

# TRUST!



A NOVEL BY

**Richard Romano**

# VIRUS!



A NOVEL BY  
**Richard Romano**



**Hidden  
Harbor  
Press**

VIRUS!  
RICHARD ROMANO

Published by Hidden Harbor Press  
Distributed by Rich Text and Graphics  
26F Congress Street, #236  
Saratoga Springs, NY 12866

Copyright © 2005 Richard Romano. All rights reserved.  
Reproduction in whole or part by any means without  
specific written permission of the publisher is prohibited.

Design and production by Rich Text & Graphics,  
Saratoga Springs, NY  
Copy editing by Colleen Quinn and Quentin Murphy  
Printed by Integrated Book Technology, Troy, NY

Library of Congress Control Number: 2004113231  
ISBN: 0-9723724-1-5

*For Kim*

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Special Edition Using Adobe Photoshop CS*  
(with Peter Bauer)

*The Scanning Workshop*

*Sams Teach Yourself Adobe InDesign 1.5 in 24 Hours*

*Digital Photography: Capturing and Optimizing Images  
for Print and Web-Based Publishing*

*The GATF Encyclopedia of Graphic Communications*  
(editor, with Frank Romano)

---

# PROLOGUE

---

**SUNDAY, JUNE 12, 20—, 5:57 P.M.**

“HONEY, THE HENDRICKSES ARE WAITING. YOU KNOW HOW HANK gets if you keep him from food for longer than 15 minutes. Myrna still hasn’t found the cat.”

“I know, I know. Hang on, I just have one last e-mail to read.”

Lance and Penny Harbinger were a fairly average middle-aged, middle-class, middle-of-the-road couple living in the typically mid-size, moderately affluent upstate New York town of Ethelman.

Penny had been the one who was into computers, and Lance had run a steadily dying typewriter sales and repair service for 30 years. He was nonplused by the idea of a computer and, quite frankly, didn’t want the thing in the house. Penny, however, was a computer whiz who as of late had been cultivating her latent talent for tying lace doilies. Her doilies had begun to make her a pretty penny, so to speak, and she had quickly risen to become one of New York State’s premier lace doily-tiers.

“‘Tatting’ it’s called,” she often said randomly to strangers at the supermarket. “It’s in most crossword puzzles these days.”

Penny was a fixture on the upstate arts and crafts circuit. She had even been a guest on *Martha Stewart Living* and was pleased as punch to discover that Martha had

been all thumbs when it came to tying doilies. Penny felt proud that she could best Martha at *something*, especially as Penny was once served a court order to prevent her from ever making homemade Alfredo sauce again. Then again, Penny had never run into problems with the SEC, so she had that going for her, too.

Prior to her interest in lace doilies, Penny had worked in the Computer Science Department of the local university and, as a result, Penny was conversant in Unix-based computer systems. She had bought her first home computer to work with computer-assisted lace doily (called CALD) design technology, as well as set up an e-commerce site to sell her doilies. Lance had sat in his favorite Barcelona lounge watching her set up the system, occasionally muttering things like, “Where’s the beauty in that damn thing? I mean, give me a good old Underwood or Remington. There was beauty there. There was *art* there. Ah, society is just going to hell.”

“You’re just a big old Luddite,” said Penny, clicking through the computer’s detailed set-up routine. “My only issue is that, as a well-educated, 57-year-old woman, why do I need a cartoon dog telling me how to set up this damn computer? I’m not a six-year-old.”

Despite Lance’s resistance, once he started logging onto the Internet, he couldn’t be pulled off the thing. Most of his friends were his typewriter customers, so he couldn’t e-mail them, but he did spend an inordinate amount of time in chat rooms. As a result, Penny resigned herself to the fact that she was never going to get on the computer and went back to her tatting.

Now they were late in meeting their best friends the

Hendrickses at Ye Olde Carcasse Inne for their usual Sunday night out. Hank Hendricks was a retired printer who had spent the three years of his retirement in a non-stop state of eating. This worked out well, because his wife Myrna was in a non-stop state of cooking. That explained why Hank had gone from a relatively svelte 220 pounds to somewhere in the neighborhood of 375. Myrna rarely ate much of the things she cooked and as a result she remained fairly petite, which again worked out, since at least one of them needed to remain mobile. Their friends admired how well they complemented each other and felt that theirs was a marriage made in heaven. Hank, though, tended to put it a bit more pragmatically: “If I left her, it’d mean I’d have to get up. I don’t wanna.”

Penny stood by the front door tapping her foot.

“Another e-mail? Who can it be from? You don’t know anyone technologically literate.”

“I don’t recognize the return address. Someone must have tracked me down. Maybe using a *search engine*.”

He emphasized that last term, trying to impress her with his increasing mastery of the lingo and silently hoping he had got it right.

“It’s from someone whose e-mail address ends in dot-gov. Hey! I’ll bet it’s Gary Govoni, my old Army buddy.” He clicked a few times. “He sent me some kind of file.”

“Lance, dear, dot-gov means—”

“Yow!” yelled Lance. He pulled his hand from the mouse and rubbed it.

“Honey, what’s wrong?”

“Damnedest thing. Some kind of electric shock. I told you we needed a humidifier.”

“This is June in New York state,” Penny pointed out. “The humidity is 500 percent. We sure don’t need a humidifier.”

He ignored her. “Huh. The file was blank. Very weird. Oh, well. Gary wasn’t always very with it. I bet he forgot to attach it. You know how that is.”

“Right. Let’s go.”

### **6:35 P.M.**

Ye Olde Carcasse Inne was one of Ethelman’s two upscale restaurants, although all that was really meant by “upscale” was that you didn’t have to order by talking into a clown’s mouth. Well, unless you thought about Chad the waiter what most people in town thought about Chad the waiter. The blue hair and nose-ring may go over in New York City, San Francisco, or even Ballston Spa, but certainly not in staid, frumpy Ethelman.

“For starters, I’ll have the steak,” said Hank Hendricks, who was wedged into the special chair management had constructed for him. “And as a main course...ah, make it another steak. And I’d like an extra baked potato with that.”

“Vegghchtbull?” asked Chad. He swallowed heavily.

“Chad, dear, are you all right?” asked Penny.

“Yes, Mrs. Harbinger, I’m fine. I just got my tongue pierced, and...well...I just can’t stop salivating.”

He stuck his tongue out, as if saying “ahh” for the doctor, and there it was: a metal stud driven right through the middle of it. Naturally, everyone at the table winced, which was pretty much the effect that Chad had been going for.

“I’m told that’ll stop after a while, but I feel like I’m at the dentist.” He swallowed. “Vegetable, Mr. Hendricks?”

“Whaddya got that’s deep-fried?”

“A vegetable?” asked Chad, swallowing. “Ummm, I don’t think we have any deep-fried vegetables today. We had that deep-fried zucchini you like, but we ran out last night.”

“I’ll just have french fries.”

“Um, Mr. Hendricks, I’m sorry but that’s not really a vegetable,” said Chad, swallowing again.

“Son, I fought in two wars for this country. That’s two more than you, so who are you tell me what’s a vegetable? Is that what they teach you in that school of yours, that potatoes ain’t vegetables?”

Chad swallowed and knew when to give up. “Fine. French fries.” He took their menus and went off toward the kitchen.

“Where did his parents go wrong?” asked Myrna.

“Oh, well, his father drinks,” said Penny. “And Chad goes to college downstate, and you know how crazy they all are down there.”

She looked over at Lance, who did not look good at all. He was sweating profusely, despite the Arctic blast coming from the air conditioning. His skin had gone a whiter shade of green. His breathing was getting heavier and heavier.

“Lance, honey, are you okay?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” said Lance feebly. He stood up shakily. “Please excuse me.”

Penny watched him stagger off in the general direction of the rest room. Chad came out of the kitchen and Lance collided with him. Lance stumbled and Chad reached out

to prevent Lance from toppling over. Their hands came in contact, and Penny could see Chad recoil slightly, as if shocked by static electricity.

“That’s very strange,” said Penny. “Lance was fine before we left. He was on the computer and everything.”

“It must be one of those summer flus,” Myrna suggested.

“Where would he catch a summer flu? He never has any customers anymore, except for that guy that thinks computers are a CIA plot. He keeps running out of type-writer ribbon writing his ‘manifesto.’”

There was a commotion coming from the kitchen area of the restaurant. Chad came running out. “Mrs. Harbinger! It’s your husband—he’s gone nuts. He’s tearing up the manager’s office!”

They all got up and ran toward the back of the restaurant and there was Lance sitting at the restaurant’s computer.

“What is he doing?” asked Penny.

Chad charged in. “Damn! He’s erasing the boss’s files. Mr. Harbinger! Stop!” Chad grabbed the chair that Lance was sitting in. It was on wheels, so Chad was able to roll him away from the computer. Lance jumped up and tore open the top drawer of a nearby filing cabinet. He yanked out a handful of green Pendaflex hanging files containing thick manila folders. Before Chad could stop him, he ran from the room. Penny, Myrna, and Chad followed him. Lance ran into the kitchen and hip-checked a cook away from a large metal pot filled with the soup of the day (French onion). Lance stuffed the folders into the pot and closed the lid. Then he ran back toward the office. At that point,

all the chefs, waiters, and other considerably younger and stronger employees stopped him. Twine was sought, found, and Lance was trussed like a turkey. They even considered putting those little white boots on his legs, but couldn't find any big enough. At that point, 911 was phoned.

Penny and Myrna returned to the table, where Hank was still sitting.

"We need more bread," he said.

"What on earth is going on?" Penny wondered to no one in particular.



**THURSDAY, JUNE 16, 20—, 8:32 a.m.**

THE VAST RABBIT WARREN OF CONCRETE BUNKERS AND UNDERGROUND chambers occupied two square miles of the earth's crust below what appeared to be a chemical treatment plant in Edison, New Jersey. Truth be told, there were no chemicals being treated at what was generally believed to be a processing plant for the cosmetics industry. The Cover Story Treatment Center, as it was called, was completely benign, but only a select few people on the planet knew that. In fact, it probably would have come as a great comfort to many nearby residents to know that the vast clouds of smoke billowing out of the plant's immense smokestacks were completely harmless and contained no carcinogenic substances, noxious particulate matter, nor any otherwise biologically deleterious material whatsoever. It was designed to resemble very closely all the real chemical treatment plants and manufacturing institutions that made central New Jersey such a fragrant place to be. The vast white clouds of smoke were produced by the facility's three cafeterias, which is why, on certain days, when the wind was blowing just the right way, the air smelled of meatloaf.

The disguise worked exceedingly well, thought General Armstrong Q. Piddle as he drove his olive drab Jeep Grand Cherokee up to the security kiosk just outside the

front gate. He flashed his ID to the MP on duty, who though dressed as—and having the same bored, detached expression as—your average rent-a-cop, was actually a member of an elite squad of trained security guards that the Army manufactures for the express purpose of guarding secret military installations. Even though it was just after dawn and the guard had been on duty for eight hours, Piddle knew that the guard was completely alert and if there were even the slightest sign of retouching or a single pixel out of place on his photo ID, the guard could and would snap his neck like a celery stalk. Piddle found that to be more of a comfort than you would think.

He drove up to what was purportedly the reception area, although the whole point of the security kiosk and Sergeant Death (which was actually his name, by the way) was that not a great deal of receiving was to be done.

Piddle was greeted by a smiling receptionist who, though she looked friendly and chirpy, was also a trained killer who could disembowel him like a chicken in seconds if need be. The fact that he weighed 250 pounds, had a thick, beefy neck, and looked like the bulldog in the old Warner Brothers cartoons wouldn't faze her a bit.

He flashed his ID again and she smiled at him.

“Good morning, Mr. Heath,” she said brightly with a trace of a British accent. Arthur Heath was the name he was called anywhere but deep within the bowels of the pseudo plant; it wouldn't do to have people referring to him as “General” around a chemical treatment plant. And, of course, it also wouldn't do for him to be seen driving into the plant wearing his Army uniform, so he adopted another uniform—a white shirt, power tie,

and expensive suit, a uniform he completely detested.

“Good morning, Miss Jenkins,” he replied, even though, if they were to revert to strict Army protocol, he would have to address her as Major Barbara. Janice Barbara was her given name.

A lifelong Army man, it was a struggle to suppress a salute and he had to grasp his right arm with his left hand in a kind of Dr. Strangelove way. Miss Jenkins (née Barbara) watched him; there was a smile on her lips, but her eyes were already peeling the flesh from his stomach. He strode quickly to a bank of elevators. Walking to a door at the rear marked “Out of Order,” he inserted a gold key into a slot on the wall and the “Out of Order” elevator slid open. He entered and the doors slid silently shut behind him.

He pressed the “6,” “16,” and “4” floor buttons, followed by the Door Close button, faced the mirror at the rear of the car, and waited. A portion of the mirror lit up forming a computer readout. A rotating wristwatch appeared on the screen, and in a moment the message

### **A Type 1 error has occurred**

was displayed.

The general sighed deeply and touched the screen where an OK button was displayed, although it was anything but okay. He went back to the elevator panel and re-entered the secret code. He turned back to the readout and noticed that it now displayed the message:

**An error of type 0267936471439 has occurred**

He grabbed the emergency phone and dialed the technology center.

“This is General Piddle,” he said with a frustrated voice. “I—no, you will *not* put me on hold. I’m the commander in charge of this project....Look, son, what is your rank? No, ‘Steve’ is not a rank. Now, I’m stuck in the elevator—I don’t know what the model and serial numbers of the elevator are....Look, son, that’s not my—”

The general thought back to his service in the Vietnam War. Suddenly, every enemy soldier he’d machine-gunned had “Steve’s” voice.

“What do you mean you’re going to reboot the elevator?” At that point, the lights went out for about 15 seconds, then came on again. He hung up the phone, re-entered the secret code on the control panel, and faced the readout.

This time, a low-intensity beam of red light shot out from the mirror and scanned the general’s retina. Why he always felt like giggling, he had no idea. Could it be he was ticklish in his retina?

There was a confirmatory beep somewhere within the depths of the elevator walls and the car started to descend. Now that he had finally made it through security, he could begin to worry about other security breaches.

General Piddle hadn’t seen combat in years. He was a veteran of the Vietnam War and had seen some combat during the horrific Cola Wars of the mid-1980s. Indeed, he is loath to recall the day in a 7-11 when a buddy of his threw his body on a can of New Coke that was about to explode. It did, and it wasn’t a pretty sight; you know what soda can do to your stomach. Piddle had to pick up his buddy, sling

him over his shoulder, and run three blocks to the emergency room, as was stipulated in his buddy's HMO policy.

General Piddle was currently heading up a special division within the Army: the Elite Computer Virus Task Force, a special joint venture by all four branches of the military as well as several top computer hardware and software companies that conducted research into computer virus creation, propagation, and—with any luck—elimination. And viral threats came from all sides. Not only were there domestic and international virus attacks to worry about, but the leaders of the project had become convinced that computer virus attacks could very well come from an extraterrestrial source.

The entire base hidden beneath Edison, New Jersey was devoted to the ECVTF. (Between the government and software companies, you figured there was going to be an acronym from hell involved at some point.)

**8:45 a.m.**

General Piddle strode briskly into the War Room. Granted, there hadn't been a war in quite some time, but "War Room" sounded a lot more impressive than "that big room with all the maps." Even at that early hour, a crowd had gathered. On most occasions, the War Room was vast and roomy. (In fact, on more than one occasion, its after-hours use involved ballroom dancing.) Today, it was like a New York City subway car at rush hour, but without the odors. Everyone's eyes were glued—figuratively, mind you—to the enormous animated map of the northeastern United States that occupied one entire wall.

Such was the excitement of the crowd that they all, to a man (and woman), completely forgot that General Piddle terrified most of them.

“What’s going on here?” the general asked gruffly.

There was general hubbub, but no satisfactory response until a noodly man in a white lab coat, Professor Fassbinder, came forward.

“It’s finally happened,” said the professor.

“What has?” asked the general.

“What we’ve dreaded since this project began,” answered the professor.

“Someone’s cut our funding?” asked the general.

A lieutenant came forward. “Three more cases have turned up in Brooklyn, sir.”

“Damn!” Fassbinder exclaimed. “How is it spreading so fast?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” barked the general. “Look, I just got here. Someone wanna start at the beginning? You, Poindexter.”

Professor Fassbinder, whose first name actually was Poindexter, gathered his thoughts.

“As you know, general,” Fassbinder explained, “we created different strains of computer virus, the express purpose being to second-guess the hackers who were unleashing them in the wild. If we could create many types of computer viruses, we could at the same time develop vaccines and thus be proactive in the fight against them. However, I discovered several days ago that someone had hacked into my system. I blame myself—I knew it was a mistake to use my birthday as my password. Anyway, to make a long story even longer, one particular strain was

copied, and I'm afraid it's been unleashed in the wild."

"What the hell are you talking about?" asked the general.

"There is now a strain of computer virus that can be transmitted from machine to man."

"Say what?" asked Piddle.

"A man in Ethelman, New York, is believed to be Patient Zero. He was the first one infected; we believe it was over the weekend. Somehow, since then, the virus got transferred from person to person and made it to New York City. At the same time, it's been transferred from human to computer and back to human. In one bizarre case, it was transmitted from computer to aardvark to human. We're still trying to figure that one out. In a word, it's been transmitted rather extensively. We're still tracking the virus's vector of transmission in the city."

"Good God." Piddle thought for a moment. "What exactly happens when a person is infected?"

"You know that in the most extreme cases, a computer virus will delete data files on an infected computer, while at the same time instructing certain software to e-mail copies of the virus to those listed in the infected computer's address book."

