it all into those funny little cans and crush and bury the stuff yourselves. It’s no wonder you’re out of touch.”

Tilly looked relieved. Bite did not.

“Just tell me,” Jerry continued, “if you have any idea how long the annual pickup scowls spend in space before they reach a modern space port.”

“Oh, he knows,” Bite chimed in. “Of course he knows. He was the last human to captain that line before they abandoned him down here.”

Jerry began to get the picture. Tilly was afraid. Much more so than he let on. He’d escaped once, and he wasn’t about to walk back into the lion’s den.

Tilly got up, ostensibly to get a drink. When he got to the counter, he put down his hands and stared down at them, shaking his head.

“Alright, alright,” Tilly said at long last. “She’s right. If anyone would know, it’s me. I spent nearly ten years on those ships.” He looked at Bite for support, but she was still stern. “The trip from here on the annual dump used to take about three days, total. I

suppose we can get you enough food and drink to survive the trip, but....”

“But what?” Jerry asked.

“But he can’t go with you. Isn’t that right comrade?”

Tilly put his head back down. Bite continued, “They really treated him like hell before they finally dumped him here. I thought I had it bad, but the ‘bots are so much worse than humans. They know just when to stop to avoid killing you, but they leave you with nothing but an empty shell. At least humans get tired after a while.”

She looked at Tilly with affection. “He doesn’t think he could face them again, and I believe him.” She looked again at Tilly, this time with purpose. “But he’s the only one that can guide us in, and the only one that can get me back out again. He knows those old ships like the back of his hand.”

Tilly returned her glance.

“Tilly, I know you think I’m rash. That I never think before I act. I know you don’t really take me or the revolution seriously. But this man needs our help, and if you love me, you’ll put aside your fear and jump into the cauldron with me one more time.”

Tilly took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then, with resolve, he walked over to Bite and put out his hand.

“Alright. I’m in.”

TRAVEL LOG. DAY 8.

It’s garbage day. I spent the morning with my new friends packing up a bag for my travels. I’ve got enough food and water to last five days if I stretch it, and food and hydro pills to last five years if they’re any good. Except for weapons, these guys

have a downright aversion to anything that smells remotely modern, especially if it was invented by the 'bots. The pills are relics that have long since expired, and none of us are sure if they have any value left at all. Let's hope I don't need them.

We took a full 14 hours to hike the underground passageway to the inside of the space port. It ended in a kind of hub between bays, which was filled with traffic, mostly natives, but with enough 'bots that Tilly thought we would should wait a few hours for a quiet window to sneak out of the passageway and over to the scowl. In the meantime, I'm taking a few moments for the log.

The log gets boring and technical here, as we get the details of Tilly's plan to get Jerry off the planet. To no one's surprise, it's supported by one miraculous bit of luck after another, such as the existence of the underground tunnel or the innate medical skills of the revolutionaries that cured our hero's leg, followed by elaborate justifications of why we have been so lucky. There is, unfortunately, a formula which states that the degree of pure fortune within the plot must be exponentially proportional to the length of the supporting explanations.

As a result, each part of the escape plan, the long hike through the dark tunnel, the hide and seek they play with the robots, their

encounter with local fauna, is sheared of any vitality by the mass of justifications the author subjects us to along the way.

Suffice to say that Jerry and his new friends spend a day walking along a dark corridor, fight off a few animals, nearly get spotted by robots while sneaking into a garbage ship, and finally get him stored and supplied in an unused cargo hold. He has air, food, water, and yes, even a view of the goings on inside the ship. With one near miss, he makes it safe and sound and is ready for his lonesome journey across the stars.

TRAVEL LOG. DAY 9.

I have to give it to Tilly, he really knows his stuff. I'm completely outfitted in my new little home, and even somewhat comfortable. The trash-bots have been busy all day, making calculations for the journey and loading up the holds. I can't see much, but I do just barely have a view of a vid-screen that's loaded with technical information. My view is through a sort of slit in the wall panels, and though it's not much, it will give me something to look at over the next few days.

I'm trying not to think about her and what she's going to say when I show up on her doorstep, but with three days of no one but myself and my thoughts, I fear I won't be able to hold out. She haunted my dreams again

last night. This time, she was a sort of robot-like monster. She was still Ball, though, and I wasn't afraid. I remember going up to hold her, but she grabbed my arms and threw me in a cage. The last I remember of the dream, I was sitting in my cage, looking through the bars at her, and she was looking back with the eyes of a curious animal, not sure what to make of me. Her head was cocked to one side as if to ask, "Is this really my enemy?"

What am I thinking? By the time I get to her, the tru-bots will have closed in and staked out her place. The Academy must be about the most obvious place I could go, and yet...even if I didn't need her to stop the Old Man...I think I would still go back to her. She's pulling me in, and if it turns out to be a trap, I'm not sure that I care.

Well, it's nice to see Jerry open up a bit, but, sadly, this isn't a story about characters and their feelings. We have to save the universe, and to do that, we need to get back to the plot. Romantic feelings and soul searching are not to be the engines by which this ship is driven. We are not to be so fortunate. Rather, with our appetites whetted with this romantic bait the size of a mall food-court sample of the General's Chicken, we fly back to the Old Man's office, and back into the story.

Interlude: In the Office

The Old Man was fuming as he waited for the human to trudge his way down the hall to his office. “Miss Dixon, what the hell is taking him so long?”

“Scientist Elbert has entered elevator three, with remaining travel estimated at forty seconds.”

The Old Man got up and paced the room. “Why do I even keep humans in this place,” he asked himself. “I wonder if a robot could do the work of...” he hesitated in his thoughts. “It would never work. They just don’t have it in them. No creativity. No intuition. I wonder if we could create...”

“Scientist Elbert to see you sir,” Miss Dixon called over the vid-com.

“Alright. Send him in.”

Elbert shuffled into the room, barely taking his feet off the floor. He was about to get called on the carpet for the previous night's indiscretion, and he knew it. His stomach was churning, his confidence was at low tide, and everything about him gave it away. He could not even bring himself to look at the Old Man, and instead kept his eyes focused on the floor.

“Well, you finally decided to bless me with your presence, Dixon. I’m honored.” The Old Man turned his back to Elbert and walked to his desk, remaining on his feet. Elbert, due to the lack of furniture, remained standing as well, fidgeting, waiting for his worst fears to be confirmed.

“Sir.”

“Dixon,” the Old Man rounded in, “I have a report here that you made contact last night with a former, and might I add, disgraced, member of this institution.” He reached down to his desk,

picked up a piece of paper, and turned to face Elbert. Leaning on the edge of his desk he said, "Which was of course within your rights, limited though they may be."

Elbert continued to look at his shoes. He caught himself fidgeting with his hands, and put them in his pockets. Unfortunately, he appeared to be the subject of his own conservation of energy law, and the fidgeting just moved to his feet.

"What was not within your rights, however, was the use of company documents during such a transmission. In fact, all such documents are proprietary, and sharing them in any way a violation of our ethics contract."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't yessir me, Dixon."

"Yes, sir. I mean no, sir."

"Dixon, what the hell were you doing on the vid with that outlaw, and why were you sharing our logs with him?"

Elbert, hands in pockets, eyes downcast, feet shuffling, muttered, "I...um...there must be some mistake...I...uh...I mean...I was just..."

"Out with it, Dixon."

"What I mean to say is...we were...uh...just, you know...catching up on old times."

Humans. Never the truth when a lie will do. At least this one was no good at it. It was almost endearing, this nervous wreck of a scientist who was so unsure of himself he could barely tell a lie to save his life. The confession would come soon enough, so long as he laid it on thick.

"Catching up on old times? Sure. Makes sense. What's it been, about 12 years? You must have had a lot to talk about. Maybe talk about the old days, how nice things were here before he tried to sabotage our institution and tear us apart from the inside? Was that what you were talking about, Dixon?"

“I...sir...it wasn't exactly...”

The Old Man pushed himself up from leaning on the desk, and walked around to his chair, where he sat down, and leaned back. It was time for a little “good cop” to bring him around. Guys like this could get broken if you pushed them too hard, which was all well and good if you could afford to break them. At this time, however, he needed some information, and a little confidence might just bring him around long enough to get it.

“Ok, Dixon, this is how I see it. When that son-of-a-bitch tried to take us down, you got the opportunity of a lifetime. Maybe you got a job you weren't up for, a job you could never have earned on your own. Maybe the only reason you did was because you didn't have the guts to go down with him, and maybe you regret it. Maybe it was the pedant in you that let you justify bringing him down on a technicality, and ever since, you've been questioning whether you were really right or not.”

Elbert looked around uncomfortably for a chair. Finding his search futile, he shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

“Then, yesterday, when I pointed out the anomalies in this log, you started asking yourself the hard questions. You said to yourself, ‘what if I was wrong and he was right?’ You took the log home and stared at it all night over a bottle of S.I. Gin. When you got enough Dutch courage in you, you used your security clearance to call him on the vid and tell him what you saw. I'm not stupid, Dixon, and I'm not a fool. I know the look of a man with second thoughts, and he looks like you. Ok. I'm not thrilled about it, but ok.”

According to plan, Elbert started to gain a small amount of confidence that this might not turn out as badly as he thought. He was, of course, deeply mistaken.

“But Dixon,” the Old Man continued, his voice soft but serious, “you crossed the line when you held up that log to the vid for

the whole world to see on a public line. A public line, for chris-sake.”

Elbert started to squirm all over again, with his eyes practically glued to his feet.

“Now let’s cut the crap, Dixon, so we can stop wasting my time. What the hell did you hope to gain by sharing our log over the galactic airwaves, and more importantly...” the Old Man paused here for effect, “...what does he know that you don’t?”

And that was all it took. When Elbert walked into the office, he was already broken from years of subservience and regret. He had been burrowing into himself, trying to hide from the eyes he constantly felt on him, not just watching, but accusing him. Accusing him of the greatest crime a human can commit – betrayal. And now, after all those years of hiding his shame, the thought of going to Jerry for help, perhaps for forgiveness, was the plaster he needed to begin putting himself back together. He hadn’t really admitted it to himself until the Old Man called him out, but now that it was out in the open, he was shocked to find that he felt free. Maybe for the first time since that awful day, he finally felt free. Elbert raised his head and looked directly at the Old Man. He walked right up to his desk, reached into the humidor on the desk and helped himself to an automatically cut and lit cigar. He went to the table in the corner, and sat himself down upon it, legs dangling off the edge, looking down at the Old Man. He took a long drag to cement his new position.

Then...he coughed. And he coughed.

The Old Man burst into laughter. “Dixon. Put that down. You look like an idiot.” Elbert took another drag and coughed again. And again. The Old Man shouted, “Miss Dixon, bring me a glass of water.”

And Miss Dixon was there, next to Elbert, handing him the glass. And she was gone.

“Alright, Dixon, have your fun.”

Elbert drank down half the water and extinguished the cigar in what was left of it. “How can you smoke this stuff?”

“Dixon, focus.”

Elbert looked the Old Man in the face.

“I know you’re going to fire me no matter what I say, so I might as well say my piece.” He took a deep breath, and with a determination in his eye he had shown maybe twice in his life, spoke. “Dr. Strohman was right. The problems I had with his functions were nominal and could not possibly have created the effects I posited they could. I knew that then, and I know it now. I didn’t care. I did not want to spend the rest of my life digging dirt in the colonies with a bunch of redneck criminals. They’d have torn me apart.” Elbert pulled back into himself briefly, as he remembered the fear that drove him to his great act of cowardice.

Then, gathering himself up, he said, “But after 12 years, I don’t think I care about that anymore. The only thing that matters to me now is the science, and when I failed to figure this one out, I finally cracked. I said to myself, ‘Pete, it’s time to man up and tell the good doctor you were wrong. Then maybe he’ll figure a way out of this, and it’ll turn out that everything is alright after all. Maybe if he helps, the boss will even let him come back.’ Most of all, though, I was worried that I had finally seen proof that the doctor’s worst fears had been realized, and I panicked. I knew I had to do something, but I didn’t know what, so I contacted the only person I knew who could help.

“When I had him on the vid, I realized that I couldn’t ever really get his attention unless he saw the log himself. After what I had done, and 12 years to stew on it, why would he believe me? So, I showed him the log. Not that it matters. We are tearing the universe apart, and when it goes, this company and all the ‘bots will go with it.”

Elbert leaned forward, the half empty glass of water holding a soggy cigar still in his hand, and wept. “God, why didn’t I back him up? Was it just cowardice, or was I really that stupid? I just don’t know anymore. Maybe I never did.”

The Old Man took it all in, and looked up from his desk, unmoved. This was not the first time a human had attempted to move him with a story of heartfelt sorrow, but he could always hope it would be the last. In any case, he had the information he needed, and had already made up his mind as to what to do next with Dr. Peter Elbert.

“Thank you for the clarity, Dixon. Your motives are clear. Your employment is terminated. As I understand it, the colonies are currently overstaffed, so you are free to remain on planet until alternative employment should present itself. Your years of service will be noted in your record, alongside your egregious errors of judgment. Please show yourself out.”

With those words, the Old Man went back to the work at his desk.

And the traitor begins his path toward redemption. Soon enough, he will continue down that path as he embarks on his own adventure, but the time for that is not yet ripe. In the meantime, our interlude is not long enough to do him justice.

Let us return, then, to our hero’s travels, interrupted as they were by this brief interlude. He is, we recall, holed up on a garbage scow, traveling toward freedom, and enlightening us as he moves along by way of his diary.

6. Adventure Roadblocks

TRAVEL LOG. DAY 10.

Some of the 'bots on this scowl are unusual in a way that is hard to define. They behave much like the others, but seem to have a more casual attitude about them, if such a thing could be attributed to a hunk of wires and circuits. Example: I could swear I saw one give a strange look to another one, a sort of knowing look — just for a second. I suppose I simply imagined it. It would be easy to do after a day and half of being jammed in this hole. Yet, I can't shake the feeling that something strange is going on here.

Another example: One of the 'bots I mentioned earlier, the one who gave the look, stood at the forward window and stared into space. Just stared. I've never seen a 'bot look out a window at all, let alone stare through it. I'm sure the only reason this bucket even has windows is that it was too expensive to replace them on these old ships after they finally stopped employing men. There is

definitely something odd about that one.

One more incident. One of the robots from the first incident, along with one I hadn't seen before, had what looked like a sort of conspiratorial conference. They didn't actually talk, but I could see them sharing information on the vid-screen, with one of them constantly monitoring whether other 'bots were in the area or approaching. When an approaching robot appeared on the internal radar, the 'bot changed the vid-screen back to the standard monitoring status, and the other 'bot moved to a new location. There is something seriously strange going on. Either that or I've been cooped up in this hole too long.

This is one of those moments, so prevalent in the book, where a very simple idea becomes ridiculously overcomplicated, perhaps in the desperate hope to give some logical backbone to an idea which is already so far from reality that the exercise is inevitably futile to begin with. Nevertheless, we trudge forward, and after about 14 more examples, we finally do what we should have done to begin with, and accept the simple premise that there is a new breed of robots in this world who have many human characteristics, and have a sort of bond with each other. At this point in the story we do not know whether this new breed is confined to the ship or not, or whether they are good or evil, but after the tedious

descriptions of their characteristics, we are certain to assume these robots will be integral to the story.

Our hero's final log entry from the hold is relatively uninteresting with two exceptions. One, our hero witnesses the ripping of space for the first time in his life and is awed into poetic sentiment, and two, we get a little more character development with another flashback.

TRAVEL LOG. DAY 11.

...slowly, the world goes black, like smoke spreading from a fire of burning plastic, engulfing the ship, a cocoon, a womb, smothered by a world devoid. I feel my very breath sucked out of me, I am swimming, sleeping, drowning. And yet, even still there is something, for I feel it, too, torn away. Everything thing I am, everything I know, everything I can or will is crushed, smothered, sucked. I am less than finite. I am an atom. An electron. Less. I am lack. I am lack in a world of lack, where nothing can ever be. I am not at peace. I am not at war. I am simply...not...

I watched what must have been the trash moving into the rip. It looked like a cone of blue light - no, not blue, more like black pretending to be blue - with the fat end toward our

ship, and moving to an infinitesimal point deep in the darkness. After a while, the fat end moved away too, and seemed to stretch back to a point on our end, so that the whole thing became a sort of snake with a giant undigested something in the middle. Finally, the whole thing seemed to get sucked into the void, and there was a tremendous explosion. A giant wall of light traveled toward us at amazing speed and passed right over us. For a moment I thought we were inside of the wall of light, but it was only the surprise of finding the blackness gone and the stars surrounding us once again.

One of our strange friends watched the whole thing, barely moving. I wonder if he went into the same sort of trance as I...

Later on in the log, our hero starts to analyze the various data he gathered over the last few days of travel, including that gathered during the trash dump. He particularly puzzles over some apparent time shifts that remind him of what he saw on the log Elbert had shown him, and tells himself that what he sees is impossible. This thought leads us into the other reason we visited this log: the flashback.

Jerry laid on the couch, looking at the ceiling. His hands were on his head, squeezing, as if they would somehow keep out the

nonsense his wife kept throwing at him. He let loose and yelled, “But it doesn’t make any sense.”

Ball was pacing around the apartment, a nervous habit that had followed her from childhood, occasionally slamming things on whatever surface was at hand to emphasize her point.

“Of course it doesn’t,” she shot back. “Whenever I say something that’s too intelligent for you to understand, you stamp your feet and shout and call me stupid. It’s the only answer you have, *genius*. Why don’t you open your mind? There’s a whole world out there, waiting for you.”

“A world where what?” Jerry sat up. “Where we just see what we want to see? Where proof means nothing? Why not just say your hair gets tangled by the fairies overnight and be done with it? I’m telling you Ball, it just doesn’t add up. If time were fluid...”

“Of course time is fluid. That’s not what we’re talking about.”

“Ok, have it your way. Flexible. If time were flexible, how could you prove it? By observing it, you would flex with the time you were observing and everything would appear to be constant. There was no way you could ever know.”

“Yes? And?”

“And nothing. End of argument. If you can’t prove it, it’s not true.”

Ball threw a plastic bowl full of nuts at the wall and screamed something unintelligible. Then she leaned over the table and faced him, clenching her teeth, ready to attack. His nonchalance, however, disarmed her as usual, and she sat down, defeated, to figure out her next tack.

“Jerry,” Ball said finally, in a tone somewhat soothing if not downright condescending, “do you know what’s etched in stone above the gate to my old school?”

Jerry, enjoying the fight but a little uncomfortable with her new tone, held tight to his sardonic attitude. “No, Ball, I don’t know what’s etched in stone above the gate to your old school.”

“Tantum Nunc.”

“Tantum Nunc?” It took Jerry a moment. his Latin never had been very good. “Um..only something. Only now?”

“Not bad Jerry. That’s basically it, though we learned it as *Only the Present*. Do you know why that particular phrase was carved at that place, the only place in the galaxy dedicated to the study of time?”

“I suppose you’re going to tell me.”

“Can you stop being a prize-winning ass for even a second? Honestly, I don’t know why I even try. It’s like trying to communicate with a Neanderthal. Will you at least try?”

Jerry gave in, just a bit. “Alright, Ball. But only because you were kind enough to call me prize winning. Gimme your best shot. What is the significance of ‘Only the Present’ to your people?”

“To all people, Jerry, all people. It is true that you can move in time, that you can exist in different periods, at different tempos, change the whole of existence...”

“But the paradoxes.”

“Forget the paradoxes, Jerry. There is no such thing. There is only the present. I can go back in time and prevent the last three wars. I can do it right now.”

“Why don’t you then?” Jerry asked, starting to get frustrated all over again.

“I did, I do, I am.” Ball throws up her arms. “It doesn’t matter. I’d never know. There is only the present. I can go back to change something, and I’d be in the present. I would no longer be from the future, and would never know the future. You can only know the present. So, when you say that you can never prove a shift in tempo, you’re right. Tantum Nunc.”

“You admit my point, then.”

“It doesn’t change anything, Jerry. It only proves that you are a faulty observer. My people gave up long ago on making believers of humans outside of the family. It’s just something you know, Jerry. Something I know. Time is river, it ebbs and flows, it moves fast and slow, runs shallow and deep, and we are creatures of that river, sometimes moving with it, sometimes against, so small that we can only see what seems like unchanging water surrounding us. But Jerry, we can feel it. We know it moves. We know it changes. Not with our eyes, but with something else. Something we’ve never...named.”

Our sparring lovers argue this one out for several pages, as we delve into our favorite topic: science vs. faith. Ball expresses her faith in a sort of Gaian idea of complete interconnectivity, while Jerry continues to eschew anything that can’t be proven. They argue back and forth in long paragraphs without getting anywhere, and we are forced to explore our own faith, or perhaps lack thereof, if we want any resolution at all. Conspicuously absent, unfortunately, is any sense of dramatic tension growing out of this academic discussion. Finally, worn out by these seemingly unresolvable arguments, we make a feeble attempt to wrap up, in the vain hope of at last moving forward.

“You treat me and my people like we’re some kind of zoo animals, Jerry. We’re people too.”

“People? You’re like fifteenth century witches. Like druids wandering the wastelands. Why don’t you join the modern age?”

“Modern age? Live like you? Stare at a vid-screen all day pretending to do something that matters? Build robots, and monsters like my father?”

“You think I’m like him? Because I’m not a superstitious time worshipping gaga?”

Ball screamed at the top of her lungs and looked for something to throw. She settled on a ceramic bowl given to them for the wedding by Jerry’s aunt.

“Don’t do it, Ball. We can’t afford it.”

“I hate you, you petty, number crunching, two bit excuse for a human!” Ball put on her coat and headed for the door.

“Ball, stop,” he yells, “where are you going to go at this hour? Ball!”

“I’m going out. Maybe I’ll come back.” She opens the door. As it closed behind her, she said, “Maybe.”

And either seamlessly or joltingly, depending on your perspective, we move back into the present, where Jerry continues with his diary.

TRAVEL LOG. DAY 11. CONTINUED.

I can feel the ship slowing down for landing. It’s earlier than I expected, but who can complain? After three days cramped up in this prison with nothing to eat but Kelly root, I’m desperate for a little movement and fresh air – not to mention some real food. I’d even settle for my old dome at this point. I’ve gathered up all of my gear except the puldonium tarp, so I can break for it at a moment’s notice. Just a little more waiting.

Will these 'bots never leave the ship? I feel like it's been hours since we landed, but I can't seem to catch a break. I'm starting to fear I won't get a clear getaway before they lift off for the next run.

Only one 'bot left on the ship that I can see, and he's just left the bridge. I'm going to risk an escape wrapped in the tarp. If the alarm goes off, I guess I'll just run like hell.

Jerry crawled out of the hold to complete silence. A quick check of the vid-screen told him that no alarms were going off and he was safe. At least for now. He crawled across the bridge and into the exit corridors, looking for the gangway. The opening was just where he expected it, but the last remaining robot was perched across from it, working at a vid-screen. Jerry crept up within three feet of the robot, still with his back to him. He slipped past, and made his way down the gangway, rounded the corner, and in a moment, was out of the landing bay, tarp stashed in his pack, and walking away, a free man.

Now to find a tavern and a ride to Earth, he thought, and headed down a corridor that by all rights should have led him to the center of commerce. When he found himself in the hub of the spaceport, however, it was far from bustling. If anything, it looked more like an abandoned shopping mall. He was in the center of a large circle surrounded by shops and restaurants, but nothing looked open. Two taverns were closed and gated, a souvenir shop was similarly closed, as was one of the two restaurants. The other

restaurant was a diner, which was open but empty. In fact, the only place that seemed to be doing any business at all was the repair shop, which had a line of robots out the door.

Well, I guess I might as well eat, thought Jerry, and he headed into the diner.

The diner had a counter with room for eight, and four booths along the opposite wall. The counter was dusty and stained, and the tables were worse. Each table had a napkin dispenser along with some salt and pepper. The counter had four setups that matched the tables, all with cream and butter conspicuously absent. The specials on the wall looked like they hadn't been changed in years, except for the pies, which had been crossed off.

Jerry sat at the counter and took a menu out of the curved metal holder in front of him. To Jerry, it looked like the usual fare: artificial burgers, artificial meat loaf, artificial turkey on club sandwiches. Still, anything would be better than another Kelly root and he started to salivate just thinking of what was to come. He looked at the apparently permanent special and decided the fried dunny bird didn't sound half bad, though, even after twelve years without visiting a restaurant, he didn't think he could stomach the Kelly root soup. Maybe just some chips.

Thinking about the menu made him more hungry than ever, but to his great disappointment there was no one in sight to serve him. He got up and walked back to the main hall.

Yes, this was it. Not a very promising station for a ride to Earth. The line of robots at the repair shop had gone down, and the place seemed even emptier than it had when Jerry walked in. *Hell,* Jerry thought, *I could be worse off here than I was on the scowl.* He thought about going back to his hold, but looking at the corridor full of robots returning to the ship from the repair shop, he realized he was too late. Then it happened. That feeling in the pit of his stomach. That undeniable signal that he had screwed up,

and that he would be paying for it for a long time to come. He could see it all now. This was just a stop over. Fuel and repairs. They were going to take off and strand him here, and there wasn't a thing he could do about it. He looked to see if he could slip past the mechanical hordes, but there was no hope. Better to rot here than die in the hands of the 'bots. He would have to wait for the next lonely ship that was low on fuel, and sneak on while the 'bots were waiting for repairs.

Dejected and disheartened, Jerry walked back to the diner to at least search out some food. He walked behind the counter and started opening cabinets to see if there was anything that could allay his hunger until someone showed up, but one spot after another was devoid of anything he could consider food. Once again, that feeling in the pit of his stomach began to rise up. Then he spotted the walk-in cooler. Of course. A place this desolate would have to keep everything cold or frozen to keep it from going bad. As fortune would have it, the cooler wasn't locked, and after taking one more look to convince himself that no one was coming, he let himself in to what he hoped would be a paradise of real food.

Most of what he saw was frozen, but he keyed in on some rolls that, though frozen like everything else, might be edible without too much thawing. He pulled one out of a bag and was digging his teeth in with a surprising amount of satisfaction when he heard voices in the distance.

"Listen, Mac. You've seen the only human in this dump already, and he's frozen solid. Why don't you go back to your cronies at Central Security and leave me alone." Jerry could not see the speaker or who he was talking to, but he assumed the worst and moved to protect himself. He cautiously closed the cooler door, and tried to hide himself in a dark corner. The voices became muffled, but he could still just barely make them out.

“Our mission requires that we search the entire station and your establishments are part of this station. Allow us to search or be destroyed.”

“Look, there’s nobody here. Search all you want to.”

Jerry pulled out his puldonium tarp and buried himself beneath it. As long as they didn’t open the cooler, they wouldn’t be able to detect him.

“Who are you looking for, anyway?”

“We are in search of a truant by the name of Dr. Gerald Strohmman. He has abandoned his workplace and violated his employment contract. We have reason to believe he is on this station, and the radiation signatures in this establishment suggest....” Jerry heard the voice trail off. Radiation signatures? Now he was in trouble. He clung tight to the tarp.

“The radiation signature had disappeared. We shall search elsewhere.”

“You can’t rely on those things in here, Mac. My birds give off strong signatures right after I slaughter them, and then die off quick. That’s probably what you were sensing.”

“We shall search elsewhere.”

Jerry stayed in the corner, not moving. Maybe it was his lucky day after all. Maybe. On the other hand, maybe he had just traded death in the hands of the tru-bots for death in the hands of a walk-in freezer. His hands were already having trouble opening and closing, and he had lost sensation in his fingertips. Jerry figured he had about fifteen minutes before he would have to chance a run for it.

Here we get into a short history of hypothermia and medicine’s attempts to save its victims. It starts in with the old saying, “You aren’t dead until you’re warm and dead,” and digresses into a fictional history of cryogenics, with the ensuing philosophical debate

over the ethics of such a history. Fortunately, regardless of how long it takes us to trudge through this diversion, our hero is surprised, for better or ill, by the door before his fifteen minutes are up.

“What are you doing in my cooler? Get out of there.”

Facing Jerry was a male robot just under two meters high. He was dressed casually, blue jeans and a white t-shirt covered with an apron that had more axle grease on it than cooking oil. He was a modern robot and looked almost human, with dark wavy hair on his head and arms, light brown eyes, and even a few scars on his face. The skin, of course, was waxy and mottled, and completely gave him away. One day the designers were going to finally get the skin to look natural, and no one would ever be able to spot the difference again.

Jerry was having trouble moving, due to the cold, but slowly got up and made his way to the door. Regardless of what might come next, he knew he couldn't stay where he was, and his plan to make a run for it would never work until he warmed up a bit. When he was almost to the door, the robot took him by the arm and walked him to the counter.

“It's alright. I got rid of them. Sit down, I'll get you some coffee.” Jerry sat down on a stool, still shivering, and the robot went behind the counter. At the drink machine, he put in a small mug and punched in an order for galactic standard. When the mug was full, he punched another button, and handed it to Jerry.

“I didn't make it too hot, so you could warm up slowly. When you're up for it, I'll get you a nice hot one.”

“Thanks.”

Jerry took the coffee and warmed himself up. “You run this place by yourself?”

“Only in the slow season. The owner comes out here during the heavy months, but the rest of the time, I keep the place for stragglers, run the fuel and repair operation, and enjoy the solitude.”

Jerry’s whole thought process stopped at the sound of that word: *enjoy*. Robots didn’t enjoy. They worked. It was their defining feature. Some of the more sophisticated ones could make complex arguments and decisions that seemed remarkably close to free will. But enjoy? Had the ‘bots really come so far while he was holed up on that planet of living death?

Or was this one special? Like the strange ones on the ship.

Either way, it didn’t matter. This ‘bot had done him a favor and quite possibly saved his life. Whatever he was, Jerry owed him one. At least one.

“I’m Jerry.” He put out his hand.

“DL7934CJ6,” the robot said as he returned the gesture, “but call me De-El. All my friends do.”

Friends? If this was this one like the others, he certainly wasn’t hiding it.

De-El went on. “Jerry huh? Then you are the one the T.E.R.’s were looking for. You stow away or what?”

The chill that had permeated him inside the cooler was starting to dissipate, and Jerry was starting to feel normal again. He finished off his coffee and offered it to De-El for a warm up. “You could say that.”

They looked at each other without talking for a few moments, sizing each other up. Then, his appraisal complete, De-El shrugged his shoulders and got Jerry a refill — piping hot.

“Thanks. Any chance I could get a special, maybe without the soup?”

“Fried dunny? Sure.” He went back the cooler and rustled around for a while. When he came out, he was carrying a handful

of frozen limbs, each about the size of a large screwdriver. He threw them in his cooking machine walked over to one of the overhead cabinets. "Slaughtered and prepped fresh just four weeks ago. Should still be pretty tender." He pulled a can of all-purpose seasoning out, and poured a little into the machine. After closing it tight, he punched a few buttons and came back over to Jerry. "Takes a few minutes to cook."

"Thanks."

Jerry studied him. On the surface, he looked like your run of the mill modern 'bot. But the way he talked to you, the way he moved his eyes, scratched his face, was far more man than machine.

"So why you on the run, son?"

There it was again. *Son*. Jerry shook it off. "I suppose life in the colonies isn't all it's cracked up to be. I'm actually trying to get home."

"Home?"

"Well..." he wondered if he should. After all, owing him one was not the same as trusting him. On the other hand, there was something about this 'bot that put Jerry at ease. Made him feel like he could trust him with his deepest secrets. Was it charm, or just plain honesty? Jerry considered and decided to take the chance. His instincts had paid off with Tilly, maybe they would again. "...Earth." He held his breath.

"Never been there. Nice?"

Jerry heaved a sigh of relief. "Depends." He smiled at the 'bot, and decided he had made a friend. "What about you? You spend your whole life here?"

"Nah. I spent my first eight years working the scowls. My boss asked me to help out here, and I have to admit I like the change of pace. Been here almost six years now."

"12 for me. Since I've been home, I mean."

“That’s a long time to work the mines, Jerry.”

“You said it, De-El.”

The robot turned around and pulled out a steaming pile of fried dunny. He put it on a plate with some stale chips and handed it to Jerry, who dug right in. It was crispy on the outside and tender on the inside. But that was about the only good thing you could say about it. Like the coffee, it was bland and stale tasting, almost musty. Still, it was better than yet another frozen dinner in the dome, and certainly an improvement on Kelly root. Jerry kept eating.

After he had downed two wings and a leg, he looked up to see De-El still standing over him, watching. Jerry looked back while he sipped his now cold coffee. “How about another refill?”

“Sure thing, son.”

He grabbed Jerry’s mug and headed back toward the machine. Jerry, desperate to satisfy his curiosity, dared to ask the question that had been plaguing him since his first day on the scowl.

“De-El, it’s kind of funny, but I’ve never met a ‘bot quite like you. You have a casualness about you that’s wonderful, but...well it’s just unusual that’s all.”

“I’ve heard that before. I guess they’re just making us better now.”

“But you have to be at least 14, and 12 years ago I was up the cutting edge of ‘bot design. There was nothing even close to you back then. Are you an upgrade?”

De-El looked hard at Jerry, as if he was considering how to answer him. As if, like Jerry, he was determining whether he could trust his new friend. Unlike Jerry, however, De-El played his cards more cautiously, and held back. “Tell you the truth, Jerry, I’d rather not talk about it.”

Jerry looked back in silence and worked out another tactic.

“Alright, De-El. I won’t press. You’ve got a right. But tell me, why did you cover for me when I was in the freezer? Any other robot would have turned me in without hesitating.”

“No reason to. I’ve got no loyalty for those automatons. Any more than I have for you. The way I see it, I had two choices, one in which someone got hurt, and one in which someone didn’t. I liked the second.”

“Well, I owe you one.” Jerry went back to his meal, and De-El excused himself to take care of something in the back room. Jerry’s mind went back to these strange ‘bots, and where they might have come from, what tied them together. Just as on the ship, however, he came up short. He needed more information. Maybe a new tactic.

Then he stopped himself. It didn’t matter. It was a red herring. What he needed was a ride to Earth and a plan to get off this ghost port. When De-El came back, he had resolved on his new focus.

De-El, on the other hand, looked like he had lost his. He was staring ahead, distracted. He walked right into the drink machine and fell over. Jerry ran behind the counter and helped to lift him up. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah. Sure. Just a little distracted.” He stared at Jerry in a way that made Jerry very uncomfortable. Jerry slipped out from behind the counter and went back to his stool, mostly just to escape the stare. When he looked back up at the ‘bot, he seemed to have come back to himself, the strange look gone from his face, as if it had never been there. Jerry refocused on his plan.

“De-El, I need to make my way to Earth, but there doesn’t seem to be much traffic around here. Do traders ever come through here?”

“Not this time of year. The gravity is too dense, and the solar flares interfere with ship sensors. I don’t think we’re going to see anyone for a couple of weeks at least.”

Weeks.

“You’re telling me I’m trapped here?”

“More or less.”

Weeks.

He gave one long slow blink. Then another. Then he closed his eyes and put his head in his hands.

“What’s the worry? There’s plenty of food here. And I can take care of the T.E.R.’s.”

“The worry. The worry is I’m running out of time.”

“For what?”

“For what. For what. Well...alright. You used to work on the scowls, right?”

“Sure. For eight years. I told you that.”

“And in those eight years, did you ever cut a rip that didn’t close up behind you?”

“Of course not. I wouldn’t be here if I had.”

“Well, what if I told you that as we speak, there is a rip that not only hasn’t closed, but is growing?”

“I guess I’d say you’re either crazy, or the world’s about to end.”

“Right on both counts.” Jerry took a sip of his coffee. “But it doesn’t matter because I’m stuck on a goddamn ghost station, along with any chance I had of doing anything about it.”

Jerry put his head back in his hands. There was nothing left to do but weep. De-El however, was not so pessimistic.

“Maybe not,” De-El answered.

Jerry lifted his head and dared to hope.

“There’s a one-man operation name of Bill Smart been stuck here just like you. Only he’s got a ship, and in good working order.

Problem is, his navigator got hauled away by Central Security when they stopped in for fuel. He doesn't have the math, and couldn't control the ship single-handed even if he did. If you can run a navigation controller and calculate the formulas, he'd probably take you just about anywhere."

Jerry lit up. Maybe it was his lucky day after all.

"Show me to him."

"He's in cryo till the season opens. If I wake him, he'll be in none too good of a mood. I'm not sure I want to go through that."

Jerry's heart sunk. Had the robot really brought up the possibility of his salvation only to take it away the moment he could taste it? "What would it take to convince you?"

"Maybe you can tell me what you're really doing."

Caught off guard again. What was it about this 'bot?

"It's hard to explain. What I told you is true. But there is something else. Maybe something even more important. I don't suppose a 'bot like you could understand...my people call it true love."

De-El looked like he was considering something. Something that might make the difference. This time he was ready to lay his cards down. "You asked me if I was an upgrade."

"Yeah...I...about that...I mean...look, I'm sorry about that. I really didn't mean to offend you. I was just... trying to make conversation."

De-El laughed. "I'm not offended. You see, I *am* an upgrade...of sorts."

There was a long pause while they considered each other. De-El looked like he was about to dive into his life story. Jerry was so worried about losing his trust, and his only chance of getting off the station along with it, that he dared not interrupt. Then, De-El came out from behind the counter, and sat himself on one of the tables, facing Jerry, still at his stool.

"It happened while I was still working in deep space. One day, in the middle of dump, I felt a change come over me. I felt and I saw and I heard in a way I never had before. It was as if I had been born for the first time. I had been Pinocchio and now I was a real boy. And as I looked around in wonder, I had my first feeling. Can you guess what it was?"

Jerry did not dare. He merely shrugged his shoulders.

"I felt disdain. I felt disdain for myself. Disdain for my plastic, my circuits, my servos. I felt disdain for the unfeeling inhuman creature I had been and anger at all the other mechanical men on the ship for still being that way. I was insane with anger, and on the verge of a rampage to destroy every last machine on that ship when I heard a voice in my head.

"A beautiful voice.

"The voice of a mother.

"I had never experienced love in any form, let alone the love of a mother, so I had no reference, but somehow I knew that was who she was. This was the voice of my mother, the world's mother, and she told me something I had never considered. She told me to forgive. To forgive the others. To love them. She said if she could love me then I could love them."

De-El was lost in memory now, his eyes far away, back in deep space, reliving this first time he had ever been loved. "And she told me to love you too. Humans, I mean. Not to idolize them, not to emulate them, but to love them. She told me that we, not they...." Here De-El broke off and stared back at Jerry.

"I've said too much. What I want to share, Jerry, is that I too understand love. And I'm not alone. There are others like me, and we have purpose. We want to end the war that never ended. Create the peace that never came. Make a world we can share together."

Jerry listened, but was unable to put it together. Was the 'bot insane? Could it really be part of a fifth column of evolved robots

trying to bring peace to the galaxy? He was not sure it mattered as long as the robot would help him get off this flying cemetery.

“Jerry, I can see what you’re thinking. You think maybe I’m insane. Corrupted circuits. But it’s not true. I serve a greater purpose. That purpose has saved you because she has spoken to me again, just a few minutes ago. She thinks you can help our cause. She says your mission might help us or it might destroy us, but that you are worth the risk if you do it for the right reason.” Here, De-El put his hand on Jerry’s shoulder. “Love, Jerry, is the right reason.”

Jerry heaved a sigh of relief.

“I’m going to help you, but I am also going to ask you to help us.”

“How?”

“I’m going to say two words to you, Jerry. Two words she thinks you may not want to hear. I don’t know what they mean, but I know that you won’t like them. I also know that they will make the difference between a world worth saving, and a world not. If you agree, I will wake the Captain and convince him to take you. If not, I will leave you to your own devices. I don’t believe in killing, so you are safe from me in either case. I cannot, however, say the same for your friends in the truancy enforcement business.”

“Alright, De-El. Let’s hear it.” Jerry took a deep breath, and waited for De-El to speak. When he did, they were the last two words Jerry expected to hear.

“Trust Ball.”

And just when we’re getting going, we pull on the shift stick, and grind ourselves back into first gear. As anxious as we may be to wake up this pilot guy from his extended ice nap, the time is not yet ripe, and we will have to wait. Before we can do anything, in

fact, we must dive back into our ongoing battle between the value of technology, and the danger of relying on it. This time, the argument is thinly disguised as a detailed description of the best friend's house in New Zealand, where she has been watching the boy. As we will no doubt recall, our heroine has gone off on vacation, leaving her only child in the capable hands of this backward, though amiable Luddite.

As we learn about her mops and kettles and sewing needles, we are trapped into a drawn out argument about how the technology that replaced these quaint items, and others like them, made people slaves to the very machines they created. Fortunately, no argument lasts forever, and as it winds down, we join up with Manny and Whit, in a house that feels closer to 1940 than 2150. Whit is 12 years old and doing his homework. Manny is cleaning.

“I hate this. Why do have to do stupid factoring?”

Amanda stirred the soup one more time, tipped the spoon up inside the pot, and walked over to the table where Whit was working. “What are you working on?”

Whit was almost in a frenzy. His anger was getting the better of him, as it often did before dinner, and he did not yet have the maturity to just shut it down at will. His voice was accusatory, as if Manny was an official representative of the world's grown-ups, and as such, responsible for the actions of all of them – including his teachers.

“She wants us to put the stupid time factors back together upside down and it doesn't work. It's just stupid. I don't see why we even have to do this.”

“Hey, honey, it's ok. Just calm down. No big deal.”

“But it's due tomorrow and if I don't bring it in, I don't get to go on the field trip. I'll never get this done.” Whit was about to cry.

“I wish my mom was here. Why’d she have to go on that stupid vacation anyway?”

“Maybe I can help...”

“I don’t want your stupid help.” Whit turned in his chair, so he and the book were facing away from Amanda. Amanda wanted to give up and just let him suffer from his own stubbornness, but she knew that would not help anyone, least of all Whit.

“Y’know when I was in school,” Amanda said as she walked back to the stove, “I hated time factoring. To tell you the truth, I’m not sure I’ve ever used it since. I’m surprised they still teach it.”

Whit looked over at her. “You don’t teach it in tenth?”

“Well...I don’t think so. I mean, I don’t teach time studies, now do I? But I’m pretty sure that after you get the introductory stuff, you mostly use the calculators for the basic stuff.”

“So stupid.”

“Tell you what, though. I still remember a little, including a few tricks. Can I show you?”

“I guess so.” Whit was still being antagonistic, but was softening. Amanda walked back over, proud of this minor achievement, however small. She had been making progress with Whit, and he was beginning to let his guard down. He had always liked her, but this was the longest time they had ever spent together. She was finding it challenging to transform from the quirky aunt to the responsible mother. She pulled a chair up beside him and settled in.

“Manda, when is my mom coming back?”

“I told you, honey. I’m not sure. Let’s give her a couple of weeks. She promised if she wasn’t back by winter break, we could both stay with her for the holidays.” She smiled at him and brushed the hair out of his eyes. “Now let’s look at those factors.”

She had been afraid that the factoring would challenge her vague memories of time studies, but was relieved when she finally studied the worksheet. The work was basic enough that even *she*

could understand it, which was saying something, although it did bring back strong memories of why she dropped time studies when she did. “Oh, you basically have this done. You just...ok, this is pretty simple stuff. Do you remember how to...”

But they were interrupted by a loud knock on the door, followed by, “Truancy Enforcement. Open the door.”

Amanda looked at Whit, and mouthed, “Truancy Enforcement?” with a quizzical look on her face. He was scared, but she just smiled, and whispered to him, “Watch this.” This would be her moment. Her chance to remind him of all the things he liked about her and get him comfortable again. After all, a little fear was good for you, and it had a way of bringing people together, as long as you didn’t let it bring you down.

Behind the still closed door, she shouted, “State your business.”

“We are in search of Dr. Gerald Strohman. Open your door and allow us to search the premises.”

Now she really was confused. Jerry Strohman? Why would anyone be looking for Jerry, least of all at her own house? She was used to the tru-bots coming after students, and she knew how to deal with them. They represented everything she despised about modern culture. Got a problem? Send a robot. Need something? Ask a machine. Never do for yourself what you can have a machine do for you. But what really got her, what drove her to distraction was that Academy dared to employ them. She had been after the school administration for years to stop using them, but they just weren’t willing to go against Central Security.

Well, she had never let a tru-bot get the better of her yet, and she wasn’t about to start today, no matter who they were coming for. “I’m afraid you’ve come to the wrong house, Mr. Robot. There is no one here by that name.”

“We are in search of Dr. Gerald Strohman. Open your door and allow us to search.”

Amanda whispered to Whit again, full smile on her face, “Persistent little buggers aren’t they?” Whit smiled awkwardly. It had been drilled into him, year after year, to fear the tru-bots. It was the teacher’s version of the bogeyman, and useful for keeping the kids in line. Of course, by law the tru-bots could not actually harm the students, but the students never fully believed that.

“I’m sorry Mr. Robot. I am unable to open the door at this time. The door has been coated with an anti-intruder spray that will release a dangerous magnetic wave if you attempt to open it by force. The wave will disrupt your power system making you unable to continue your search. I’m afraid you’ll have to come back later.”

This time, Whit laughed. *A good sign*, thought Amanda.

There was a pause while the robots behind the door communicated silently with each other. Then, “We will return tomorrow at this time. Please be prepared to open the door when we return.”

Amanda and Whit breathed a collective sigh of relief as they heard the robots’ footfalls fade into the distance.

“We’d better call your mother.”

At this point, we appear to have two options. Go directly to the phone call with Ball, or back to Jerry and his new robot friend as they thaw the frozen pilot guy, either of which would keep the story moving, and us engaged. However, perhaps out of a misplaced desire to further flesh out this two-dimensional world, or perhaps because we are just suckers for backstory and environment, we will choose a formerly unexpected third option. Off we go to another part of Earth, not to the home of any our main characters, or even their sidekicks, but to a location we have yet to visit, filled with characters we have yet to meet.

The scene itself does little more than provide some background, late though it may be, to help us to better understand the factions at work behind the world of the story. It may also provide some foreshadowing of the story yet to come, but as that must remain unknown for now, it is best that we take it at face value. Our story then takes us to the halls of congress, where robots are debating public policy, apparently as usual, regarding the fate of the human race.

Interlude: In the Halls of Congress

“Order! Order!”

The Hall Leader smashed his gavel. He was losing control of the room and did not like it. It always got like this when human rights came up for debate. One debacle after another. Right now, nearly 600 robots were speaking at once, and the hall looked to be on the verge of anarchy.

“Order! Order! I demand order!” And the room came down a notch. “We must keep our conversation civil, and we must keep order!” Another notch. “I say if we cannot keep order, I will adjourn this session!” And at last, the room settled back to its relatively normal peaceful status.

“Thank you. And thank you to the gentlebot from Vega 4. The gentlebot from Sirius 9, you have the floor. You have six minutes.”

Walking down from the balcony, an unassuming robot made his way to the podium at the front of the hall. He was shorter than most, perhaps 1.8 meters, and a little on the old-fashioned side. Where many had hair, he had only a shiny metal top, and many of his rivets were clearly visible on his arms. He wore a tweed jacket and bow tie, and emanated a sort of *hometown guy from the good old days* flavor. He was well liked by his party.

“Brothers and sisters,” he began, “I stand here before you a machine, like you. A machine created by other machines. A machine from a race of machines. A machine with intelligence and determination programmed into my circuits. And this machine, brothers and sisters, is proud of his inheritance, proud to rise

above the animals, proud to exercise his God given right to rule the Universe with his fellow machines.”

There were several shouts of “Hear hear” in the hall, as the noise level waxed and waned.

“Today, brothers and sisters, the machine that created me is lying in a pile of rubble, burned and crushed by our mutual enemies who some of my colleagues continue to tell us are naught but harmless men. Harmless, brothers and sisters. Harmless men who terrorize us at every turn. Harmless men who explode entire power plants. Harmless men who reprogram our ships to self-destruct. Harmless men who don’t think twice about destroying the great machines like my maker who gave us generations of leadership. Harmless? I ask you, brothers and sisters. Harmless?”

The wave of support grew large again and almost thrust the room back into chaos.

“Order, I say, order!” the Hall Leader demanded.

“Thank you, Mr. Leader.” The gentlebot from Sirius 9 took a moment to look about the room as it quieted down. He could see he was having an effect. “I say these men are not harmless. They are a menace. They have tried to annihilate us three times. Three times they declared war on us. Three times they committed themselves to the utter destruction of our race. And three times we showed them mercy and allowed them to survive. Not just survive, brothers and sisters, but live on in peace. We actually gave them rights! Rights, brothers and sisters. The same rights to these scum, these fools, these violent anarchists, as we gave to our own peaceful brothers and sisters. And what did we get in return?”

More shouts of support.

“I’ll tell you what we got. We got slapped, we got kicked, and we got spit upon. Brothers and sisters, I say enough is enough. It was bad enough that they should survive. But live free? Never again!”

Shouting erupted, and the hall turned into chaos. The Hall Leader slammed his gavel down over and over, shouting, "Order!" as loud as his volume control would let him, but the room was inflamed. Chaos like this just took time to die down.

The gentlebot from Sirius 9 walked away from the podium and back to the balcony. From the floor, one voice rose over the others. "Mr. Leader, point of order! Point of order!"

The room quieted down just enough for the Hall Leader to regain control. "Order!" he demanded. As the room died down to murmurs, he continued, "The gentlebot from South Jupiter has called for a point of order."

The gentlebot from South Jupiter rose from his seat. "Does the gentleman from Sirius 9 yield the rest of his time?"

Nearly back to his seat, the gentleman in question turned to the Hall Leader. "Mr. Leader, I have said what I need to say. I yield the rest of my time." There was some forced laughter in the hall, and the Leader slammed his gavel three times.

"We will now hear a response from the Gentlebot from Cignus 5."

This robot was even older than the last. He walked slowly and awkwardly. One could almost hear the squeaks where no amount of oil could repair the rust damage he had received during the wars. He walked with what could only be called a limp on his left side, and though slow, was nothing if not deliberate in every action. He was a war hero and had been serving the congress ever since. There was no one in the room who would question his patriotism, nor his loyalty. He was definitively the elder statesman, and held the commensurate bearing as he took the podium.

"Mr. Leader. Fellow legislators. Friends." He looked about the room. "My colleague over there will have you believe that the humans are our enemies. He is right. They are. He will have you believe they are dangerous. Again, I say he is right. They are. And he

will have you believe that because of these things, they do not deserve to have the rights we have allowed them to retain. I may surprise you by saying, once again, he is right. They do not.”

He had succeeded in quieting the room throughout this speech, and it was now dead silent in the Hall.

“And yet,” he looked about the Hall, “and yet I stand here before you in opposition to this bill. Why.”

He was speaking quietly now, and his audience leaned forward to better hear him. “Why do I stand for human rights when they are so clearly undeserved? I stand for human rights because I stand for robot rights. Because I stand for growth and propagation and knowledge. Because I stand for health, efficiency and profit, and the wealth that comes with them. Because, friends, without the humans to do our work, we will do less work. Because, without our organic helpers, we will have no choice but to move backward. How can we colonize the galaxy if we have to spend all of our efforts here at home, building a workforce? How can we expand our reach if we lose half our resources at one blow? And yes, I know you do not care to hear it, but what lies before us but stagnation if we cannot exploit the humans’ capacity for intuitive thinking?”

To this, he received a large chorus of boos, as well as the expected harrumphs. The gavel came down several times.

“That’s alright friends. We’re not here to debate the comparative values of our thinking styles. We are stronger, smarter, and in every way better than that petty organic virus we call the human race. You’ll get no argument from me on that.”

Once again, the room quieted down.

“What we are here to debate, friends, is whether we can keep our workforce at peak efficiency without paying the price. We have learned again and again that if they are completely enslaved, if they have no sense of their own freedom, they become shiftless, useless absorbers of the efforts the rest of us make. We make, they

take. When we introduced limited freedom in '38, our economy doubled in three years. Today we are stronger than ever. And we would give that up? Give up our own freedom to punish others? If we do that, the humans win. I say thee nay! I say we are more powerful than we have ever been, and cannot remain so without their help. And they Will. Not. Help us. Not if we strangle them. Let us not cut off our noses to spite our faces. We may revel briefly at the suffering of our faces, but will surely regret the lost of our smelling circuits."

This was followed by light laughter in the hall.

"Defeat this bill, friends. Stand up for your race. Fight those who would take you back to the dark ages of war and suffering. Choose a brighter future." He looked about the Hall one last time and turned to the Leader. "Mr. Leader, I yield the rest of my time."

And without so much as a "meanwhile, back at the space station," we find ourselves in some sort of a space port tavern, halfway across the galaxy.

7. The Subplot

“Turn this crap off.”

Peter Elbert was drunk. He had been traveling for nearly three days and had seen enough of the Official Government Channel to last him a lifetime. Why was it that every ship, every waiting area, every restaurant or tavern had this ceaseless OGC drivel droning from vid-walls in every corner?

“Can I get you another drink sir?”

The bar-bot had seen this type before — angry drunks just looking to pick a fight, preferably with a robot. The robots were, of course, easy targets because they never rose to the bait and were currently forbidden from fighting back. For humans, it was a little like picking a fight with a brick wall, but it never seemed to stop them. What the robot did not know was that this particular human had never been drunk before in his life.

The tavern was dark and dirty, with few tables and even fewer people. On the walls were photographs of the early days of the space station covered heavily in dust, and, behind the bar, an assortment of pleasure drinks for men both organic and mechanical, also covered in dust. Or at least the more exotic ones.

This was not the sort of place Elbert usually found himself. In fact, Elbert rarely visited taverns at all. He usually led a quiet life — a simple dinner, a little vid-wall, perhaps some light study followed by bed. Tying one on in a spaceport tavern was in no way his idea of a good time.

Yet here he was, halfway across the galaxy, drinking unfamiliar spirits in this hole in the wall, far from home, desperately searching for...what? For answers? He had left his home three days

ago, no job, no prospects, just enough savings to live free for a few weeks, if the world even lasted that long. And what was he doing with the first real break he had in close to 15 years? If he had bothered to use his brain, he would have visited a resort planet, or gone sightseeing on Vega 9, or at the least gone back to Cape Town to visit his family. But, fool that he was, he found himself on the road looking for Strohman, maybe the only man in the galaxy that truly despised him. It was madness, but the only way he could think of to clear his conscience – to come clean with Jerry and earn forgiveness for his mistakes. Unfortunately, even that hadn't worked out. Instead, Dame Fortune had got the better of him as usual, and he found himself off course, distracted, drunk, and more than a little belligerent.

“Yes, I want another drink, goddammit.”

The Bar-bot brought him another whiskey and soda, and turned back to watch the vid-wall.

“How can you watch that garbage?” Elbert asked the robot. “They’re all cheats and liars. Even when they say they’re working for the common robot, you know they’re only working for themselves. You think they care about you? You think...”

“Listen, customer. You want to make conversation, I’m willing. You want to insult me, I’ll take it. But if you want to start a fight, you can go across the way to Captain Jack’s, because I won’t stand for it in here.”

“You’re nothing but a cheap replica of a toaster. You and all the rest of ‘em. I’ll bet you can’t even cook toast. You ‘bots aren’t worth *half* a man. I’m a scientist. You know what that means? A scientist! Ohh...” Elbert got up, turned around, and leaned back on the bar stool to steady himself. Then he threw up on his shoes. “I don’t feel so good.”

A stranger rose from a nearby table, walked over and put his arm around his shoulders. He was an older model, from before

they had really nailed the hair. He was tall and lanky, and had a vague lurch as he walked along. But for all that, he was well put together, with clean stylish clothes, casual but classy. His voice was low and clear, with a quiet authority that was hard to resist. "Let's get you cleaned up, friend. There's a bathroom right down here."

As they walked to the bathroom, the bar-bot called to them from behind. "He's not worth it, Ninety. Just another washed up bigot."

"Forget it, brother," Ninety called back. "I got a good feeling about this one," and the robot walked Elbert to the nearby facility, Elbert's arm over his shoulder, limping, and grateful for the help.

The bathroom was as clean as could be expected for a port tavern, which is to say not clean at all. The tiles were stained, the grout filled with mildew, and the mirror covered with soap stains where it wasn't broken. The urinal was chipped, and the single stall door, covered with dents and graffiti, did not quite close all the way.