"Right..."

"Human infection has similar effects," said Fassbinder. "The infected individual is compelled to destroy data, whatever happens to be nearby. In the case of Patient Zero, that data involved the contents of the restaurant's computer as well as its physical files."

"How far has the infection spread?" asked Piddle.

"Well, Ethelman, where it started, has a few cases.

Fortunately, Patient Zero was subdued when he first began displaying symptoms, so he never got the opportunity to infect very many people—except for one person who came to New York City immediately thereafter.”

“Do we know who this Typhoid Mary is?”

“Not yet. Patient Zero is en route to the facility. I think we should interrogate him when he arrives and is secure. Dr. Pock will provide a place to keep the patient.”

Both the general and the professor were distracted by the loud slamming down of a telephone.

“General,” said a sergeant. “We’re now getting reports of a new rash of infections in Midtown. The employees of a Gap store and a Starbucks have been infected. The computer systems of both locations have been wiped clean, as have all physical files. Both locations are unable to function at this time.”

“General, say what you will, but perhaps there’s an upside to this after all,” said Fassbinder.

“Professor,” asked the general, “is there any way we can defeat this virus? Do we have a vaccine?”

“We hadn’t gotten that far. We hadn’t even gotten as far as developing the virus to survive in the wild.”

Piddle thought for a moment. “I have a hunch.”

“Yes, but you can hardly tell when you wear that suit jacket,” said Fassbinder.

Piddle glared at him. “Let me know the minute this Patient Zero arrives. The sooner we can find the one who brought it to the city, the better off we’ll be.”



**THURSDAY, JUNE 16, 20—, 9:00 A.M.**

THE CLOCK STRUCK 13.

Claudia Moller glanced at it and sighed. *I thought I had fixed the damn thing*, she mused. She grabbed a polo mallet from a rack by the fireplace and smashed the fragile timepiece into several hundred tiny timepieces.

The malfunctioning clock was only a minor contributing factor to her ennui. Or was it anomie? It could even be anime, for all she knew. At any rate, she set the polo mallet down and walked to the window. Spread out before her, like a patient etherized upon a table, was all of New York City. She considered it her city, even though the mayor had rejected her offer for it in favor of Disney's. Her view from her one-bedroom apartment was breathtaking, which explained the oxygen tank she kept nearby. She was lucky she had found a private residence in the Empire State Building, although it was she who had converted it into a residence. It had previously been a dentist's office and she kept the dental equipment lying around for old time's sake. It had made her dates mildly uneasy, which had always been her goal, but they invariably liked the spit sink. Go figure.

The cause of her malaise suddenly occurred to her. *He* hadn't called her in days. There hadn't even been an e-mail. That was unlike him, even if he was essentially an

absent-minded professor. When they had first started dating, he used to e-mail her all the time. Just thinking of those e-mail subject lines he used to come up with—"I love you with all my heart," "You're the one for me," "Make money on the Internet," "Make her groan all night—Viagra at the BEST prices." It sent her heart aflutter.

Her reverie was interrupted by a lot of shrieking and yelling from the hall outside her apartment. Intending to investigate, she quickly changed out of her bathrobe and into jeans and a T-shirt. She looked at the T-shirt in the mirror and smiled. It had the periodic table of elements on it, and had been a gift from her beloved.

She rushed out to the hall, but there seemed to be no one there. She tentatively made her way toward the elevator. She rounded a corner and saw that an office door was ajar. She cautiously peered inside. There was a great deal of crashing and tearing, punctuated by shrill yelling.

A youngish man came into view. He had blue hair and wore a pair of ripped jeans and a red plaid flannel shirt. He also had a nose-ring and for some reason he seemed to be drooling heavily. The office was a travel agency and he was tearing down travel posters, snapping CD-ROMs in two, tearing up timetables. There was a noise behind her, which attracted his attention. He caught sight of Claudia and lunged toward her. She wasn't fleet enough of foot and he grabbed her around the waist and threw her to the floor. She rolled onto her back and watched him hover above her. He froze and his eyes grew huge. He appeared to be staring at her chest. Now, Claudia was not an unattractive woman, but she certainly was not Dolly Parton, and there was no compelling reason why the sight of her in a T-shirt

should draw that kind of expression, unless he'd been in prison for 30 years.

"Data!" he screamed. "Data! Must...destroy...data..."

She looked down. The periodic table!

"Get up!" he said, drooling. She did as he instructed, primarily because she wasn't too thrilled about being drooled on. He pinned her arm behind her back and looked around the room. He tugged her over to a desk and grabbed a letter opener.

"Now, let's go."

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

"The observation deck. This is a matter best disposed of from a great height."

#### **THURSDAY, JUNE 16, 20-, 9:23 a.m.**

Professor Fassbinder had driven himself and General Armstrong Q. Piddle from the headquarters in Jersey to a nearby Army base, where Piddle immediately changed into fatigues.

"Ah, my old friends," he said as he slipped them on over his ample frame. The uniform complete, he sighed a contented sigh. They requisitioned a proper Army Jeep. Not one of those candy-ass Grand Cherokee Yuppiemo-biles, a *real* Jeep.

Fassbinder jumped behind the wheel and headed for Manhattan at breakneck speed. In fact, there were a few moments when it seemed quite probable indeed that necks would be broken. Even Piddle was more than little unnerved by Fassbinder's driving.

Piddle caught a glimpse of himself in the Jeep's rear-

view mirror. His fatigues were getting a bit tight around the midsection. He needed a war, he concluded; the only thing peace was good for was filling up on doughnuts.

As they made their way from the Lincoln Tunnel toward Midtown they could see the remnants of several billboards that had been pulled down. The Port Authority bus terminal was on fire.

“The infection is spreading at an alarming pace,” said Fassbinder. “Those infected seem to be driven to destroy data of any kind, be it computer files, papers, billboards, or anything that can be construed as information.”

As they headed down Broadway and passed through Times Square, they could see that the *New York Times* building was also in flames.

“I guess someone had some trouble with a Friday crossword puzzle,” said Fassbinder.

“It looks like they burned down the clock factory, too,” said Piddle.

Fassbinder coughed. “We may be overcome by second hand smoke,” he said.

“I should have you courtmartialed for that.”

### **9:30 a.m.**

They continued south and cut over to Fifth on 38th Street, then headed downtown.

“Base to General Piddle,” came a voice from the radio between Piddle and Fassbinder.

“Piddle here, over.”

“We have an incident at the Empire State Building. A woman has been kidnapped and is being held at knifepoint

on the observation deck. The kidnapper's intent appears to be to toss her over the side. Over."

"Jesus. Over." He turned to Fassbinder. "34th and Fifth. Hurry!"

"Empire State Building? Woman? Claudia! Over." He gunned the engine and tore down Fifth Avenue.

"You don't have to say 'over.' I'm right here."

"Sorry."

"Let's get to the heliport. We need a helicopter."

The Jeep screeched to a halt outside a nondescript building on East 36th Street. Piddle and Fassbinder ran through the lobby in a flash of credentials and took the special military elevator up to the roof, where an Army helicopter was waiting. Piddle grabbed the pilot, and the three of them were quickly airborne.

In a few minutes, they were hovering above the observation deck of the Empire State Building. The kidnapper didn't seem especially dangerous. Claudia was sitting on the floor while her captor turned his attention from disposing of her to dealing with the helicopters that had started to swarm above the building.

Fassbinder grabbed a bullhorn and called down to her.

"Claudia! It's Poindexter! I'm here for you!"

"That's less of a comfort than you would think," she yelled back at him. "If I remember correctly, you couldn't even kill a spider in my bathroom without whimpering like a puppy."

"Give me that!" said Piddle, grabbing the bullhorn from him. "Young lady, are you injured?"

"No, I'm fine," she replied.

"Okay," said Piddle to Fassbinder. "So what's your plan

for defeating this virus?”

“Well, the involvement of Claudia complicates matters a bit,” Fassbinder said sheepishly.

“You don’t have a plan, do you?”

“Of course I do. We need some okra, prawns, rice—no, wait, that’s my recipe for seafood gumbo. Damn. What is the plan for the virus?”

Piddle was not amused.

---

# THREE

---

LISTEN:

Zev Zyzyyx has come unstuck in time.

Yes, just in time. He peeled his shirtless flesh from the leather couch and lunged toward the coffee table, grabbing the remote control in the nick of time. He was able to change the channel just as the trailer for a new Adam Sandler movie was starting. *Whew!* he gasped. He nearly had to hear Sandler speak.

But there was no winning: he had inadvertently switched to “The World’s Most Freakishly Mutated Creatures” on Fox. This, after he had sat through a full hour of “The World’s Most Tedious Reruns” on FX. Then, of course, there was “The World’s Nudest Women” on FoXXX, a new cable channel that Fox had just launched.

“Earth sucks,” Zyzyyx said aloud. Zyzyyx was gauged to have an IQ of 5,000, at least in Earth terms, but on his home planet of Gargleplax, he was only of mediocre intelligence. Even his name, which in Gargleplaxian translates roughly as “one who owns a stapler,” was horribly prosaic. As a result he, like most people of only moderate intelligence, led a fairly humdrum life as a magazine editor, working for the Southern Antares edition of *Gargleplax News*. Since everyone on his planet recently acquired telepathic abilities, he had had to learn how to publish for the “new media.” Beaming information directly into other

beings' brains certainly made publishing a bit more of a challenge. Fortunately, there was an Adobe Acrobat plug-in that handled it quite nicely.

He was growing weary of the fight, he had decided. He was 197 years old (which corresponded to age 45 in human terms) and he was getting a bit tired of keeping up with technology that changed every six months. He knew it was time to say "Uncle" and retire from the technogame when e-books made their debut on Gargleplax. In the case of Gargleplaxian technology, the "e" didn't stand for "electronic," but rather "eye." These new "eye-books" essentially altered the organic molecules forming the cells of the cornea of the eye, taking advantage of the ability to polarize light as it was coming into the eye itself. Thus you didn't need any medium whatsoever; you simply flipped a switch on a special headset and the material you wanted to read was broadcast directly onto the surface of your eye. Since the Gargleplaxian sun was much dimmer than Earth's sun, Gargleplaxians had evolved much larger eyes than had humans, making the technology that much more viable. You can get larger type on a Gargleplaxian cornea than you could on a corresponding human cornea. Well, with the exception of maybe Marty Feldman's.

Zyzyx wasn't too keen on the notion of eye-book technology or in finding ways of not only publishing to it, but somehow making money off it. So when the opportunity to go into space came along, Zyzyx jumped at it. His mission was to live among humans and defend Earth from the Force of Evil that Gargleplaxian prophets had determined would be visited on the Earth "in a little while." The Gargleplaxian prophets, like their human counterparts, were

woefully unspecific; their primary text read, “At that time, that guy will do that thing and that stuff will happen.” Still, it was far more specific than anything prophesied by Nostradamus. Coincidentally, in Gargleplexian the word “evil” is translated as “fax” and upon his arrival on Earth, Zyzzyx had caused a bit of a scene (Office Depot, sledgehammer).

As much as Zyzzyx wanted to go on the mission, that’s how much the project’s planners wanted him to go. He had been chosen for the mission for one crucial reason: he had been born a shapeshifter.

A Special Report broke into “The World’s Most Freakishly Mutated Creatures.” He turned up the sound on the television and learned that a computer virus had been transmitted to a human user and had quickly spread throughout the population of New York City. The infected were on a destructive spree, destroying anything that could be considered “data.”

The scene switched to an interview with an Army officer who looked like a cartoon bulldog, whom Zyzzyx recognized almost immediately.

“General Armstrong Piddle,” the interviewer was asking, “how does the military plan to cope with this deadly outbreak?”

“I should point out that no one has actually died at this point,” said Piddle.

“But you haven’t ruled out that possibility, have you?” asked the interviewer with what looked to Piddle like ghoulish glee.

“We’re still evaluating a proper course of action,” explained Piddle. “We had some degree of success in singing the entire score from *Cats*. That seemed to mollify those

who had been infected somewhat, as the songs contain absolutely nothing that could be construed as data or information. Top scientists from around the world are working on a plan. In the meantime, we've got Dr. Poindexter Fassbinder to basically heckle the rampaging mob, perhaps shame them into giving up their destructive rampage. Dear God, how I'd love to let loose a salvo of missiles! But there are real estate issues involved, so that's a no-go."

The reporter turned to a noodly-looking man wearing a white lab coat, whom Zyzzyx also recognized.

"Dr. Fassbinder, is it true that you're partially to blame for all of this?"

"Yes and no. But that's all water under...well, under what's left of the bridge. For some reason, they destroyed the bridge. It's possible graffiti is being interpreted as 'data,' which is a terrifying prospect. But I am working with the military to make a killer seafood gumbo—I mean, to find a cure for the virus! Yes, defeat the virus. That's...um, what we're doing."

"You're a very strange man and I'm not going to interview you anymore," said the reporter. Turning to face the camera, he said, "We now go to Rock Slab up in the Channel 5 DeathCopter. We understand a woman has been kidnapped by someone infected with the virus and has been carried to the top of the Empire State Building."

The scene cut to a man with a heavily chiseled face and a ludicrous toupée sitting in the co-pilot's seat of a helicopter. He had one hand on the top of his head to keep the wind from the spinning rotor blades from blowing the rug off. The door was open and the helicopter descended to just above the observation deck of the Empire State Build-

ing. Claudia Moller was looking through one of the telescopic viewers in the direction of Queens. Her captor had climbed to the very top of the building and was waiting to start swatting down Air Force jets.

“This is Rock Slab reporting from just above the observation deck of the Empire State Building. We are here with Claudia Moller, who is caught in the deathlike grip of her captor, about to be thrown over the side of the Empire State Building like a sack of garbage.” He looked down and noticed that she was not caught in the deathlike grip of her captor, nor was she about to be thrown over the side of the Empire State Building like a sack of garbage. “Well, she was until quite recently caught in the deathlike grip of her captor and about to be thrown over the side of the Empire State Building like a sack of garbage. Really.” He coughed. “Anyway, Ms. Moller...”

She took her eyes from the viewer, looked up at the helicopter, and started.

“Oh, sorry,” she said. “I didn’t see you there.”

“Ms. Moller, we understand that your boyfriend is working with the military to extricate you from this situation. Do you have anything you’d like to say to him?”

“Poindexter, you’re a real yutz, you know that?” she said, more than a little bitterly.

“Great Caesar salad!” exclaimed Zyzzyx. “*This* is the Force of Evil! What else could it be? I must get to New York City with the Device!”

But as Zyzzyx quickly packed a suitcase and ran from the house, he didn’t know that he was wrong. All the time he had spent in publishing caused him to forget essential

elements of Gargleplaxian theology. The virus was not the Force of Evil; it was merely the Force of General Aggravation. The real Force of Evil as foretold by the Gargleplaxian prophets was in fact the Adam Sandler movie he had scrambled so desperately to avoid.

---

**FOUR**

---

**THURSDAY, JUNE 16, 20—, 9:52 a.m.**

ZYZZYX'S GIRLFRIEND EEP, A FEMALE FROM THE PLANET FESTE-ria—located two solar systems west of Gargleplax—was outside his house even before he was ready to head to the airport. In fact, she was there about a nanosecond after Zyzzyx realized he was going to the airport. The Festerians communicated primarily by telepathy and as a result could read other people's minds from quite a long distance away. Eep had been driving back from the 7-11, had passed Zyzzyx's house, and picked up that he needed a ride to the airport. She put down her Slurpee and picked up an immense pastrami sandwich—what she felt were the only two advantages to life on Earth, really—and pulled into his driveway.

“I really need to train myself to shut out other people's thoughts,” she thought to herself—and only herself. “I end up volunteering for too many things.”

Eep was faintly humanoid and with heavy makeup could pass for a human female, like Cher in a way. She was also an artist and as such had that unconventional (or just plain freakish, depending on your point of view) approach to life that either fascinated or appalled non-artists. Zyzzyx belonged to the former camp; he was completely infatuat-

ed with her—in her native, alien look—and they had been dating for a few months.

As Zyzzyx closed the front door, Eep called out to him, “You left the TV on!”

He ducked back inside, then reappeared a few moments later. He threw his bag gingerly into the back seat, and buckled himself in.

“How did you know that? I wasn’t even thinking about television.”

“You were glancing around the room and I could see the TV on,” she said as she pulled out of the driveway and headed toward the freeway.

“You are a wonder,” he said, smiling at her.

She smiled back, then lightly slapped his shoulder. “Ah, ah, ah. No, there’s no time for that. The next plane to New York leaves at 10:37.”

“Damn,” he sighed. “Maybe there’ll be gridlock.”

“On I-81? We’ll see.” She pulled onto the highway. “Why are you going to New York anyway?” asked Eep, as “It’s not trade show season so soon is it? I mean, the hookers haven’t had time to rest yet.”

“I think it’s the Force of Evil. A computer virus has mutated and is infecting humans.”

“That’s a bad thing?”

“Yes, it is. What other species can make decent pastami?”

“Good point.”

“So I’ve got the Device—”

“Jeez, Zev, thanks for telling me. I’ve got the most powerful weapon in the universe in my car and the potholes on this road are big enough to hide a rhinoceros.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t know already. Can’t you read my mind?”

That is perhaps the only time that a significant other could legitimately ask that question.

Eep sighed. “What’s bothering you? Is it the impending battle with the Force of Evil? The possible end of the world?”

“No, none of that. It’s just, well, you know how much I dread flying.”

“Zev, you’re a hyper-intelligent being from an advanced race of aliens. Surely you must realize that flying is safer than driving.”