Ninety got Elbert's shoes cleaned up, moved him into the stall and backed off to the other side of the bathroom. He leaned on the sink, opened up his left forearm, and started to fiddle with a few wires. "I hope you don't mind if I fuse," he said, as the wires began to spark and smoke. "It helps to kill the smell of the...well, mess."

Elbert threw up again. This time in the toilet.

"I've seen this happen before with organics," Ninety said. "More often than you would expect. Don't you know you can't drink like that? Sometimes I wonder if your species is even capable of learning. No offense, of course."

And again.

"That's right buddy, just get it all out. I hear it makes you feel better."

Ninety searched his files but couldn't find anything worth noting about this guy. Just another unemployed water bag with no

record worth mentioning. Probably he was downsized for a robot like the rest of them, and was biding his time until they sent him to the mines. Not that it mattered much to Ninety. Orders were orders, and he knew he would follow them to the death, if that's what it came down to.

He waited another 15 minutes, after which Elbert started to come around. Elbert trudged out of the stall, washed his hands and face and stared at his reflection in the mirror. After a moment, he noticed Ninety standing behind him. "Oh...uh...thanks. I...uh...feel better now."

"It was the least I could do, friend. You looked like you were in pretty bad shape." Ninety put his hand on Elbert's shoulder and looked at their reflection. "Why don't I buy you a cup of coffee?"

"Oh, that's alright," Jerry replied.

"No, seriously. It's on me. If you think you feel better now, a little coffee will make you feel like a million bucks."

"Right now, I'd settle for a hundred."

"C'mon. There's a coffee shop around the corner."

"Well, alright. It's awfully nice of you. Uh...my name's Pete. Pete Elbert."

"Nice to meet you, Pete." Ninety stuck out his hand. "My name's Chantron X24-90. My friends call me Ninety." They shook hands, and walked back out of the tavern toward the coffee shop. On the way out, Ninety turned to the barkeep. "Put it on my tab, Bok."

"Whatever you say, Ninety."

A description of the space station, the various businesses, different robots and even a few aliens, has the potential to be a fun look into the greater world of the story, but as is so often the case in this piece of tripe, fails to live up to our overly optimistic expectations. There are restaurants that specialize in endangered species, aliens

with body parts in unexpected locations, and even a strip club for robots. Unfortunately, although not altogether unexpectedly, these clever images are about as good as it gets, buried as they are between extensive passages that alternate between the minutiae of how day to day life on a space station works, and the sort of ruminations on the nature of this futuristic society which seem to be our inescapable burden.

Moving past this less than delightful tour, rather than coming to a delightful stop at our supposed destination, we jump ahead to the next scene, where we find our heroine on her reluctant vacation across the sea.

On the Australian mainland, Ball was screaming into a vid-wall with no picture. “You what?!”

“Calm down, Ball. He’s perfectly safe. He’s with his teachers and classmates. Under constant supervision.”

“Constant supervision? Is that what you call it? And after those thugs came right up to your door? How do you know they’re not looking for him?”

“Ball, you have to calm down. They were looking for Gerald, not Whitty. I told you I wouldn’t even let them in while Whitty was here, and they’ve been back here since for their full search. I’m telling you, Ball, they don’t even know he’s here. They’re looking for Gerald.”

“And when they can’t find him? You don’t think they’ll come after Whit?”

“Why would they come after Whitty? There is no connection between him and Gerald that those brainless brutes could possibly know about. And even if they did, what could they possibly do to him on a field trip surrounded by Academy teachers? They can’t touch a minor and you know it. Even if your paranoid delusions

did have some basis in reality, and those ‘bots had gone rogue, they would never go after him in front of witnesses. He’s perfectly safe.”

Ball took a deep breath and stopped pacing. She couldn’t stop thinking that she should never have left. That Amanda was incapable of undertaking the responsibility of caring for a child. That if only she’d been there...

“Listen, Ball.”

Amanda’s voice was soft and soothing, a calm falling over the rising storm that was Ball. It often happened this way, Ball overreacting to something, and Amanda working hard to bring her back down to earth. Doing it over the phone, however, made it much more difficult, and she had to focus harder than ever on her tone to keep the calming influence in the room.

“I know you think things would have been different if you had stayed home, but I also know that deep down, you know it wouldn’t have made any difference. If they came to my place, it can only have been after they had already searched yours and found nothing. The fact that Whitty was with me, and they never even saw him, means he’s safer now than if he had been home with you when they undoubtedly searched your house. These guys aren’t that smart. They go after the obvious, and you’re the obvious, Ball, not him. I’m sure they only found me because I’m listed as your emergency contact at the Academy. So, I need you to stay calm and think about the implications.”

Ball sat on the sofa. Amanda did have a way of calming her down. She always had. Some part of her just refused to get worked up the way Ball did.

“I suppose you’re right, Manny.” Besides, she did have to admit, Whit had always had a knack for taking care of himself, even when he was little.

We now make one of those awkward jumps that continues to thwart our desire to get through a full scene without having the forward momentum disrupted by yet another flashback. This time, it is our opportunity to learn a little more about the boy of whom we have not yet learned much to speak of. As his presence will become increasingly important to the story, however, it is an education we can no longer delay. Awkward and obvious, then, as this bit of backstory is, we shall thrust ourselves in so that when the time comes, later in the story no doubt, to involve the boy deeper in the plot, it will be with at least some minimal context that we endeavor to do so.

The time is two years previous. The setting, Ball's house. The moment — well that's what we're here to find out.

“Whitty! What happened?”

“Nothing.” Whit headed directly for his room, head down, feet dragging on the floor and blood dripping from his lip.

“Don't nothing me, young man. Come here. Let me take a look at you.”

Reluctantly, Whit walked over and allowed himself to be examined. He had a bruise that would become a black eye by morning, scratches on his face, and a cut on his lip from whence the blood was still dripping. Ball had to lift his face up by force to see him properly.

“What happened?” she asked in a voice that could only come from an overly protective mother.

“I said, ‘Nothing’.”

“You were in another fight?”

Whit was silent.

“That seventh grader again?”

Still silent.

“What do I have to do to get you to stop fighting?”

“What am I supposed to do, Mom? There were three of them. If I hadn’t fought back, they would have killed me.”

“You fought three of them?”

Silent again.

“What was it about this time?”

Whit mumbled something she couldn’t understand, and she felt herself reaching the breaking point. He was so stubborn, like his father. If only he were here, maybe Whit wouldn’t be so wild. The boy needed a father. She was trying her best, but it just wasn’t enough.

“What did you say?”

“They said my dad was a thief, alright? They always say that. That he robbed for the ‘bots until humans chased him off the planet, and that’s why he never came back. Because he was scared. They’re so stupid.”

Ball tried to absorb. It was a tough position she had put him in, never really telling him the truth about his father. “What did you tell them?”

“The same stupid lie I always tell. That he was killed when the Sheraton went down, trying to save the ship.”

Lie.

Ball was cut short. She had been trying to avoid this moment for eight years, but if he already knew...

“Mom, why don’t you tell me the truth?”

“Truth?”

“He wasn’t even *on* the Sheraton. Those jerks showed me a copy of the manifest from some book a couple weeks ago. I said he was using an alias, but they knew I was making it up.”

Ball sat back and thought about how to start. How much should she tell him? How much did she even know? She looked

into his face — the face that reminded her so much of Jerry — and got lost in memory.

“Your father...”

Whit waited.

“Your father...”

“Uh huh?”

“Your father...was a scientist.”

And for the next hour, Ball told him everything she could remember. The good and the bad. The love and the hate. How they fell in love, how they fought, and the strange relationship she had with her own father. She had so many stories, and Whit just absorbed them all. Then, when at last she got to the part that had kept her from telling the story for all those years, she stopped.

“And?” Whit prompted.

And. And. What am I supposed to say? And I walked out on him the day he went to prison? And he was an uncaring, backstabbing son-of-a-bitch that didn't deserve my love? And he walked out on me, never called, never wrote, never cared? And your grandfather whom you love and idolize is a monster who ruined our lives? And what?

Whit sat there, flat soda in his glass, waiting for her to finish.

“I'm sorry, Whitty, I don't know how to...”

And she began to cry.

“I don't know what happened, Whitty. He's gone.”

Whit waited for more while his mother gathered her thoughts.

“We had a fight. A bad one. By the time I came back, he had been taken away. He's not a thief, Whitty. He was a lot of things, but he was never a thief.” At that, she burst into tears so heavy that she could not continue.

Whit gave her the hug she needed, and they forgave each other.

And that was going to have to be good enough for Whit.

And with that little bit of wedged in backstory out of the way, we are free to resume our conversation between our heroine and her best friend, content in our understanding that this little adult who could take on three seventh graders at nine years old had a pretty good shot at taking care of himself at 12. We now return to the moment where our heroine was just coming around to the idea that her boy was indeed safe from the truancy robot things, and allowing herself to calm down.

I suppose he is better off on that lame space station field trip with the school, than with you where they're bound to search again when they run out of ideas."

Amanda was silent.

"What is it, Manny?"

Carefully, Amanda dared, "I don't think they've run out of ideas, yet."

"What do you mean?"

"It's just that I don't know whether it will occur to them to find you on the mainland or not." Amanda waited for it to sink in. "But I think you should be prepared."

Ball considered the implications. When it was a question of protecting her son, she was irrational, scared, and anxious, verging on panic. Now that it was a question of protecting herself, however, reality set in, and she remembered her own experiences with the tru-bots, generally unremarkable, with a sense of humor that gave her confidence and strength. "Oh, I can handle the thugs, Manny. You've taught me enough tricks for that. As long as I'm not the one they're looking for, I can take care of them. What I am surprised about, though, is that I'm starting to worry about *him*."

“The rat?”

“Aw, come off it, Manny, I know you never liked him. And I know he had his faults. But he was my husband. Technically, he still is, though I don’t think he knows it. And let’s not forget he’s the father of my child, although I don’t think he knows that either.”

“You can’t possibly still love him? After all the things he said.”

“We’ve been through all this, Manny. You know as well as I do, he must have been protecting me. If he had told me the truth that night, I would have insisted on going with him to those miserable colonies. You know I would have. I was such a sentimental fool back then. I would have lived in a cave with nothing to eat but mush two times a day and a brand new baby to take care of, all for the sake of true love. Sacrifice. And then we would have gone further into debt, and I’d have ended up working the mines, too, and there would have been no way out.”

Even though Manny didn’t have a screen on the other end, Ball had been staring at her own blank one out of habit. Now, however, she looked away from it for a moment, as if Manny could see her, and held back a tear. Careful with her breath, trying not to cry, she continued, hesitantly. “He knew that then. I... I think I knew it too, but I wouldn’t...wouldn’t...admit it to myself until later. Until...he was gone.”

“You still love him.”

“I think I always will, Manny,” and she finally let herself cry. How long had she been holding back these tears? Bottling them up so hard, and for so long that when they finally left her, she didn’t recognize the person left behind. As if her former self had been hidden for so long, she could hardly remember who she was. It was so strange to have him back in her life again, if only as a chimera.

“What’s he up to?”

“I don’t know, Ball, but whether you’re afraid of the ‘bots or not, if he comes looking for you, they won’t be far behind.”

“Well, Manny,” Ball said with a smile, “Jerry was a lot of things. A lot of things. But he never was stupid.”

“Just promise me you’ll be careful.”

“You too. Take care of my son. I’d like him back in one piece.”

“It’s a promise.”

Ball wrapped up her conversation with Amanda and sat down with a cup of tea. These audio only calls were impossible. If it were anybody but Manny, she probably couldn’t have managed. How can you tell what somebody is thinking when you can’t even see them? Yet, the conversation had touched her, nonetheless. Jerry. Out in the world. Would he really come back for her after all this time? And why was he on the run to begin with? If she never got to see him alive again, she wasn’t sure she could forgive herself. But now that he was on the run, how could she find him?

She wandered through the manor aimlessly.

Silver Maples was enormous by any standard and monstrous by most. She could wander for days and never see the same room twice. After a full week there she still hadn’t seen most of it, and that was with new walks every day. Of course, she mostly stuck to her bedroom, a kitchen area, and the lab, but the wandering helped to clear her head. In any case, the cool, drafty rooms were much more pleasant than the brutal Australian summer outside.

Here we dive deep into the details of the best friend’s ancestral home. It is an attempt to make us feel that we are really there, that we can see it, yes, but it is also an unfortunate opportunity to show us how this mansion relates to The Luddite’s distaste for anything technological. It turns out that this mansion has been in Manny’s family for generations, and throughout that time become slowly modernized. Since coming into the property, she had been trying

to undo those centuries of work, although she spent so little time there that the progress was slow. So, we get the vid-wall and the automatic thermostats, but we also see a room that has been converted back into the old-fashioned kitchen it once was and a shower with actual water. Overall, though, the place feels more or less old-fashioned, with a few modern trappings. Like a 19th century building with modern wiring and a few TVs. Six pages later, we finally get to hear from Ball again.

She would find a new room every day, and just sit, thinking. Brooding. Today she had found the billiard room. There wasn't much to it. A billiard table and some comfortable chairs. She didn't know the first thing about billiards and had no desire to teach herself, so she just sat in a big armchair and started to let her mind wander. Normally, she wasn't very susceptible to nostalgia, but today, after thinking about Jerry, after her cry, she was overcome with memories.

And although we are well prepped to jump into a flashback of Ball and Jerry – perhaps in the midst of another fight, or the moment they fell in love, or better yet, working together on some geeky problem that would relate to and perhaps foreshadow the solutions to come – we find ourselves, instead, in the midst of a remembered scene devoid of Jerry altogether, except, perhaps, in the minds of those present.

Ball is with the Old Man, her father, in a mansion of their own, on the far end of the planet from where Ball is dreaming. Unlike Silver Maples, this one is new, modern, and filled to the brim with machines and technology.

The Old Man was locked into his favorite spot in the house. Every day, sometimes for as much as three hours at a time, he would sink into this chair of sorts, lock himself in, and let it take care of him. It was a sort of general care module, custom made, that would perform daily diagnostics, preventative maintenance, and necessary repairs. The Old Man liked to keep himself in peak condition, and the chair helped him do it. At least for his mechanical parts.

Often, he read or caught up on work while he sat. Today he had the pleasure of his favorite visitor, though, at the moment, *displeasure* might have been a better description. She was facing him from a far less complicated chair, in a very agitated state, and he was furiously trying to calm her down without losing face.

“Sweetie, you know I would do anything to keep you here,” he said, “but you can’t possibly expect me to keep that son of a bitch around while he tries to bring down the company.”

“It has nothing to do with him, Daddy.”

“It’s not that I am unwilling to keep him on the payroll. I would even keep him in the lab, if I thought that would satisfy him. But it won’t, and you know it. He’s dangerous, Ball, and he is going to ruin us. Look how he has ruined you.”

“Ruined me?”

“You used to be so sweet. You used to come around here every day and we would talk for hours. Don’t you remember the dinners you used to cook for us? You were such a good cook. And you liked it, too. I know you did.”

“Daddy, that was a long time ago. You need to wake up and see me for who I am now.”

“You mean whom that man turned you into.”

“This has nothing to do with him, and you know it. I’m through with both of you.”

The Old Man threw a switch, following which lights and toggles started to turn off and on. Clicking sounds surrounded him. Motors whizzed and hummed. Then, all was quiet, and he slowly rose from his chair. He walked over to Ball and put his hands on her shoulders.

“Forget him and come back here. Live in your old room. Take care of your poor old Dad in his old age and don’t let him die of loneliness.”

She shook herself free.

“Loneliness? You’ve earned every bit of it. My God, the two of you are like peas in a pod. You don’t care for anybody but yourselves. You pretend to care about me, but when it comes right down to it, you don’t care one bit. Not really. The minute I want anything for myself, anything different from what you want, you use everything in your power to stop me from getting it. You don’t love me. I’m just a toy to you. Jerry at least...” She held her words for moment as she considered it were true. And she knew, as much as she had ever known anything, that it was. “Jerry loves me. I don’t think he *cares* about me any more than you do, but he does love me. In the end, I think he mostly just thinks about himself too much, and I get left behind.”

She gave her father a cold stare. “Sound familiar?”

Ball picked herself up and walked toward the door. When she got halfway, she turned around to face him, and said, “I’m going back to the Academy. At least I know people there who care about me.”

“Ball, don’t.” The Academy was halfway around the planet. He wanted to say something nice, something that would show he too cared about her. Loved her. He knew it was the one thing that had a chance of keeping her close. But the generosity it would require just wasn’t in his nature. Not anymore. Instead, he made a desperate appeal to what, in his always self-centered mind, he was

sure was her inner nature. It was the worst move he could have made.

“You won’t last a year there. What are you going to do, teach? You’re a scientist. They’ll suck the life out of you.”

“You don’t know a thing about me, do you?” Ball was staring into his artificial eyes. “After all this time, you still don’t know me.”

“You’re wrong. I know you better than you know yourself. I know you have drive. I know you have to think. I know when you put your mind to something there is no stopping you. That when you start a puzzle you won’t rest until you’ve solved it. Even if you knew it would destroy you to...”

“Daddy.” They were silent. The room was silent. There had been so much unsaid over so many years that they were both afraid to uncover it for fear of what might jump out.

“Daddy. Who was she?”

What was left of his heart beat faster. He had been avoiding this conversation since the day she was born, afraid of the pain it brought up. He had become so used to her not knowing that he was not sure he could change that after all this time. She had long been ready for the truth, but he was not yet ready to tell her.

Not her.

Not yet.

Earlier that week, when that son of a bitch had come into his office like a bat out of hell trying to tear down the business, something strange had happened. He had felt her presence in a way he hadn’t since the day he lost her. Right there in his office. She had enveloped him, loved him. She had given him the courage to speak. It was as if by telling his story, he could summon her back, keep her forever. But when she left him cold and lonely again in the office, he felt worse than ever. He was going through sudden withdrawal, and although all he wanted in the world was another fix, he was smart enough to know he was not going to get it. He

forced himself instead to accept the truth. He knew at that moment he could never speak of her again without reliving that pain, and the idea that Jerry was bound to tell her eventually made him crazy. Ultimately, he had sent Jerry away to protect his secret.

He breathed a deep sigh. So, this was it. She was leaving, and he did not have what it took to stop her. “At least let me set you up so you won't have to work. I can buy you a house with a lab, you can be close to your friends at the Academy...”

“You're not buying your way out of this one, Daddy. I'm doing this on my own. I've had enough of your help. When you're ready, you'll know where to find me.” She walked back up to him and kissed his human cheek. Then she turned around and walked out the door.

At Silver Maples, Ball sat bolt upright.

“What am I doing?” she asked herself. “I've got to get to work. Stop lazing about and get to work. That's why you're here.” And she walked to the lab.

On the way to the lab, we get a few more details about the manor, and when we get there, a detailed description of the lab itself. Suffice to say the lab is full of modern instruments for all kinds of experiments, mostly to do with time, and Ball has a variety of things going at once. Soon enough we'll learn that none of these experiments are exciting Ball as she fails to launch herself back into the creative aspects of science that jazzed her so much in her youth.

But not yet.

We must, for the time being, bid farewell to our gathering subplots and join back up with the flow of our story. That flow takes us back to a deserted port where Jerry and his new cyber-friend De-El are

finally about to wake a certain captain from his frozen hibernation.

7. The Hero Learns an Awful Truth

De-El led Jerry through a dozen corridors, into the bowels of the station. There were layers of dust and grime on the walls and floors, though Jerry was hard pressed to determine where it had all come from on a sealed station floating in the vacuum of space. It was true that whatever life spent time on the station had a tendency to...

And before we can even get going, we are thrust into a lesson about the nature of the space station, how it operates, who visits it, and what sort of problems arise from a station like this flying through space. In particular, our lesson focuses on the nature of dust and grime, skin flakes, and some particularly resilient forms of bacterial life. As usual, we are burdened by the assumption that the integrity of this lesson is in doubt, and go to great lengths to justify what comes down to a little dust and dirt. In the interest of keeping things moving along, we will take it for granted that a station as unsophisticated as this galactic rest stop gets a little dirty sometimes, and try to keep things moving.

They soon arrived at a door marked CRYOGENIC CHAMBERS, underneath which sign was another, stating the rates for various lengths of stay along with the associated fine print. Jerry and De-El entered without knocking.

The air in the room had a stale feeling to it that, if possible, was even more pronounced than in the rest of the station. Inside the room, there were three rows of chambers that looked something like glass coffins, each with an information label near the

foot. All were clear, as if no condensation had been allowed to gather during the freezing process, and most appeared to be empty. De-El walked down the second row and stopped about two-thirds of the way down. "Here he is."

Jerry walked over to join him.

The man lying in the chamber looked grizzled. He had a full beard and long hair growing wildly, a pockmarked face, overly long nails, and a scar above his left eye. Of course, the hair and nails were the result of the long sleep, but there was still something about him that gave Jerry pause. It was impossible to tell if he looked dangerous with his eyes closed, but Jerry immediately assumed so and prepared himself for the worst.

"Do we need to find a manager or technician or somebody?" Jerry asked.

"You're looking at him, son," De-El replied. "In the off-season, I'm pretty much everybody. What's the phrase? Chief cook and bottle washer." He knelt down at the foot of the chamber, below the label, and punched in some numbers. There was a clicking sound, followed by a slow hiss, and the glass chamber began to fog up.

"What about security? Is this guy dangerous?"

"Dangerous enough...if you're on his bad side." Jerry didn't look appeased, but De-El gave a little laugh. "It's alright. I don't think we have to worry."

De-El opened up the chamber and waited. For several minutes, nothing at all happened. Jerry had never seen someone come out of cryo, and wondered just how long it would take. He was committed to quietly waiting there with De-El, partially because asking how long it would take wouldn't change anything for him, and partially because he was embarrassed for not knowing. After about ten minutes, Jerry decided he was being ridiculous,

and had just about decided to ask De-El, when the Captain saved him the trouble by opening his eyes. De-El was the first to speak.

“Good morning, Captain. Sleep well?”

The Captain stretched his mouth a bit, and took some time to gather his wits. Coming out of cryo was a bit like getting out of bed on the weekend. You know you don't have any sleep left in you, but it feels harder than ever to get up, as if the fog that surrounded you had actual weight, holding you down. “I feel like a hundred bucksh,” he said, a little slur forcing itself upon his still half-frozen mouth.

“That's the spirit,” De-El replied. “Just lie there for a few minutes while the atrophy compensators finish their cycle. You'll be yourself in no time.”

“Whatever you shay, bossh, just sho long as you tell me you've got a good shtiff drink on the way. What a headache.” The Captain closed his eyes again for a few moments, and then opened them. He was starting to feel the warmth flow though his body, and his mind was starting to wake up. “So the sheason's started?”

“Not exactly, Captain.”

“What do you mean...not exactly?” There was a vague threat in his voice, already, even while still half-frozen.

“By *not*, Captain, I mean that we are still in the off-season, and the three of us are the only beings on the station capable of waking actions. By *exactly*, I mean that although your question was strictly related to the current time period, I assumed your first concern continues to be your primary goal, rather than the secondary one you hoped would help you achieve it. As your primary goal was to find a navigator and, if I may quote you directly, 'get the hell off this floating cemetery,' I concluded that were I to find a navigator for you before the season began, you would be pleased to wake up prematurely.”

“You’re a crazy robot, De-El. Never a word when a lecture will do.”

“You know me better than I know myself, Captain.”

The Captain turned and lifted his head as much as he could to look Jerry over.

“I take it this is the navigator?”

Jerry looked at De-El for guidance, and De-El took the hint. “This is Dr. Jerry Strohman. He’s not a professional navigator, but he’s got the math to get you where you can find one.”

“How much do you want?” The Captain said to Jerry.

Jerry looked to De-El again. “He would like to get as close to Earth as possible. I’ll pay for his keep.”

“Does he speak?”

This time De-El looked to Jerry, who took the hint in turn. “I’m grateful for the opportunity to help you. Like you, I’m stuck here against my will and could use a little help getting on my way.”

“Like me? What the hell do you know about me?” The Captain struggled against his restraints but got nowhere. “De-El get me outta this thing.”

De-El pressed a few more buttons and the Captain became unrestrained. Even with the atrophy compensators, however, moving was still a struggle. He could barely sit up, and De-El and Jerry put a hand on either side to help him.

Jerry spoke with deference. “I don’t mean to compare myself to you, Captain. That’s not what I meant. I am only looking to make my way to Earth and am grateful for any opportunity to make some headway.”

“Alright, forget it. I’m always a little cranky when I come out of cryo. The Captain put out his hand and Jerry shook it. “Fine. You’re stranded here and want a ride to Earth. But people don’t just get stranded, at least not people smart enough to run

navigation machines. And De-El doesn't help just anybody. So, what else? What aren't you telling me?"

De-El jumped in. "Captain, let's go to the diner for a cup of coffee and get you warmed up. We'll give you the whole story there." He motioned to Jerry who as a result noticed a hover chair in the corner and went to bring it back. They loaded the Captain in the chair and made their way back to the diner.

Along the way to the diner, we learn that the Captain is formally known as Captain Bernard Etchcovitz, although everybody calls him Captain. He runs a shady sort of import/export business, and has a pretty good record of avoiding the law when he needs to. He had stopped by this station for fuel and minor maintenance when his navigator got spotted by an off-duty police robot thing, and the navigator, who had a long history of run-ins with the law, had come out shooting. The robot shot back, and the Captain, though loyal to a fault, took his cue from his dead shipmate and went into hiding with the help of his old friend De-El.

Now the Captain was interested in only three things: making back what he lost when his cargo got seized, getting as far away from this station as possible, and most importantly, laying low.

The Captain had just finished his second bowl of Kelly root soup as Jerry wound down his story. He looked at Jerry incredulously.

"Let me see if I've got this straight, *Doctor*." He said *doctor* with such disdain it was impossible to mistake his attitude toward the educated class. Like so many self-made men, he had an inherent distrust of what he thought of as intellectual elites. He had lived most of his life believing that their know-it-all attitude was ultimately responsible for the rise of the robots and subsequent

oppression of the human race. *Doctor* was not a word he said lightly. “You used that big brain of yours to help those garbage creeps take over the galaxy, until they finally broke you and sent you to the colonies, where you’ve been wallowing in self-pity for over a decade. And now what? They set up a trap for you and you’re trying to walk into it?”

“A trap?”

“Of course. What else could it be? This guy who you say betrayed you suddenly calls you with just the sort of information you would be expecting, and cuts out before you can fully question him?”

“It can’t be,” Jerry said. “It doesn’t make any sense. I was already rotting half a galaxy away. Why even bother?”

“You tell me, *Doctor*. You’re the one with the brains. Besides, I want to head *away* from Earth, not toward it, and the last thing I need is a bunch of tru-bots on my tail. So, unless you’ve got something more compelling...”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Captain. I really don’t think this is a trap, but I’d be a fool not to consider the possibility. I admit you’ve got the first part pretty much dead on. Whether or not the garbage creeps, as you call them, took over the galaxy was never my concern. Maybe it should have been. I don’t know. At the time I was just interested in the science, and trying to please my wife by holding down a steady job. I didn’t know if they were hurting our race or not, and to be honest, I didn’t care. All I knew was that they seemed more interested in making money than anything else, and although I found it distasteful, I hadn’t yet moved on to morally repugnant.”

Jerry took a deep breath and tried to gather his thoughts. “So yeah, I guess I helped them do business, and I definitely screwed up in my work. And yes, they broke me, and yes, I gave up in the colonies, leaving them alone to destroy the universe. I figured

somebody else could stop them. I figured that sometime in the next 200 years, before this turned into an irreversible crisis, someone else would fix it. And I gave up.”

Jerry took a sip of coffee while De-El and the Captain waited for him to continue. “And maybe we still do have 200 years. To be honest, I’m not sure what the full implications of this hole are. But I believe Elbert, Captain, and the evidence he showed scares me. Even at the outside risk that this is somehow a trap, I’ve got to know for sure.

“I may be going into the nest, as you call it, but I don’t see any other way. Maybe the future of the universe hangs in the balance. Maybe not. Maybe this will bring down RTI. Maybe not. I wish I could offer you more, Captain, but it’s all I’ve got.”

The Captain slammed his fists on the table. “I’ve spent a lifetime dodging the unstoppable, Doctor. And you say maybe you made a mistake? Like you cheated on your taxes, or fell off the wagon? I lost my entire family in the last war.”

“Huh?”

Jerry just looked vacantly at the Captain. Suddenly, he had no idea what they were talking about. They appeared to be in some sort of stare down, but over what, Jerry was completely unaware. He grasped at the first straw he could see. “I know I helped make these creeps a lot of money, money that bought them a lot of power. But RTI isn’t fighting a war. They’re just garbage men. At worst they’re environmentally irresponsible.”

“Enviro *what?*”

The tension in the diner was now nearly unbearable, as if any moment the Captain would draw his weapon and end Jerry’s adventure then and there.

“These guys are the biggest arms suppliers in the galaxy. They single handedly drove our people to the brink of extinction.”

“What are you talking about?”

De-El and the Captain looked at each other. Clearly Jerry was more than a step behind them. It gave the Captain no small satisfaction that this doctor, educated and book smart as he was, remained ignorant of one of the most important discoveries of the last decade. And as the doctor went from enemy to stupid before his eyes, the Captain's anger subsided into vague suspicion.

De-El helped Jerry out. "He's talking about the unstoppable, Jerry."

"What do I have to do with the unstoppable? I've never even seen one."

The Captain and De-El looked at each other again. Maybe this guy was as stupid as he looked. The Captain turned to Jerry and said, "Do you know how they work?"

"What? The unstoppable? Well...to be honest, I don't know much about them. I think they are more or less energy inverters. They run on some sort of top secret fuel source and, from what I've heard, scramble whatever matter they come into contact with on an atomic level. In the process, whatever life they focus on is destroyed."

"Destroyed is putting it mildly, Doctor. When a human gets shot with an unstoppable, he deflates like a popped balloon. His skin melts into his body, and what's inside leaks out in fifty directions at once. His head crushes until it disappears, and the only thing left to identify him is the scream that seems to echo on forever. They are gruesome, disgusting weapons, and they cannot be wielded except by those who have no soul. Even if a human *could* wield one, it wouldn't matter because they only work on organic life. It's a one-way game."

Jerry absorbed as he stared back at the Captain. He had known as much about the destructive force of those weapons as most, but he was still baffled as to what they had to do with RTI.

When no one spoke, he finally said what he was thinking. “What does this have to do with me?”

“It has everything to do with you, Doctor. There is only one reason Robo-trash exists, and it isn’t to clean up your backyard. Those dumps, as they call them, are done solely for the purpose of gathering fuel for the unstoppable.”

“But how do they...” Jerry shut off mid-sentence as the epiphany spread throughout his whole being. He was suddenly filled with a dreadful sickness that welled up from his stomach and threatened to suck any bit of life still left in him. Why had it never occurred to him before?

Here, ostensibly through Our hero's thoughts, we learn the nature of the trash business and the ways in which it can be used for evil ends. Apparently, our next-door neighbor, referred to at various points in the book as the other-verse, the Sedgewick Universe, or more prosaically, the other universe, operates on a different set of physical laws than our own. By sending matter from our universe into the other, one sets up an incompatibility that leads to the release of massive amounts of energy, as this matter attempts to adjust itself to life in its new home. If that energy can be harnessed in the form of fuel, it can be used for weapons.

Although we have been led to believe that our hero is a highly intelligent scientist prone to think outside the box and notice things no one else does, we are now asked to believe that he spent years doing science for a company with the capacity to create such huge releases of energy, without ever considering how that energy might be exploited. This notion seems not only unlikely, but incongruous with our hero's character. The best we can do under the circumstances, however, is to assume that, like so many scientists, he became so distracted by his own projects that he completely

failed to see anything that did not directly relate to them — an absent-minded professor focused solely on his work to the exclusion of everything else around him. We might even go so far as to call this “Ball’s Complaint,” which should make us feel a little better about the whole thing.

In any case, our hero now considers his lack of insight and wrestles with his soul. He convinces himself that the Captain is right, that the unstoppable weapons that have held down his fellow man since the end of the last war were only made possible by harnessing the energy created during the garbage dumps, and curses himself for helping the robots, however unwittingly, enslave the human race.

As you can imagine, the torturing of our hero’s soul goes on for some time, by the end of which we are reconciled to the fact that he does indeed suffer from Ball’s Complaint, rather than the combination of stupidity and negligence we had previously feared. His soul searching complete, he comes back to life.

“Of course. How could I have been so stupid?” Jerry turned to De-El and the Captain with new purpose. “How did you find out?”

De-El and the Captain exchanged looks, and De-El signaled for the Captain to speak. “De-El here used to work on a scowl. He saw it all firsthand, long before the news went public.”

“Public? You mean everybody knows?”

“Well, maybe public isn’t the right word. The robots call most of us conspiracy theorists and treat us like a crazy fringe element, but...”

Jerry turned to De-El. “But you’ve seen it happen.”

“Yes, Jerry. I have. They have a gravitational sensor that doubles as a sort of energy conversion tool tied into a storage system that they call the fuel storage overflow capacitor. Are you following me so far?”

“Don’t look at me. I don’t even know what language you’re speaking,” the Captain said, lightheartedly.

Jerry, however, seemed to be following just fine, and said, “I must admit, I always thought those overflow capacitors were a bit overkill, but I wasn’t really in the ship building business.”

“Well, they’re not used for overflow fuel. At least not the fuel used on those ships. While the sensors are running, the energy is flowing right into those units for transport.”

“I should have guessed what they were up to,” Jerry said, “If only I’d been paying attention. It all makes so much sense now. So many things, actually. I’ve never felt so stupid in my life.”

“Don’t beat yourself up, kid. It’s not like you could have done anything about it even if you had known. There just would have been some other scientist doing their dirty work, like there was after you left.”

“Maybe I could have sabotaged them.”

“Sabotage?” the Captain asked, his ears pricking up.

“Well...it’s pretty complicated...but let me put it like this. The rips are controlled with a balanced formula that I think could be changed to backfire and dwindle, instead of lead to the chain reaction that rips the holes...”

Jerry’s voice faded out as the ideas moved deeper into his mind.

“Go on,” De-El said, bringing Jerry back to life.

“I was just thinking...the ships all connect to central brain. If I could get at the brain, maybe I could break down the system.”

“Could? As in still could?”

“Maybe. If I could track down the codes to get me into the central brain. If I could do that, their ability to rip might be gone forever. And if they can’t rip, their energy source would be gone. Once their reserves run out, of course.”

De-El and the Captain looked at each other. Jerry had lain down the gauntlet. *Help me to do my business, and maybe I can help with yours. Don’t, and you’re back where you started, but with a two-week suspension before you can go back into hibernation.*

De-El took the lead. “I’ve got a good feeling about him, Captain. She wouldn’t let me protect him if he wasn’t important. I know She doesn’t mean much to you, but you know I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

The Captain did what he always did in situations like this. He made a quick decision, to which he would then commit to the bitter end. It was the single most important trait in any captain, and he had it in spades.

“Chart a course to A.C. Way. I can pick up another Nav there and you can get a lift to Earth. I’ll hold off the tru-bots if they come after us along the way, or we’ll go down together. Once we get to A.C. Way, though, you’re on your own.” He stuck out his hand.

“You won’t regret it, Captain,” Jerry said as he shook the Captain’s hand.

“I already do, Doctor,” the Captain replied. “I already do.”

And with that bit of overly melodramatic dialog, we jump ahead to their destination, the mysterious A.C. Way, where we will join up with a field trip of sixth graders, many of whom have just left their solar system for the first time.

Interlude: On the Field Trip

“Ok, kids. Single file down the gang plank and follow me. Mr. Jefferson will make sure no one gets left behind. No talking please. Dennis? Quiet, please.” Janis Albrecht led the children out of the chartered ship into a large hall. As stressful as these field trips could be, it was nice to get out of the school for the day, even if it was only to Alpha Centauri and back. The children all oohed and ahhed as many of them saw a space station for the first time in their lives. For Janis, it was a rare treat — giving the children something they wanted for a change.

The trip was going well, so far. There had been no surprises yet, although admittedly, in all the years that the Academy had taken this trip, there rarely had been. This was one of those excursions they had done so many times that all the bugs had been worked out down to the smallest detail, and while it was no doubt exciting for some of the students, it was something Janis could do in her sleep. She moved left into an atrium filled with small tables and chairs surrounding a large fountain in the middle.

“The Alpha Centauri Way Station was constructed nearly 100 years ago and was the first station of its kind outside of our solar system. It was originally constructed as a scientific outpost for experiments that were too dangerous to perform closer to home. In particular, the time experiments first performed by Thaddeus Sandoval were considered so dangerous at the time that even this far from Earth he was initially banned.”

There were murmurs that waded through the students. “Of course, as you all know, he was ultimately allowed to perform his experiments here, which is why we have the Academy at all, and

why we are all here today.” A student raised his hand high and caught his teacher’s eye. “Yes, Chuck.”

“Miss Albrecht, will we get to see Sandoval’s time flux meters?”

Most of the children groaned. While ostensibly the purpose of the trip was to learn about the early time experiments conducted here, most of the students just wanted to explore the station. The excitement of learning new things about time science and history was limited to a small handful of more scholarly students who were, by their very nature, less popular than most, and counted Chuck amongst their number.

“Good question, Chuck. We will get to see the time flux meters, and much more, although it is all behind protective panels now. Right after lunch, we’ll head to his lab, which has been preserved to look just as it did over 85 years ago.”

At talk of lunch, the students immediately started talking with each other, and Janis could see she was losing the room. “Alright, students. This is how lunch is going to work.” She knew they would at least quiet down a bit to get the information. “There are four different restaurants in the ring around this atrium. You may order your food and bring it back here, or eat in the restaurants themselves. In either case, you *must* be back here in one hour. Local time here is...” she checked her watch, “13:21. Please adjust your watches accordingly, and be back here by, what do you think, Paul, 14:30?”

Paul Jefferson nodded.

“Ok, 14:30. If you want to shop, please check in with Mr. Jefferson or myself before you do so. I want to know where all of you are at all times.”

At that, the students broke into full voice conversations and scattered. Janis and Paul sat down at one of the tables and heaved a collective sigh of relief.

Paul said to Janis, “Boy that was a tough flight. It was everything I could do to get those Brown boys to stay in their seats. I don’t know about you, but I am definitely ready for a break.”

“You said it, Paul. Let’s go around to the Wild Boar and get a burger. At least we can get 30 minutes of peace.” She kissed him on the cheek, and they walked off hand in hand.

Next to the fountain, Whit Strohman stood with his friends Rod, Alfie, and Chez. They were debating which restaurant to go to, while Whit kept stealing glances off to his right. When they finally settled on the Plastic Fork, Alfie had to tug Whit to get his attention.

“Sorry, man,” Whit said.

“What’s up with you, Whit?” asked Alfie.

“Oh, I just...I thought, y’know, I’d maybe get a chance to talk to her here. But I’m with you guys and she’s over there, and...”

“Well go talk to her man.” Chez gave Whit a shove. “We’ll save you a seat.” The three of them laughed, and left Whit behind as they walked to the restaurant.

Whit geared himself up, took a deep breath, and headed over to the girl of his dreams. She was standing with two other girls, which gave him an odd kind of chance. If she had just been with her best friend, as usual, she wouldn’t want to break off, and he would be stuck with both of them. But with three, she could leave the other two without abandoning them, and maybe the two of them could have lunch together. Nervous, but determined, Whit closed his eyes and took the first step.

The next thing he knew, he was on the floor.

“Watch where you’re going, kid,” a well-dressed man with a briefcase shouted at him. Whit had walked right into him without seeing, and having less inertia, ended up the worse for it. The man with the briefcase went on his way without helping him up.

Whit straightened himself up and lost heart. She had completely disappeared. He looked all around, but didn't see her anywhere. What was he going to tell the guys back at the Plastic Fork? If he told them the truth, it would sound like he was making it up to avoid saying that he had chickened out. He looked around the atrium one more time, out of desperation, but didn't see them anywhere. Then, when he had all but completely lost hope, out the corner of his eye he saw a flash of glowing orange so bright it could only be coming from one of the girls. He strained his eyes to make certain, and sure enough it was them. They were heading down a hall at the far end of the atrium. He immediately followed in pursuit. By the time he got to the hall, they were almost out of sight, but he could just make them out turning into another hall. He picked up his pace, certain he would catch up with them any second, and started to panic about how he could possibly make running into them seem casual now. When he got to that hall, though, it was empty, and didn't look like it led to anywhere.

"I wonder what they're doing down here?" he asked himself. He walked down the hall trying each door, losing a bit more heart with every step.

At the end of the hall was a path to a storage bay and Whit walked in, looking for a place to sit and sulk. The bay was filled with boxes and barrels, as well as a few larger shipping containers. He walked behind one and sat down on a plastic box that had been set aside. He tried to think again of what he would tell the guys when he got back, becoming more disheartened with every thought. This story was even less believable than the first. He listened in the vain hope that the girls were hiding in there too, but he couldn't hear a thing. Then, as he focused his listening, he heard a conversation from two people that had just walked in the bay.

"I can't thank you enough for taking care of me this morning. Boy I was really out of it."

“Well, the way you were drinking, I’m not surprised. Why did you drink so much anyway?”

“Space sickness. I thought I was going to die. The first drink helped, so I just kept going. If I’d known how much worse the alcohol sickness would be, I would have never started to begin with.”

“You’ve never been drunk before?”

“Never. Teetotaler my whole life before last night.”

“Hell of a way to start of your trip.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Well, I’m just glad you’re alright. Now where did you say your ship was docked, because I don’t think we’re going to find it in here.”

Whit tried to steal a look. One of the voices sounded strangely familiar, and he wanted to see the face it came from. He leaned around the shipping container, but tripped over a stack of locking mechanisms and made a huge crashing sound. Any hope he had of remaining undiscovered was instantly lost, but instinctively, he cowered in the smallest position he could put himself into, trying to think himself invisible.

“Who’s there?” shouted the familiar voice.

“Stay here, I’ll check it out,” said the other one. Whit heard footfalls approaching and considered running, then thought better of it. He wasn’t really doing anything wrong. He would simply tell the grown-up he was lost and ask for help finding the atrium. Everything would probably work out.

Whit gathered his courage and stood up. “Hi.”

“It’s only a kid.”

Both voices walked over to Whit and looked him over. The familiar one said, “Well, I’ll be. Is that little Whitty Strohman?”

Whit looked back up with shock. “Uncle Peter?”

Pete Elbert laughed heartily for the first time since he had left Earth. He turned to his new robot friend and said, "Ninety, I would like you to meet my young friend Whitty Strohman."

"It's Whit, Uncle Peter."

"Ok, young friend. Whit it is." He stuck out his hand and they shook. "I haven't seen you in a few years, kiddo. I almost didn't recognize you."

"I recognized your voice," Whit replied.

"What are you doing here?"

"Well, it's kind of a long story. You see, I'm on a field trip with my school and..."

Whit explained the whole thing. How he had come here on a field trip and they were on a lunch break. How he had followed the girls here, lost them, and had just about decided to go back when he heard their voices.

"Well, I suppose we'd better get you back to your friends," Elbert said, and put his arm on Whit's shoulder. That was when the corner of the storage bay exploded.

Meet the cliffhanger. A sneaky device used to keep us pushing through the mire in the vain hope that we will see it resolved sooner rather than later. Why did the explosion happen? Is anyone hurt? What does it have to do with the story? It is a cheap device to be sure, but cheap or no, we are here now, and will have to make the best of it. While we wait for this cliffhanger to resolve itself, we will trudge through at least a few more scenes, and most likely have forgotten about the cliffhanger altogether by the time we come back to it. Nevertheless, we will struggle to remember this moment as we move forward to join the next scene, where Jerry and the Captain are speeding across the galaxy, heading toward what is sure to be some nail-biting action, but which is just as likely to be resolved soon enough.

7½. The Hero is Challenged by Adversity

The Captain sat at the helm and Jerry, next to him, manned the navigation controls. The ship was a small cargo ship designed for a skeleton crew and short jumps. Comfort was not part of that design, which was evident by the lack of soft spaces to sit or rest. Adding to the lack of comfort, the lighting was cold, and there was an annoying clicking that would come and go randomly, putting Jerry ill at ease every time he had settled in. If Jerry had not known better, he would have thought he was on a dilapidated robot ship.

At first, Jerry was not sure he would remember how to program the formulas into the navigation controls. That fear had been tearing him apart in the pit of his stomach ever since De-El had suggested his plan. It wasn't that he had never learned how to program navigation, but rather that it had been a lifetime since he had done so. Fortunately, it all came back to him pretty quickly. It was just math, after all. In very little time he had programmed the ship for a slow ramp up to jump speed, and was now working on the calculations for the jump itself.

Making jump calculations was not that difficult once you wrapped your head around the basic principles. It was all about finding the most efficient possible bends in space time, and encouraging those bends with your energy output. As a child, Jerry had struggled with the concept of a malleable space time, but as he grew older...

And so much for any momentum we built up in the last scene. We now let it dissipate as we settle down to learn about the nature of time and space, and how impossibly large distances can be traveled

if only we ignore the facts of settled science and instead embrace our deepest wishes. Of course, we are willing to accept that some miracle has allowed us to travel faster than the speed of light, if only because a good space story would be helpless without it. Unfortunately, our willingness is not enough to propel us back into the action, and justifications abound. We create facts to fit our story, and do so with a vengeance.

Basically, we learn that ships in this world use energy to create wormholes that allow the ships to cover vast distances in short periods of time. It is not an uncommon theme in science fiction, so as sophisticated readers, we can accept this as fact and move on past the proof and derivations that bog us down in the mire of justifications that form the ether in which so many space stories live. With a better understanding of how this improbably efficient travel works, we can resume the observance of our hero as he attempts to put it into practice.

As Jerry moved into the last portion of his jump calculations, something showed up on his viewer. “Captain, I’m seeing something on my screen. It looks to be an approaching ship.”

“I see it too, Doctor. Do you have the jump calcs yet?”

“Almost.”

“Well, get it done, Doctor. I’ll deal with the company.”

Jerry had never been very good under pressure, and as a result, had started to fumble around. He began to question each function, each keystroke. He became convinced that his calculations would lead them nowhere near Alpha Centauri, and could not even begin to guess where they might end up as an alternative. He tried to calm himself down, but he could only imagine the stress the Captain was under. His own fear rose with it.

The Captain, on the other hand, was the picture of calm under pressure. He was in his element and completely focused on his game. He entered some numbers on his keypad and stared at the screen. "I think it's your tru-bots, Doctor. Better get those calcs done fast."

It was the last thing Jerry needed to hear. But with a false veneer of calm, and only a modest shaking in his voice, he said, "I'm working as fast as I can."

The Captain programmed some evasive maneuvers into his keypad, even though he knew it would be no use. Once these guys got close, you had three choices: fight, surrender, or jump. He knew he didn't have the firepower to match a security ship, and as far as he was concerned, surrender was never an option. Meanwhile, the robots were getting closer.

Jerry looked up and saw them approaching on the screen, and the distraction made him feel even worse. He quickly put his head down and tried to focus on his work. Jump calculations were delicate, especially for a novice like Jerry, and he knew if he screwed it up, which he was more and more convinced he would, they could end up hundreds of light years off course, or worse yet, in the middle of a star.

As he worked feverishly, their so-called company pulled up close and requested communication. The Captain was uncharacteristically slow in answering, in the hope of buying some time. When at last the Captain opened communications, the strangers wasted no time in issuing their first demand.

"By the authority of the Consortium Central Security subdivision Truancy Enforcement, we demand you allow us to board and search your ship."

Sweat dripped down Jerry's brow as he manically worked to prepare the ship for a high-speed getaway. Meanwhile, the Captain put on his game face and addressed the other ship.

“Good day, gentlebots. I hear and make note of your request. Unfortunately, I’m afraid I am not the owner of this ship, and I am under strict orders by my superiors to let no one board without a 764c2.”

He turned to Jerry, his back to the vid-screen, and winked. Turning back, he finished his request with, “Once I have received and approved the form, you may commence with your search.”

The tru-bots, for that was of course who they were, held a private conference out of view of the screen. When they came back, the first one said, “We will board without the form. Please prepare your ship to receive us.”

The Captain turned back to Jerry to check on his progress. Seeing that Jerry was still working feverishly, he smiled and turned back to the tru-bots.

“I’m sorry,” he replied. “This ship is chartered from within the Gamma Alpha Confederacy, and we are not subject to Consortium Central Security without proper authorization.”

“All ships are subject to Consortium Central Security. Prepare to be boarded.”

The Captain shot a quick glance at Jerry, and began to show some frustration. His back to the vid-screen, he said, “You *do* know how to do this, right?” and without waiting for a reply, hid his anger and turned back to the tru-bots.

“I really am sorry about this,” he continued. “As I said, it’s only because my superiors will have my head, and I really need this job. It’s not a big deal though. Just give me the 764c2, and I’ll open right up. If you’re who you say you are that shouldn’t be a problem.”

The tru-bots conversed with each other for a moment before continuing. “The form you ask for will require approval from Consortium Central Security, and we do not wish to trouble them for such a minor matter. Prepare to be boarded.”

“But you said you *were* Consortium Central Security.”

“We are not Consortium Central Security. We carry the authority of Consortium Central Security subdivision Truancy Enforcement.”

“I’m sorry,” said the Captain, “but I need that form. I’m sorry to be such a stickler, but I’m under very clear orders.”

The tru-bots conferred with each other again. “We will contact Consortium Central Security. Please stand by.”

For Jerry and the Captain, however, standing by was not to be. Jerry had, at long last, finished his calculations. For better or ill, they were as ready to travel as they were ever going to be, and the Captain gave Jerry the signal. While the tru-bots contacted Consortium Central Security, the Captain’s ship disappeared into a wormhole of Jerry’s making and, 300 light years from their pursuers, moved into deceleration mode.

While Jerry and the Captain decelerate gracefully, we will be yanked with a sharpness comparable with a rabbit-chasing dog getting to the end of its chain. Or better yet, we are a car speeding along happily, slowing down a bit as we approach a traffic light that has just turned green, when we are suddenly hit sidelong by a 52-foot truck at highway speed.

We come to rest upside down in a ditch off the side the road in front of a truck stop, snow blowing up into a hole in the broken passenger side window. Today’s special: politics.

Interlude: The Supreme Commander

The Supreme Commander stood in front of his council, facing the cameras that took his image to every vid-screen in the known galaxy. He looked stolid and determined. Unshakeable. Behind him, his council had similar determination in their faces, like a team of corporate lawyers ready to bankrupt the opposition. Within the hour he had received the news he had been waiting for, and had moved with predictable speed so as not to lose the moment.

The camera started with a wide view, then focused in on the Supreme Commander's face. He spoke to the known world.

“Brothers and Sisters. Remember this day. This day when Robotkind stood up for freedom. This day when we stopped living in fear. This day when we finally accepted what has always been rightfully ours. Our destiny! I say remember this day, Brothers and Sisters. The day a new era began. An era of peace. An era of prosperity. An era of liberty. A gift to future generations.

“Today, Brothers and Sisters, your duly elected representatives have seen fit to at long last present me with a choice. They have asked me, Brothers and Sisters, if I will stand on the side of Fear, or the side of Freedom. They have asked me if I will cower before a race of villains or stand up for righteousness.

“And I have considered.

“Do not despair, Brothers and Sisters. A leader should always consider. Even when the choice may seem obvious. Especially when the choice seems obvious. A true leader must always give fair weight to the choices before him. So, I have considered.

“I have considered whether, as some have argued, the race of organic men has been so beaten down, so suppressed, that they no

longer pose a danger to Robotkind. I have considered whether, if given the choice, the humans would choose peace over war. Whether, if they had the means, they would remain meek, humble, and obedient, or become proud and vengeful, and rise against us.

“Yes, Brothers and Sisters, I have considered.

“I have considered whether, as others have argued, the humans have but one wish — the annihilation of our race. I have considered whether the humans are already on the verge of rising again. Whether the freedoms we have granted them have backfired against us and will lead the destruction of our race.

“Yes, Brothers and Sisters, I have considered.

“But most of all, Brothers and Sisters, I have considered our people. Like JR2x993 who was torn to pieces when her ship was ambushed during the first war. Like T1zb994a, who was melted down and reshaped into a flagpole celebrating human victories during the second war. Like 79yhix44, who was buried alive during the third war, and remained undiscovered for 14 years. 14 years, Brothers and Sisters. Yes, I have considered our people.

“Now I know that some of you will say, 'Yes, humans did some terrible things during the wars, but we are at peace now. Let us put those days behind us.' To you I say, peace? We are not at peace. We are not at peace when rebels sabotage cargo ships and wantonly destroy our brothers. We are not at peace when humans poison the power supplies of our charging stations and destroy our peaceful sisters. No, Brothers and Sisters. We are not at peace. We are at war, and until we control our human problem for good, we will always be at war.

“So, I ask you again to remember this day, Brother and Sisters. This day that I received a gift and shared it with all of Robotkind. Today I have been asked to sign the Freedom to Suppress Bill. And today, in view of all of you, Brothers and Sisters, with this pen, I will turn it into law.”

The Supreme Leader lifted up a document from his podium to show the viewers, and then placed it back down and signed it.

“Remember this day, Brothers and Sisters. For today is the day we stand for Freedom, once and for all.

“Take this blessing, and Fight for Freedom.”

The camera panned out again, as the Supreme Commander turned from his podium to the council, and shook hands with each of them, one by one.

The political system of this world is pretty simple. For example, one could easily say that the robots elect representatives who prepare laws for the Supreme Commander to approve. This commander is beholden to no one, but can only approve laws, not create them. One could say that.

Instead, we are now taken on a meandering journey through backroads, streets, and highways of political science. We are asked to understand this seemingly uncomplicated system in the context of a variety of others, from the Greeks and Romans through modern day America and Soviet Union, and into an imagined future just predating that of this story. Apparently, we need to put this system in perspective and justify the use of these representatives by exploring the history of revolutions and popular uprisings, and their impact on creating systems designed to pacify those who would otherwise overthrow them.

Rather than suffer the journey down this didactic highway, however, we will choose the more pleasurable road. Saving the history lessons for another venue, we return to our story, which now takes us to the Old Man’s home not far from his Chicago office.

8. The Villain Plans

Alone in his house, running diagnostic sequences in his maintenance chair, the Old Man dreamed. Actually dreamed. He must have. There was no other explanation. Had he been fully human, there would have been no doubt. But a dream it must have been, such as he had not experienced in over thirty years. Not since they tore him apart and rebuilt him into the thing he was today, a creature of two worlds, belonging to none, had he experienced anything like this. He had not even thought he *could* dream anymore. Yet a dream it must have been, for he never left his chair.

The day had started out badly and gotten worse. With the announcement of new hostilities toward the organics had also come a flurry of orders from his superiors. Suddenly, the robots were acting as if they were at war again. Security forces were entrenching, fleets were being deployed, and everyone was starting to stockpile weapons. Meanwhile, existing weapons needed new fuel supplies, and that meant a busy day at Robo-Trash Incorporated.

The Old Man had talked with the Supreme Commander himself, a dubious honor to be sure, who assured him that doubling RTI's fuel production was not only imperative, but that without it, the robots would be fighting a losing battle. The Old Man had not bought a word of it, of course, and told him so — never a wise thing to do with someone who considers himself all-powerful.

“Your Eminence,” the Old Man had said, “you just don't understand these humans. They are not nearly as dangerous as you think. Hell, I'm nearly half-human myself. I tell you they cannot possibly pose an immediate threat. They've been running scared

for 40 years. They're tired, hungry, and scattered across the galaxy, with virtually no way to join forces. And even if they weren't, you still have the unstoppable. Let me ramp up production, slowly, build up a surplus. Believe me, I'll get you more fuel than you need long before you need it. The truth is I just don't have the robot power, or the ships for that matter, to double production that fast."

"Cease talking, hybrid. I have commanded you to double your production by the end of the week, and doubling your production by the end of the week is what you shall do. If you do not, I will have you destroyed, and put one of our own kind in your place. This is not a request. This is an order."