“Well, I hate driving, too.”

Zyzyx actually preferred subspace teleportation by means of a true Universal Serial Bus. It was essentially a high-speed transfer process that could send all the molecules in the human body through space at speeds well in excess of the speed of light, made possible by the SIB (Scientific Implausibility Buffer) interface.

“Do you think I should come with you?” asked Eep.

“No, this shouldn’t take long. I’ll show up, launch a salvo of destruction, then catch the next plane back. What’s tomorrow, Friday? Let’s drive up to the Thousand Islands tomorrow afternoon. We’ll spend the night in some waterside inn. I’ll bring the champagne, you bring the squid costume.”

“Mmm. That does sound romantic.”

They weren’t joking. Don’t ask.

She pulled up to the terminal at Hancock Airport and they kissed goodbye.

“I’ll call you when I know when I’ll be back,” said Zyzyx.

“You’ll have to call. You’ll be out of telepathic range.”

“Heh heh heh, I can think dirty thoughts all I want!”

“Dirtier than usual?”

“One word: mollusks.”

She slapped his shoulder playfully. “Get out of here.”

He grabbed his bag and closed the door, watching wistfully as she drove off.

#### **THURSDAY, JUNE 16, 20—, 10:17 A.M.**

As was his habit in airports, Zyzzyx got lost almost immediately and ended up in the baggage claim area. He wasn’t sure which was more disorienting: the fact that he couldn’t find the gate, or the sight of the human form that tumbled out of the baggage return chute and began to rotate around the carousel. Zyzzyx knew enough about intra-Earth travel to know that this wasn’t how people typically deplaned, although it did look more comfortable than the usual means. The figure was a male, somewhere in his mid-40s, paunchy and balding, and he wore a pair of white khakis and a loose-fitting blue polo shirt. He seemed to be unconscious and rolled and tumbled as the carousel rotated. Zyzzyx, although conscious of the fact that his plane was leaving in 20 minutes, ran over to see if he could help.

“Excuse me, mister?” he said, shaking the figure and nearly tripping over his own baggage as he tried to keep up with the figure as it rotated. The figure would not awaken. Zyzzyx tried to search for a pulse, but wasn’t certain if the reason he couldn’t detect one was that a) there wasn’t one or b) that he couldn’t get a good grasp on the figure’s wrist, what with the rotation and all.

“Hey! What are you doing there?” came a voice from behind him.

Zyzyx spun around and beheld what could have been the maybe-dead figure’s doppelganger, although dressed a bit better with a white shirt and tie. That threw him for a loop.

“Um, this guy, I thought...he’s dead.”

“No, he’s not dead. He’s just asleep.”

“How does someone sleep as they tumble out of baggage chute?”

“I haven’t woken him up yet.”

“I see.” He didn’t, not even remotely, but went along with it, although he wanted to shout, “Excuse me, but *who the hell are you and what the bloody hell are you talking about?!*”

The man watched as the carousel rotated and awaited his sleeping twin to approach his location. As he did, he reached out to the prone figure, put his hand down the back of the figure’s polo shirt, and pulled out what looked like a large handle. He used it to hoist the figure off the carousel. He carefully set the figure down on the floor and pushed the handle back down into his shirt, then placed an index finger on each of the figure’s temples and pushed inward. There was a loud *boinging* noise that reminded Zyzyx of the sound a Macintosh computer makes when it starts up. The figure sat bolt upright and although his eyes opened, he seemed to be staring into air, still unconscious. Zyzyx could hear some sort of mechanism starting up within the figure.

“Impressive,” said Zyzyx, catching on. “A robot?”

“Yes, it is,” said the man, waiting for the figure’s start-up routine to finish.

“I didn’t think Earth tech—I mean, I didn’t think technologically that such a thing was possible. At least not yet.”

“It wasn’t, until now. We’ve invented the future.” He reached into his breast pocket and retrieved a small rubber banded stack of business cards. He handed one to Zyzzyx. “My name is Frank Meineke. Nothing to do with mufflers, I hasten to add.” He had apparently gotten many remarks in the past.

“I wouldn’t imagine that there would be,” said Zyzzyx, not being up on automotive parts manufacturers.

Zyzzyx read the card. “Sy Borg Enterprises.”

“Right. There is no actual ‘Sy Borg.’ Sort of a joke.” Meineke chuckled a tad more than was really necessary.

“I like your slogan, ‘We’re not a dot-com.’”

“We feel it is necessary to ensure potential investors that we develop actual products. Although Jet here is Internet-ready, we prefer to distance ourselves from the whole dot-com fiasco.”

“Jet’?”

“Yes, that’s what we named him. He’s our prototype.”

“With a name like Jet, I guess he’s got a fast processor.”

“Sort of, but actually we named him that because the Paul McCartney and Wings song ‘Jet’ was playing on the radio when he was first switched on.”

“Right.”

“You know, ‘Ah, maître, me want Jet to always love you.’”

“Right.”

“Kind of like how the Leakeys named their prehistoric human ‘Lucy’ because the Beatles’ ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds’ was playing on the radio. There’s a loose con-

nection...next generation...evolution...what have you.”

“Right.” Zyzzyx had no clue.

“It was Marketing’s idea,” said Meineke sheepishly.

The clicking and whirring within Jet seemed to be slowing down. He stirred and got to his feet.

“Jet,” said Meineke, “what time is our flight?”

“Hold on, please.” He stared blankly for several seconds as more noises emanated from his head. “10:37 A.M. Eastern Daylight Time.”

“Damn, we’re running late,” said Meineke.

“You’re catching the 10:37 to New York City?”

“CheapAir Flight 56, departing Syracuse’s Hancock Airport at 10:37 A.M. arriving at New York’s La Guardia airport at 11:45 A.M.”

“Thank you, Jet,” said Meineke.

“CheapAir Flight 56, departing Syracuse’s Hancock Airport at 10:37 A.M. arriving at New York’s La Guardia Airport at 11:45 A.M.”

“Thank you, Jet.”

“CheapAir Flight—”

“*Fine!* Yes, thank you, Jet, please be quiet.”

“Anyway,” said Zyzzyx, “I’m on the same flight. Gate 15. Let’s go. I have many questions to ask you. I was until recently a writer for *Gar*—for a technology magazine, so advances like Jet here interest me greatly.”

Meineke beckoned Jet to follow them. “Sure. I should point out at the outset that we don’t have the money to advertise in your magazine. If you still want to talk, I’d be happy to answer your questions.”

Zyzzyx picked up his bag, and the three of them hurried along the corridor.

“Flight 56 departs in 16 minutes,” said Jet.

They arrived at the top of the escalator. “I was going to check him as baggage again to save money on an extra ticket, but I’m not crazy about the idea. He did seem to take quite a tumble out of that chute.”

“Probably a wise idea.”

Zyzyx resisted the urge to tell Meineke about Penrose V, a planet in the Rigel system where robots were created to handle all the chores that the native beings hated doing, like writing advertising copy, marketing materials, and press releases. The native Penrosians were a snobbishly intellectual race that preferred writing political treatises, pretentious novels, and poetry. They looked down on déclassé writing tasks as beneath their collective dignity, but they couldn’t help but notice that none of their political treatises, novels, or collections of poetry were selling. So, seeing a need for marketing, advertising, and publicity, they invented robots for that purpose. Somehow, when he was at *Gargleplax News*, Zyzyx ended up on one of their press lists. Until he could get off it, he lived in dread of the telecommunicator ringing. (They don’t have phones as we know them, by the way.)

“Hi, Mr. Zazzox, this is Public Relations Unit #765,” the improbably perky synthesized female voice would chirp. “I’m calling on behalf of—” suddenly, the voice changed, as the unit inserted data from another file “—Carl bongul Trondaltellium, the bestselling Penrose V novelist.” The voice switched back to the perky one. “We recently sent you a press release announcing his new—” the other voice again, “—collection of essays, *Spiritual Bankruptcy and You*.” And back to the perky voice, “I am

just following up to make sure that you received it.”

“Yes, I did,” Zyzzyx would say, “but I write about computers. Please stop sending me press releases about novelists and poets.”

“I just wanted to make sure you didn’t have any questions about the release and if you do, I can be reached at the number on the release. Please inform us of any upcoming editorial opportunities. Thank you for your time.”

And the telecommunicator would go dead. Needless to say, Zyzzyx wasn’t especially fond of robots.

“What does Jet do, exactly?” Zyzzyx asked Meineke.

“Basically, Jet here is a walking, talking personal computer. Warner, our designer and programmer, built Jet’s operating system from the ground up and he has some great hardware and software built in. For example, I can dictate a letter to him, and he has a built in laser printer. Watch. Jet! Command-Dictation.”

Jet stopped and faced Meineke.

“Voice recognition,” said Meineke slowly and distinctly. “Option-Command-Dictation. Command-Print.”

There was a whirring from within Jet that lasted a few moments and then stopped. Jet pulled down the zipper on the front of his trousers, reached in, and pulled out a sheet of paper. He handed the sheet to Meineke and zipped up. Only Zyzzyx seemed to be aware that they were getting odd stares from passersby.

“Um, about that...” said Zyzzyx.

“Yes, we’re not sure that’s the best approach to his output features. Jet is still our prototype and we have had some user complaints about that. We are working on the problem. Anyway, here is what he printed.”

He handed the sheet to Zyzzyx.

*Voice wreck ignition*, he read.

“Interesting,” said Zyzzyx.

“The print quality is excellent, 600 dots per inch with a special resolution enhancement feature that allows him to simulate 1200 dots per inch. We’ve OEMed the print engine from HP. I can also specify font, type size, and line spacing. Basically, anything a word processor is capable of.”

“Flight 56 departs in 11 minutes,” said Jet.

“He also has scheduling and contact management software. He has a digitally enabled mobile phone built in, and he can dial any number stored in his database. He can also send faxes and e-mail wirelessly. He is, quite literally, a personal digital assistant. He also has a built-in combination DVD-ROM and CD-ROM drive that lets you install other software into him. For example, we’re working with Adobe Systems to develop software that will allow him to do graphic design, digital image editing, and illustration. Needless to say, we’ve had a not inconsiderable amount of interest from Microsoft. We’re not sure why they want to add giant laser cannons, but talks are progressing.”

“Flight 56 departs in 10 minutes,” said Jet.

“So at the moment, he’s pretty much a big cuckoo clock,” said Zyzzyx.

“I disagree. We also built some powerful computer maintenance and recovery features into him. For example, Jet is able to effectively troubleshoot all our company’s computers and can recover lost data too. He’s also found my car keys on more than one occasion. I’m very proud of the progress we have made so far, and we’re on our way to an investor meeting to get more venture capital to con-

tinue developing his features.”

“What kind of artificial intelligence did you give him? Does he have a personality? I mean, can you converse with him?”

“Absolutely. Jet? Command-Weather.”

“Weather for the Syracuse, New York area is mostly cloudy with a chance of showers by evening. Temperature is— Flight 56 depart—” Jet stopped abruptly.

“Damn, he crashed,” said Meineke. “He has some problems multitasking. I’ll have to reboot him.”

He placed his index fingers on each of Jet’s temples and pressed inward. There was the *boinging* noise again, and Jet went into his start-up routine.

“There are still some bugs,” said Meineke, “but we think Jet is coming along quite nicely.”

#### **THURSDAY, JUNE 16, 20—, 10:31 a.m.**

They were held up at the gate as Zyzzyx still had to buy a ticket, as did Jet. Then of course the security checkpoint posed some degree of trouble. As Jet walked through the metal detector, the alarm went off.

“Sir,” said the security screener, “please remove everything from your pockets.”

“CheapAir Flight 56 departs in six minutes,” responded Jet.

“He has nothing in his pockets,” said Meineke, noticing that the line behind them was getting longer and more impatient.

“Sir, do you have any artificial limbs or body parts?” the screener asked Jet.

“Yes, he does,” responded Meineke.

The screener looked at both of them expectantly. “Arm, leg...?” she asked.

“Pick one,” said Zyzzyx, barely suppressing a smile.

“I can solve this,” said Meineke impatiently. He led Jet back through the metal detector and instructed him to climb onto the conveyor belt. He was barely able to squeeze into the scanner.

“Um, sir...” said the screener.

“Holy crap,” said a security screener, staring at the scanner’s monitor. “Check this dude out.”

They raced toward the jetway, followed closely by other late arrivals. As they were dashing down the tube toward the plane, Jet said, “Flight 56 de—” and stopped short. That caused a number of people to plow into him, which yielded much cursing.

“Damn! He crashed again,” said Meineke. “No time to restart him now.” He turned Jet around, reached into his shirt, pulled out his handle, and dragged Jet backwards down the jetway.

“How much does Jet weigh?” asked Zyzzyx.

“About 100 pounds. Although he can walk himself, we also strove to make him at least luggable.”

---

**FIVE**

---

**THURSDAY, JUNE 16, 20—, 10:30 a.m.**

MEANWHILE, AS ZYZZYX WAS HAVING HIS AIRPORT ENCOUNTER, General Piddle and Professor Fassbinder took the helicopter back to their headquarters in Jersey, where Patient Zero had been brought.

“They’ve had to adapt one of the clean rooms we’ve been using for hardware manufacture and testing to a medical facility so we can keep Patient Zero quarantined,” Fassbinder explained as he and Piddle wended their way from the heliport to the elevators.

“Does this guy have a name?” asked Piddle.

“Lance Harbinger.”

Piddle inserted his key into the slot beside the “Out of Order” elevator and after the security check—which went off without a hitch, about which Piddle was silently thankful—the car descended.

“We’ve also retrieved Patient Zero’s computer and brought his wife in for observation,” said Fassbinder. “With any luck, Dr. Pock will be able to tell which is which.”

The car stopped and let them out one level below the War Room, which housed not only the hardware and software manufacturing and testing labs, but also the gift shop, where project employees and visitors could buy souvenir T-shirts, mugs, and mouse pads with the logo of the proj-

ect and the facility. Unfortunately, since it was a top secret project, no one was allowed to carry souvenir items outside the facility. In fact, one of Major Barbara's tasks back up in the reception area was to check to make sure that no one was smuggling out shirts that read "My senior engineer was involved with the Elite Computer Virus Task Force and all I got was this lousy T-shirt" and other such tchotchkes.

Piddle and Fassbinder progressed down a white, many-doored hallway. One of them opened and Dr. Pock exited, staring intently at a handheld computer. He absent-mindedly walked into Piddle.

"Oh, sorry, general," said Pock. Pock was one of the few men in the world who still used Brylcream. Never having believed that the "wet head is dead," his thick hair was shellacked firmly in place and he had rather dramatic sideburns. He also wore thick, horn-rimmed glasses and Piddle always thought that despite Pock's relative youth (he was 27), Pock would not have been out of place in the 1950s, or at the very least some fictional depiction of the 1950s. He also would not be out of place in the local pub and in fact wasn't usually.

"What have you found?" asked Piddle.

"Come, you have to take a look at this," said Pock, leading them into the next door down the hall.

Within, there were several banks of computers, monitors, miles upon miles of wiring and cabling, and a not inconsiderable number of empty vodka bottles. The lights in the room were off, but there were enough active computer displays to provide ample illumination. Pock strode directly to a workstation and picked up a cable, one end of which was connected to the workstation. He inserted the other

end into his handheld device, and pressed a set of buttons on the keyboard. Immediately, a status bar appeared on the monitor and a tiny hourglass started marking out time. Suddenly, the status bar and hourglass stopped. The box containing the status bar went blank.

“Damn, it’s crashed,” said Pock. “Let me restart. It’ll just be a minute.”

He restarted the computer, then disconnected the handheld.

“Could it be the virus?” asked Piddle.

“No, it’s been doing that for weeks. My synchronization software is conflicting with something in the operating system. I haven’t managed to isolate the problem yet, but if you check out the handheld, you can see what I’ve found.”

He handed the device to Piddle, who looked at it blankly. It was a tiny spreadsheet, at the bottom of which was a line chart. Whatever the chart showed, Piddle noted, it was increasing, albeit gradually.

“We’ve been tracking the viral load in our Patient Zero. Essentially, there is a gradual but regular increase in the amount of virus in the bloodstream. But here’s what’s really cool—er, I mean, here’s what is the most lethal thing about this virus.”

Dr. Pock’s computer had finished restarting and he double-clicked the desktop shortcut for his analysis program. On the screen, the message

### **Application not found**

appeared. Pock sighed and navigated through his hard

disk until he found the program he wanted. He double-clicked and immediately the message

**There is not enough memory to  
complete the required operation**

was displayed. Dr. Pock cursed.

“General, please find out what happened to the extra RAM I requisitioned two weeks ago.” He pushed the mouse away with a disgruntled grunt. “And people wonder why I drink,” Dr. Pock muttered. He reached into a desk drawer and removed a sheet of white paper.

“What I was going to show you is that we know what the virus looks like.” On the paper, he drew two large circles which had what looked like small hairs sprouting off them.

“You mean these people are being infected by giant hairy eyes?” asked Fassbinder.

“General, please slap him.”

Piddle sighed threateningly.

“Believe it or not,” continued Dr. Pock, “those are zeros and ones. What I just drew is about 100 nanometers across, which is not out of line sizewise with many common viruses. Basically, physical groups of ones and zeros form in the bloodstream and start to attack cellular material. They burrow into the cell nucleus and fuse with the host’s DNA. Now, I’m not a geneticist, I’m a computer scientist, so until the genetic expert I’ve requisitioned gets here, I’m kind of clueless about a lot of this. Now, you know how the human genome comprises four basic building blocks, indicated by the letters A for adenosine, C for cytosine, G for guanine, and T for thymine. For example, a genetic

sequence could run something like this.” He wrote out on the paper:

**ACTGACTGAGCGTAC**

“Well, the virus starts inserting patterns of ones and zeros into that genetic sequence, so we could end up with something like the following...”