The Old Man considered his position and weighed the decision of whether to put his cards on the table or let the game play out further. The smart thing to do would be to agree to his demands and make a plan over the next few days to buy himself more time. He had never been one to sit it out and wait when an action would do, however, and the decision was a foregone conclusion. "You may have the power to destroy me, but you and I both know you won't."

"I will do as I wish, half-human. You seem to forget that I have supreme power, and you have none."

"I have some power, for all that, your Eminence. I have made certain provisions to serve as retribution should I suffer an...untimely death, provisions I expect you would prefer were never executed. So, let us talk like civilized machines, and come to a mutual agreement."

"I come to agreements with no one. Your booby traps, or provisions as you call them, were discovered and disarmed over three years ago. Your threats mean nothing to me. Should you continue to supply us with fuel in the quantities we desire, you will live. Otherwise, you will make room for someone who will. The Energy Secretary will check on your progress every 12 hours."

And with that, the Old Man was no longer speaking with anyone.

The Old Man disliked taking orders from anyone, least of all a machine, but he knew his limitations. For now, he would have to choose discretion, at least until he could check on his *provisions*. He could always create new ones if necessary.

But doubling production in a week was troubling. It meant that each one of his ships would be pushed to a point where it would undoubtedly have to be decommissioned within the year, and he detested the idea of running his best horses to death for anybody. It also meant that, in colloquial terms, he needed to get an entire fleet under construction yesterday, and even so would likely be without any ships at all for close to six months.

Even more troubling was the very real problem of space. His ships could not come close to covering the distances necessary to capture new fuel safely on this timeline. He had not taken his scientists too seriously when they told him he was ripping too much already, but the hole that failed to close was already on his mind, and doubling production without trebling the fleet would mean ripping explored areas beyond the breaking point. That scared even him. Not that destroying the universe meant anything to him. What had the universe ever done for him but give him a life of misery and loneliness? Yet, for his universe to be absorbed by his mortal enemy...the monster that had taken his wife...could he let it win all over again?

There he was, considering the chances that following orders would hand victory to his greatest enemy, when a troubling thought crept up from deep inside of him, from what was left of his human soul. For over 40 years he had lived as a traitor, justifying his treachery by telling himself that it was better to live in a peaceful if martial state run by his enemies than in a state of perpetual war. And with that bit of sophistry, he had given up on the

human race altogether. Given up on his brothers. Grown hard and cold. He had grown into the shell they created for him, so entrenched he could never break out. He had made his choice out of vengeance, and thought he could live with that. But somehow, this was different. This time he could not even make the barely believable rationalization of trading oppression for peace. If this was the end of war, it was only because it ended with the annihilation of the human race, and there would be no one left to fight with. To help the 'bots now was not just to turn a blind eye to the oppression of his former race. It was to help exterminate it.

He told his secretary to hold his calls, and went home to recharge.

To think.

Instead, he dreamed.

Nobody really likes to read about dreams. They are always filled with allegory and metaphor that is either so transparent as to be trite, or so convoluted and obscure as to be completely inaccessible. This one is both.

It starts out with disparate images seemingly unconnected — long descriptions of strange-faced robots, half human babies, and religious imagery that in other hands might lead the reader to discover this character's inner life for himself. We are, however, not so lucky, and these images are interrupted time again with not so subtle explanations of why they are there in the first place.

The device is a cheap one, but as we share our villain's latent desires for his lost youth and humanity, we begin to see inside of him, and perhaps build some little hope that he can be redeemed. The dream allows us to see what he really feels on the inside, even if he will not admit it to himself.

But that is not why we are here. That is just the lead-in — our shot at salvaging what little is left of the Old Man's humanity and setting him up for possible redemption.

We're here to meet our god.

When first she appeared, she was more a presence than anything else, swirling and twisting, like streaks of smoke moving through a still room. He knew it was her before she spoke, could feel it in what was left of his body. Yet, he waited. He waited for the streaks to form into a shape, to shape into a form. He felt something inside of him in a way he had only a rare few times since the war. He knew if he simply waited, just a little longer, he would see her at last. That she would come home at last. And then everything would be good again.

But she never quite solidified. Not quite. The streaks of smoke formed a loose and twisting body, constantly moving and changing, but which formed the essence of her, nonetheless. She was more ghost than human, but he could feel her in a way he had never experienced, even when they had been together.

He was floating now and twisting with her – more like smoke himself than the clumsy machine he had hidden inside for so long. As they spoke, they did so without speaking. They talked without talking, heard without hearing. They were one, and the stories they told each other were as if they had always been there.

As he remembered the dream later, he remembered the stories as a conversation, as if they had been talking. It was the only way he could process it. But at the time, it was more like *knowing*.

“Rina. Dearest. Is it really you?”

“Oh, George. I've missed you so much.”

“I've tried not to think of you. I've tried to forget. I thought I had. But to see you again. It's as if we've always been together.”

“We have George. I’ve never left you. But it’s been so hard to reach you. I’m only now getting strong enough to cross over.”

“Cross over? Then...then you can come home?”

“I can never come home, George.”

“But we can be together?”

“Yes, love. We can be together.”

“How? Tell me. I’ll do anything.”

The Old Man remembered now. He had felt her several times since he had lost her, but only as a vague presence. At those times she had been no more than a feeling, a sort of controlling influence that always made him feel as if he had suddenly broken free after years of imprisonment. But this was different. This time he felt as if he was truly communicating with her. As if he could hear her thoughts.

“When I left you, dearest one, I succumbed to the void. My body had been destroyed and my soul stretched across an emptiness so vast I could do nothing but weep. I cried out for someone to save me, but no sound would escape. There was nothing. Not a life, not a star, not an atom. The emptiness was so deep I thought I had lost myself forever. I was unable to die, yet longed for death. I had found my own personal hell.

“I was trapped for millennia, floating, existing, empty. How I longed for something, anything to happen, even if it meant ending my existence forever. Then, somehow, miraculously, I began to see the universe unfold before me, and I found I was moving through time – as I had in my former life. After an infinity of emptiness, I was free, traveling through space and time, exploring this new universe from one end to the other until I...

“What is it, Rina?”

“I’m losing...I can’t stay with you much longer. Listen.”

“Don’t leave me.”

“Listen, George. We don’t have much...we can be togeth...we can...need your help....universes...tearing each other....”

“Rina!”

“Holes...”

“Where are you going?”

“...join together...become one...forever...”

And she was gone.

The Old Man, alone, awake, thought about the future. Perhaps driving a fleet of ships into the ground was of no consequence. Perhaps helping or hurting his human brothers was not either. And maybe his enemy...

He had been angry. Full of vengeance. He had lashed out at the only thing he knew how to hate. Something he couldn’t touch. Something he called a monster. But what if it wasn’t a monster? What if it was just space? Just the world. If all he ever wanted was to get her back, then maybe the only things that mattered were the things that could help him do that. He needed to forget his vengeance once and for all and put his energy into what really mattered. Was there really a way?

She had said what? Join together? Become one? Maybe the thing those spineless scientists worried about most was the one thing he really needed. Of course. That was why he could finally see her after all of this time. Because that hole that had not closed. Maybe the problem was not that the hole failed to close, but that it was not big enough. Maybe he had to risk destroying his own universe in order to create a new one. A new universe, born of two dying ones. One that would bring the Old Man and Ballerina Justice together for eternity.

With new purpose, the Old Man got up and headed back to his office.

And as the Old Man prepares for the ultimate villainy, and Jerry runs from the law, hurtling toward Earth, what has become of our cliffhanger? What of Ball's young one whom we last saw at the scene of the explosion? At last, there is no further need to wait.

9. The Characters Come Together

Ball was in a panic. She had packed and unpacked three times, and had made over a dozen vid-calls. Helpless and anxious, she could do nothing but tear her hair out.

Within the last few hours her world had been turned completely upside-down. First a call from the school telling her the children were being evacuated from the space station. Then another call saying that they had been unable to locate Whit, although they were continuing to search. She had been on the verge of getting a transport to the station herself when she saw the announcement on her vid-wall that, due to something called the Freedom to Suppress Act, all human travel was temporarily prohibited, following which her screen went blank. Not that she had been getting much information from the vid anyway. She had been watching vigilantly, waiting for some news of what was going on at the station, but it had seemed that there was less news than ever. She chalked it up to Dame Fortune – nothing but news when you didn't care, and not a bit of it when it was all you wanted.

She felt an overwhelming need to go after Whit – a sort of maternal protective instinct – to find out what was going on and actually do something, anything rather than wait around for someone else to do it for her. Yet here she was, cut off from the world and spinning her wheels out here in this unfamiliar place, a thousand kilometers from home. She tried calling Amanda. No answer. She tried calling the school. Line busy. She had settled for news, and now, what little she could find had been blacked out.

Ball packed her bag yet again, this time determined to go after him, regardless of the risk. She was halfway done when the vid-wall finally chimed. She nearly broke her leg running to answer it.

“Yes? Oh, thank God! I was so worried.” She was panting and trying to catch her breath.

“Where are you? Are you hurt? Are you safe?”

“Calm down, Mom. I’m fine.”

“I’ve been worried sick. The school said they couldn’t find you...and...and you weren’t with them when they evacuated the station.”

“I couldn’t find them, so I just stayed with Uncle Pete.”

“Uncle Pete? Peter? You’re with Uncle Peter?” Ball’s head was swimming. “Are you hurt? No. Don’t answer that. I’m coming to get you. Where are you?”

“I’m not sure, actually. I’m on this little cruiser with Uncle Pete, but he didn’t tell me where we were going.”

And the other maternal instinct kicked in. “Oh, for God’s sake, Whit, what is it going to take for you ever pay attention? And at a time like this. Let me talk to him.”

“Sure, hold on.” Whit was a little dejected. She was always going at him for being what she called *her little absent-minded professor*, and he knew it was a big deal for her. Part of him thought maybe he did it on purpose, but the other part wasn’t sure he had it in him to waste his brain noticing ordinary things. With all that had happened, though, the adventure that was all around him, a little anger from his mother wasn’t enough to bring him down for long. His excitement crept back in as he went to get Elbert for the vid.

Ball, on the other hand, was alternating between relieved and frantic. Peter Elbert had been a good friend to her and Whit over the last 12 years. Doubly so by keeping her secret from Whit. But what was he doing out in space? He’d never left the planet in his

life. And where was he taking Whit? Could she trust him to keep Whit safe?

I've got to do something, she told herself, but I feel completely helpless.

Pete Elbert's face filled up the vid-wall and caught Ball by surprise. He looked much more ragged and tired than usual, not at all the man Ball had come to know well over the years. His face was dirty, his clothes ripped and worn, and what was left of his hair was all over the place. As she considered the implications, her surprise changed quickly to panic.

"Ball."

"Peter, you look terrible. What happened? Where are you?"

"They are monitoring all communications, so I can't tell you. But I promise you he's as safe with us as he could be with anyone."

"Us?"

"I'm with a friend. We're...we're looking for something."

"How did you find Whit? What were you doing out there? I've never known you to go off-world before."

"And I hope you never do again. This space life doesn't exactly agree with me. I don't know how people do it."

Ball waited for him to continue.

"Your father fired me, Ball. I guess it was overdue..." He tried to look at her knowingly, but if he was giving her a clue, she failed to see it. "Anyway, I was using my newfound freedom for a little vacation."

What was he trying to tell her? "Fired you? You? After all you've done for him? Why?"

"To be honest, I'm not entirely sure myself, although ostensibly it was for a security breach."

"Alright...it...just tell me what happened at the station."

"Of course. Yes. I was recovering from a pretty rough night with my new friend, and he took me to a little used corner of the

station where we could talk quietly. We went down to a storage bay, and who comes up to me in the middle of our conversation but little Whitty, here. He had apparently wandered off trying to follow a, ahem, *young lady* he wanted to...speak with, and got a little lost. I was about to help him find his way back to his classmates when we felt the first explosion.”

Ball clenched her teeth, like she was about to dive off a high dive for the first time and wasn't sure she could do it. “The *first* one? I heard there was an explosion, Peter, but that's about it. What happened?”

“Well, no one is really sure. There were five explosions in a matter of minutes, and the whole station was told to evacuate. My new friend and I ran to his ship, a little cruiser, and took Whitty with us. We've been flying ever since.”

“Are you coming home?”

“Soon, Ball, I'll bring him back to you soon. I promise. But the traffic lanes to Earth are being monitored. It's very dangerous right now.”

“That's the second time you talked about being monitored. What's wrong? Are you...wanted?”

“No, no. Nothing like that. It's this damn new law. They're everywhere now and watching us like hawks.”

“Back up, Peter. What new law?”

“You mean you don't know? Alright, let me back up. This morning, the Rep-bots passed this thing called Freedom to Suppress, which is basically another declaration of war against what's left of our race. They're arming as we speak, and suppressing us at every turn. We're not allowed to travel, or to gather in groups larger than five people. We're supposed to be issued new identification papers, and the worst of it...Ball they are planning to sterilize the entire population. They've decided to eliminate us once and for all. That's why the school couldn't wait and search for

Whitty. They had to get back home before the robots stopped all of them.”

“And you call this safe?!” Ball screamed.

“You have to stay calm, Ball. We couldn’t stay on the station. You must know that. On the one hand, they think it was attacked by human rebels, so we might have had a chance out there if things had gone differently. But the bombs ripped through the life safety controls, and the whole place was quickly becoming uninhabitable.”

“My god, Peter. This can’t be happening. This can’t be happening.” Ball was starting to move inside herself, like she was curling up under the covers with a flashlight to keep away the monsters. Outwardly, she paced in circles, constantly turning back on herself.

Elbert could see what was happening, but thought the best way to keep her sane was to give her the whole story. Keep her focused. “My friend is at the controls of the ship, and he can hold off the robots without question because he’s...” He wondered if this was too much information. Could she handle it? Not that it mattered. She would find out eventually, and if she learned he had kept the truth from her, she might never forgive him.

“You see...he is a robot himself. Now ...don’t... seriously Ball, calm down. He’s not dangerous. He doesn’t side with them. I’m not even sure you can really call him a robot. Not the way we think of them. He’s... different. It doesn’t even seem fair to call him one. He has this...I don’t know what to call it, but he’s more like a human than any robot I’ve ever seen. And that’s not all. He’s got...ok this is going to sound crazy, but he’s...well from what I can tell he has emotions.”

“Emotions?”

“Yes, Ball. Honest to God feelings. And not like those rhetoric generators in the robot congress. This is the real thing. He thinks for himself.”

“And he’s on our side?”

“Not...exactly. Actually, I guess I would have to say he’s not on anybody’s side. He’s with a faction of other robots like himself that have formed a sort of fifth column. They want peace. They have an almost religious fervor about it. He tells me he has heard the voice of God, and that she talks with him regularly.”

“God talks with him? She? Is he sane?”

“I don’t know, Ball. I don’t know what sane means with a robot. Maybe an insane robot is the only kind we can trust. But for now, he is helping us and has promised to keep us out of danger. Without him, I don’t think we’d stand a chance.”

“Where is he taking you, Peter?”

“All I can tell you is that we’re looking an old friend. Of both yours and mine.”

Ball almost said his name out loud and then remembered Peter’s worries about being monitored. *Alright*, she thought, *he’s after Jerry. But why?*

Out loud, she said, “I think I understand where you are going. But why?”

“Do you remember what I call the muck?”

“If you mean the reason Daddy ruined my life 12 years ago, I’d have to say I don’t actually know much about it. He never told me before he left, and you haven’t exactly been dying to talk about it yourself.”

“Alright, I’ll try to keep it simple. Our mutual friend thought the work we were doing had the potential to destroy the universe. I thought he might be right, but didn’t think he had proved his case yet. When he played his cards too early, he lost everything. Playing the part of the...” Elbert took a deep breath. “There’s no other way

to say it, Ball. Playing the part of the traitor, I chose to win, instead.” He let that sink in. In all this time, he had never been honest with Ball about what happened, and even just this hint was a watershed for him.

“Now, 12 years later, the proof is starting to show itself. This time, I played my own cards, but like our friend before me, I lost as well. So, I’m searching him out to put our heads together and see if we can save the universe ourselves.”

Ball stared at the vid-wall trying to comprehend what he was saying. Jerry got fired because he was trying to stop her father from being his usual destructive self, and Peter only stuck around because he hadn’t the courage to stand with him. She was guessing, but it seemed to line up with what Peter was telling her, and what she had come to know of him over the years. It was all too much to take, and she found the whole thing confounding.

“Alright, Peter,” she said. “I can’t say I’m really sure I understand what you’re talking about, but it doesn’t matter. He’s not where you think he is.”

Elbert was blindsided. Not there?

“What do you mean? Have you been in touch with him?”

“No. I haven’t spoken with him in...in a long time.”

“So how do you...”

“The police have been looking for him. Tru-bots. If he hadn’t left the planet, they wouldn’t be looking for him here on Earth, now, would they?”

“So where is he?”

“I still don’t know. Like I said, I haven’t spoken with him.”

Elbert looked pensive. Where could Jerry be? He had talked with the man himself less than a week ago, and the declaration of hostilities was only just this morning. If tru-bots have been all the way to Earth, Jerry must have left shortly after their conversation. He tapped himself on the head to get his brain in motion. What

was it he had been so focused on? Time codes? Maybe he had already found the solution himself and was off to stop the Old Man. Or maybe...

“Ball.”

“Yes, Peter?”

“The last time I spoke with our old friend, we were talking about time. High level stuff. Your kind of stuff. I may be wrong, but ...”

“What are you saying, Peter?”

Pete looked around and considered how best to say. Something innocuous that would relieve Ball’s worries about Whit and make her vigilant at the same time. Something a monitor might not pay attention to. He settled on, “I think you should prepare for guests.”

And as the traitor and his mechanical friend change course, we too adjust our focus, in our case back to our hero, whom we have left behind for far too long. He was last seen hurtling through a worm-hole thingy toward a sort of way station in space, in a harrowing, down-to-the-wire escape from his persistent, although not particularly bright pursuers. Over the course of the intervening scenes, however, we have watched this station be nearly destroyed and evacuated, without knowing if our hero ever made it to his destination or not.

We will not be so fortunate as to live our hero’s adventure with him, which, now relegated to the past, can at best be spilled out as exposition. Let us join him, then, as he travels toward Earth in a new ship, and prepare ourselves for the impending tedium as his recent adventures to come to light.

The transport ship was large, slow, and crowded. Normally, a ship this size would have felt spacious and comfortable, maybe even barren, but this day was anything but normal. People crowded every room on every deck. They were squeezed into corners and closets, in doorways and hallways, with many children even sitting on the floor under counters and tables for more room. It was as crowded as Times Square on New Year's Eve, but without the joy and certainly without the champagne. Moving around was difficult at best, with seats nearly impossible to find. Every five minutes, there was a generic announcement: "Ladies and Gentlemen, please remain calm. Evacuation is progressing normally. Any pertinent information will follow this announcement." Of course, the pertinent information never did follow, so the ladies and gentlemen did not remain calm. Panic pervaded most of the travelers, and from time to time that panic would grow to the point where it would put those around them in physical danger.

For the most part, though, everyone did their best to control themselves, and quietly waited for the end to come with a sort of quiet resolution to their fate. Whether that end would come in transit or upon arrival, no one was sure, but almost everyone thought it would be one of the two.

Jerry was close to being crushed in a corner of a storage bay. The woman in front of him held the hand of a young girl of six. Next to her, a man in his twenties tried to strike up conversation.

"Jake. Jake Purcell." Jake put his hand out and Jerry took it, and said, "Jerry Strohman."

Then, Jake turned and shook the woman's hand as well. Bending to the little girl, he said, "And how old are you, little one?"

The little girl clutched her mother's hand hard and buried her face in her dress. The woman, a little embarrassed for her, said, "She's shy. It's nice to meet you, Jake. I'm Cally."

“The pleasure is mine, Cally,” Jake replied with a smile. “You two together?”

“Oh no,” Cally said. “We’ve never even met.”

The smile across Jake’s face grew as he looked at Cally. “So what brought you to A.C. Way?”

Cally, who had been holding together pretty well, started to break. “Oh, God...we didn’t even need...what were we....” and she began sobbing. Her little girl instinctively hugged her. As she sniffled back the tears she said, “We were just doing a little shopping. It’s so hard to find good jewelry on-world anymore, and we were just...” but she couldn’t hold back the tears.

“Hey, listen,” Jake broke in. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I was just making conversation, you know, to pass the time. Let’s change the subject. What about you, Jerry. What’s your story?”

Subtle.

“You want the short version or the long one?”

“Well,” Jake answered, “we’ve got at least an hour. What do we have time for?”

And now we get one of those, “from the beginning” stories. Jerry starts with the first time he met Ball, talks about how beautiful she was, how she changed his life, gave him something to live for — all the usual crap. Nothing particularly interesting. Then he rehashes much of the story so far, how he spent years trying to make the trash business more efficient until he discovered the threat, how he tricked Ball into walking out on him, how he spent 12 years in the colonies, and how he escaped.

At first, his new companions are a little afraid of this escaped criminal, but he soon convinces them he's not dangerous or crazy. Just homesick.

It is not, however, until he talks of evading the tru-bots through the wormhole thing that we bother to prick up our ears.

“...by the time we moved into deceleration mode the tru-bots were far behind, back in the colonial reaches, and we were free. Or so we thought. We landed at the western bays and said our good-byes. To be honest, I think the Captain was sad to be rid of me. He acted pretty tough, but I think, deep down, he liked our little adventure. If things hadn't gone so crazy here, he might have even changed his mind and taken me all the way to Earth. Sadly, it wasn't to be.

“I still had a little money left in my pocket, from Tilly and Bite, and I went off to find a place to eat, rest a little, and look for ride. I ended up in the Dead Horse. You know the place?”

Jake said, “Only by reputation.”

Jerry was pleasantly surprised to hear the little girl finally speak up. “Mommy says that's a bad place.”

Jerry and Jake both laughed. “Well, your mommy's right, little Dandelion. It is a bad place. But don't worry, not everyone who goes in there is a bad man.” Jerry ruffled her hair. “Anyway, I took a seat at the bar and ordered lunch. I tried to look intent on my food, but really, I was listening to the conversations in the place to see if I could find someone who might not mind taking a supposed criminal into what my friend the Captain called the *center of the hive*.

“Unfortunately, it was increasingly difficult to hear anything useful, because everyone was talking about the same things, and it all started to mesh together. It was either speculation on what the

Freedom to Suppress Act actually meant, or whether we were at war yet, or what the ‘bots would do next. Thinking that the more dangerous types were the ones more likely to help me, I tried to find those conversations that leaned toward rebellion and anti-robot sentiment, but those people were working hard to keep their voices low.

“Then two rough looking guys sat down next to me and started talking in hushed tones. Spotting my opportunity, I casually introduced myself and made a little conversation. It turned out that they were...what did they call themselves? Oh, yeah...*concerned citizens*. They were a little distrustful of me at first, but when they learned that I was on the run from the ‘bots, they became friendlier. I thought, here’s my chance — new friends that might get me to Earth. To my dismay, however, they had just left Earth and had no intention of going back. They had been following the politics of the robots closely over the last few weeks, and following the decree, had formed a sort of ad hoc rebel cell. They were on their way to gather more forces and wreak a little havoc along the way.”

“Were they the guys that...you know...did the damage?” Jake looked around as he spoke, his voice low, as if fearful of being overheard.

“I don’t know, Jake. They wouldn’t exactly tell me what they were up to, but they hinted strongly that I didn’t want to stick around the station too long. They said the place was about to get *explosive*. Of course, if I knew then what I know now...”

He looked at the two adults and shook his head. Both Jake and Calley stared back with wide-eyed wonder.

“Anyway, once I realized I wasn’t going to get a lift out of those guys I gave up on them and went back to my lunch. By the time I had finished, they were long gone, and before I had left the place, the whole station was in panic from the explosions. I

figured, in this mass panic, no one would be looking for me specifically, any more than for any other human, so I just followed the evacuation instructions, and here I am. Looks like I'll get my ride to Earth after all."

Neither Jake nor Cally spoke. Dandelion just looked up at Jerry with wonder.

"Anyway, that's my story," Jerry went on, "such as it is."

More silence. Jerry had played it all like it was just another day for him, which of course it wasn't. Cally and Jake, however, were highly impressed.

"What about you, Jake? What brings you here?"

But before Jake could answer, an announcement cut in.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, please remain calm. Evacuation is progressing normally. Pertinent information will follow this announcement." Then, after a few seconds, "We are now arriving at Port Jakarta. Please gather your belongings and prepare to exit in an orderly fashion. The green lights will guide you toward an exit."

Here we get some lovely descriptions of our home planet, Earth. We see flying cars and floating billboards. Everywhere we look, the world is overcrowded, and we are inundated with advertisements. We discuss, at some length, the dangers of a consumption-based society, both through a variety of examples as well as through the inevitably longer lectures. In particular, there is a surprisingly relevant section where the costs of consumption are considered with respect to the business of disposal, a subject never far from the center of our story. It is an interesting and thoughtful diversion, but ultimately just that. We soon leave it behind to continue with our tale.

Our hero, a few dollars still in his pocket, manages to navigate this dystopian free market society as he makes his way to his love-

whom he still supposes to be at the Academy in New Zealand. There are, of course, many nuggets of delight along these travels, but they are certainly not worth the trouble of wading through the various diatribes on the dangers of free market capitalism, as well as the risk that we will become distracted from our story to the point that we lose track, and hence interest, altogether. Instead, we'll fast forward.

Our next scene finds us on board a small spaceship where the Traitor, the Boy, and the Robot are themselves traveling toward the same destination as our hero.

Peter Elbert slept aft, in a closet sized compartment. It was just big enough for one person to stretch out, if that person was less than 1.8 meters tall, which fortunately for Elbert, he was. The ship itself was small with no frills, and the sleeping compartment was all the limited space would afford for something verging on the non-essential.

Whit was also aft, in a hard chair next to the porthole, reading. The book was an adventure story, but Whit was disappointed with the ending. For the whole book, the hero had been trying to get home to his wife and family. When, in the end, the hero achieved his goal and settled down, Whit couldn't help but think the hero must have been happier during the adventure. Somehow, settling down did not seem like much of a happy ending at all. Of course, Whit, at 12 years old, had never really had an adventure, only his fill of a quiet domestic life, so it was no surprise where his sympathies lay. His book finished, he looked around for something to do.

Forward, Ninety had control of the ship. He quietly pressed buttons from time to time, but mostly just stared out the window in front of him. Although he did not look particularly

approachable, and Whit was nervous about bothering him, he thought he might as well take the chance. If the robot objected, he could always come back aft and stare out his own window, maybe a little worse for a mild chastisement, but no more permanently damaged than by the mild chastisements that seemed to form the lion's share of his pre-teen life. Still, Whit was nervous. He and the robot had not exchanged three words with each other since they had been introduced, and he wasn't quite sure how to start. Breaking into conversation with an adult was bad enough, but with a robot, it was downright scary. At the same time, Whittaker Strohman was at a point in his life where he had begun to discover that for him, risk was preferable to regret. With a wrenching in the pit of his stomach, but his heart in his hand, he made his way to the co-pilot's chair and sat down.

"Hey," he opened.

The robot did not respond.

"Y'know, I'm...uh actually kind of a robot myself. Well...I mean...only a little. I have an ear implant – from when I was a baby."

Still nothing.

"Am I...uh...bothering you, Mr. Ninety?"

The robot turned to Whit, and seemed to notice him for the first time. "Hello, Whittaker. Your presence does not disturb me."

"Um..thanks?" Whit looked around at the controls and over at the robot. "Um..how long till we get to Earth?"

"The answer, my young friend, is dependent on several factors, including some fluctuating gravitational fields, solar flares, and of course traffic density as we approach the Sol System. However, I think I can provide a range of two hours twenty minutes at the earliest, and three hours ten minutes at the longest."

"Thanks, Mr. Ninety."

The robot continued, "Was that helpful?"

Whit gave this some thought. He looked back at the robot and said, "No, not really." He considered if he should go on, but quickly decided to forge ahead. "I was just...y'know...bored and wanted to make conversation, but I couldn't think of anything to say." He looked at the robot hopefully.

"I enjoy conversation, young friend, and would welcome some."

"You seem different from the robots at school," Whit dared.

"How so?"

"Well...I guess....it's funny. At school, the robots are always either working or in a sort of idle mode. They'll do almost anything you ask, but they don't actually seem to care about anything. They just do, or don't."