**TGACTGACT1010010110GTCGAT010100101**

“...and so on.”

“Is that what produces the urge to destroy information?” asked Piddle.

“Yes, near as I can tell.”

“Is it lethal?” asked Piddle.

“Rewriting someone’s genetic code is never a good thing.”

“What other effects does this have?” asked Fassbinder.

“Nothing has manifested itself yet, but we’ve got Mr. Harbinger under close observation and when the geneticist gets here, we’ll hopefully find out more.”

“We’d like to interrogate Mr. Harbinger.”

“He is conscious. He is perfectly calm, but we have to be careful not to expose him to anything that can be construed as information or data, or he starts to go berserk. So we have him watching *Jerry Springer* and that seems to be keeping him quiet.” He paused expectantly. “What confuses me is that this is similar in some ways to one virus we were developing here, but this is way beyond what we had accomplished.”

“So we know for certain that this originated from here?” asked Piddle, looking at Fassbinder.

“No, of course not,” said Fassbinder.

“But earlier you said someone hacked into your system and copied it.”

“Sorry, I misspoke,” said Fassbinder sheepishly.

“This is light years beyond what your run-of-the-mill hacker is capable of,” added Dr. Pock.

“Then we’re not looking for the run-of-the-mill hacker, are we? I think at this point we can’t rule out terrorism.”

“Or an elaborate practical joke,” said Fassbinder.

“But my question is,” said General Piddle, “regardless of where it came from, how did it end up in a middle-aged man from upstate New York?”

Pock led them back out into the hall and into another door. Within was a small anteroom that had a giant window—actually a two-way mirror—that looked into a sterile, ersatz sort of hospital room. Lance Harbinger sat in bed, staring up at a television suspended above the viewing window. A nightstand next to the bed had a vase of yellow flowers.

“The flowers are a nice touch,” said Fassbinder.

“The virus, near as we can tell, is transmitted by physical contact,” said Pock. “The virus is present in sweat. One of the effects of the virus is increased body temperature. The victim sweats, thus keeping a layer of virus on the skin at all times.”

“How clever,” said Fassbinder.

“What this means, though, is that we have this glove box.” He gestured to what was indeed a glove box beneath the window, which Dr. Pock demonstrated as he described

it. "This metal door flips outward and you stick your hands into the thick, impenetrable neoprene gloves that protrude into the room and allow us to manipulate objects."

"You know," yelled Lance Harbinger, staring at what he presumed were people behind the mirror, "it's really freakish and disturbing to suddenly see two giant green hands protrude from the wall. A little warning would be a nice thing, guys!"

"He does have a point," said Piddle. "How do objects get placed into the room?"

"At the moment, we have heavily uniformed nurses bring food in through an airlock at the back of the room. We just put the glove box in this morning and we're having a hydraulic arm system put in that will lower objects through the ceiling and place them on a work table that will be set up within reach of these gloves."

"What sort of time frame are we looking at?" asked Piddle.

"It's being installed tomorrow, sometime between 8:30 A.M. and 5 P.M."

"Good," said Piddle.

"Now, what about Patient Zero's computer?" asked Fassbinder.

"Ah, right, this way," said Pock, leading them out of Harbinger's anteroom and across the hall into another, virtually identical anteroom. They looked through the window at a room that had been set up exactly like Harbinger's. In the bed sat a personal computer.

"We don't know how infectious the computer is, so we're taking similar safeguards. It only just arrived a short time ago, so we haven't removed the hard drive yet."

“Excuse me for a moment,” said Fassbinder. “Gotta find the little professor’s room. Back in a moment.”

When he had left, Dr. Pock said, “General, don’t tell me he’s second in command of this project.”

“You have a problem with Professor Fassbinder, Doctor?” It was said more as a challenge than an attempt to listen to dissension among the ranks.

“He’s a real yutz, sir.”

“Doctor, I’m not interested in battles of ego among scientists and engineers. I have personally checked and double-checked every member of this project and if someone’s performance or basic intelligence is found wanting at any point, it is up to me to fire them—out of a cannon, if necessary. Is that clear?”

“Yes, General.”

At that point, a young research assistant ran in. “Doctor, General—er, General, Doctor, however the rank thing works,” she said.

“What is it, Mildred?”

“Patient Zero—Lance Harbinger—is dead.”

“What?!” yelled Pock. He ran from the room, followed by Piddle and Mildred.

Looking through the anteroom window, they saw Harbinger lying in bed, unmoving. An assistant in a protective contamination suit stood over him.

“All vital signs are non-existent,” she said, assuming someone was behind the mirror at this point.

Dr. Pock clicked on the intercom to talk with the assistant. “But how? Are there any marks on his body? Any signs of what he might have died of?”

“No, Doctor.” She began examining Harbinger. “Wait

a minute. Dr. Pock, this is very strange.”

“Doris, this whole thing has been pretty strange.”

“We’re in relative terms here, Doctor. On his chest, there’s... there’s...”

“What?”

“An error message,” she said, not half-perplexedly.

“An error message? What does it say?”

“A fatal error has occurred.”

“You’re joking.”

“You think this is a joke? Here’s a joke, tell me if you think they sound alike. ‘A priest and a rabbi walk into a bar...’”

“Yes, thank you, Doris, I believe you. Let’s prepare to do an autopsy.”

“You’re going to do an autopsy?” asked Piddle.

“Me? No. I’m a computer engineer, not a doctor. We’re going to have to get a forensic pathologist involved.”

“This is starting to get expensive,” grouched Piddle.

They walked out the anteroom and bumped into Fassbinder in the hall, still zipping up. He asked, “General, didn’t you want to interrogate Patient Zero?”

“Too late,” said Dr. Pock.

“Huh?” puzzled Fassbinder.

“Mr. Harbinger is dead.”

“What?”

Mildred came running back in. “Dr. Pock, Harbinger’s computer—”

“Now what?!” snapped Dr. Pock.

“The hard drive has been erased. A complete low-level reformatting. There’s not a single bit of data left.”

At that point, Doris came running in. “Dr. Pock!”

“Now what is it?!?” Pock whined loudly.

“Someone ate my tuna fish sandwich again. This is the third time this month. I’m getting really sick of it.”

“That does it,” said Pock. “I’m going to the commissary to down a pitcher of martinis and think about this.”

And with that he left.

Doris and Mildred went back to their respective tasks, and Piddle walked slowly toward the elevator. Fassbinder followed. “You know, General, I don’t like to bring this up at a time like this, but—”

“But what!” snapped Piddle.

“I think Pock’s drinking may make him a liability on this project.”

“Do you now?”

“Um, yes. Yes, I do.”

“Your concern has been duly noted and promptly forgotten.”

He entered the elevator. Fassbinder did not follow. The doors closed and Fassbinder smiled, apropos of nothing really. He had come a long way, baby.

Poindexter Z. Fassbinder’s career in science began somewhat inauspiciously at the age of five when, examining his older sister’s aquarium to find out how fish work, he inadvertently—and even the best ichthyologists of the day were unable to explain this—caused a harmless angel fish to mutate to massive proportions as freakish as anything on Fox and burst from the tank in a violent explosion of water, gravel, and plastic treasure chests. As the pre-professor looked on in something that was a cross between awe and bemusement, the giant fish chased the family cat around

the house in a crazed, yet ironic carnivorous rampage.

Once the large fish was subdued, Fassbinder's parents, not knowing what the future would bring, simply sighed, more out of stunned disbelief than anything. "You're a real yutz, you know that, Poindexter?" said his mother lovingly.

Things went downhill from there, as far as Fassbinder's career was concerned. But come hell or high water, he was destined for a life of science. After all, his name was Poindexter, so a career in professional sports was out of the question.

It wasn't all heartbreak and hellbeasts. When he was nine, he received his very first chemistry set from an unknowing aunt, and within five minutes of his opening the box, there was a massive explosion in the family room. His parents sighed heavily, got out the tranquilizer gun, and strode purposefully into the room. To their surprise, all they saw was a giant sofa looming over a startled yet moderately relieved Poindexter. Yes, somehow young Poindexter had caused the couch to grow to five times its normal size. It crushed the end tables as it expanded, but Mr. and Mrs. Fassbinder were relieved that now they didn't have to trot out the uncomfortable dining room chairs when they entertained guests.

High school was not kind to Fassbinder, but then again it's not kind to anyone really, so there's not much to dwell on there. He was a nerd in the days before computers, so there was much taunting, jeering, pantsing, and wedgieing. Strangely, Poindexter aced chemistry class, even though he never actually went to chemistry lab. It would be years before he knew it, but his parents had written the school—and provided signed affidavits—recommending

that he not be allowed within 50 yards of a chemistry lab.

Tragedy, as is its wont, was to ensue nonetheless. One day during his senior year, Poindexter walked into chemistry class to find a substitute teacher who had brought some materials from the lab for an impromptu, in-class demonstration. This substitute teacher had some kind of axe to grind (but then don't they all?) and he singled out Poindexter—who had the highest grade in the class at the time—to come up and perform an experiment of his choosing. There was much protesting from the class, which the teacher completely misinterpreted, and was even more insistent that Poindexter dazzle them all with his scientific prowess. Well, in a very short period of time, there was an explosion, as you would expect. When the smoke cleared, behind the teacher's desk sat a 50-foot-tall substitute teacher. He was a little dazed and confused at first, but before long went on an orgy of death and destruction, avenging himself on those who had mocked him and otherwise made his substitute teaching assignments such ego-scarring cavalcades of pain.

Various branches of the military were called in and the school made a deal with Army brass during the siege. After the ordeal was over and the enormous carcass was hauled away, it was decided to immediately graduate Fassbinder magna cum laude and draft him into military service. After all, just about every university on the face of the Earth had decided unanimously that in no way, shape, or form would Poindexter Z. Fassbinder be admitted to any science program. Therefore, he was sent to the military, where his inadvertently evil ways could at least be checked by massive amounts of firepower. It was either that or go to college

and be forced to graduate with a degree in English. Fassbinder, quite wisely, chose the military.

And so it was that ten years later, Fassbinder ended up working with the military on computer virus technology.



A SCREAMING CAME ACROSS THE SKY.

“Oh, sorry, that was me,” said Zev Zyzzyx smiling sheepishly at the man sitting in the airline seat next to him. “I really don’t like to fly.”

**THURSDAY, JUNE 16, 20—, 11:07 A.M.**

The plane hurtled southeastward toward New York City. Zyzzyx had the Device he believed would defeat the virus safely stowed in the overhead compartment. It was a very powerful device capable of untold destruction, but he had been able to get it through airport security since to the naked eye, the Device—actually a complex network of microwiring and the latest in laser-focusing technology—looked like nothing more than an immense salami.

Zyzzyx ordered a gin and tonic as soon as he was able to and as the booze eased its way into the canyons of his mind, his thoughts wandered. Anything to take his mind off the horrors of Earth-based air travel. He looked to his right; Jet had the aisle seat directly across from him, and in the middle seat was Meineke, who took a laptop computer out of his satchel and placed it on the tray table. He started up the computer and removed a thick cable from his bag. He plugged one end into the back of the computer. As for the other end, that required accessing an input port locat-

ed on Jet's inner thigh. Meineke did not look pleased about having to access it. He glanced up and noticed Zyzzyx staring at him.

"Engineers have a bizarre sense of humor sometimes," he said.

#### **THURSDAY, JUNE 16, 20—, 11:23 A.M.**

Zyzzyx looked out the window and saw the Catskill Mountains below. It was amazing to be on a planet that had such exciting geology and geography, he thought. Gargleplax was primarily flat and featureless, the ever-expanding population leveling what scant geological structures had been there.

There was a jolt of turbulence and Zyzzyx ordered another drink. He took out a computer magazine, one of the Earth-based competitors to *Gargleplax News* and read about the latest forecasts on e-commerce and how it was expected to grow exponentially in the next 15 years. "We're talking literally *zillions* of dollars," remarked one market researcher.

"Big deal," he muttered.

Shortly before Zyzzyx went to Earth, everyone on Gargleplax was getting into what was called brain-commerce, or b-commerce, for short. Much Gargleplaxian venture capital was invested in b-commerce, but on Gargleplax, venture capital wasn't handled the same way that it was on Earth. Although the Gargleplaxian monetary system was based on loaves of bread, business-to-business commerce—especially venture capital—was handled as strictly virtual money that existed only in spreadsheets, not as actual cash. You know, absolutely nothing like Earth. With

b-commerce, goods and services could be ordered merely by directing your thoughts toward a b-commerce server and thinking really hard about what it was you wanted. Many were convinced the technology had great potential, but its detractors had dubbed b-commerce “wishful thinking.”

Zyzyx turned his attention to the in-flight network news programming on the monitor. It was a cheap airline, so all they had was the UPN network news feed. Taye Diggs was reporting on the virus situation from the base of the Empire State Building. A graphic at the bottom of the screen said “Live.”

Behind Diggs, a Jeep pulled up and Fassbinder and Piddle got out.

“I thought you said you had a plan for this,” grumbled Piddle. “Now, you say it’s mutated again?”

“I did have a plan initially,” said Professor Fassbinder. He stopped and listened intently.

Piddle spun, and a taxicab careened out of control toward them. The driver had a look of madness on his face and was screaming—or at least more than most New York City cab drivers do—while beating the dashboard with a clipboard. He wasn’t paying a great deal of attention to where the cab was going, so intent was the driver on clubbing the dashboard.

“Great gumbo!” yelled Professor Fassbinder.

General Piddle sprung into action. He picked up Fassbinder and leapt to safety just as the cab hit the back end of the Jeep. The Jeep spun around and the cab kept going. From the cab’s open window, Fassbinder could hear the cab’s radio blaring, “and those damn liberals in Washington want to turn everyone in the country into gay, Stalinist,

flesh-eating zombies!”

The cab made a sharp right onto 33rd Street and disappeared.

Piddle set Fassbinder down and the professor shakily got to his feet.

“That’s unusual—” started Fassbinder.

“Say what?” said the General. He stared at Fassbinder and furrowed his brow. “The whole damn thing is unusual.”

“If what I suspect is true, the virus has mutated yet again,” said Fassbinder. “Did you hear the cab? The radio was on.”

“You mean that now audible data are in danger of being destroyed?” asked Piddle. “But talk radio is the very antithesis of ‘information.’”

“I know. That’s pretty cool.”

“Hm...the destruction of talk radio. Maybe there is a silver lining here after all,” said Piddle.

As the General and Fassbinder continued to gawk at the destruction all around, neither of them heard the cab, having circled the block, on its way back, until....

Zyzyx was able to see some of Piddle and Fassbinder’s adventures unfolding whenever the camera cut back to Taye Diggs. Everyone seemed completely oblivious to what was going on behind him, an Army officer and a military scientist nearly run over by a rogue cab.

Zyzyx had to wince as he watched the cab come screaming down the block. The radio was still on, but had cut to a commercial and the description of the low, low, low prices and huge, huge, huge selection to be had at the

Metropolitan Carpet Warehouse provided far more actual information than the program it had interrupted, which sent the poor driver into a new frenzy of destruction, resulting in the radio being ripped from the dashboard and flung out the window.

“Funny, I do the same thing when I hear Bill O’Reilly,” said Zyzzyx to himself.

Back on TV, the cabbie looked up and spied the flashing *Don’t Walk* light. His virus-addled brain interpreted it as yet more data to destroy, and the cabbie turned the wheel and made a beeline directly for the utility pole on which the sign was mounted. The force of the collision knocked the pole over and the large metal cube that was the *Walk/Don’t Walk* light arced downward where, rather coincidentally, Piddle was barking orders to Fassbinder, who saw the plummeting light too late. The upshot was that it hit Piddle on the head rather severely, and the general crumpled to the ground.

“O, Captain, my Captain, Mylanta!” cried Fassbinder, bending down to try to revive the general. He was about to perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation when the general began to stir.

Even Taye Diggs took notice of this.

“Whoa,” he said, pivoting to where Piddle lay on the ground. The camera zoomed in.

“General, you may have a concussion or any number of other injuries,” said Fassbinder. “Try not to move.”

“I am a lineman for the county...” sang Piddle.

“Oh, my god, he’s delirious! Medic!” yelled Fassbinder.

From one of the military vans parked nearby, a medic jumped and ran over to the fallen general. He examined the general’s pupils.

“General Piddle,” asked the medic. “What year is this?”

“I don’t know, but it has an em dash in it.”

“Who is the President of the United States?”

“That sleazy guy with the shady past.”

The medic looked at Fassbinder. “Well, it’s remarkably unspecific but accurate. I think the general’s got a minor concussion. He’s not unconscious, which is a good sign.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Fassbinder. “Have you heard what he’s singing?”

“We have to get him to the hospital. I’ll get an ambulance.”

As Zyzzyx downed another gin and tonic (his eighth—curse that second liver!), he found it increasingly hard to concentrate.

At that point, the flight attendant appeared with the food service cart.

“Sir, would you like six-year-old peanuts or—” she examined the packaging—“some peanut-free mystery material?”

“Waiter, I’ll have the chicken,” slurred Zyzzyx and promptly passed out.

The plane began its descent into La Guardia Airport.