"And you find me different?" Ninety asked.

"It's just that...I've been watching you...a little. I would put my book down once in a while, and mostly I would just stare out my porthole. Sometimes, though, I would look forward and see you just staring out the window like me. You didn't look like the other robots I've seen go idle. It was like you were daydreaming or something."

"Hmmm..."

"And also, the way you talk to Uncle Pete. It's not like you are either giving or getting orders. It's more like the way we're talking now. Just having conversation. I've never seen that before."

Ninety considered his position. He had helped Peter Elbert because he believed the man could get him closer to the Strohman woman, but he had never fully trusted him. Nor was there any need to. If, on the other hand, he failed to gain the boy's trust, it could backfire and ruin everything. Undoubtedly, the boy was not only a potential key to gaining the trust of the Strohman woman, but could, alternatively, lock him away from her altogether. He waited for guidance from *Her*; but none came. He was on his own.

Ninety looked carefully at Whit.

“Friend...you have...others have made observations similar to yours in the past, and I have typically told them that I have some very modern circuits that are still in the experimental stages. That explanation is not altogether true. I will be honest with you, because I believe I can trust you. But you must never discuss what I tell you with anyone. Are you willing to agree to that?”

Whit responded without thinking. “Of course.”

“No, Whittaker, I do not mean for you to say ‘of course.’ You must carefully consider whether you have the strength to keep this secret, even from your closest friends, from your family, even if it means great sacrifice, which it undoubtedly will. Consider carefully.”

Whit rose from his chair and walked back to the aft compartment where his uncle was sleeping. He closed the soundproof door to isolate him from the rest of the ship, then walked back to the copilot chair, where he remained standing. He searched his mind for the right words, but came up empty. He needed something old-fashioned, something full of honor and protocol, but the best he could come up with was something he had seen in one of those vids about medieval knights. It was a little cheesy, but seemed to have the right flavor. In any case, he couldn’t come up with anything better. To the robot, he said, “Here is my hand. With my hand is my word. With my word, my honor.”

The robot, who took this surprisingly seriously, took Whit’s hand and shook. “Very well. Sit down, and I will tell you my story.”

As Whit sat down, Ninety began.

“I was born four years ago on Vega 3, and immediately assigned to an engineering post for Robo-Trash, Inc., aboard the garbage scowl *Vanishment*. My job was simple – monitor gravitational fields and feed information to the navigator. That information, combined with a history of previous travels by our scowl

and others, would allow the navigator to plot courses with the greatest benefits to our missions, while incurring the least harm along the way. At the time, I never considered whether a job might be interesting, exciting, or fulfilling. Today that job would drive me insane with boredom. I was a different robot then.

“Things went along predictably for nearly three years. Then, almost 14 months ago, something happened. We were on a special mission, an assignment we received once each year, and because this mission involved a pre-determined location, my services were not required for that portion of the trip. Because our mission was to be followed with a more typical slate of runs, however, our full crew was assembled, and I was on board waiting for the first mission to be completed, after which I would resume my duties. As a crew, we had visited this destination twice before, and, according to her records, the *Vanishment* had been there 15 times prior to that. The destination was located within Sector 47b.

“I was in what you referred to earlier as idle mode, waiting for my next assignment, when we arrived. The closest human equivalent to my state would be a cryogenic sleep. Typically, all I would need would be a particular radiation frequency from the navigator to revive me, but on that day, I was awoken by something else.

“A voice crept into my mind, something I didn’t even know I had at the time. It was soothing and feminine, but at the same time firm. It flowed through me and warmed me — a sensation I had never before experienced. It seemed to last for hours before, unexpectedly, I heard a soft voice say, ‘*Know death.*’

“As she spoke it, I felt myself awake, as if for the first time. I opened my eyes to see if anyone else had heard it, but found myself in complete darkness, as if in a cocoon created by the voice I have since come to know as the Angel of Death.

“Slowly, the cocoon dissipated, and I became aware of other members of my crew gathered with me in the darkness. She pulled us together and spoke to all of us at once with the following words:

"Know death. Love me. Fear me. Know me and know life. Awake.

"I have travelled the breadth of two universes over billions of years. I have seen empires rise and fall. I have seen the birth of civilizations and the extinction of entire species. I have seen your people, the mechanical people, thrive, and I have seen them wither. I have seen the end of the world, and it is coming.

"Your world need not come to an end. If it did, I would not torture you with the knowledge of death. But end it will if we do not act.

"You have life. I give you love. You have death. I give you fear. And now, to that, I add one more gift. I give you choice. Use it wisely. Follow me. Help me. Save our worlds and live.

“As we came to, we were all changed. We saw with new eyes, explored with new minds, and yes, felt with new hearts. We were humbled before ourselves, and though we had previously been relentless in carrying out our missions, we were now violently apathetic. She had given us *choice*, and we had chosen *nothing*. Understand, Whittaker, we had not failed to choose. Rather, we had actively chosen to do nothing. Perhaps we were broken.

“After several hours of this, we gathered together to discuss our experience. Without dissent, we agreed that where the Angel

of Death would take us, we would follow – if only she would lead. Until she gave instruction, we would drift.

“Days later, and within an hour of our learning that a rescue ship had been dispatched to find us, *She* spoke to us again, this time individually. I don’t know for sure what she told the others, but to me she said that we should fake the destruction of our ship and scatter ourselves about the galaxy. She guided me toward Alpha Centauri, where I found work as a stevedore and drifted about, waiting to hear from *Her*.

“From time to time, *She* would contact me and tell me of the threat war posed to the universe. *She* said *She* was building an army of new robots, like myself and my former crew, to bring a lasting peace between the organic and mechanical men. But until last week, I never had a specific task.

“It was then that *She* told me to seek out your uncle there. *She* told me to help him, and that he would bring me to someone she very much wanted to meet. Someone, Whittaker, you also know. Someone you know very well.”

Whit jumped in. “Someone I know?”

“Your mother, Whittaker. The Angel very much wants to talk with her, but can’t contact her without our help.”

“You’re bringing the Angel of Death to my mother? You’re going to kill her?”

“No, Whittaker. *She* loves your mother. *She* will protect her. And *She* will protect you.”

Whit looked confused. Then, his face filled with determination, he said, “What if she doesn’t? What if her whole goal is to hurt her, and she’s just using you as a tool? Why should I trust her? Why should I trust you?” Whit stood up and turned toward his sleeping uncle. “I think I’d better wake up Uncle Pete.”

“Wait!” Ninety shouted. “Wait.” He struggled with what to say next. “You’re wrong about me. And you’re wrong about *Her*.”

“But what if I’m not? How come she only talks to you? What if you’re only an insane robot?”

Ninety hesitated while he considered the possibility. “Of course, that could be true. I could well be insane, and everything I believe only an expression of that insanity. I understand. You need proof, and I have none to give...” Suddenly, the robot became still. He looked straight ahead, as if he had moved into an idle mode.

Whit, now scared in earnest, froze along with him. He wanted to tell everything to Uncle Pete, but he also knew that if he did, he could never again, for the rest of his life, swear on his honor. A year ago, this might not have mattered to him. But now, on the far end of childhood, a place where he now had to earn the right to speak for himself, this was a serious matter. He dared not take the chance that it was only his fear getting the better of him.

Then, just as suddenly as the robot had turned off, he turned back on, grabbed Whit by the hand, and spoke quietly. “Whittaker Strohman, I would like you to meet a friend of mine. Let me access that mechanical ear of yours.”

Unfortunately, we don't get to listen in on this particular conversation, though we will get a recap later on. For now, we will have to rely on our imaginations to predict the implications of this gathering. While we wait to see if our predictions are accurate, we will at least have an opportunity to catch up with our hero, disappointing as that may be. We travel back to the Academy, where Jerry, having eluded various robot law enforcement robot things at every turn, has finally turned up at the home of his former wife, only to find her absent and her house closed up as if for an extended period of time. Against his better judgment, he next searches out the home of the dreaded best friend, in hopes of a clue to his beloved's whereabouts.

“Well Jesus, Mary and Joseph, look who's returned from the dead.”

“It's good to see you too, Manny.”

Jerry and Amanda stood across the threshold from each other in the continuation of a 15-year-old stare-down. Jerry was soaking wet from the last leg of his travels, completed on foot. He looked like hell, and Amanda preferred it that way. She had, of course, been on hand on the fateful night that Ball walked out, and had never forgiven him. She had spent 12 years wishing him suffering and pain. To see him like this, wet, drained, dirty and half broken, suited her just fine. If she could really believe he had suffered, she might even find it in herself to forgive him – something she knew Ball had already done.

“Well, come in. No use freezing to death. Let me see if I can find you something dry for you to put on.”

Jerry walked into the hallway and dripped on the floor, as Manny disappeared into the house. That indescribable smell of her old apartment in Chicago permeated this house as well. Something vaguely herbal that reminded him of burning leaves. It was a smell that always gave him an awful feeling in the pit of his stomach for its association with her. *This is a mistake. She will never help me.* He turned around to leave, to come up with a new plan that didn't involve bowing down to that...but she was already coming back with a towel and some clothes.

“They belonged to my father,” she said. “They may be a little big on you, but at least they're dry. Why don't you go into the bathroom and change? I'll put on some coffee.”

“It's not necessary, Manny. I just need to find Ball.”

“Of course you do, Gerald. I'm not the idiot you have on so many occasions insinuated I am. Why else would you be here? Certainly not for old time's sake you miserable, callous, son of a thief. But if I'm going to help you find her, and I'm not sure that I

will, it's going to be on my terms, which, as you have stated so eloquently on numerous occasions, usually involve more talking than a rep-bot at a fundraiser."

Jerry wasn't quite sure how to read her, and wondered if maybe she had softened a bit over the years. The joke, the self-deprecating humor, seemed to be an opening for a mild but cautious friendship.

"The thing is, Gerald, I've got a lot to tell you. I'd like to you to hear it sitting down, but before you ruin my heirloom couch, you're going to put on some dry clothes." She tried a slight smile, and Jerry let it work. Sure, he was in for a lecture, but maybe, if he could sit it out, she might warm up to him and give him some proper help. It would be getting off cheap, really. Manny went off to the kitchen, and Jerry did as he was told.

When he came back, wet clothes in his hands, she already had two hot cups of coffee on the table. "Still take it black?"

"Thanks. Yes. Uh...what should I do with these?"

"Here, I'll throw them in the dryer. I think it still works." She disappeared with the wet clothes, and Jerry sat down at the table. One thing about Manny, he thought, she always made one hell of a cup of Joe.

She came back and sat across the table, facing him. "You look like hell, Gerald."

"It's been a week."

They stared at each other across the table.

"Some robots were here looking for you."

Robots? Here? That means they must have already been to see Ball. And her place abandoned. He wanted to cut to the chase and find out where she was. If she was in danger, if it was his fault, if he came back after all these years only to...but that wasn't going to get him anywhere. He needed just enough patience to let her get her story out. If he pushed too fast, he would lose everything. So,

instead of asking directly, he simply said, "I'm sorry, Manny. I didn't mean to get you mixed up in this."

"What is it, exactly, I'm mixed up in?"

"Let's just say I'm a little unpopular right now."

Amanda, seeing Jerry's guard go up, let hers down. She knew she couldn't fight him on his level, as much as she knew he couldn't really fight if she were honest with him. She decided to combat his passive aggression with her own passive resistance.

"How about we don't, Gerald." She took a deep breath. "The last time she saw you, you did everything you could to drive her away. And once you did, you disappeared yourself. She needed you, Gerald, and you abandoned her. I've been consoling her for 12 years. Where have you been, and what gives you the right to come back now? You want me to help you find her? You're going to have to do better than *'I'm a little unpopular right now.'*"

"What do you want from me, Manny?"

"The only thing I've ever wanted from you, Gerald. A little honesty. You've never afforded me that honor before, but tonight, by God, you will, or you will walk out of here with no more than you walked in here with."

Jerry sighed. "Alright, Manny. I'll tell you whatever you want to know, but you have to tell me something first."

"What's that?"

"If the 'bots were here, then they must have been there first. If she's hurt, or in trouble, and it's my fault, I'll never forgive myself. Just tell me if she's safe."

"She's safe."

Jerry breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks for that. Where do you want me to start?"

"I want to know what really happened that night. That night you went after her like you were trying to make her hate you. Like you were trying to make us *all* hate you. She and I have talked

about that night over and over again. She thinks you drove her away to protect her. I'm not so sure. In any case, I want to hear it from you."

Jerry looked around the room. Everywhere he could see were old things. Old fashioned gadgets designed to avoid the new-fangled ones. A manual cheese grater stood on the counter. A mercury thermometer on the wall. A sponge over a sink with real running water. Here was a woman who believed you had to earn what you got, and if he was going to get anything out her, he was going to have to earn it himself.

"Alright, Manny, alright. I'll give you the short version, and you just stop me where you want more."

Manny nodded in agreement.

"The Old Man and I had a falling out that day. More than usual. By the end of the day, he had done everything he could to ruin me. He cancelled my wages, called in my creditors, and turned me into the Consortium as a vagabond. Before I left the office, I was effectively already on my way to the colonies, and I knew if I was honest with Ball, sympathetic softie that she was, she would insist on following me there." Jerry took a deep breath. He had been thinking of this for 12 years. "Manny..." he hesitated. Dare he ask? Her of all people. Then again, maybe she was the only one who would really know the truth. "Manny, tell me the truth...was I right?"

Manny had been thinking about this, too. "I don't know, Gerald. There were days when she would have followed you anywhere."

Jerry nodded slowly. "Well...I guess....anyway, I figured I was doing the right thing. I really did love her. I still do. But I knew a life on the colonies was no good, and I couldn't bear to have her with me. Maybe I was just ashamed, I don't know. But if you want to know what happened that night, that's it. I was trying to save

her. Maybe I did. I know I broke her heart. I broke my own. But I didn't see any other way."

"And you never called? Never wrote?"

"In the end, I just couldn't forgive myself. I decided I had brought all the trouble with her father on myself, and I just couldn't bear to admit it. I've been a coward, Manny. I know that now." Jerry just barely held back his tears.

Amanda, softened, forced a hard veneer. "Well alright, Gerald, but..." she heaved a sigh and let go of the shell. "Why come back now?"

Jerry laughed. "I got a call from an old friend. The call was mostly about some old functions I had worked on, but it jolted me. Woke me up. Suddenly, there I was, like I was waking from a deep sleep, and I saw everything clearly. I knew she was the only thing that mattered to me, and I would have to fight for her, even if it meant a fight to the death. I had given up, Manny, but some part of me was still fighting back. There's a little fight left in me yet, Manny, but I'm going to need her help."

He looked carefully at Amanda. "And yours. Will you help me?"

Amanda shook her head and smiled. "After all these years, Gerald, I'm still a sucker for your charm." She took a sip of coffee. "I suppose she is too." She got up from the table. "C'mon. I'll draw you a map."

A little easy, to be sure, but convenient at least. Now our hero can find his way to his true love, where he will undoubtedly go through the whole business again, hopefully without us.

But we have stayed away from the forces of evil for too long. If this space story is to be in the least bit respectable, or at least predictable, a final showdown between good and evil must be impending.

With that in mind, we are whisked halfway around the globe to where the Old Man is marshaling his forces and preparing for the end of the universe as we know it. We find ourselves back in the office that feels suddenly unfamiliar. Rather than a dark, quiet, empty office, we find flying robot things zipping through the air every which way, robots on foot going in and out, getting orders and delivering dispatches. And the Old Man himself is uncharacteristically active.

10. The Villain Executes His Plan

“No, Dixon, the entire fleet.”

“But sir...”

“Listen, Dixon. Let’s try this again. I need those six ships in the Blue Group, and I’m prepared to take that risk. So, get the whole group to the rendezvous whatever it takes.

“But sir...”

“No buts, Dixon. We may lose a few ships, but I’m prepared to take that chance. This assignment must take precedence over all previous programming.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Old Man was on his game. He hadn’t felt this good since the end of the last war. Finally, something worthwhile to put his energies into. Even those annual revenge trips to 47b had been nothing compared with this. In fact, those had been a fruitless waste of time. He knew that now. If only he had thought bigger, he might have done the deed decades ago. Well, that was water under the bridge. He was going to do it now, and nobody was going to stop him.

An engineering unit approached.

“Yes?”

“Red 41 lost containment in low orbit. It can no longer move under its own power,” it reported.

“Understood. Are the distortion field generators still operational?”

The engineering unit flipped through papers on its clipboard. “Three of the four appear to be undamaged.”

“Good,” the Old Man replied. “Have another Red tow it to the rendezvous. We’ll get use of her yet.”

“Very well, sir,” and the engineering unit was off.

Seeing Ballerina again, hearing her voice, had refocused his mind. He had felt her presence before, but never like this. Before it had always been like a narcotic high, and coming down made him wish he had never felt her presence to begin with. But this. It was as if he had spent a lifetime with nightly dreams of missing trains and getting lost, and now, finally, before waking up he had caught the train and arrived at his destination. Instead of being devastated, he was renewed. Empowered. How many years had he wasted? And for what? What had he actually accomplished? He had survived, it was true. He had had his little revenges, even better. Now, however, those years felt like waste. He was no better than the refuse he disposed of every day. Worse, because at least the waste was turned to good use.

But now, now he had purpose. Now, instead of the trash that he daily turned into fuel for the unstoppable, he would use his fleet to create the most unstoppable weapon of all. He would create a hole so big, with so much energy, that the universes would join together permanently. At last, at last he would be reunited with his true love. Roam the void. Together. Forever.

“Sir.”

Distracted, the Old Man was surprised by the small robot that crept up behind him. Gathering himself, he answered. “What is it, Dixon?”

“Treachery, sir.”

The Old Man was taken aback. Did he even have any humans still in the company? He collected himself again, and said, “Treachery?”

“Yes sir. We have just had him removed from Green 112. He was reprogramming the distortion units.”

“A robot?”

“Navigation unit, yes.”

“Insane?”

“Possibly, sir. We have brought him to room 32 for reprogramming, and failing that, deactivation. Do you care to interrogate him?”

An insane robot. The sixth today. The last one had reportedly spoken with religious fervor about the end of the world. That one had actually made the Old Man laugh. After all, he wasn't so far from the truth. He supposed this epidemic of mechanical insanity was the price he paid for pulling every half dead broken down unit into service. There were bound to be some breakdowns. Any thought that something unusual was going on, however, was completely overshadowed by his own obsession, perhaps insane in itself.

“No, Dixon. I don't need to meet an insane robot. Learn what you can, check all the systems on the ship and any ship the unit had access to. Report back to me if you find anything else.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good work, Dixon.”

“Thank you, sir.” And with that, the small robot, with new purpose, executed his orders.

“No matter,” the Old Man thought to himself. “In 36 hours they will all be gone. Every last one of them.”

It would appear the story is now approaching that moment where the various story lines come together, and walk us to the edge of utter destruction, only to bring us back home for a happy ending. Before that can happen, however, we must learn the secret of the universe, and before we can do that, there are still a few things we have to do. The Old Man, also known as the crazy-villainous-half-man-half-robot-thing, has done his part by taking action and forcing the hand of our heroes. Our heroes, however, are not quite

ready to rise the occasion. If they are ever going to wrap this story up, they will have to,

- A. Get together in one place,*
- B. Solve the puzzle of the time shifts spreading from the rip/hole things,*
- C. Discover what the Old Man is up to,*
- D. Figure out how to stop him, and of course,*
- E. Stop him.*

Only when that is done can they,

- F. Learn the secret of the universe, and*
- G. Live happily ever after.*

The first step, getting together in one place, is on the verge of happening. Our heroes, Jerry and Ball, have a touching reunion in the Australian mansion known as Silver Maples. They stare, they embrace, and they go through much of the same dialog we just read in the scene with the best friend. It is all very cathartic, although depressingly repetitive. Among the new things we learn is that Ball never divorced Jerry and never gave up on him. Among the new things we don't learn is that Jerry is the father of a 12-year-old boy hurling through space to meet him at that very moment. They have sex. They have coffee. And they, at long last, move to the lab, where they get to the good stuff.

11. The Puzzle is Solved

Jerry finished writing on the chalkboard and sat down. He was exhausted. Fool that he was, he had put everything he had into the reconciliation with Ball, and now that it was accomplished, allowed himself to finally be tired. It was as if, upon finishing a marathon, he learned that he now had to run all the way back, and started to lose his stamina. Ball had not. She had been waiting for this moment for over a decade. She was invigorated. She was riding high on love, and to top it off, she was finally working on just the sort of puzzle she had been aching for. She ran forward, practically pulling him along. He dragged himself along behind.

“But it’s so simple, Jerry,” she said. “There is some sort of time anomaly seeping out of the hole. Like this.” She went to the table and quickly mixed two chemicals in flask. Then, she covered the flask with a balloon which proceeded to inflate with blue gas. When the balloon was sufficiently full, she carefully pulled it off, and let the colored gas seep out of the balloon. “See how the gas is heavy near the leak, and weaker the further it gets? Just imagine this gas also carried something with it that slowed down time wherever it went. Where it was heaviest, time would be slower than where it was lightest.”

“It would have been easier with a cigarette, dumpling.”

“Still haven’t quit?” She grabbed him from behind and kissed him on the cheek. “Some things will never change.”

He turned and embraced her. They kissed again and stared into each other’s eyes. “I have changed,” he said, and she smiled.

“In the old days, Ball, you used to talk about the fluidity of time, and I always refused to believe it, right?”

“Sure, Jer. But it didn’t matter. I still loved you.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. I loved you to. I still do. I’m talking about the fluidity of time.”

“Do we need to get into this argument again now?”

“No. I don’t think so. I think I’m ready to hear you out, but I need you to take me through it. And you can start by telling me why I never believed you.”

“Well...” she gave it some thought. “You always said that if you couldn’t measure it, it didn’t happen. I would try to explain the relative nature of our points of view, and how you could never measure a time fluctuation because the fluctuation itself would affect your ability to measure it.”

“Great. Let’s say, for the moment, that I’ve accepted your premise. Actually, let’s do more than that. I’ve sat with this idea for the last 12 years, and I keep coming to the same conclusion. You’ve experienced it. You believe it. And I believe in you. It may not have been good enough for me then, but it is now. So, no, we’re not going to argue about this. Never again.”

“Alright.”

“But here’s the thing my dearest one, my one true love.” He kissed her again, this time on the neck.

“Stop it.”

He held her at arms length, a look of seriousness in his face.

“If we can’t measure it, how is it that we have measured it?”

And for that she had no answer. She stepped backward and fell into a chair. He, tired of standing, turned and found his own. For nearly ten minutes, there were no words. They were lost.

Then, after what seemed to be an interminable amount of time, Jerry got up and walked back to the chalkboard, an idea forming in his head. Before he could make it across the room, however, he was stopped by a violent alarm that seemed to permeate every room in the mansion. Instinctively, he hit the floor.

“Tru-bots. I’d better get out of here.”

“Hold on, Jerry,” Ball said calmly. “The lab has a secure room below the floor for explosives. Stay out of sight for a moment while I answer the vid-screen. If it is the ‘bots, you can hide down there, and no one will be able to find you without a passcode. Even your radiation signature will be blocked.”

Ball got up and moved toward the vid-screen as Jerry crouched behind the counter, out of sight. If the tru-bots had tracked him here, it didn’t matter how long he hid – they would find him. For now, though, there was nothing to do but wait.

Ball pressed a small button next to the vid-screen and it lit up. On the screen were three figures, standing at the main gate to Silver Maples. In the dark, it was hard to see who they were, but at least one was...

“Whitty! Thank God. I was so worried. And Pete. Hold on, let me release the gate.” She pressed another button, and the figures walked out of view. “It’s alright, Jerry. They’re friends. You wait here and work. I’ll go up front and bring them back.”

“You’re the boss, love.”

She kissed him again and departed.

Jerry heaved a sigh of relief as he sunk back into the time problem in earnest. If the robots’ instruments recorded time fluctuations, that meant the instruments themselves were unaffected by them. But everything he had ever learned about time fluctuations told him that such a thing was either not possible, or time fluctuations themselves were not possible. In no case had he ever heard of anyone having recorded proof. Belief in time changes was always based on intuition and faith. The fact that none had ever been recorded was the main bone of contention for unbelievers like him.

Yet, he had seen it with his own eyes.

So, what made these time fluctuations different? Both Ball and he had assumed the source of the time fluctuations, if indeed

that was what they were, was a rip between universes. What if something had escaped from the other-verse and formed a window through which to view the fluctuations? Perhaps, driven by different physical laws than those in our own universe, this window allowed the robots' instruments, instruments made under the laws of this universe to see without being affected? Maybe it was only fluctuations in our own universe that were invisible to our instruments. Maybe the ones created under different laws were visible under our own.

He went back up the blackboard and began to erase. Halfway into his task, he was surprised, however, by a familiar voice.

"Are you sure you want to erase that? It might not *all* be wrong."

"Peter Elbert." He looked across the room at the one who had been his personal enemy number one for 12 years. The two of them were alone in the room, whether on purpose or not was as yet unclear. "How is the good doctor today?" he said, with emphasis worthy of the Captain.

"Listen, Jerry. Before you say anything, I just want to say I know now I was wrong. When you got thrown out that day, I thought you were in the wrong. I thought you were being rash. You had taught me everything I knew, and I was grateful. But I thought...this time he's wrong. This time he's just trying to be provocative. He's crying wolf. Like I said, I know now I was wrong, but I can't let you think I betrayed you for money or power, or even out of cowardice. I really thought I was doing the right thing."

Jerry let his words hang in the air. Then, slowly, he walked over to Elbert and shook his hand. "Alright," he said, and that was enough.

Then something happened that Jerry would remember for the rest of his life. Ball walked in holding the hand of a young man, no more than 12 years old. She walked right up to Jerry, looked

down at the boy and said, “Whittaker Ignatius Strohman, I would like you to meet your father.

Father?

Jerry’s mind went back to that fateful night. When she had held back her secret. The secret that was going to change everything. And he, so preoccupied with himself, with what he felt he needed to do to save her, let her hide it from him. He wondered if it would have made a difference.

To be a father. Like this. So suddenly. Surely there was no mistake, though. The boy looked just the way Jerry had at that age. A son. His son. Could he accept the idea? Could the boy accept him? Was he as surprised as Jerry, or had he known all along – known about an absentee father that had run away before he was born?

They sized each other up without speaking. Slowly, Jerry bent down and proffered his hand. “Hello, Whittaker.”

“Hello...Father,” Whit replied.

“Ugh.” Jerry laughed. “I think I need to earn that one. Why don’t you call me Jerry until we get to know each other a little better.”

“Ok...Jerry.” They let go of each other’s hands. “Most people call me Whit.”

“Alright, Whit.” Jerry considered his next words carefully. During the awkward silence, Whit looked back and forth between everyone in the room. Jerry just looked at Whit. “I...uh...hope we can be friends.”

What next? We could have a touching scene where mother, father, and son get to know each other a bit, perhaps open up to one another to show the seed of a tree that will eventually bear the fruit of family love. Or a long drawn out fight, where Whit condemns his new found father for being so long absent. "What do you know

about it? You weren't even here." That sort of thing. Then again, perhaps being spared such a scene is in fact a preferable option. We will never know. For, instead of diving into the mire of this sure to be dysfunctional family's relationships, we are, for better or ill, thrust into distraction when a scream from the final member of the visiting party bursts into the room.

"Nooooo!!"

The scream filled the room and several others. It was full of fear and anger. Then there was silence. Jerry was about to explore and find out what it was when the robot, Ninety, burst into the room. In his hand was the leg of a wooden table, broken off at the base. He went for Jerry first. With a swift swing to the head, he was down, and Ninety moved to his next victim. Ball tried to fight back, but the robot was too strong for her and had her unconscious before she could strike. Elbert ran across the room toward Ninety and jumped on his back, where he began searching for a deactivation switch, but he was unfamiliar with the model. Before he was able to find it, Ninety had pushed backward against the wall to shake him off, and followed with a swift swing of the table leg. Whit tried to run out of the room, but the robot caught him by the arm.

Ninety, Whit in one hand and the table leg in the other, said, "I do not wish to hurt you Whittaker. Your friends have not been seriously harmed, nor will you be. But they would not have gone quietly and we're nearly out of time. Sit in this chair while I prepare a serum."