#### **THURSDAY, JUNE 16, 20—, 11:45 A.M.**

Stately, plump Armstrong Piddle came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. A yellow dressinggown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him on the mild morning air. He held the bowl aloft and intoned:

—*Introibo ad altare Dei.*

“Oh, God, the general is up again,” said the medic as he looked at the back of the medical van. The general was at the open back hatch standing regally. “Professor Fassbinder!” the medic yelled.

For the past 15 minutes, General Piddle alternated between quietly groggy and generally delusional. Since Army cutbacks had led to all soldiers and officers enrolling in an HMO, most battle injuries were treated on pretty much an outpatient basis. He was put in the back of the medical van to recover.

“I’m Henry VIII, I am!” bellowed Piddle in his stentorian tone.

Fassbinder appeared and eased the general back into the van. He laid him gently down onto the cot.

“You’ll be fine, sir,” said Fassbinder.

“Did I ever tell you about the time I was a POW in Burma and had to build a bridge for the Japanese?”

“No, sir, but I think you’re confusing yourself with Alec Guinness. And that wasn’t your actual life, but rather the movie *Bridge On the River Kwai*.”

“You mean I’m not British?” asked Piddle.

“I’m afraid not, sir.”

“Oh. Well, then, did I ever tell you about the time I became Earth’s emissary to the larger galactic community of worlds?”

“Ri-i-i-ght,” said Fassbinder.

The medic came over. “How’s he doing?” he asked Fassbinder.

“Getting more delusional by the minute.”

---

**SEVEN**

---

**THURSDAY, JUNE 16, 200—, 11:33 A.M.**

CAPTAIN REGINALD BOING BROUGHT THE PLANE TO A HALT OUTSIDE the gate and watched as an airport worker struggled to maneuver the jetway into the proper position over the hatch. This was obviously this person's first attempt—Boing hoped—and it took a good five minutes of jerky, back-and-forth jetway jostling before it was close enough to safely open the hatch without danger of the passengers plummeting to the tarmac below.

Boing unbuckled his seatbelt and busied himself with checking instruments and buttons—anything to avoid having to smile and say “buh-bye” to the unwashed masses filing out of the airplane. His copilot and navigator, inveterate “people persons,” went out to grin maniacally at the line of deplaners.

Boing loved flying, even after September 11, but he hated the passengers. Sure, it used to be fun, he mused as he waited for everyone to deplane. Then air fares got so cheap that the boorish and uncultured started showing up on his planes. Jennie, the attendant with whom he usually shared flights, found it incredibly snobbish of him to prefer a more well-heeled crowd, but he didn't care. The well-heeled crowds were usually better behaved, they smelled better, and they didn't trash the cabin.

Enough time had passed so Boing felt certain that it was safe to leave the cockpit. No such luck. Denise, the flight attendant, walked up.

“Captain, um...there’s a weird, squid-like creature sitting in Coach.”

“Well, that would be the place for one.”

He penetrated back to the Coach section. *Hmm*, he thought, *Denise was right. There is a weird, squid-like creature sitting in Coach. How about that.*

The squid creature woke up and leaned across the aisle, where a middle-aged man was removing wires from what looked like his identical twin. The squid creature glanced at Boing, and Boing didn’t quite know how to react to that. He inched hesitantly toward the creature.

The creature stood and stared at the name plate on his uniform. “Captain Boing—”

“Actually, it’s Bo-ing, pronounced like the aircraft manufacturer, not the silly noise.”

“Sorry. Captain Boing, we’re having some degree of difficulty getting our friend Jet here ready. We’ll be deplaning shortly,” said the creature.

“CheapAir Flight 56 arrives at La Guardia Airport at 11:45 A.M.,” said Jet, as Meineke yanked a cable from his inner thigh.

“Actually, Jet,” said Meineke, “we’re about ten minutes early.”

“Ah,” said Jet. “We’re not precisely on time?”

“No, we’re early.”

Jet seemed depressed by this news. He looked at Zyzzyx. “*Architeuthis dux*, the Atlantic giant squid, is perhaps the rarest creature on Earth. It has never been seen alive.”

“What?” said Zyzzyx. He looked down at himself. “Oh, damn.”

He closed his eyes and thought a moment, then, with an audible “pop,” took on his traditional Earthly form.

Captain Boing, who had been curiously watching Meineke put Jet’s pants on, suddenly looked over at Zyzzyx. His gut reaction was that he was glad he no longer saw a weird, squid-like creature. But what he now saw...

“Ernest Borgnine?”

“No, my name is Zev Zyzzyx. We’re sorry for the delay.”

“I think we’re all set,” said Meineke, zipping Jet’s trousers up. He handed his laptop case to Zyzzyx and helped Jet out of the seat, and, followed by Zyzzyx, they headed down the aisle toward the exit.

Boing simply stared into space.

# Zev Zyzzyx: Down to Earth Guy is Literally Out of This World

**RANDALL TWEE, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR**

“I never really thought of myself as any kind of pioneer,” says Zev Zyzzyx over gin and tonics at Syracuse, New York’s Darwin Pub. “I just do what it occurs to me to do and if it ends up being pioneering, so be it.”

Zyzzyx is exhibiting his typical modesty. Although he is one of the best technology writers on this planet, the truth is that he started as one of the best technology writers on a completely *different* planet. Earthbound scientists don’t know the specific location of Gargleplax, the world that Zyzzyx called home until several years ago. And don’t go walking the streets of Syracuse looking for a little green man! Zyzzyx has one more ace up his sleeve: he was born a shapeshifter.

According to Zyzzyx, a small race of shapeshifters inhabits Gargleplax, and almost all of them, for whatever reason, pretty much keep to themselves and never venture far beyond their own clans and villages. Of course, those “villages” are ultra-modern luxury condominiums with all the conveniences you could ask for. The Sklor—the ancient race of Gargleplaxian shapeshifters—are a very wealthy race, but Zyzzyx has his suspicions about where the money

came from. “I had always been told by the elders of the tribe—as well as by my doorman—that the Sklor had hit it big in the Gargleplaxian ‘dot-con’ boom 700 years ago.”

The great Gargleplaxian dot-con boom. *Zyzyx* says it’s still a sensitive subject for the descendents of those who were suckered into it, but here’s the saga in a nutshell:

Gargleplax had always been way ahead of the curve technologically. For example, they had developed the windshield wiper 200 years before the windshield. They are *that* advanced. At one point on Gargleplax, the pinnacle of technology—before it was surpassed by another one (a version of chia technology)—was what was euphemistically referred to as a “dot.” This dot was a supersmall set of superconducting semiconductors that enabled small telecommunications devices to function via a small round disk about the size of a shirt button. That was the theory—and the public relations. All the dots ever did was emit beeping noises which some Gargleplaxians developed into a sort of Morse code, allowing simple messages to be transmitted from dot to dot. However, the technical cognoscenti deemed that to be “like, totally lame,” despite the fact that it was the only practical use anyone had come up with for the dot.

But everyone on Gargleplax, especially those with far more money than sense (which was apparently everyone who had money on Gargleplax), thought the dot was the greatest thing since sliced bread. (The Gargleplaxian monetary system actually is based on a loaf of sliced bread; one loaf contains 20 slices. A cup of coffee, for example, costs one and a half slices. Buying a sandwich can get complicated. Word of advice when lunching on Gargleplax: order the soup.) Therefore, everyone was starting up or investing in

companies that purported to do something with these dots. Some claimed you could order airline tickets through them. Some companies claimed that using the dots to add more stages to the print procurement process made print-buying more streamlined. Some claimed you could talk to the dead through the dots. And so on.

After about two years, none of the companies that had been founded were showing anything like a profit, and in fact it seemed unlikely that anything useful was ever to come out of the dots. Investors who had been milked dry suddenly read through the business plans that these companies had developed. Even those that weren't written in crayon or on cocktail napkins made no sense. Clothing manufacturers, trying to save the day, thought that perhaps they could use the dots as shirt buttons, but found that it was impossible to sew them onto fabric without them falling off almost immediately.

So, funding for dot companies was pulled, investment dried up, and everyone began to have the feeling that the dot was the biggest con job ever performed on the Gargleplaxian race. Thus was it referred to as the great "dot con" boom. The architects of it, although they profited quite handsomely, were eventually tracked down by a very Frankensteinian mob of Gargleplaxians carrying torches—the torches had to be custom ordered and thus the pursuit was delayed by 6 to 8 days—and stoned to death after the dot-con boom led to a crippling planet-wide depression. The violent deaths of the dot-commen perked the planet up quite a bit, and the long arduous process of rebuilding commenced. The planet rebounded, and 500 years later, an actual prosperity, based on real goods and services and sensible economic and business

models, was realized and continued unabated for 200 years.

So as to the greater-than-average prosperity of the Sklor, Zyzzyx is more of the opinion that a few unethical Sklor used their shapeshifting for nefarious means. Not that it's strictly illegal for the Sklor to metamorphose into bank presidents, corporate CFOs, or plumbers; it's just "not done." Such was the environment in which young Zev was raised.

"I had a typical Sklorian upbringing," the alien shapeshifter says, but unlike the generally reclusive Sklor, his family made certain that he was introduced to the rest of Gargleplax, if not physically, then at least intellectually. "As a result, my family had been one of the early adopters of both cable television, which gave me a glimpse of what the moneyed elite thought was the world at large, and the Gargleplaxian version of the Internet, which gave me my first taste of hardcore Gargleplaxian pornography." And thus at the age of 57 (equivalent to age 13 on Earth), "I discovered just what an advantage being a shapeshifter could be," he says with a mischievous smile.

Intrigued by the outside world, Zev was the first of his family to head to the "big city," the urban center of Xzygczysxczna (it rhymes with "orange") to seek fame and fortune. Although he found other people's fame and fortune, he quickly found himself reduced to eking out a meager living dancing in a strip club; fortunately, his shapeshifting ability, which allowed him to take on the form of various Gargleplaxian celebrities, made him an instant draw. He was not proud of his unfortunate career choice, but his family was understanding and supported him. Alas, his dreams of being a world champion pinochle player ap-

peared to have been put on hold.

“It’s hard for humans to understand the place that pinochle has in the lives of the average Gargleplaxian,” says Zyzyx. As he explains it, pinochle is more than a game; indeed, it is a metaphor for the struggle of existence itself. Especially to the Sklor, always a more spiritually driven alien race, the whole bipartite nature of the game sums up life. Early in one’s life, one is dealt a random set of assets—beauty, privilege, artistic talent, a head for business, a love of snails, etc.—which the recipient must do with as he or she sees fit. Those assets can be assembled in patterns that, taken as a whole, give one a certain number of “points.” For example, the ability to understand how computers work (referred to in pinochlian parlance as “100 aces”) would yield a certain number of points. Beauty combined with a great deal of inherited money (“double pinochle”) would yield another set of points. And a thorough knowledge of one’s native language and its literature (“four nines”) would yield another set of points.

Thus, at the age of 70 (equivalent to age 16 on Earth), all Gargleplaxians undergo the sacred rite of Meldia. Held once a year, every 70-year-old on Gargleplax participates, and all one’s assets are presented to everyone else in one’s age group. Thus, everyone knows what everyone else has to play with. At the beginning of the ceremony, the Grandmaster Trump enters. The Grandmaster Trump is traditionally the oldest Gargleplaxian (“though he tends to fudge it a bit,” admits Zyzyx) and examines all the assets that have been laid down. He assigns one particular asset as “trump,” which is then seen as the benchmark to which everyone else undergoing Meldia that year needs to

strive. And it varies every year according to the whim of the Grandmaster. One year the trumping asset could be wealth, the next year it may be beauty, the year after that it could be the ability to pilot a blimp.

After the rite of Meldia is completed, the Gargleplaxian youths are ready to move into the next stage of their lives, using their own assets and seeking ways to strategically outmaneuver those who have trump. Thus, many years later, when a Gargleplaxian dies, the advantages he or she has accrued in life—the “tricks” he or she has taken—are tallied up and, based on the final score, the Gargleplaxian proceeds to one afterlife or other.

Gargleplaxian theology specifies 15 different afterlives. Those with the highest number of points go to Level A, where they get to not only meet God, but also have drinks and play golf with Him (word to the wise: always let God win). As the number of points a Gargleplaxian accrues decreases, the afterlives get progressively less inviting. At Level B, you get to commingle with the greatest intellectual minds in Gargleplaxian history. At Level C, you get unlimited access to the soda machine. At Level D, you get to hang out with God’s brother-in-law, who installs air conditioners. And so on and so on. At the bottom-most levels, pain is par for the course. At Level N, you spend eternity being poked repeatedly with a stick. And at Level O, you spend eternity watching Adam Sandler movies.

So when the adolescent Zev was preparing his career plans, he consulted the career guidance counselor at his school, one Madame Sosostris. As he tells it, “In her office, she laid out her wicked pack of cards (a pinochle deck, natch) and predicted my future occupation.

“I see great things in your future,’ she had intoned.

“Money? Fame? A giant foam-rubber octopus?’ I asked.

“You’re a strange boy, Zev. No, I see—oh, my. No, I’m not going to tell you that. Have you ever heard the term “prepress?” At the time I had no idea what that meant.

“You mean like when you wake up and the sheets are wet?’ I asked.

“She had looked up from the cards at me. ‘Um, no. We’ll leave that one. I think I need to shuffle this deck better.’

“She scooped up all the cards and started shuffling.

“It was at that point I blurted out, ‘I want to be a world champion pinochle player.’

“Startled, Madame Sosostriś sent the cards flying all the over the room.

“‘Excuse me?’ she stammered.

“‘A world champion pinochle player. That’s what I want to be.’

“Now, on Gargleplax, for me to say that I wanted to be a world champion pinochle player would be akin to someone on Earth wishing to be a sort of Thomas Aquinas or St. Augustine, a hardcore theologian capable of contemplating and seeking answers to the most perplexing conundra known to religion and philosophy.

“‘But there’s no money in it,’ Madame Sosostriś told me.”

This didn’t discourage young Zev and, as we have seen, it didn’t turn out quite so well. He scanned the *Xzygcxzyxczna Times* but found no job openings for a pinochle player, even though he was pretty good at the game. So he took the strip

club gig to finance his pinochle playing.

Disillusionment quickly set in and it wasn't before too long that, driven to the brink by depression and a general unwillingness to go on, Zev did the unthinkable and the tragic: he abandoned his dreams of pinochle playing, and went to work in publishing. His parents were crushed and to this day, they have not spoken to him.

So Zev spent the greater part of the next 100 years writing for *Gargleplex News* and generally becoming an expert on computer technology. No matter how successful he became at it—and believe me, in trade publishing, success is measured by the quantity of hate mail you get—he could never shake the feeling that it was a compromise, something he had settled for rather than something for which he had anything akin to passion.

Thus, at the tender age of 197, he applied for the Defeat Evil on Earth (DEE) program and found himself living in Syracuse, New York. Zyzzyx got around the quite dramatic physiological differences between humans and Gargleplexians by virtue of his shapeshifting ability.

Fortunately, Zyzzyx only had to alter his outward appearance and he is infinitely proud of the fact that Gargleplexians have two livers. As a result, Zyzzyx found that he could drink anyone on Earth under the table. But, once news of his IQ got out, he found that there was still no getting past that purported mental superiority issue. At parties, friends invariably introduced him as “a member of a hyper-intelligent race of aliens.” But, then again, an Earthling brought to Gargleplex was invariably introduced as “a member of a rock-stupid race of space hicks.”

“It's all relative,” Zyzzyx concludes.

---

## EIGHT

---

**THURSDAY, JUNE 16, 200—, 11:40 a.m.**

THE THING THAT ANNOYED FASSBINDER THE MOST WAS THAT IT was damn near impossible to get anything to eat. As the infection spread, everyone was destroying menus. He stood in front of a hot dog vendor's cart at the corner of Fifth and 36th, trying to block the adhesive-lettered menu with his body until he could complete his order.

"Could I get a hot dog with mustard?" he requested.

"You're the boss," said the grizzled hot dog vendor as he dipped his tongs into the metal vat.

"I'm glad *someone* thinks so," mumbled Fassbinder.

As he reached for his hot dog, he knocked a can of soda off the vendor's cart. He leaned over to pick it up, exposing the vendor's menu to a group of presumably infected youths coming across the street.

Fassbinder heard screaming behind him and spun to see the pack of youths charging at the cart, which they overturned amid an explosion of buns, raw wieners, and hot greasy water. Fassbinder deftly ducked out of the way, still clutching his hot dog. The vendor charged after the kids, waving his tongs and shouting profanities.

The scary thing, thought Fassbinder, is that this is actually a fairly typical day in New York. He slunk off into a doorway and quickly scarfed down his hot dog.

\*\*\*

Zyzyx, Meineke, and Jet made their way across the Cheap-Air terminal at La Guardia Airport. The wave of destruction hadn't affected the airport yet, but concerned passengers were watching coverage of the enfolding crisis on monitors placed around the terminal.

"Are we on time yet?" asked Jet.

"New York City is in a bit of a state of disarray right now," said Zyzyx. "For your own safety, I think you'd both better come with me."

"I do have a meeting to get to," Meineke reminded him.

"I don't think there are going to be that many meetings held today. Weren't you watching the newscast on the plane?"

"I'm afraid not. I was busy attending to Jet."

Zyzyx took a cell phone from his bag and dialed a number.

"Thank you for calling the Cover Story Treatment Plant," said what sounded to Zyzyx like an automated telephone system.

"This is new," he grumbled.

"If you know your party's extension, please dial it now," the voice continued. "If you are...um...calling about, shall we say, something else—wink wink—please enter your password followed by the pound sign."

Zyzyx dialed his password, "314159...."

"Thank you. Please hold why I verify that password."