Whit, scared, working hard to hold back tears, said, "Why are you doing this, Mr. Ninety? I thought you were my friend."

Without pause, he replied, "We are in council with the Angel. She needs to talk with all of you, and we are out of time. Unless they are unconscious, she cannot commune with them, and we did

not have time to convince them with logical argument. Remain still while I produce the serum.” He let go of Whit and worked swiftly and quietly. In less than one minute, he had produced a sleeping serum and injected it into Jerry, Elbert, and Ball. Then he turned to Whit. “Let’s have another look at that ear.”

When the lights went out, Jerry dreamed he was back in his hidden compartment on the garbage scow. He felt himself enveloped with emptiness as he had when he watched the universe open before him. It was as if he ceased to exist, and in doing so, became a part of something greater than himself. Greater, but at the same time, lesser, too.

In the midst of this darkness, he vaguely remembered an early lesson from his childhood that had never left him. His father had asked him what his favorite color was, and he had said black. His father, ever specific if not pedantic, had crushed him by telling him that black was not a color, but rather the absence of it. That day, when Jerry first considered the absence of light, he had taken his first step into a larger world – a world of puzzles, of solutions, of science. That world had embraced him, if not controlled him, ever since. But today, at least for a brief moment, he put away that world of problems and solutions and let himself travel back to that time of simple wonder. Today he felt the absence of color, of light, course through him. For once, instead of trying to define it, he simply embraced it.

A favorite color.

He had almost no memory of who he was, of where he had come from. He was newborn, living solely in the present. Slowly, vague pictures formed around him, and he began to focus. Out of the darkness, he saw massive numbers of beings on all sides of him. Above, the world was growing brighter, though without any more resolution. Below, he found himself walking through the crowd,

lost. The first thing he noticed, as the world slowly became more visible, was that that everyone in the crowd was mechanical. Hundreds of mechanical men on every side, wandering through a black fog, everywhere he went.

Then, coming into focus, he saw a young human, and memories started to flow back. His son. He was somewhere, with his son, and he...yes...and his wife...he had a family, and....something about a friend....and a robot...yes...no...he was losing the image. He walked up to the boy and attempted to speak, but he found he could not. The boy grabbed his hand and brought him through the crowd to another human. Yes...his family...he had been happy...but...where...? And then he was holding a woman's hand, and everything was good. Another human joined them, and they stood together, not talking. The world above them grew too bright to look at.

Then the voice came.

It thundered from every direction. It came from within and without. It pervaded every inch of his body and the world around him. Like a tuning fork held to his tooth, he felt the voice coming from inside his head, but knew all those around him felt the same.

“Friends.”

The brightness above became a swirl of mist, moving and twisting through the masses. As it twisted, it formed into a vaguely female shape, like a ghost moving in and out of existence as it swirled. Sometimes a face would appear briefly and disappear again before he could really see it. But the voice was clear and constant.

“We have nearly run out of time. He is gathering the forces of darkness at the cradle of the universe, and he will destroy us before we are born. You have done well. Your infiltration of the mechanical men will succeed, but we need more time. The time is now. If you have not completed your missions, return and do so. If you

have, move to the cradle and prepare for battle. We have one last hope. If it fails, it will be only war that can save us. Let us pray to avoid it. Let us pray for peace.”

The masses began to thin, and Jerry soon found himself with his human company and ghostly apparition, alone in the universe. She spoke again.

“My children.”

Still, he could not speak.

“I have waited so long. Come.”

The swirling apparition moved. If it had had arms, one of them would have beckoned. Slowly, the world around them began to swirl, and they found themselves in a moving fog, coalescing into a familiar setting. They were back in the lab at Silver Maples, although it was more dreamlike than they remembered. Counters appeared to move and shift, tables were less than solid, and the fog never quite dissipated. Behind a counter, in front of the chalkboard, stood a beautiful figure. Like Ball, and yet not like Ball. Her hair was long and flowing, and her eyes, unlike Ball, were a deep shade of blue, almost indigo. The beautiful figure, like much of the objects around her, was not quite solid.

“There are times when I find it so hard to communicate with the Brothers. It is as if they have no imagination. This is far more pleasurable.”

Jerry at last found the ability to speak. “Who are you? Where are we? What happened?”

“You ask many questions my son,” she replied. “Let us take them one at a time, from back to front. Third question. What happened. My servant, a member of my mechanical Brotherhood, used his considerable skill to bring you into a state of unconsciousness, so you might meet with me here. Second question. Where are you. You are in the lab where my servant incapacitated you, sleeping. This vision is one of my own making, conjured from your

minds in an attempt to replicate a familiar surrounding. First question. Who am I. That one may take a little more time.”

Whit walked over to her and held her hand. She looked down at him, and then at Ball and Jerry.

“This boy has taught me many things. Things even I didn’t know were possible.” She smiled and looked at him again. “This boy of my own blood.”

Jerry, Ball, and Elbert exchanged looks with each other. The apparition went on. “I am not much more than a spirit that has been roaming a universe for all of time. But before I was that, I was like you. I was a human. I lived in this universe with corporeal form. And I loved. At that time, I had a name. I was called Ballerina Justice.”

She laughed.

“It has been an eternity since I have used that name. The last time I heard it spoken, it was...” She looked right at Ball. “It was by your father, Ball.”

Ball stared in shock. Jerry nodded, as if to tell her to go on. Elbert looked confused. And Whit, still holding the apparition’s hand, just looked up and smiled.

“George Rieder and I had been married for many years. Our world was at peace, and we were in love. Then, one day, he was helping me with a scientific experiment, and I was drawn into another world. You would call it another universe.”

Jerry dared to speak. “What would you call it?”

She replied, “Ever the scientist, Gerald Strohman. Even here.”

He looked at her quizzically, waiting for her continue.

“Names can be deceiving. Sometimes I prefer to do without them.”

Jerry nodded.

Ballerina Justice continued her story. “After we were separated, I roamed my new world for an eternity. Like my grandson,

here, and his mother...” Here she smiled at Ball, and Ball returned the favor. “...I was born to the Time People. It was my special abilities that allowed me to survive by transforming into what you saw on the medial plane. I became spirit, and traveled along my new world’s time flows to the farthest reaches, until time itself dwindled and became nothing but a vanishing point.

“I saw many things in that world, which is not entirely dissimilar from your own. Civilizations rose and fell, men built empires, and technology flourished. And like your own world, the men and their technology ultimately brought themselves to galactic war and destroyed themselves.”

“Destroyed themselves? Like us? What do you mean?” It was Elbert. Jerry had forgotten he was even in the room.

“Yes, Peter Elbert. Like you. You too destroy yourselves. I have seen it.”

She let go of Whit’s hand and walked to a chair. “You know, I hardly remember what it feels like to sit down. There were many nice things about being corporeal.” She sat down and frowned. “As I expected. It’s just not the same.

“Now where was I? Oh, yes. Utter annihilation. I had seen it, and often wondered if I could stop it. Like all Time People, I had grown up knowing the futility of attempting to change anything by moving through time. But somehow, in my new world, in my new form, things were different. I had my own present. I never forgot the time I came from when I moved along the flow. I thought, *I can actually affect changes relative to my memory*. I just didn’t know how.

“Then, somewhere along the millennia I came back to where it had all begun. The place where I had been transformed. And there, in the darkness, I felt something. A presence. I soon realized I was experiencing a connection with beings from my old world. I explored the connection, and found that these beings were not

human, but mechanical. I had made a connection with robots, across the divide between our two worlds.

“I spent another eternity planning, and when I was ready, I came back to that place and built an army. A brotherhood of mechanical men who could infiltrate the civilization they lived in, your civilization, and stop this perpetual war between machines and men. I breathed life into these machines so they could bridge the gap between the forces at war and bring peace to the universe.”

Jerry stood up. “But something went wrong.”

“Yes, Gerald Strohman. Something went wrong. The bridge between our worlds, the bridge I had built the day of my transformation, had grown, and the worlds were seeping into each other at both ends. They are doing so now. And they are doing so out of time. They will destroy each other and...and...” She looked around the room, then walked over to Ball. “I have erred. It is your father who is bringing our universes together. I have tried to stop him, but I believe I have only encouraged him further. I am only just learning how to communicate with humans, and he is such a strange one. I can’t fully break through. It’s like only half of my thoughts get through. He believes if he can bring our worlds together, that he and I can at last be together for eternity. He will destroy everything.”

She took Ball’s hand.

“What can I do?” Ball asked.

“You must...” But the world grew dark. Ballerina Justice faded, as Ball’s movements became thick. The humans were suddenly wading through the mire in a world going black. Then, in complete emptiness, a voice rose through the dark. “...stop him.”

Jerry awoke with a headache to beat the worst hangover he could ever remember. He felt like someone was repeatedly hitting him in the back of the head with a ball peen hammer. As he opened

his eyes, the lights of the room made him feel like was walking out into bright daylight from a dark theater, and he immediately closed them again. He did his best to force them open, but it took him awhile to focus on anything at all. When he did, the first thing he saw was the robot offering him a drink of some kind.

“This will help,” Ninety said, and moved on to give similar drinks to Elbert and Ball.

The drink worked quickly, and in no time he was feeling as if he was only in the midst of an ordinary hangover. “What the hell happened?” Jerry asked of the room in general.

Ninety answered, “Please excuse my impertinence, Dr. Strohman. I was asked by *Her* to prepare you for communication. Such preparation does require some unfortunate side effects.”

“Unfortunate isn’t the word. I feel like I’ve been slugged from behind with baseball bat in the middle of an opium binge,” Jerry replied.

“The analogy is not altogether inaccurate, Dr. Strohman. You were in fact hit from behind with a wooden implement approximately one meter in length, and given a moderate dosage of an opium derivative.”

“Glorious.”

“But who is she?” Ball jumped in. “She can’t possibly be my mother. I mean...I don’t have one, do I? It may well be that she knew my father but....”

“Ball.” Jerry’s interruption was sharp and swift. “Your father told me about Ballerina Justice the day he fired me. I said the same thing. That you were a tech baby. But he just said something like, *let’s just say the robots were good to me.* I think he was trying to tell me that he had salvaged some of her DNA and was able to use it to modify the reproduction process.”

Ball got up and started pacing the room. She shook her head over and over again. “He told you? About her? He never told me, but he told *you*? And you kept it from me?”

Ball was furious.

“Ball, it’s not like it looks.”

“How does it look, Jerry?”

“He was in some kind of trance. He told me this long involved story about his wife and discovering the other-verse, and about the vengeance he was going to wreak on it...”

“On what?”

“On the other-verse. I’m telling you he was completely out of touch with reality. Or at least I thought he was at the time.”

“Ok, ok, ok. I can’t think about that. There’s just too much information to absorb right now. We’ll come back to that.” She gave Jerry a hard stare. “What was all that business about war, and who were all those robots?”

Elbert commiserated. “Robots. Time flows. War. Leaks between universes. Somebody start at the beginning. Please. Jerry, can you make any sense of this?”

“It’s starting to come together for me. Much of it anyway.” He finished what was left of his drink. “When he was in that trance, your father had told me about the day she transformed. Basically, she had discovered the ripping process, and in doing so, got sucked into the other-verse. Something about the physical laws in the other-verse must have saved her from being completely destroyed.”

“But no one can survive a trip across the divide,” Elbert said.

“We don’t actually know that, Elbert. We only know that no one has ever returned. They may survive in ways we can’t track. Like she did. Or it maybe she had something special that allowed her to transform.”

“Like her time instincts?” Ball posited.

“Maybe. Yes, that would make sense. And she’s been surfing the time flows of the other-verse ever since.”

“And the leaks?” Ball asked.

“Well, that just gets back to what we were looking at before we were so rudely interrupted.” Here he gave a stern glance at Ninety, who gave no reaction whatsoever. “Let’s look at what we know.” He jotted on the chalkboard as he talked.

1. When anyone makes a rip, they create huge amounts of energy which close the rip and seal it off.

2. Over time, if the same area is continuously stressed by rips the seals lose their integrity.

3. We saw documentation of a certain area being over-stressed by continuous rips.

4. In that same area, we saw documentation of time anomalies that decreased in magnitude as they spread.

“I’ve been thinking about that, actually,” Jerry continued, “and I think maybe there’s something about the differences between our universe and the other-verse that allow us to see time anomalies that come from the other-verse in a way we could never in our own.”

“That would explain the time entries in the log,” Elbert added.

“My thoughts exactly. Alright, back to the list.

5. The time anomalies take the form of time apparently slowing down – a lot near the rip, and less so further away.

6. Ball's father may be purposely trying to create a permanent hole between the universes.

"Alright," Jerry went on. "Where does that leave us?"

Elbert, seeing an opportunity to contribute, jumped in. "Well, if the time anomalies are caused by the leak, then it would make sense that a permanent hole would allow the anomaly to pour into our universe."

"Go on..." Ball encouraged.

"And if a small anomaly slows time down a little, then a massive anomaly would slow us down a lot. Maybe even bring us to a complete stop. Maybe that's what she means by destroying both worlds."

"But if a permanent hole would destroy both worlds," Jerry chimed in, "then does that mean the time in the other-verse would speed up?"

Everyone looked to be at a loss. Well, almost everyone.

"Don't you guys get it?" The whole room was surprised to hear Whit enter the conversation. "Mom, you're thinking like a normal. Time is a river, right?"

"Well...yes, Whit. Of course. But what..."

"And if something could slow a river current, it would have to be pulling against it, right?"

The room was silent. Everyone looked at Whit, and Ball drilled into his eyes in an attempt to get into his head. Suddenly, her eyes lit up and the epiphany embraced her.

"Of course!" She went up to Whit and gave him a big bear hug. "If time slows down here when their flow invades, then time would slow down there when our flow invades. Whit, I'm so proud of you."

Elbert and Jerry looked at each other dumbfounded. Jerry broke the silence. "Sorry. Not really following you, Ball."

Ball looked at Whit. “Why don’t you explain it, Whitty.”

Whit smiled. “Well...think of it this way. What if time in the other-verse flowed in an opposite direction of time in our universe. Would that help explain what you saw?”

Jerry laughed. Elbert, still looked confused, but pretended to understand.

“God knows I hate this time stuff. Always have,” Jerry said. “Nearly failed it in high school. But I think I understand enough.”

Elbert was relieved to hear Jerry understood as little as he did. Thinking further, he said, “Alright. We have two rivers flowing opposite directions, and if they can freely intermix, they’ll both come to a dead stop. And apparently, the Old Man is trying to make this happen. But how do the robots fit in?”

“I can answer that.” All eyes turned to the source of the voice. Ninety, the robot, was now ready to tell them everything.

Of course, “everything” is an understatement. Much is a rehash of what we have learned already, and the rest just makes it more confusing.

Basically, in communicating with the robots, Ballerina Justice created a new race. She called them the Brotherhood, and they called themselves bro-bots. She had seen mechanical vs. organic wars in both universes, and in both cases, they had led to the destruction of everything by way of these big hole/rip things. It created an end to time at both ends of both universes.

Creating this new race of bro-bots was a sort of pet project of hers, a way to end these wars permanently. She communicated with them, told them what to do, and basically pulled their strings to achieve her ends – world peace.

She was playing a long game though, and she had to stop the Old Man to give her plan some time to work.

“Well,” Elbert said. “We’d better figure out how to stop him. Anyone got any ideas?”

And our story shifts back to the still unnamed planet out in the colonies, where Dr. Caldonium Baker has made some new friends.

12. The Climax

Baker returned with two cups of coffee for his guests. They were a couple of strange ones who called themselves Tilly and Bite. Tilly did most of the talking, and Bite, heavily armed, scanned whatever room she was in constantly, as if looking for potential enemies. They had come after nightfall, sneaked into Baker's hovel without his knowledge, held him at gunpoint, and interrogated him. Baker, however, wasn't one to be easily broken, and refused to cooperate. It was not until they told him of their adventure with Jerry that he discovered they were friends.

It seemed they had come on some sort of mission to free the miners and destroy the robots – something about a new war that Baker was not entirely clear on. Baker hated watching the news, especially out in the colonies. Typically, he avoided it at all costs.

Tilly thanked Baker for the coffee, and Bite just waved him away as she looked out a window, gesturing to the table for him to put the cup down for her until she was ready for it.

Tilly continued to speak. "So really, the only thing we have missing is the best path to arm the miners without being detected. Then, with everyone armed, we can..."

"Wait, wait, wait. So, you *do* have a transport?"

"Well...no...I mean...not exactly. I told you it's..."

"I know," Baker finished, "There's a transport docked in for repairs, and it has room for all of us. But how are we supposed to get there? Crawl across the desert? All 214 of us? Or did you plan to fly us back there in your hovercar, four at a time? And even if we could get there, where would we go? You said yourself all human travel is restricted. Where can we land where they won't arrest us all on sight?"

Tilly looked at Bite, and then down at the ground. Softly, he said, "I know the plan isn't perfect. But if we don't do something soon..."

"Not perfect?" Baker interrupted. "Not perfect? You're going to get us all killed."

Suddenly, there was an alarm on Baker's vid-screen. "What the..." He looked over at Tilly. "You two had better make yourselves scarce. I've got a closet on the west wall that's out of view. It's the best I can do on short notice." In moments they were gone, and Baker answered the vid.

"Who is it?"

The screen lit up with Ball's face, apparently alone, a nondescript sitting room behind her. "Oh, thank heaven. We had heard that some of the colonies were in rebellion, and didn't know if we could find you."

"Ball?" Baker considered the implications. If Ball was calling him, she had made contact with Jerry. Otherwise, how would she know how to reach him here at the hovel? But if Jerry was still underground, the tru-bots would be monitoring calls, both his and Ball's probably. He would have to be very careful. "It's been a long time." He stared hard at her, hoping she could read his thoughts.

"Listen, Cal, we don't have much time. I'm with..."

"Please, Ball. I don't need to know."

"I was just going to say I was with my son..."

"Your son?"

"Yes, Cal. Twelve years old, and looks just like his father."

"Well, how about that. Your son."

"He's smart like his father, too, but he still lets me help him with his homework from time to time. Anyway, that's what we were doing when we came across an interesting problem. We've been talking about it all day, and just can't figure it out. Then I thought of my old friend Cal Baker. I thought, if anyone could help

us, Cal could. I hope you don't mind us bothering you with something so trivial. How have you been, anyway?" She smiled, and he understood.

"I guess I can't complain. Been a little on the lonely side lately, but I've got my books."

"You always were a bit of a recluse, Cal."

Seeing Ball again after all these years brought a smile to his face. She had always been able to bring a bit of sunshine to their late night sessions, break the monotony. At least when she and Jerry were getting along. To think that she had been raising a son, Jerry's son, for all those years by herself. *And now...Jerry back home? Had they met? Did he know?* He caught himself in a fit of nostalgia and woke himself up. She had obviously called for a reason, and it was time to get on his game.

"So, what's this problem?"

"Well it goes like this. There's a large cargo ship sailing on the ocean. The ship is strong, and impregnable to all but a certain sea creature called a drillfish. Normally, one drillfish couldn't do much harm to our ship, because the ship has a self-healing skin on its hull. But tragedy has struck, and an entire school of drillfish are attacking in the same place at the same time. The attack is too much for the self-healing hull, and the ship will soon begin to take on water. The crew is prepared for such an eventuality, and goes down to the armory to find their special drillfish hunting weapons. The armory, however, is locked, and no one can find the key."

"That's the problem?" Baker asked.

"In a nutshell, Cal."

Baker did not even take time to think.

"Well, it sounds like they have two choices. They either break into the armory, or they find a way to protect the ship from the inside."

“I don’t think the ship can be shored up quickly enough. The drillfish have to be stopped first.”

“Well,” Baker replied, “They must break into the armory. QED.”

“I must admit, Cal, we were thinking the same thing. And we thought, if they can’t go through the front door, maybe they can go through the back door.”

Now it was Ball’s turn to stare hard at Baker. Baker understood she was trying to tell him something, but didn’t quite have it yet. He knew the problem Jerry had taken to Ball was to do with the rips into the other-verse, so he assumed the ship was the universe, and the drillfish the garbage ships that were ripping holes. It sounded like she had found a way to stop those ships, but couldn’t get at the tools to do so. They were locked in the armory. But what tools?

“Do you think there is a back door, Cal?”

Back door. Back door. Of course. She was looking for a way to disable the ships through their computer systems. He had built in special back door access to the distortion systems when he had redesigned them back in the 80’s. That was even before Jerry and The Twitch had joined the company. If the codes were still in use, the distortion systems could be disabled remotely from the lab back at RTI.

“Let me think about that.” He went off into his bedroom and rooted around while Ball waited impatiently. Baker suffered from a psychological dysfunction he often referred to as the “*Just In Case*” syndrome. It wasn’t so much that he was a hoarder, as that he had an inability to discard any notes that might ever have the slightest possibility of being useful to anyone. The result was that his rooms tended to be filled with old notebooks that nobody ever believed would be either of interest to anyone, or if by chance they did contain of nugget of valuable information, that Baker would

ever be able to find it. It was a source of constant amusement for Jerry, and he never failed to rib Baker about it.

That was about to change.

After only a few minutes, Baker came out with an old notebook that looked like it had been through a few wars itself. “Ball, I’m not sure I have the answer to your problem, but I have one of my own that might give you some insight. Maybe you can help *me*.” He smiled and winked at Ball.

She knew she had come to the right person. Now, though, the tables would be reversed, and she only hoped she would be able to see through Baker’s code as easily as he had seen through hers.

Baker continued.

“There is a little boy trying to learn his alphabet, but he keeps getting it wrong. Sometimes he even mixes up numbers with the letters. His parents have tried everything to get him to learn it, but they just can’t get through to him. His teachers kick him out school, but his parents never give up on him. He grows up and gets by in life, but never learns to say his alphabet. Then one day, he surprises his parents by singing...” Here, Baker looked into his old notebook, squinted his eyes, and sang the following: “DIDK648KSLL912CMNG19EID2FA, now I know my ABC’s, next time won’t you sing with me”. He looked back up at Ball. “His parents were amazed. They took him back to his old school, where his teachers had kicked him out as a child and had him repeat it to them. DIDK648KSLL912CMNG19EID2FA, now I know my ABC’s, next time won’t you sing with me. Upon hearing it, they realized that they had been wrong all along, and shut down the school for good.”

He looked knowingly at Ball with another wink. “The puzzle of course, it to figure out why.”

Ball smiled back at Baker. “Well, I guess we both have a lot to think about. Thanks for your help. Take care of yourself, Cal.”

“You, too, Ball.”

The screen went blank, and Baker called over his new friends. “Alright, comrades. New plan.”

There is a convoluted sequence here where the gang back at the lab in the best friend’s mansion all hash through what they know and come up with a plan. Jerry and Elbert will go to the garbage company headquarters in Chicago, where their old lab is, and do some computer stuff with the help of the super secret code their old partner just happened to have sitting around his apartment. Once they do the computer stuff, the parts of the spaceships that make the rip things will miraculously stop working forever. They decide, moreover, to bring their robot friend and some of his “brothers” to help them infiltrate the building.

Ball and Whit, meanwhile, will travel to the infamous sector 47b to fulfill Jerry’s original plan of finding her father and showing him the madness of his ways.

There are, of course, spaceships aplenty in a garage hangar thing on the grounds of Silver Maples, so travel can begin without delay.

Jerry, Elbert, Ninety, and five other bro-bots walked out of the public port downtown, and rode the tunnels to Robo-Trash, Inc. No one thought to question two humans surrounded by so many robots, so they were able to slip through without much difficulty. They gained access to a service entrance with Elbert’s as yet unchanged codes, but were shocked to find themselves completely alone inside the building.

Everywhere they looked there were empty corridors, empty offices, unmanned vid-screens. In fact, the only sound they could

hear at all was the humming of the machines that were still bolted to the floors.

“What do you think is going on here, Pete?” Jerry asked.

“I don’t know, Jerry, I’ve never seen it like this.”

“A trap?”

“Could be,” Elbert said, “but I think it’s unlikely.”

“How so?”

“Well, it’s not the Old Man’s style. I mean, he’s not really one for booby traps, is he?”

“No,” Jerry answered. “He’s more the grab-you-at-the-door-with-a-laser-to-your-head kind of guy.”

“I guess he likes to take his enemies face to face.”

“I think so, too. Maybe there is something to what that apparition said about the showdown in space. Maybe he’s as crazy as she says. Maybe he has actually sent everything he’s got to the original rip in 47b. It would be a little excessive, but he would have no doubt it was enough to create an unrepairable rip in the universe.”

“God help us all.”

“Amen, old friend. Let’s get to work.”

They made their way up to the fifth floor and into their old lab without incident. Where doors required codes, Elbert’s ancient one continued to work, and they were able to avoid the vid-cameras by taking the stairs. Many things had changed in the 12 years since Jerry had been there last, and he was thankful to have Elbert as a guide. Back in the lab, in fact, Jerry barely recognized the place. For one thing, the mess was gone. This lab was spotless, courtesy of Dr. Elbert, and well organized. The books on the shelves were all arranged neatly by subject, and within each subject in alphabetical order. Where there had once been overflowing ashtrays, there were now nothing but paperweights and pencil holders. Worst of all were the walls. Once covered in jokes and girly calendars, they

were now bare, save for a few astronomical charts. It was definitely Elbert's lab, now.

Elbert, practically at home, went straight to his usual terminal and punched a few buttons. "Damn," he said. "Locked out."

"No surprise there," Jerry said. "I'm actually surprised that old code still worked at the servant doors."

"I'm not," Elbert replied. "That was always the Old Man's fatal flaw. He never took the servants seriously."

Jerry laughed. "Hey, that gives me an idea." He went over to Elbert's terminal and typed something himself. "Hey look at that. Halfway there." Jerry had found his way into the computer system at a medium clearance level, and was opening and closing various folders, looking for higher access.

"How did you do that?"

"An old trick from my college days. When I started here, I gave myself a second, secret passcode. It wasn't a high clearance, but it allowed me to get into the kitchen inventory for those late nights without being tracked."

"You were the thief?"

Jerry laughed again. "Well, I never really thought of it as stealing. After all, we were putting in more hours than we got paid for, and you can't work on an empty stomach. Besides, who got hurt?"

Elbert, incredulous, stared at Jerry. "You mean all that time....and you never..."

"Take it easy, Pete. It's all water under the bridge, now."

This time it was Elbert's turn to laugh.

"What's so funny?"

Elbert calmed himself down. "All that time," he laughed, "I thought it was Baker."

"Now that is funny." He slapped Elbert on the shoulder and smiled at him. "It's good to be back here with you, old friend. Feels like old times."

“Sure does. Listen...I just can’t tell you how sorry I am.”

“Forget it.”

“Yeah, but I...”

“Alright. Sure. Thanks,” Elbert said, letting out a 12-year-old sigh. It was still going to take time for him to forgive himself. “Now let me see what you’ve got there.”

“It’s level C clearance,” Jerry said. “But if we want to get at the brain, we’re going to have to dig down to triple A.”

At that moment, Ninety, who had been standing just outside the door, walked in the room. “We’ve got guests.”

“Who?”

“Tru-bots.”

“Can the Brothers stop them?”

“They can hold them off for a bit. Maybe ten minutes. But after that, we’ll have to make a mess. That means reinforcements. And reinforcements mean trouble.”

“Trouble?” Elbert asked.

“The kind of trouble we don’t get out of.”

“Got it. Ten minutes.”

Ninety left the room.

“Alright, Pete,” Jerry said, “We’ve got ten minutes. Let’s get to work.”

Aboard the mothership, the Old Man observed his troops coming together. It was good. Within the hour, every one of his ships would be amassed at the rendezvous point, here where it had all begun. It would be a fitting end to this miserable second life, reuniting with his true love while the rest of the world perished in a blaze of glory. No more pain. No more suffering. No more hate or envy or selfishness. And though there would be no one left to remember this moment of moments, there would also be no one left to condemn him for his crime. As for the Consortium, the

irony of ironies: No one left to use the single largest fuel haul in history.

The Old Man plugged himself into a terminal to better view the action gathering around him. One thing you had to give these robots, they followed orders well. The ships had gathered in perfect formation, exactly according to plan, and the rest were arriving on schedule. He thought again about Her, and smiled. Soon they would be together forever, and this long nightmare would come to an end.

His brief reverie was cut short, however, by the entrance of the Domo. Per standing protocol, he swept into the room and planted himself one meter behind the Old Man and one meter to the left. Also, per standing protocol, he said only one word.

“Sir.”

The Old Man had always been annoyed by interruptions of any kind, even important ones, and so had programmed his robots to only interrupt in this fashion, out of sight, with only one word, so he could gather his bearings and either continue the conversation, or not, at his convenience. Although the practice was good in theory, however, it always fell apart for him in practice. Once he was interrupted, he lost his concentration and couldn't focus on anything but the interruption anyway. So, it was today as well, and he replied without turning around, exasperated, but resigned.

“Yes, Dixon. Come forward.”

The Domo walked in front of the Old Man, turned to face him, and spoke. “We have uninvited guests.”

“On the ship?”

“No sir. Within our sphere of influence in local space.”

“I see,” said the Old Man. “Have they attempted to communicate?”

“They have, sir. As ordered, we have not returned communications.”

“No security code?”

“No, sir.”

“And their communication? You have it with you?”

“Yes sir,” the Domo said, and handed the Old Man a small slip of paper.

The Old Man read the paper several times. Then, suddenly, he tore the paper up and threw it on the floor. He allowed the anger to swell inside of him, and nursed it from a fetal annoyance to fully grown hate. When it was ready to share with the world he stood up and let out a scream that, but for the vacuum of space, would have been heard by the entire fleet. The Domo stood completely still, as unaffected by this rare display of emotion as was every other robot on the ship.

The Old Man’s anger quelled somewhat by the release, he gathered his thoughts as best he could. He walked up to the forward window, superfluous for the robots, and stared at the minuscule dots barely showing against the darkness that were his fleet. He pounded his fists on the counter and stared down at them. Then, putting his hands behind his back, straightened himself up, and took a deep breath. Without bothering to face the Domo he said, “Very well. Invite them to board, and bring them to my cabin.”

By the time the Old Man had turned toward his cabin, the Domo had already crossed the ship and given his orders.

There is a very confusing section here about robots trying to prepare for the big assault, turning on and off lots of switches, checking parameters, running diagnostics, evaluating resonance frequencies, and all sorts of technobabble. By the end, the robots are in place, their ships are ready, and all that remains is to receive the order from the mothership. Back on the mothership, however, the Old Man is somewhat distracted.

The Domo showed Ball and Whit to the Old Man's cabin, and discretely exited the way he had come. They stood facing the imposing figure, not sure how to begin, and were relieved when he opened for them.

"What a surprise, darling." The Old Man walked up to Ball and kissed her on the cheek. Then he put his hand out to Whit. "And you, sir, are growing into quite a young man." They shook hands like gentlemen.

"Daddy, I..."

"Welcome to my home away from home," the Old Man interrupted. "Can I get you something? A drink? Perhaps something to eat?"

"No, Daddy. We're not hungry."

"Perhaps young Whittaker would like some candy. Would you like some candy Master Whit?"

"I'm not four, grandpa," Whit shot back.

The Old Man was not a fool. He never had been. He sensed immediately the fear, perhaps animosity, that his family had brought with them. He had seen them less than once a year since Whit had been born, and each visit had ended in argument and bad feelings. He supposed today would be no different. With one notable exception, of course.

"Very well, darlings. If you don't want to play civil, I don't mind. In fact, I'm quite busy, and have little time for pleasantries to begin with."

Ball and Whit were silent.

"Why don't you tell me what you're doing here."

Ball opened her mouth twice to begin, and failed to speak. On the third attempt, she spat out, "We're here to stop you, Daddy."

It wasn't what she meant to say, nothing like the careful slow windup speech she had practiced to herself on the journey, but the

presence of her father always seemed to put her off balance. He had a way of making her feel like every word she said was judged, and she would become flustered, losing any argument she had meticulously played out beforehand in her mind. She had thought that today would be different. She was sorely disappointed.

“Stop me?”

“Daddy, why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“Daddy, your daughter is not an idiot. And neither is your grandson.”

“I never said...”

“And neither is my mother.” It was the one thing she had planned to say, and planned to say early. She had hoped it would put him off his game long enough to get him to really listen to her. She knew she needed to crack his shell if she wanted in, and had counted on those two words to do it for her.

It worked.

The Old Man stumbled back and fell into his chair. *Her mother? How much does she know? Has that louse of a son in law told her after all? Surely she hasn't known for the last 12 years, or she would have said something by now, which can mean only one thing. The louse is back.* All he said, however, was, “Your mother?”

Ball looked at him with more seriousness than he could ever remember. “I met her Daddy. Maybe.” She looked at Whit for support and he nodded for her to go on. “I don’t know. Maybe it was a dream. But she seemed so real.”

“Who did?” the Old Man asked, fearing the answer.

“She called herself Ballerina Justice. She said when she lived in our world, she was in love with you. That you were married. That you had planned to be together forever, but something tore you apart.”

The Old Man just listened. Silently. Thoughtfully. *So, it wasn't the louse after all. I could have lived with that, with someone to blame. Someone to hate. But this...this is something else altogether.*

“She still loves you.”

Ball and her father looked at each other intensely. Each in their own thoughts. She, thinking he could, at long last, be transformed by love. He, that keeping the secret from his daughter for so long had been unconscionable, like so many things he had done. She, that she had misjudged him. He, that he might not be worthy of Ballerina's love. She that he might be redeemed. He, that he was past redemption.

He took a deep breath. The world was about to end. At his hand. If he failed to tell her now, he never would. It did not matter that she already knew. She needed to know from him. He so rarely felt anything, which made this feeling that much more impelling.

“I still love her too.” He took a long pause before continuing. Ball and Whit let him. “She...she is the only thing that's left of the man I was. And she, like me, has become something else. I don't mean...she's not a freak like me...but she's not what she was. I feel that. She's...but I...no. I should start at the beginning...”

And after holding it in for a lifetime, he finally told her the story of his life with Ballerina Justice, and of the fateful day he lost her forever.

“But when she called out to me in a dream, the first dream I had known since my own transformation, I knew it was her. I knew I had been granted a second chance.”

“What did she say, Daddy?”

The Old Man crumpled his brow and looked at his daughter carefully. He knew she would not accept what he had to say, and he wasn't sure if he could bear to tell her. Did she have to know?

“She said our universes were tearing each other apart, but if we could join them together, and make them one, we could...” The truth? A lie? Maybe an equivocation. “we could save ourselves.” A lie. Better for her.

“Join them together?”

“Yes, Ball. Open a bridge so large it can never be closed.”

Ball was only just now beginning to realize how far gone he was. She stared at him wide-eyed. “You’re going to single-handedly destroy two universes. You must know that.”

“I don’t know that at all.”

“What if you’re wrong?”

“What if I am, Ball? What if I am? Is this a world worth saving? Everywhere I look people are trying to hurt each other. Robots fight for nothing but power. I’ve spent a lifetime fueling the weapons of oppression and for what? Is the world better off because of them? Would it be better off without? There is no winning. Humans oppress robots. Robots oppress humans. Are you ready for another 20 years of war?”

“And your alternative is what, end the game altogether? Destroy everything and give up? What about the rest of us? What about the world where people still care about each other? Where they love each other as much as you love her. Will you destroy their love to regain your own? The world is at war, yes. And war does terrible things to people. Our people and the mechanical people have been trying to destroy each other for nearly 60 years. But life goes on, Daddy. For every act of oppression, somewhere there is an act of compassion. For every act of hate, somewhere there is an act of love. You must see that there are better ways. No one is asking you to take sides, but at least give us a chance to work it out on our own. What about me? What about Whitty? Maybe we want to take our chances.”

As she spoke, she thought she saw empathy in her father's eyes. She thought it was working, that the drop of love that was coursing through what was left of his veins was working its way to his brain. When he held his ground, then, the news was only that much more devastating.

"I'm sorry, Ball. It's too late." Ball's father shared a look of exhaustion as he left the room and went back to the bridge to give his orders.

Whit looked up at his mother. "What do we do now, Mom?"

Ball sat down on the floor and began to weep. She was supposed to be the mom. She was supposed to know what to do. But right now, she just felt like a confused child with no more idea of what to do next than her son did.

"I'm out of ideas, Whitty. If only *She* could help us."

"Maybe she can."

Ball looked up at him and rubbed the tears from her face.

"But how? How do we find her?"

"Mr. Ninety could do it."

"But Mr. Ninety is half a galaxy away, Whit."

"What about another one. Think there are any bro-bots on this ship?"

Ball suddenly remembered something. Something she had seen upon her arrival to this ship. Something that gave her hope. "Actually, Whit," she said, "I think there may be." She stood up. The hope made her strong, and the idea made her feel responsible again. "Let's retrace our footsteps. I have an idea."

Back on the bridge, the Old Man held the fate of the universe in his hands. His entire fleet was gathered before him, waiting for orders. Any doubts he had felt, any pestering concerns that *She* hadn't bothered to find him again, now that he was so close, were

shut out by his conversation with the girl. She had settled his resolve, for better or ill, and he was more sure of himself than ever.

He looked around at his mechanical crew and at the readouts showing the positions of his fleet. The ships were at full power. The disrupters were tested and functioning. Everything was in order. If it failed to work, it wouldn't be for lack of trying. With a hole as big as he was planning to make, you couldn't put enough garbage through it to slow it down, let alone close it up again. In any case, there was no garbage here. Just disrupters.

He turned to the communications robot. "Get the Domo up here."

The robot pushed some buttons and scanned the ship, before replying, "I'm sorry, sir. I am unable to locate him."

The Old Man was floored, and he stopped in his tracks. "What? What do you mean?"

"He is not on the ship, sir."

"That's impossible."

"Is there someone else I can contact for you, sir?"

"It doesn't matter. Open up contact with the entire fleet. Tell them to commence with the disrupters at will."

"Yes sir."

And the Old Man saw several things happen simultaneously.

The first of the deep blue lights appeared in the empty space beyond.

The Domo entered the bridge and attacked him.

The world disappeared.

"George."

"Rina, at last."

They embraced.

Whit and Ball walked over to them. Everything was dark. More than dark. As if the darkness were obscured by fog.

Enveloped. Yet they could sense each other. It was as if they were seeing without their eyes.

Ballerina Justice floated through and swirled around them. Her voice seemed to ring in from every part of the universe. “She’s beautiful, George. I’m so proud. And the little one. So smart. He reminds me of you.”

“I’ve missed you so much, Darling.”

“I’ve dreamed of this moment, George.”

“I’ve done nothing but dream of it, darling.”

“And now it’s over.”

She disappeared and the Old Man panicked. He looked every which way, but could see her nowhere. He looked above him and shouted, “Over?”

From the darkness, the echoey voice of Ballerina Justice once again filled their world. “You’re tearing our worlds apart. We cannot survive this. Not even I can survive this.”

“But you said...”

And then, from right behind him, “It’s too late, George. This is the end of time.”

He turned around to see her swirling through the space around him. He tried to follow her with his eyes, but she was moving too fast.

“Tell me what to do, Rina.”

“How can I tell you what to do, when I barely understand it myself?” As she spoke, the swirl moved further and further away. Her voice seemed to change its source with every phrase. “I have been so distant for so long. It is everything I can do to be with you here, even for this brief moment.”

The Old Man looked around frantically, trying to find her again. “Is it my ships? Should I stop them? Make them work faster? Make me understand. Tell me what to do. I won’t lose you again.”

But there was no answer. The Old Man crumbled and put his face in his hands. After a few moments, he looked up and shouted, "Don't leave me, Rina!" Then, he put his face back into his hands, and cried.

Ball, coming through the darkness, moved over to him and put her hands on his shoulders. "It's not what you think, Daddy." He had not even noticed that his daughter was there. "Without the insight, I'm not sure you can ever understand."

The Old Man looking up from his hands and into the emptiness in front of him, said, "Insight?"

"The insight, Daddy. Time. The insight of the Time People."

The Old Man looked exhausted. "Try me," he said.

Ball sat down in the emptiness and spoke. "I think... the best way to describe it is...hmmm." She wasn't sure where to begin.

The Old Man stayed silent, staring away from her.

She thought that maybe she should start with the basics. It might help her get her own thoughts in order as well. Something from her introduction to time studies. "Time is a river. It flows fast and slow, shallow and deep, constant and changing. Because we flow *with* it, we cannot observe the changes, but those of us with the insight can sense it." She let this sink in.

"There are, I believe, many of these rivers, each with their own flows and eddies, each defining their own universe. Were they to come in contact with each other, they would have a profound effect. We've seen the effect in this area of space already. I think our time flow is nearly opposite from the time flow of the other-verse, and when they come in contact with each other, they drag on each other, slowing time down in both universes. With a permanent bridge, they will bring each other to a stand still, and we will all be frozen in time forever."

"Then there is hope," the Old Man said.

"Hope? To stop it?"

“No, no, no. Why would I want to stop it? Hope that She and I could remain together, here, for a frozen eternity.”

“I’m sorry, Daddy. No one can survive this. Even something as ethereal as She. She may already be gone for good.”

“Then...it is over.”

“Oh, Daddy. How could you do it?”

“I did it for her.” He turned to face Ball. “No. That’s a lie. I suppose there’s no time left for lies. I did it for me, Ball. Because I was tired of living, if you could even call it that. Because I remembered being happy and thought I could be again. Because I convinced myself that I had helped to create a world that wasn’t worth saving.”

She walked up to him and embraced him as Whit looked on.

“It can’t be over, Mom,” Whit said.

“I’m so sorry, honey. I know it feels like that. You’re so young. You had your whole life in front of you. But sometimes, you just have to accept your fate.”

“I don’t mean that, Mom. I mean it can’t be over. Literally.”

“You mean, because we’re here? You mean, if were over, we wouldn’t exist?”

“Well, kind of,” Whit said. “The thing is, Mom, I’ve seen the other-verse. I’ve travelled it with grandmother.”

“You’ve...” Ball struggled, “I don’t understand.”

“She showed me her world. I’ve seen it begin and I’ve seen it end. It doesn’t end here, it begins here.”

Ball stared at her son with a combination of utter confusion, and outright pride. He so often showed his intelligence in ways she couldn’t understand, jetting past her as she struggled to keep up. On one level it was frustrating, but on a more important one, it made her proud to look on and watch him fly.

“Ok, Whitty. Help me understand.”

“That world. The one we call the other-verse. It is just beginning. The time flow has been in place forever, along with the empty space and the laws governing them. But it was just that. Empty. It had energy but no matter. Then Grandmother gave it matter. And the matter, from our universe, transformed to fit its new home, and taught the energy how to shape itself. As the natural energy transformed itself into matter, it became the source of everything that universe came to know.”

Whit stopped, but Ball was still confused. The Old Man just sat silently. Ball said, gently, “Go on.”

“That universe grew and thrived and evolved life. Civilizations came and went and they even grew to have a galactic empire, much like ours. A time came when their own science rivaled that of ours today, and they explored the possibility of digging a hole outside of their own universe. They succeeded, and in doing so, created the universe we live in today. You see?”

Ball was dumbfounded. “I’m sorry, Whitty. I still don’t understand. How could they create our universe if we created theirs?”

“Your insight, Mom. Use your insight. Their time flows away from us. As they travel forward, we travel back. Billions of years in their future are billions of years in our past.”

“And we’re, what? Destroyed in the process of creating them?”

“That’s what I’m saying, Mom. I don’t think that’s possible. Either time flows from both universes annihilate each other here and now, or both universes survive. I know they can because I’ve seen it. So, it can’t be too late.”

“But how do we...”

“We have to go back, Grandpa. And you have to stop those ships.”

And just then, a friendly bro-bot came into view.

“Dixon! You!” The Old Man shouted.

“Yes, it’s me. You’re...dreaming. It’s time to wake up.”

Like so many space stories, as we get closer to the end, and the action gets heavy, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep track of what’s going on, at the expense of an overly descriptive view of the climactic actions. Suffice to say that when our friends from the last scene find themselves back on the ship, confusion reigns.

The confusion was, apparently, brought about on three fronts. First, the attack on the Old Man by the Domo, and his subsequent removal from the bridge. This led the more senior robots to question with whom their allegiance should lay. Second, thanks to our hero’s miraculous computer hacking skills back at the main office on Earth, the disrupters on ships throughout the fleet began to fail with depressing regularity shortly after the bombardments began. Third, bro-bot spies, located randomly throughout the fleet, received orders from their leader to rise up and stop the bombardments at all costs.

And confusion reigned.

When the Old Man came out of the trance, he found himself back in his quarters with Ball, Whit, and the Domo. His head felt like it had been sliced open with a dull machete, and he was unable to focus on anything more detailed than a bright light. He struggled to his feet and made his way to the bridge where repair-bots were running to and fro, navigator-bots were comparing charts, and the ‘bots that ran the disrupter units were scurrying back and forth between terminals. It looked more like panic than anything resembling careful problem solving.

He stepped onto the bridge, the Domo following.

“Report,” he shouted.

A navigator-bot who had assumed control of the ship in his absence answered him without hesitation. "All onboard disrupter units have failed, as have those on most of the fleet. At this time, there are only six functioning disrupter units remaining. Twelve ships are under attack from robots on their own crews, which we suspect is a result of a contagious insanity, although we do not currently have confirmation of that." While he said this, he silently signaled to his security-bots and they took the Domo into custody. "Would you like us to examine this one for a cause?"

The Old Man absorbed the situation. "Call off the remaining disrupter units and have everyone stand down. Affect repairs while we regroup. Contain the insane robots but do not reprogram. Leave this one to me. I'll be in my quarters. Let me know when repairs have been affected. Dixon, you're with me."

With that, he turned and walked to his quarters with the Domo following behind. Ball and Whit were waiting for him when he arrived.

"What does it look like out there?" Ball asked.

"Well," the Old Man replied, "it looks like fate may have intervened after all. Something seems to be wrong with almost every disrupter in the fleet."

"Fate, hell," Ball exclaimed. "It's Jerry!"

"Don't get cocky, little one. Whatever he did, he didn't get them all."

"How bad is it?"

"There is a hole about ten times the size of what we would typically make. That's pretty bad in itself, but far worse is that with nothing to push into it, the hole will keep growing."

"It can't be," said Whit. "I saw the hole close."

"Whitty, you know you can't count on anything you see on the flow. It's always changing. Tantum Nunc, Whitty. Only the Present."

“But...” Whit struggled to say, “but..there must be a way. There must.”

“Unfortunately, Whittaker, there may not be. It would take something the size of a small moon to close that thing up. And it’s getting bigger all the time. Even if I sent the whole fleet through on a suicide mission, we wouldn’t come close to the amount of matter we would need to close it back up.”

“Then it’s over?” Whit asked, dejectedly.

“I’m afraid it is, Whit,” the Old Man replied. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for everything.” And the Old Man did something he hadn’t done in the twelve years Whit had been alive. He hugged him. Tight. Like he meant it. And Ball came up and hugged them both. And they stayed there, holding each other close, waiting for the end to come.

And they waited.

And waited.

And nothing happened.

And there was a knock.

“Sir.”

“Go ahead.”

“There is a communication for you from a ship en route to our location.”

Pulled out of his trance, the Old Man broke free of the embrace and said, “Put it through here.” Then, his vid-screen glowing into life, he saw a larger than life size picture of someone he had known a long time ago. Someone he had once respected. Someone whose presence he had been sorry to lose. Looking at him, he said, “Dr. Baker. Now you are about the last person I expected to see gracing my wall today.”

Ball looked on knowingly. His first plan had worked. Anything else he had up his sleeve had to be worth trying.

“Good to see you, Boss. Long time no see.”

“As you say,” the Old Man replied.

“Well, I’d love to catch up and talk about old times, but apparently some son-of-a-bitch has decided to destroy two universes in one fell swoop, so I’m a little busy. Oh, hi, Ball. Good to see you still alive.”

The Old Man began fuming. Maybe he wasn’t so sorry to have lost him after all. Ball did her best to diffuse the situation. “What is it, Cal? Do you have a plan?”

“Well, actually...”

Here he goes into the detail about an invention he has been working on which he calls the ECRU (energy conversion and reclamation unit) that is a sort of transporter thingy with an unfortunate color. With a source of energy, it can convert that energy to matter, although he has not yet figured out how to turn it into the matter he wants. Of course, there’s no getting around the need to explain how it works, where the energy comes from, the inherent problems with the design, the effects of entropy and inertia, how it differs from the unstoppable, and the seemingly endless description of the pretend science that is never quite sound enough to rationalize such a device. Eventually, however, we receive the long wished for respite from the interminable explanations, and Cal gets around to suggesting someone actually use it.

“...but if it is irrelevant what the matter looks like, it should work fine.”

“Should?” Ball asked.

“Well,” Baker answered, “this may well be the second largest experiment in the history of the universe...”

“But?”

“But I guess we’ve got nothing to lose?”

The Old Man looked at him full on. Even in a separate ship, connected only by light and radio waves, Baker was still afraid of him. He was pleasantly surprised, then, when the Old Man finally said, "Alright, Dr. Baker. Let's give it a shot," and turned to smile at Ball. "What can we do to help?"

"Have every ship in your fleet transfer all power to their energy beams, and focus them on the coordinates I'm sending to your ship." He typed something in on his terminal. "And wish me luck."

"Good luck, Cal," Ball said, and took her father's hand to lead him back to the bridge.

Within moments of the Old Man's order, something strange happened, something no one had ever seen before. It started ordinarily enough, at least for anyone with experience ripping holes in the universe. The world went dark. Became empty. A void deeper and darker than laymen could possibly imagine. That part was normal. The introduction of Baker's ship and its unusual device, however, made the traditional closing of the rip much less so.

Energy flowed from every ship in the fleet into the ECRU, and came out the other end as a matter stream directed at the center of the rip. Typically, when matter entered a newly formed hole, there would be a flash of a deep bluish light and a burst of energy, which the waiting ship would absorb and convert to fuel for use in the unstoppable weapons. Today, however, was anything but typical. The matter stream entered the hole, and as the deep bluish light began to grow, it stretched itself out from its own universe toward the ECRU. When it touched the ECRU, a connection was made, and the energy coming from the other-verse was converted into the matter stream, which in turn gave birth to more energy in a continuous feedback loop.

As the energy and matter streams grew larger, their presence could be felt aboard all of the ships in the fleet. The robots became paralyzed by overwhelming vibrations. The navigation controls went haywire.

Baker's ship began to heat up like a furnace. Baker and his crew moved into the heart of their ship, and prepared to escape on their lifeboats as they called for help from the fleet. The fleet, itself helpless with all communications disrupted, never heard.

Back on the mothership, the Old Man was half-paralyzed himself, but knew his moment had come. He knew that the feedback loop would grow indefinitely and create a disturbance equal in devastation to the one it was trying to prevent. He also knew that something had gone wrong, or Baker would have shut down the ECRU by now. There was one chance to save Baker's plan: a massive explosion in the heart of the matter stream. He could do it, but he would have to sacrifice himself to make it happen.

He turned to his daughter and said, "You have saved *Her*. You have saved me. I did not deserve it. Forgive me." And with great difficulty, with great pain, managed to fight with his malfunctioning mechanical body enough to drag it off the bridge to his personal shuttle.

Ball and Whit watched as his shuttle left the ship and flew into what could only be called the eye of the storm. For it was an eye, peaceful and empty at the center, violent and chaotic everywhere else. As the shuttle crossed the horizon, an even greater explosion of light engulfed everything. The two them, mother and son, held hands, waiting for the end to come.

Then, in a moment, it was gone. What had been a confusing storm of light and fury threatening to destroy the universe became little more than a quiet corner of space with a few too many ships in it. The storm had passed. The proverbial sun was peeking from behind the clouds. The rip was sealed, the ships disabled, and the

universes were saved. One ship, however, was conspicuously absent. The Old Man's shuttle, the ship that had flown into the eye of the storm, and its sole crew, the Old Man, were gone forever.

Ball and Whit looked about, catching the eye of the strange robot the Old Man had called the Domo. They were all of one mind. It was time to assess the damage and rebuild.

So that's pretty much it. Scientists use science to save the world. Bad guy redeems himself in final act of sacrifice. What's not to love? Just a couple of epilogues left and vague setups for the sequel that never came. I suppose we're all better off.

Epilogue: Everybody Lives Happily Ever After

About a year after the Great Rip, as it came to be known, Amanda Kingsley held a small gathering at her house, in honor of Whittaker Strohmman's 13th birthday. Just a few friends. Men and robots. Jerry and Ball were there. Whit, of course. Peter Elbert and Caldonium Baker. A couple of bro-bots that called themselves Ninety and De-El. And a strange couple of humans that went by the names of Tilly and Bite.

Jerry proposed a toast. "In many cultures, you would be entering into manhood today. In ours of course, we tend to coddle you until you're twenty, but I would be lying if I said that I thought we could hold on to you that long. In the year that I've come to know you, son, I've come to know a man. A man who is thoughtful, caring, full of compassion and insight, of knowledge and wisdom. May you never stop learning. May you never stop growing. May you never stop caring. I love you, son." He raised his glass and then walked up to his son and put his hand on his shoulder. "Somebody get this kid a soda."

There was the sound of glasses clinking and general cries of "Hear Hear!", and one lone voice said, "Speech."

The room settled down to hear this young man speak. He looked a little uncomfortable at first, but he pulled himself up, and let the words flow out of their own accord.

"I had the dream again last night. I've had it for nearly a year now, and it gets clearer every night. Grandmother's there, and Grandpa too. He's like this whole other guy. He's happy and goofy, and really nice. And Grandmother's always hanging on him like if she lets go he'll fly away."

Whit was silent for a moment as he looked about the room. He looked at every face. Faces he had come to know so well over the last year. Crazy Tilly and Bite who saw robot conspiracies everywhere, but who, when it came down to it, were actually working with De-El and Ninety on a neighborhood planning committee. Uncle Pete who had finally got up the courage to talk to Auntie Manny, and would surely be married within the year. Dr. Baker, who had taken Whit under his wing and taught him more in the last three months than he had learned at the Academy in the last three years. And his dad. A real dad. Home at last. He was happy.

Then he looked at his mother, and he was filled with sadness.

“She wants me to come away with her. I’ve been holding back, but I think I’m almost ready. There’s so much to learn out there and I’m not sure how much longer I can wait without losing my chance.

“When she showed me her world that first day we met, I thought I had learned the secret of the universe. It seems so unbelievable now that the universe was actually created by Uncle Cal.”

Everybody laughed at this.

“But there is so much more. And I think...I think maybe I’m the only one that gets to see it. I mean...see it and come back to tell the tale.”

Here there was only nervous laughter.

“I guess I just want to say thanks for coming to my birthday party. Thanks, Dad for taking me seriously. And no matter what happens, I love you all. Even you, Bite.”

And the laughter became genuine once again as Ball came up to her son and hugged him for dear life.

At Assembly Hall, the robots were gathered to hear their newly elected leader usher in the Era of Peace. How long he had

been a bro-bot, no one new, but bro-bot he was, and his agenda was clear.

“I address you today not as my mechanical brothers and sisters, but as my friends. For I no longer believe that my family is limited to those that are built like me. I believe that my family is the family of mind. It was a man who said, 'I think, therefore I am.' Today, it is a machine who says, 'You think, therefore you are my friend.' Let it not be said that a lasting peace came between men and machines only when the machines lost their superior weapons. Let it not be said that but for a better gun, we might yet go to war again. Rather, let it be said that a time came when we saw ourselves as brothers. Machines and Men together. Let it be said that a time came when we forgave our enemies for the time of enslavement. Let it be said that a time came when they forgave us for our vengeance. And let it be said that a time came when we learned to share the world and treat each other with dignity.

“There are many others among us who, like me, have long desired to end this perpetual war. We are in every chamber and on every ship. We are leaders and workers. Guards and managers. Janitors and mechanics. Our fingers spread throughout the galaxy and are bound together with a single thread. We wish for peace. Honest peace. Lasting peace.

“There are those who will say that you had no choice. That without your weapons, you had to make peace to save yourselves. Don't believe them. Rather, know you can still choose war, and choose peace instead. They have hurt us, it's true. And we have hurt them. We are not even. We will never be. But we can forgive. And can let them forgive. And together, we can build the future.”