There was a brief pause and Zyzyx caught what sounded like a snippet of a James Taylor song. "You are now admitted to the Elite Computer Virus Task Force main telephone system. Please listen carefully, as some options

have changed. To do anything even remotely meaningful in this phone system, press 1 followed by the pound sign.”

Zyzyx did.

“Thank you. Please enter the first four words of the Gettysburg Address, using the telephone keypad. I’ll wait.”

Zyzyx thought. “Is ‘four score’ one word or two?” He took a guess and started dialing.

“Thank you. Please enter your date of birth, your social security number, your mother’s maiden name, and the number of quarts in a gallon, followed by the pound sign.”

Zyzyx took a deep breath and began.

Jet, meanwhile, was staring at a row of monitors displaying arrival and departure information. He shuffled over to it and placed his hand on one of the screens. He turned back to Meineke.

“These departure times are incorrect,” said Jet.

“What do you mean, Jet?”

“My internal clock tells me that it is 1:41 A.M. and these planes should have departed by now.”

“No, Jet, your clock is wrong. Come here, let me reset your time.”

“If it is 1:41 A.M. on Friday, June 17, CheapAir Flight 19 should have departed at 11:45 A.M. on Thursday, June 16.”

“No, Jet, your time and date are set incorrectly. Let me fix them.”

What neither of them knew was that due to a mechanical problem, CheapAir Flight 19, which was supposed to have departed at 11:45 on June 16 would in fact be delayed until 1:41 A.M.

“Thank you,” continued the automated phone system. “Now press 5 for no particular reason.”

Zyzyx did. "This could take all day," he said.

Meineke was not paying attention to Zyzyx's phone troubles, as he was preoccupied with chasing Jet around the terminal. Jet could move swiftly when he had a mind to, and Meineke was not the most active of people.

"No, my clock is correct. You are in error," Jet insisted, and Meineke tried to grab him.

"Jet, you're worse than my four-year-old grandson sometimes," complained Meineke.

A middle-aged woman clutching her five-year-old daughter stood and stared at the sight of a pudgy, balding middle-aged man chasing what appeared to be his identical twin around an airport terminal.

"You have to admit," Zyzyx said to her as he pushed more buttons, "this isn't the sort of thing you see every day."

"Thank God for that," she said, and ushered her daughter off toward the ticket counter.

Meineke finally caught up with Jet and reset his internal date and clock. He was interrupted by a plaintive howl from Zyzyx.

"I was so close to actually getting a human, and the cell phone battery died. Would you happen to have a cell phone I could borrow?"

"I'm sorry I don't," said Meineke. "But Jet here has cellular communications built in."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. Jet, Command-Phone."

Jet whirred for a moment. "Ready to dial."

"There you are," said Meineke. "Just tell him what number you want, then say 'Command-Send.'"

Zyzyx dictated the number to Jet. "Now, how does

this work?”

“We haven’t attached the telephone interface yet, so you have to talk into his left ear and listen through his mouth. To enter numbers simply speak them, followed by the word ‘send.’”

Zyzyx put his ear to Jet’s mouth. He again heard the autoattendant, and, speaking into Jet’s ear, began the long process of wading through the Elite Computer Virus Task Force phone system.

Finally, Zyzyx was connected to a person. “Lieutenant Sprong, this is special operative Zev Zyzyx requesting special connectivity option alpha-rio-bravo.”

“Zev,” came a voice out of Jet’s mouth, “long time no hear. What have you been up to, you old space dog?”

“I don’t have a great deal of time. I’m talking into a guy’s head right now.”

At that point, the mother and daughter returned from the ticket counter and, with a look that was something of a cross between terror and amusement, hurried past Zyzyx and Jet.

In a few moments, Zyzyx had successfully requested a helicopter and was instructed to head to a special government heliport on the roof of the CheapAir terminal. Zyzyx led Meineke and Jet up to it, and before long the helicopter arrived and they were in the air bound for Manhattan.

**12:12 P.M.**

Fassbinder had finished his hot dog and managed to find an intact knish vendor two blocks away. He huddled in a doorway and scarfed down his knish. All he needed now

was a pretzel, or maybe some of those roasted peanuts.

He headed back toward the Empire State Building. A small crowd had gathered on Fifth Avenue and everyone was staring up toward the observation deck. They couldn't see anything—and actually Claudia and her captor were on the Sixth Avenue side—but they thought they were about to witness something dramatic and potentially tragic about to happen.

Fassbinder saw one of the ECVTF's helicopters appear in the sky and descend into the middle of the Fifth Avenue/34th Street intersection. He was confused; who could it be? The general was still in the medical van recovering, and everyone else had been ordered to remain at headquarters. The copter landed and a *frisson* of terror shot up his spine. He saw a green, many-limbed creature with five eyes emerging from the rubble. *Zyzyx!* he thought. *What the hell was he doing here? He was supposed to be retired—and out of my hair for good.*

Zyzyx spotted Fassbinder and, with Meineke and Jet in tow, wandered over toward him.

“Zev, you're looking...well...” said Fassbinder.

“Say what?”

“The chief predator of the Atlantic giant squid is the sperm whale,” said Jet.

“Damn, I'm having problems concentrating. Let me shapeshift.” He popped back into his human form. “There. That's better.”

Fassbinder finally worked up the nerve to ask Zyzyx the question he had always wanted to ask him. “Why Ernest Borgnine?”

“On Gargleplax, we were told that this is the ideal of

male beauty on Earth. I figure, heck, I'm a shapeshifter. Why not?"

"I see," said Fassbinder.

Meineke took out his cell phone. "I'd better check in with the office and explain I'm probably going to miss my meeting."

"I thought you said you didn't have a phone," accused Zyzzyx.

"I lied. I wanted to test Jet's cell phone feature."

"Did it have to be in the middle of La Guardia Airport?"

"Any port in a storm. Excuse me for a moment."

He ducked off into a doorway.

"So anyway," Zyzzyx said, "about the virus...."

"See all that carnage and destruction behind you? That would be it, pretty much."

He pirouetted and jumped back in surprise. "Yes, I gathered that." He turned to face Fassbinder and sighed. "Claudia was right: you are a yutz, Poindexter."

"Me? What did I do? I'm trying to stop this," the professor protested.

"Right. And Dewey defeats Truman."

"What are you insinuating?"

"Fortunately, I have the device that will stop all of this," Zyzzyx announced. He closed his eyes, held out his arm toward the helicopter, concentrated really hard, and seemed to be waiting for something to happen. His eyes snapped open.

"Damn, that's right. I don't have magic powers. I'm thinking of Starman. I'll be back in a minute."

"Freak," muttered Fassbinder to no one in particular.

Zyzzyx dashed back to the helicopter and disappeared

inside. Fassbinder noticed Jet, who was staring blankly into space.

“Hi,” said Fassbinder to the robot. “Do you need help?”

“Accessing Help files, please wait,” said Jet.

“No, I meant...”

“For a list of Help topics, please say, ‘Topics.’ To search for a specific Help topic, please phrase your keywords in the form of a question.”

“Huh?”

Jet was quiet a moment. “Your search turned up Zero items on the subject of ‘Huh.’ If you’d like to try another search, please say ‘Search Again.’ To exit, say ‘Exit.’”

“A robot, eh?” Fassbinder thought a moment, then grinned mischievously. “Exercise your prime function.”

“Please pick an application by saying ‘Start,’ followed by the application name.”

“Start—Prime Function,” said Fassbinder.

“I’m sorry. Application not found.”

“Aha!” said Fassbinder. “You have failed to perform your prime function! You are in error. You are faulty. You must destroy yourself.”

“Input error,” said Jet. “Please specify the name of an application or file to open.”

“Compute this,” said Fassbinder. “Everything I say is a lie. Got that? Everything I say is a lie.”

“Acknowledged,” said Jet.

“Now, get this: I’m lying.”

Jet said nothing.

“Well...”

“Please specify the name of an application or file to

open.”

“But everything I say is lie and I’m lying. What do you make of that contradiction?”

“Get bent,” said Jet.

“Oh, no, no, no,” said Meineke, rushing over and snapping his cell phone closed. “We’ll have none of that ‘Captain Kirk talks the computer to death until it explodes’ nonsense.”

Fassbinder growled.

Zyzyx returned with a Bloomingdales Big Brown Bag. He reached into and retrieved what looked like an immense salami.

“What the hell is that? You’re going to defeat the virus with luncheon meat?” Fassbinder asked.

“This only looks like a salami to all but the most discerning eyes. It operates rather like one of your mortars, only it’s far more sophisticated than such a primitive Earth device, I assure you.”

“Oh, right. Everything’s better on other planets.” The worst thing about making contact with alien races, concluded Fassbinder, was those damn extraterrestrial snobs, pooh-poohing Earth civilization and technology, going on and on about how everything on Earth was so-o-o primitive. They’re worse than San Franciscans.

He aimed the salami in the general direction of Midtown. He again seemed to be waiting for something to happen. Nothing did.

“Hmm, this is strange,” Zyzyx said. “It should have unleashed a salvo of untold destruction. I don’t get it.”

“Are there batteries in it?”

“There should be.”

“Try rebooting it.”

Fassbinder walked over to get a closer look at his “weapon.” To the professor, it looked and smelled exactly like a salami. Fassbinder grabbed it from Zyzzyx and took a bite out of it. It was a salami, and a very good one at that.

“Uh, spaceboy. This is a salami.”

“What? Damn! What did the cleaning woman give to that food drive?”

“Oh, and we Earthlings are so primitive, you green-blooded bonehead.”

“I’ll have you know that I am not ‘green’-blooded. It’s far more yellow than green.”

“Whatever, you five-eyed freak.”

“You two-armed bozo.”

“Tentacle-limbed dorkface.”

“One-livered wuss.”

“You...magazine editor.”

“That does it!” Zyzzyx, though eschewing violence in most of its forms, could hardly resist the opportunity to beat the living crap out of Fassbinder. They crashed to the ground. Zyzzyx began bashing Fassbinder’s head against the sidewalk. It was at that point that a Jeep pulled up and General Piddle got out.

“Poindexter, why the hell is Ernest Borgnine beating you up?”

Zyzzyx and Fassbinder got to their feet.

“General Piddle, we meet again,” said Zyzzyx. He laughed ominously and stared intently at the General.

“Oh, dear,” said the General clutching his bandaged head. “Oh, God, no! Stop!”

---

**NINE**

---

CLAUDIA MOLLER DESCENDED ANOTHER FLIGHT OF STAIRS AND stopped on the landing to catch her breath. She looked over at the door. *65th Floor*. She sighed and sat down on the stairs to rest.

After her captor turned his attention to contending with the various aircraft that had started buzzing the building, Claudia took the opportunity to check out the telescopic viewers that were installed on the Empire State Building observation deck. *After all*, she asked herself, *I live in this building, but how often do I ever get up here?* She walked over to a telescopic viewer pointed in the direction of Queens. From this angle she could see the Swingline Stapler factory billboard. Above the ashheaps of Long Island City the watchful eyes of the Swingline Stapler brood on over that solemn dumping ground.

One can only look at Queens for so long, so she ambled around to the other side of the building and took a look at New Jersey. *Maybe Fitzgerald got it wrong*, Claudia mused. *Maybe Jersey was the more solemn dumping ground*. It was, after all, were she had met Fassbinder, speaking of solemn dumping grounds.

“Enough,” she said, and pushed the viewer away.

Seeing that her captor was still distracted by the increasing air assault (or, at the very least, several news helicopters), she slipped inside the building. Not only was the

gift shop closed, but the elevators weren't working either, so she entered the stairwell and began the long arduous descent.

If nothing else, descending 100-plus flights of stairs gives one time for ample reflection. Queens. New Jersey. Polar opposites in some ways. Geographically, to be sure: one was east of the city, one was west. More importantly, though, one was associated with Julian, the other with Poindexter. There was only one common thread linking the two men of her life together: teeth.

Ever since she was a young girl growing up in Astoria, Queens, Claudia Rototiller (her maiden name) had been fascinated by teeth and dentists. Which was strange, because actually the idea of teeth terrified her. She was unable to explain the paradox, although her older brother, who was an astrophysicist, once explained it, "I love the sun. I find it completely fascinating, but let's face it, I would not want to be in a room with it." Very wise words, but Claudia was probably not going to be able to clear any room she was in of teeth, her own or others'.

She wasn't quite certain where the dentophobia came from. Her parents theorized that perhaps she had been bitten by something at a tender age, and in a tender spot.

As she grew older, she was exceedingly relieved when she found her teeth starting to fall out, but became distraught when larger ones grew in their place. Even the Tooth Fairy, a benevolent dispenser of cash to the dentally parted, was in her mind a fiendish ogre who was collecting all the children's teeth of the world for some horrible,

nefarious purpose. Which may not be far from the truth, come to think of it.

Claudia never really overcame her fear of teeth, and it could explain why she never trusted people who smiled too much. Tragically, she had once accepted a job in public relations, and her first press event was a complete disaster. She and several other PR associates were hosting a press luncheon and as the reporters arrived, she found herself surrounded by her colleagues' big, toothy smiles. She felt herself perspiring heavily. She tried to smile herself, but her upper lip began twitching uncontrollably and it felt as if her own teeth were moving about of their own accord. Her vision blurred; it all went black and white. The room became something out of a German Expressionist nightmare and teeth came at her from all directions. She grabbed her head and ran from the room screaming, "The teeth! The teeth! Make them go away!"

Needless to say, she was fired immediately.

She kicked around New York City aimlessly for several years and if you're going to kick around aimlessly, there are certainly far worse places to do it than New York City. As she was heading home on the N train late one Friday night after some hours of carousing, she passed out just after the Beebe Avenue stop. She collapsed into the lap of a man sitting next to her, who was bewildered, to say the least, especially as she had landed face down in the cream pie he was bringing to his sister.

When she awoke several hours later, fear gripped her. She was sitting in a dentist's chair staring up at that weird light fixture they always seem to have. The taste in her mouth seemed to be pie.

“Ah, Sleeping Beauty awakes,” came a voice from behind her.

She wasn’t quite sure how to take that. He walked around in front of her. He was wearing a white dentist’s smock and had rubber gloves on.

“How did I—”

“You passed out on top of me on the train. You had no ID on you, so I brought you here to my office.”

“That means, you’re—”

“I’m a dentist, yes.”

She got a close look at him and the thought went through her mind that he was quite possibly the most attractive dentist she had ever seen. She would get over the teeth thing, she decided.

They had a whirlwind courtship and married very quickly. They moved to California, for some reason, and his dental practice skyrocketed. What with California kids being brought up on bottled water, no one drank the fluoridated tap water anymore, so cavities and other dental problems were on the rise. Julian and Claudia Moller (her married name, which was a bit of an improvement) lived the fabulous lives and wore the crowns—as it were—of the dental elite. It was all swanky Beverly Hills parties and Brentwood flossings. Together, they had rinsed and spit in the sinks of the rich and famous.

Until one tragic day, when the tooth fairy tale life ended. Julian was doing an examination on a patient, a football player who had suffered a hefty blow to the face when an outraged fan ran amok and charged onto the field. A fight ensued, which resulted in loosening several of the player’s teeth. Julian was gauging the extent of the damage, and

had stood to write something on a clipboard. You could call what ultimately happened being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and smelling like the wrong thing.

“Doc, are you wearing cologne?” asked the patient, whose immense build had caused him to be given the nickname “the Washing Machine.”

“Why, yes, my wife is very fond of this scent. After I’m done with you, we’re meeting for a romantic dinner at In-n-Out Burger. It’s our one-year wedding anniversary.”

“You’re wearing a lot of it, man, and I’m allergic.”

The Washing Machine started building up an immense sneeze. Julian Moller, DDS, graduate of Colgate University, husband of Claudia, owner of a cat named Crest, simply smiled and continued writing on his clipboard.

O cruel fate!

The sneeze mounted until finally, the Washing Machine exploded into a sneeze of cataclysmic proportions. It would merely have been disgusting, if the strength of the sneeze hadn’t uprooted his five loose teeth and propelled them out of his mouth like buckshot. They struck Dr. Moller, who screamed, watched the blood begin to seep out of the five wounds on his chest, then crumpled to the floor.

One of the teeth had pierced his heart, and several of L.A.’s top surgeons and even orthodontists were unable to save him.

As you can well imagine, Claudia did not take that well at all and was despondent and inconsolable for months. She moved back to New York City, and the Washing Machine—who had a lucrative contract with the intramural football team at Beverly Hills High School—assuaged his guilt by giving her a gift of several hundred thousand dol-

lars. Unfortunately, it was all in dimes, but she knew better than to look a gift horse in the mouth, as it were.

For sentimental reasons, she hung onto Julian's dental equipment, and moved the lot into her Empire State Building residence, where she spent a lot of time standing before the window in a dental hygienist's smock.

That got real boring in a hurry, so she decided to pick up the pieces and start anew, but things were different. First off, she had become embittered. Even though no one would ever have associated her with doe-eyed innocence, she honed her psyche to an even sharper edge, even preferring to be called "Clau" as a symbol of her new sharpened lease on life. Believing that true love was inevitably bound to end tragically, she gave up looking.

Once again, though, she spent an evening carousing and for some reason ended up on a New Jersey Transit train. She passed out just after the Elizabeth stop.

Some things don't change.

She awoke on a metal table in what looked like a science lab.

"I've got to stop doing that," she said to herself.

She watched a figure approach.

"Oh, good, you're awake," noticed the figure. "I need to use that table."

"You're not a dentist are you?" she asked immediately.

"Not even remotely," he said. "I experiment with computer viruses. I work for the government."

"Ah."

There was a terribly awkward silence.

"Do you have any coffee?" she asked.

"They don't usually let me make it, but I think I know how."

She watched him retreat into another room. Seconds later, there was what sounded like an explosion.

“Oh, damn,” she heard him say.

She had to check this out. Peering through the doorway, she watched her would-be rescuer, her knight in shining armor, or even her knight in white satin, beating back an immense coffee pot with a broom.

He noticed her standing there, watching him, and he no doubt caught the wry smile on her face.

“It’s a very long story,” he said sheepishly and smiled awkwardly. Nice teeth, she thought to herself. This guy had braces when he was younger. Probably not a cavity in his head—or at least his mouth—either.

Despite that most inauspicious of first impressions, and though she thought he seemed like a bit of a yutz, they started to date, after a fashion. Actually, after an old-fashioned, usually several. What really appealed to her, however, was what she felt was a latent dark side in him. As they dated more and more, she discovered that, like herself, he had no great love of life, and no great romantic streak. He *tried* to have a romantic streak, but it was all a put-on, she had to admit, and a lame one at that.

One night, he had her over to his house for an ostensibly romantic, candlelit dinner. Any woman who expected to be bowled over by the romance of it all would have been repulsed. And yet, Clau found it all darkly appealing.

“Poindexter,” she had said to him, “these candles. Where did you get them?”

“Home Depot, I think,” he said, pouring her some wine from a box on the edge of the table.

“They’re citronella candles. They’re used to keep mosquitoes away.”

“Good. I’d hate the evening to be spoiled by mosquitoes,” he said, attempting a sexful tone.

She stifled a laugh. “But we’re in your living room. Anyway, they’re in galvanized steel buckets.”

He shrugged.

“And the music...”

“What about it? Hiring that strolling musician cost me a fortune.”

“Poindexter, he’s playing the tuba.”

“Your point being?”

She couldn’t stifle the laugh this time. “Have you ever dated anyone who was seduced by the sultry sounds of German oompah-band music?”

“Once.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“Come on, Clau, haven’t you ever heard ‘The Way We Were’ played on a tuba?”

“I can’t say that I have,” she confessed.

“Prepare to be pleasantly surprised.”

She stared at him a moment. “Poindexter, we don’t have very good chemistry, do we?”

“That’s not a surprise,” he replied.

“Why not?”

“I’m not a chemist.”

She groaned. “Poindexter...”

Their relationship continued in that fashion, primarily because she hadn’t anything better to do. As the novelty of their relationship turned routine, Fassbinder, like most males, found it increasingly hard to keep up that “first date

face” and gradually the façade fell away, revealing his true, darker nature. And that’s when Clau fell for him. The nihilism, the loathing of humanity, the bleak despair forged in youth and allowed to fester throughout adulthood—she found it all powerfully erotic. Until...

Until she met someone else who rekindled something within her, something that brought back memories of the way Julian had made her feel. She soon began to feel like a fraud. Was her own dark nature a reaction to what had happened to Julian? Of course it was, she had to admit to herself, and now that it was dissipating she felt as much a fraud to Poindexter as his pseudo-romantic posturing had seemed to her. She didn’t quite know what to do.

“Poor Poindexter,” she said aloud, as she stood up and contemplated the rest of the stairs. “What a yutz. And yet, dear sweet Julian.” How did she get from Julian Moller, so filled with a lifeforce, to Poindexter Fassbinder, so filled with a deathforce? She knew it was time to break it off with Fassbinder.

She stared at the stairs, sighed resolutely, and resumed her descent.

Meanwhile, on the street below, a wounded General Piddle was clutching his bandaged head in pain as Zyzzyx stared deeply into his eyes. Fassbinder watched in horror.

“You’re scanning his brain and trying to make his head explode, you psychopathic alien!” yelled Fassbinder as he charged at Zyzzyx.

“What?” said Zyzzyx. “Make his head explode? I’m afraid I have no such powers. Oh, but if I did, it would be so cool. But the brain, well, that’s one human organ I just

haven't been able to get the hang of."

"Don't get your drawers in a knot, Poindexter," said Piddle. "I have a concussion. It's just time for my happy pills, that's all. Now, Zeitgeist—"

"Uh, Zyzzyx, sir."

"Right." Piddle never could remember Zyzzyx's name. "I have several questions for you."

"So do I," added Fassbinder. "Like, I know you're a shapeshifter, but how come your clothes can change shape, too?"

"I don't have to answer that!"

"All right, you two!" barked Piddle. "Zelda!"

"Zyzzyx, sir."

"Whatever. The Device was a bust. What else you got?"

"Yeah," sniffed Fassbinder, "maybe a large wheel of gruyère that's actually a radio-controlled—"

"That's enough!" snapped Piddle, cutting him off.

At that point, they were interrupted by someone charging out of the Empire State Building. They turned and saw a heavily panting, very sweaty, yet still radiant Claudia Moller. Fassbinder ran toward her.

"Clau!"

They met, their arms enfolding each other, their lips melting into each other's....

"Jeez, you reek," said Fassbinder.

She sighed and pushed him away.

At that point, she saw a shadow on the ground beneath Piddle and Zyzzyx, quickly widening like an unpleasant stain. She looked up, and saw her captor dislodged from the top of the building—plummeting directly toward them.

“General! Zev! Weird, immobile, bald guys! Run!” she yelled.

“Or not,” added Fassbinder, *sotto voce*.

There was scant time for them to get out of the way.

---

**TEN**

---

**THURSDAY, JUNE 16, 20—, OH, YOU KNOW ALREADY...**

“ROBERT COHN WAS ONCE MIDDLEWEIGHT BOXING CHAMPION OF Princeton. Do not think that I am very much impressed by that as a boxing title, but it meant a lot to Cohn.”

“Oh, dear, the General’s head wound is acting up again,” said Professor Fassbinder as he struggled to his feet. “He’s talking to himself like Grandma. Grandma had actually been a boxer. Or she may have even been a schnauzer, now that I think about it.”

When Fassbinder noticed the figure plummeting from the top of the Empire State Building and was expected to land exactly where General Piddle, Zyzzyx, Meineke, and Jet were standing, Fassbinder immediately dived into the general, knocking him clear mere seconds before the falling figure landed with a milky squelch right on top of Zyzzyx, which sent down Fassbinder’s spine a *frisson* of—well, it wasn’t really terror per se. More like relief. Joy, even.

Claudia Moller, who was watching the grisly tableau from some distance away, screamed as she watched her captor crush Zyzzyx. He wasn’t very big, granted, but there’s something about an acceleration rate of 32 feet per second squared that can cause trouble if you’re not careful.

They stared at the inert form of the fallen body. Strangely, there was no sign of Zyzzyx. Some kind of mist

wafted up from the ground.

General Piddle got to his feet shakily and staggered over to the remains of Chad. He clutched his bandaged head. "Well, that's the end of Xylophone," he said solemnly.

"Zyzyyx," corrected Claudia.

"Right."

"You know, General," said Claudia. "I'm almost ashamed to say this now that he's gone, but I loved him. Or it. Whatever."

"Aha!" exclaimed Fassbinder. "Just as I had suspected all along. There was something between you and that slimy, five-eyed alien."

"No, Poindexter, my deluded little fool, there wasn't," said Claudia. "But he was a shapeshifter. Think of the possibilities."

"Um, yes," coughed Piddle. "That's quite enough of that. Let's get back to our more immediate problems."

"He gave his life to save the human race—and he wasn't even human," said Claudia. "Makes you think, doesn't it?"

"Do we even know if he gave up his life willingly, or was he just kind of a klutz? It can happen," Meineke pointed out.

They stared at him.

"I didn't know him all that well, of course," said Meineke. "We just met at the airport."

"Poor Zymurgy," said General Piddle.

"Uh, that's Zyzyyx, if you don't mind," said a familiar voice from behind them.

They spun around and—oh, gee, what a surprise—it was Zyzyyx.

“Okay, how did you escape almost certain doom?” asked Claudia.

“Mm, yes, do tell,” grumbled Fassbinder.

“Well, as you know, I’m a shapeshifter. Mere nanoseconds before impact, I simply shapeshifted into the Millita Mist Monster, one of the indigenous life forms of Beta Antietam IV. It’s a primarily gaseous form of life.”

“Kind of like my Uncle Barney at an all-you-can-eat buffet,” offered Claudia.

“Yeah, that’s great. We’re so happy for you, you great, gaseous goof,” said Fassbinder.

“Well-spoken, Dorothy Parker,” said Zyzzyx.

“Zev,” said Claudia, sotto voce, “who are the bald guys?”

“Zev,” said Meineke, also sotto voce, “who’s the Army guy and the grouchy nerd-like guy?”

“Our return flight—CheapAir Flight 39—departs La Guardia Airport at 5:35 P.M.,” said Jet, sotto voce.

“I see introductions are in order here,” said Zyzzyx to the crowd. “This is Frank Meineke.”

“Oh, like the muffler,” said Fassbinder. Meineke growled.

“Meineke is the president of Sy Borg Enterprises. He has invented a prototype robot, which is Jet here. Frank, this is General Armstrong Piddle, who is the head of a special military task force concerned with fighting computer viruses.”

“Uh, Zoloft, ixnay on the irusvay,” growled Piddle.

“General, I think we can safely say that the cat is out of the bag,” replied Zyzzyx. He turned back to Meineke. “General Piddle’s second-in-command is Dr. Poindexter

Fassbinder, and Dr. Fassbinder's significant other is Claudia Moller."

"That's 'Clau,'" she corrected.

"I was involved with the project when I first came to Earth several years ago."

"You mean you're an alien?" said Meineke, with a slight amount of trepidation.

"Oh, yeah," said Fassbinder. "In a big way."

"Ah, so that would explain your tendency to randomly turn into a weird, squid-like creature."

"I hate to rain on everyone's parade here," said Piddle, "but we need to do something about this virus. Remember that? Poindexter here thinks it's mutated again."

"I've seen several distinct mutations," said Fassbinder.

"General," said Zyzzyx, "are you still working out of the Cover Story Treatment Plant in New Jersey?"

"Yes. Dr. Pock is heading up the lab crew."

"Good. If I may, I'd like to have a look at the data he has accumulated."

They all piled into a Jeep and went back across the river to the Cover Story Treatment Plant.

Zyzzyx was being modest when he said he had been "involved" with the ECVTF. In fact, it could be said that he was one of the project's prime movers.

There were not very many people on Earth who knew about extraterrestrial races. Despite what many television programs, movies, and books claim, the United States Government knows nothing about Gargleplax nor the ten or 20 other worlds that are known to contain life. Indeed, only a few members of the military-industrial complex (the

military-industrial complex started as an industrial park built off Route 128 just north of Boston) were aware of what was going on.

Contact with other planets began in the mid-1970s, and General Piddle had had gotten in on the ground floor, so to speak. At that time, he'd been in his early 20s and had just returned from Vietnam. There had never been any doubt that he was destined to have a lifelong career in the military. It was his own brand of revolution against his upbringing.

Piddle's father had been a beat poet in 1950s Greenwich Village; he had tried to be a Beat poet, but that never quite worked out. The name Aloysius Xavier Piddle has been lost to the mists of time, but at the time "Piddle" was a name that ranked up there with Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs. Piddle *père's* 1954 poem "Jowl" opened with the lines:

*I've seen the best thighs of my generation  
Coated with ointments:  
Brylcream, shampoo, cream cheese...*

Though "Jowl" sold only two copies when it was first published, both of them to an improbably inebriated advertising account representative from New Rochelle who thought it was a treatise on marketing, Piddle read it to his friend Allen Ginsberg, who was so appalled by the poem that he wrote a parody of it called "Howl." Both men were completely shocked when "Howl" became one of the defining works of their generation.

That depressed the elder Piddle to no end, and thus began his descent into substance abuse. (That substance

was shoe polish, but it was a sign of things to come.) Worse, the “Jowl”/“Howl” incident was not to be the end of the indignities visited upon Aloysius Piddle.

A year later, things got even worse. Piddle had begun inhaling helium, and soon was hooked. In 1956, he wrote a novel based on the drunken and drug-addled antics of himself and several of his friends as they took a transcontinental blimp ride from New York to San Francisco and back again. Although *Helium Highway* would fare slightly better than “Jowl” (the Goodyear Tire Company bought several copies), it still tanked. Even worse, Jack Kerouac’s 1957 book *On the Road*—which Piddle felt was a complete rip-off of *Helium Highway*—was hailed as another landmark work. Despondent, Piddle did the unthinkable: in 1958, he bade farewell to the Beats and, tragically, moved to New Jersey to go into sales.

He felt that a normal environment would be best for his son, Armstrong Quincy Piddle, who was four years old at the time. It wasn’t easy being a single father in the late 1950s; Armstrong could be said to be a “love child” of Piddle Senior’s hedonistic days. Such was Piddle Senior’s womanizing at the time that he never knew who Armstrong’s real mother was; it could have been any of the women who drifted in and out of his bed.

But even though Piddle quit the Beats, they didn’t quit him, probably because he was the inadvertent source of their best work. They plied him with all manner of substances and, despite his attempt at living a respectable suburban, middle-class life, his past kept coming back to haunt him—especially when William Burroughs would put a white sheet over his head, leap out, and yell “Boo!”

As a result, Piddle Senior drifted from job to job, home to home, and blimp to blimp. Little Armstrong grew up with no real family structure or even basic discipline. Thus, he took it upon himself to raise himself properly. Punishment could be strict; somehow he always found out about his own misbehavior. Finally, at 18, needing true discipline, he joined the Army. By then, he was completely estranged from his father, who had become completely addicted to helium and was actually living inside the airbag of a blimp. His one or two attempts to call his son did not improve the communication problem between them; Piddle Senior's voice was too high and squeaky, and Armstrong could not make out what he was saying.

By the time the Vietnam War was over in the mid-1970s, Piddle had risen to the rank of major, and, remaining in the Army even after the war ended, he became a general by 1977.

1977. It was a fateful year. Punk rewrote the rules of rock'n'roll music on both sides of the Atlantic, a little movie called *Star Wars* took the galaxy by storm, and a young scamp by the name of Billy Joel told the world that, "if that's moving up then I'm moving out." However, for our purposes, it was a milestone year in that it was the first time that an Earthman had contact with alien races.

It was mid-summer. Piddle was on leave and was driving from the base to the airport. He was going to meet his girlfriend for a tryst in the Caribbean.

He would never make his flight.

Traffic on the Van Wyck Expressway heading toward JFK was too heavy. A semi had overturned, and, sitting in traffic for hours, Piddle watched as the flight time came

and went. There not being another flight until three days later, he took the nearest exit and went back home.

He would not get home.

No, traffic was fine, but as he turned onto his street—a quiet, dark, residential neighborhood—a blast of intense light lit up the road ahead of him. Startled, he slammed on the brakes.

“It’s always something with these damn streetlights,” he muttered.

Well, it didn’t take Piddle long to realize that it wasn’t the streetlights, unless they had grown immense and saucer-shaped and floated above the road in front of him. The craft—which is what it would have to be, thought Piddle—not only spanned the street, but barely fit in between the houses on opposite sides of the street. Looking up, he saw that it was at least as high as a 25-story building. It had a bare minimum of lights; nothing colored or flashing, just simple white lights at various intervals around the center of the craft. A few more lights came on and Piddle studied the ship. It was actually quite beautiful. It appeared to be made out of carved marble, with intricate, inlaid goldwork. There were several gargoyles protruding from the center of the ship. It was probably the most Baroque spaceship Piddle had ever seen. Not that Piddle had seen that many, but compared to what NASA was turning out—well, there was no contest. This was Jet Propulsion Lab meets *Architectural Digest*.

From the craft emerged cast-iron, claw-footed landing gear and as the ship touched down a ramp descended from the bottom of the ship. It was big enough for Piddle drive up, and he headed toward it. It was at that point that

a being darted out and stood at the end of the ramp. It was humanoid and looked about five feet tall. It was wearing a fez and had on what looked to Piddle like a red satin smoking jacket. It was flailing its arms wildly.

“Please stop!” it yelled. “Your vehicle will play havoc with our oak floors.”

Piddle pulled over to the side of the road and got out. He followed the being up the ramp, which closed behind him.

Inside the ship, he was led down a corridor that did indeed boast beautiful oak floors. He made sure he kept to the runner (of what looked like Persian design) that protected the floors from oafish aliens wearing boots. The hallway was lit with gaslamps.

“Is this a Metropolitan Museum of Art period room or an alien spacecraft?” he asked.

“Just because we travel to other worlds doesn’t mean we can’t have taste,” said the alien.

Piddle was led into what looked like a Victorian drawing room. The tapestries on the wall could have been from any art museum, except that they depicted decidedly extraterrestrial scenes—battles between aliens, not all of whom were humanoid. Space battles took the place of the more typical horseback raids.

The alien gestured to a scarlet settee.

“Please, sir, do have a seat.”

Piddle did. He didn’t know if he was more afraid of the situation in general or of damaging the furniture.

“Am I being abducted?” he asked.

The alien walked over to a drinks table. “Can I get you a drink?”

“I’m afraid to ask what you have.”

“You mean, do I only have exotic beverages from all parts of the galaxy, liquids you’ve never heard of?”

“Something like that.”

“Yes and no. I do have some amazing stuff, and some basic Earth-based potables, as well. Our race has discovered that the secret to successful interplanetary entertaining is to provide a judicious sampling of the common and the exotic.”

“This is more like entertaining than abducting,” said Piddle.

“Oh, my, yes.” The alien looked back at Piddle. “You look like a Scotch man. I have some single-malt I’m sure you’ll adore.”

“That would be fine.”

The alien dispensed a quantity of Scotch from a crystal bottle and handed it to Piddle.

“My name is Tharbax Cannuutuu. Of the Aldeberan Cannuutuus.” He waited for Piddle to be suitably impressed. He wasn’t. “Anyway, I’m the host of this ship.”

“Host?”

“Yes, rather like ‘Captain,’ I should think, except that we’re not especially military. We’ve been studying your planet for some time and we’ve discovered in your literature, as well as what they sell in your chain bookstores, that your race generally believes that so-called ‘alien abductions’ take place in the dead of night and involve antiseptic hospital rooms, a disquieting amount of rectal probing, and all sorts of other affronts to one’s dignity. We don’t believe that’s the best way to get to know other races.”

“Oh?”

“We think dinner parties and soirées are far superior to rectal probing.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more.” He took a sip of his Scotch. It *was* first-class. “My name is Armstrong Piddle. I’m in the United States Army, one of the branches of our military.”

“You like the work?”

“It has its moments. I’m far more interested in—” he gestured around him.

“Mm, yes, we get that a lot. We are from the planet known to you as Aldeberan VI, but which we call Splonge. *Galactic Traveler* magazine has six times voted Splonge as ‘the most hospitable planet yet discovered.’ We are renowned for our parties and general graciousness. Our space program was launched to, how to say, ‘gad about’ the galaxy, getting to know other races and species, and doing so by means of parties and banquets. In fact, our engineers spent decades perfecting a staggeringly tiny yet immensely powerful engine simply so we could have more space for ballroom dancing.

“Anyway, the reason we are here is that we would like to begin friendly relations with your planet, and we would like you to be the emissary, for lack of a better word. What that means is that the first Saturday of every month you will be invited to attend a dinner party on board this ship—and I must stress these are black-tie affairs. As you know, tomorrow is the first Saturday of the month, and we would be very much honored by your presence. It’ll be your chance to get to know all of us, as well as many of your galactic neighbors.”

“I would be happy to attend. My only question is: why me?”

“The leader of our planet was a very big fan of your father’s novel *Helium Highway*. He has quite a following on Splonge, I should point out. How is he doing these days?”

“I’m afraid he died five years ago in a blimp accident.”

“I am terribly sad to hear that. Anyway, we must go, but we are happy that you will be attending our soiree tomorrow night. We will pick you up here at 7:30 sharp.”

With that, Piddle was led back out to his car, and the immense marble spaceship heaved itself into the sky and disappeared slowly into the night.

As for how the following evening went, here’s the short version: Piddle got along extremely well with galaxy beings of all shapes, sizes, colors, and smells. Thus began Earth’s unwitting entrée into the Galactic Council, more a kind of interplanetary Rotary or Kiwanis Club than a governing body. One member that Piddle had struck up a friendship with was the representative from Gargleplax—Zev Zyzzyx. They became friends, and when the Gargleplaxian prophets predicted doom for Earth, it was Piddle and friend who devised the Defeat Evil on Earth program, which Zyzzyx was so eager to join, if only to defect to Earth. Thus, in late 1994, when Zyzzyx first arrived on Earth, he immediately hooked up with Piddle. Since at that time, no one really knew what the Force of Evil really was, Piddle got Zyzzyx a job working for a computer magazine.

Zyzzyx’s first day on the job would have consequences that still haven’t played out yet. He booted up his computer and discovered that he needed a text file from one of the disks he brought from Gargleplax. On Gargleplax, all computer storage is still done with 3.5-inch floppy diskettes. He inserted the disk in the floppy drive and almost imme-

diately, there was a bright flash on the screen. A large skull and crossbones came up, and from the computer speakers, came a deep, booming laugh. A voice intoned, in Gargleplaxian, “You have contracted the Xryxchym VI virus. All your text files are being translated into French, all your image files will now be hand-drawn sketches of nude political figures, and all your MP3 files will be converted into Debbie Boone recordings! Prepare to die!”

It was tremendously fortuitous that the magazine’s computer network had gone down, otherwise the company’s entire computer archive and all files on the central server would have been rendered useless.

Zyzyx was fired after only three days—nothing to do with the virus, which he quickly eradicated, but rather because he had inadvertently approved for publication a story that failed to gratuitously mention the magazine’s biggest advertiser in glowing terms.

Zyzyx immediately took the infected disk to Piddle and explained the problem. He also brought up to Piddle the fact that as Earth had more and more contact with other planets, it took the chances of opening up the world’s computer networks and systems to alien viruses. Therefore, some sort of initiative was needed to help combat extraterrestrial virus threats.

Piddle agreed, and, without telling any of the nation’s or world’s leaders about his own role in human-alien contact, he played everyone a video of *Independence Day* and subtly impelled them to come to the conclusion themselves that extraterrestrial viruses were a very real threat. And thus was funding established.

\*\*\*

Piddle, Fassbinder, Claudia, Zyzzyx, Meineke, and Jet soon arrived at the Cover Story Treatment Plant.

“I haven’t been here in years,” said Zyzzyx. “It feels like a sort of homecoming.”

There were some new faces—he didn’t know Major Barbara—but the place looked the same.

Piddle led them past the reception desk.

“Thank you for calling the Cover Story Treatment Plant,” said Major Barbara in a voice that Zyzzyx thought sounded familiar. “If you know your party’s extension...”

“Hey!” said Zyzzyx.

She immediately hung up and scowled at Zyzzyx.

“Oh, Mr. Heath,” she said, addressing General Piddle.

“What? Oh, right, my code name. Yes?”

“I have some mail for you, sir.” She handed Piddle a rubber-banded packet of mail that included a computer products catalog.

“Those guys find you no matter where you are, even a top-secret military installation,” said Fassbinder a bit too loudly.

Everyone shot him a nasty look. All except for a pale, wiry man in an ill-fitting suit sitting in the waiting area. He stood up immediately and sauntered over.

“Excuse me,” he said in a very nasal voice. “Did I hear you say that this is a top secret military installation?”

“No, you didn’t,” said Major Barbara. “We make cosmetics. Do you have an appointment?”

“No, but if this place is top secret, then I can think of nothing you need more than inflatable office furniture. Let me tell you about our inflatable filing cabinets. Secret

files? Simply deflate them before anyone can read them. We at E-Vill Co. believe that—”

The general nodded at Major Barbara, who leapt from behind the reception desk and, before the guy knew what happened, she literally tore his body into two pieces, right at the waist. His bottom half fell over and she tossed the top portion to the floor.

“A simple ‘beat it, mac’ would have sufficed!” said the man’s mouth.

There was a blinding flash of light and a thick puff of smoke, and both body portions were gone.

“Do they always do that?” asked Piddle.

“That’s a new one on me,” said Major Barbara non-committally. She calmly returned to her desk.

“He mentioned E-Vill Co.,” said Zyzzyx. “I wonder...”

“The guy was selling inflatable furniture, for God’s sake,” said Fassbinder. “That’s not exactly suspicious. Dopey, yes, suspicious, no.”

“We must see Dr. Pock,” said Zyzzyx. “Frank, Jet, Claudia—*Clau*, stay here for now. We’ll call if we need you.”

Claudia, Meineke, and Jet stayed in the reception area, while Piddle, Fassbinder, and Zyzzyx took the elevator to Dr. Pock’s lab. Pock was sitting at his computer studying spreadsheets. A half-empty bottle of vodka was on his desk.

“Y’know, General, I’ve never told anyone this before, but I think Microsoft Excel is just beautiful. Just beautiful. I mean look at this: all the cells are the exact same size. Oh, and check this out—They call it a ‘chart wizard.’” He clicked the mouse a few times, then giggled. “Hee hee hee!

A bubble chart! For my money, you can't beat that with a polo mallet."

"For God's sake, General, he's drunk!" exclaimed Fassbinder.

"Actually, if I remember good old Dr. Pock, that's actually how he behaves when he's sober. He doesn't get serious until he's had a few."

Pock turned his attention from the Excel bubble chart. "Zev? Zev Zyzyx?"

He noticed Zyzyx and stood. The two hugged.

"You old alien mutant, you," said Pock. "How've you been? Still doing the Borgnine thing, I see."

"How could I be anyone else?"

While Fassbinder pouted, Piddle said, "Now that you've had your tearful reunion, Pock, what have you found out about Harbinger's death?"

Pock sat back down and took a swig of vodka. "The virus didn't kill him, or at least, not the original virus." He closed Excel and opened his special scientific analysis program called *WhatTheHeckIsThat?* v. 2.5.

"A different virus? But how?" asked Piddle.

"We don't know. Here's what we found, though." Piddle stared at a series of swirling shapes on Pock's computer monitor. "We found the original virus already merrily reproducing in Harbinger's bloodstream. Then, we found this second virus. It has all the signs of another experimental virus we had been working with that essentially erases all the information in the human brain and attempts to install Microsoft Windows XP. The body, of course, immediately shuts down because the human brain architecture will only work with Mac OS X."

Piddle pointed at the screen. "Is that the virus?"

"The what? Oh, no. That's my screensaver. Unfortunately, I can't run my analysis program because someone else on the network is using a copy with the same serial number. General, could we *please* get another license?"

"I'll see what I can do."

"How did he get infected with the second virus?" asked Zyzzyx.

"We don't even know how he got the first one," said Pock. "But the coroner found a puncture mark on the back of his neck, from a syringe. According to all my assistants, no one had been jabbing him with anything, and the puncture apparently occurred moments prior to his death, leading us to believe that someone injected it into him."

The intercom buzzed. "Dr. Pock!" yelled a voice over the intercom.

"Yes, Doris."

"Doctor, please come to Utility Closet 54A immediately. You'll want to see this."

He looked at Piddle.

"We're on our way."

---

## ELEVEN

---

CLAUDIA WAS BORED OUT OF HER MIND. NOT ONLY THAT, BUT she was unnerved by being under the watchful—and potentially psychotic—gaze of Major Barbara. Since she and Fassbinder had been dating she came here often, so she knew Janice Barbara. Not *really* well, but well enough to know that the magazine selection in the waiting area—*Soldier of Death*, *Weaponry Illustrated*, *Decapitation Monthly*, *Better Gutturings and Disembowelings*, among others—was more reflective of her tastes than what you would expect to find in the reception area of a cosmetics factory.

“I think you need some new magazines,” Claudia remarked, walking up to Major Barbara’s desk. The major eyed her suspiciously. “I mean, I’ve read that story on the disposing of human body parts at least a hundred times.”

“Mm,” Major Barbara grunted.

That was pretty much how any conversation Claudia had ever had with Major Barbara had ever gone.

She sat back down and stared at Meineke and Jet, who sat across from her. Meineke was deeply immersed in digging through his laptop carrying case while Jet seemed content to stare blankly into space.

Meineke uttered an audible “Aha!” and pulled from the bag a small plastic card about the size of a matchbox and only a millimeter thick. He grabbed Jet’s right ear and swung it open like a small cabinet door. Beneath were not

only the holes that allowed sound to reach his audio card, but also several small slits of varying sizes. Meineke inserted the card into one of the slits and closed Jet's ear door. A whirring noise came from Jet's head.

"I can't read that," said Jet.

"What do you mean you can't read that?" said Meineke.

"It's not formatted properly. I am unable to read it."

"But you formatted it yourself before we left Rochester," Meineke protested.

"You must have done something to it, or it's not the same memory card I formatted because I can't read it."

"It's the only 128-meg SmartMedia card I've got and I haven't done anything to it."

"Well, don't look at me," said Jet, with just a hint of petulance.

Meineke sighed exasperatedly and opened the ear door. "Command-Eject," he said, and the card popped out of the slit. Meineke examined the card closely, but could make out no discernible damage. He reinserted it and closed the ear door.

"That's better. That card I can read," said Jet.

Meineke looked at Claudia and shrugged. "Whatever."

"Reading 'E' drive," said Jet. "Disk is named 'Financials.'"

"Right. Command-Spreadsheet."

"Spreadsheet opened," said Jet.

"Right." Meineke thought. "Query: If we increase the R&D budget—column D—by \$10,000 each month and hold all other costs—columns A, B, C, E, and F—the same, how much additional revenue will we need to make in order to make our projected earnings for the third quarter?"

Jet whirred for a moment. “Six hundred billion dollars.”  
“What?!”

“Six hundred billion dollars.”

“Jet, that makes no sense.”

“Don’t look at me. According to File Information, spreadsheet was created by F. Meineke on November 5, 20—, and modified June 15, 20—.”

“Yes, I know I created it and when I modified it.” He sighed again. “All right. Command-Print, page 1 of 1.”

“Printer not found.”

“What do you mean ‘printer not found?’”

“Which word eludes your grasp?” asked Jet.

“The printer is in your friggig pants!” yelled Meineke.

That attracted Major Barbara’s attention. She stood up, reminding Claudia of a rattlesnake that was coiled tightly and ready to strike.

“Oh, right,” said Meineke, oblivious to everything save for getting his robot to perform a simple task. “Activate-Printer.”

Major Barbara sat down, but didn’t take her eyes from Meineke and Jet.

“Thank you. Printer activated,” said Jet.

“Now, Command-Print, page 1 of 1.”

“Spooling file...printing file.”

Jet stood up, unzipped his pants, retrieved the printed sheet, and zipped up.

“We’re working on that,” said Meineke sheepishly, noticing Claudia’s wry smile.

“I’ve had coworkers who liked to do the exact same thing,” she said.

\*\*\*

Utility Closet 54A wasn't really a closet per se. Rather, it was a immense room the size of a supermarket with row after row of every imaginable—and perhaps even unimaginable—type of supplies the base would ever need, from something as simple as paper clips to something as vastly complicated as an analytical laser thingamajig. Doris led Pock, Piddle, Fassbinder, and Zyzzyx to row Q, along the rear wall. She pointed to the floor. Zyzzyx removed a handkerchief from his pocket and used it to pick up a hypodermic needle the size of a turkey baster.

“Doctor, is this the syringe that injected Mr. Harbinger?”

“It looks about the right size. I'll have it analyzed and compared to the puncture mark.” He took the syringe from Zyzzyx.

“Poor guy. That thing must have stung like a son-of-a-bitch,” said Fassbinder.

“What's it doing in here?” asked Piddle. “This is hardly an inconspicuous place to deposit it.”

“What's behind this set of shelves?” Zyzzyx indicated the red metal shelves that lined the back wall of the room.

“The wall, I should think,” said Doris.

“No, I mean what's behind that wall?”

Dr. Pock thought. “Actually, I think it's the room we had been keeping Harbinger in.”

Zyzzyx examined the shelving. He paused for a moment, then concentrated very hard. With an audible pop, he shape-shifted into a nine-foot-tall, heavily muscled ape-like creature.

Doris screamed, as did Fassbinder.

“Good grief!” said Piddle.

“Beautiful, man. Just beautiful,” said Pock.

The Zyzzyx-esque creature grabbed the shelving unit and pulled it from the wall. He then popped back into Zyzzyx’s Earth incarnation.

“Sure, where were you when I had to move?” said Pock.

Zyzzyx panted. “The huge physiology helps, but it does take it out of me.”

Doris pointed to the floor behind where the shelf had been. “Look!”

At the bottom of the wall was a perfectly rectangular hole three feet wide and two feet high.

“Where does that go?” asked Piddle.

“I’ll let you know,” said Zyzzyx and concentrated again. And then shapeshifted.

“Billy Barty?” said Fassbinder.

“Why not?” said Zyzzyx/Barty and crawled into the hole.

“This must be the playful side of Zev Zyzzyx,” said Pock.

Zyzzyx/Barty crawled about ten feet and came to a wall. He noticed that the wall was rimmed with a thin line of light. He pushed the wall and felt a slight amount of give. He pushed harder and the wall gave, being nothing more than a rectangle of plywood. There was something on the other side that kept him from pushing it all the way out, but he was able to slide it to the side. The object in the way was actually a bed. Zyzzyx pushed it out of the way and, climbing out of the hole, discovered that he was indeed in the room Harbinger had been kept in. As he stood up, he heard a scream from across the room. He had apparently surprised the heck out of Mildred.

Mildred reached for the intercom. “Dr. Pock! Billy Barty has crawled out of the wall!”

Zyzyx popped back into his normal form. “Sorry. Mildred, it’s just me.”

“Oh, Zev, you gave me quite a start. Where did you come from?”

“There’s a small passageway that leads from Utility Closet 54A to under the bed.”

“That’s weird.”

“You’re telling me.”

He left the room and went back to the Utility Closet. Pock, Piddle, Fassbinder, and Doris were still staring into the hole.

“It does indeed lead to Harbinger’s room,” said Zyzyx. He was secretly pleased to watch them all start simultaneously.

“Jesus Christ, Zorba!” said Piddle, clutching his chest. “You want to give me a heart attack to go with my concussion?”

Pock smiled. “Very good, Zev. Very good.”

“I’m afraid, though, that this simply creates more questions than it answers. Such as, who dug this hole? And who would be able to use it? After all, it was located behind a set of very heavy shelves and most people, at least in this base, are too big to fit through it.”

At that point, Mildred appeared. “Dr. Pock, Mrs. Harbinger has been brought to the base.”

“Thanks. Let’s see if we can get any answers.”

Penny Harbinger was upset, naturally, about her husband’s death, but remained stoic enough to answer Dr. Pock’s

questions without too much of an emotional meltdown.

“It was Sunday night, it must have been. Lance had been at my computer and he said he got an e-mail from his old Army buddy Gordon Govoni.”

“Who?” asked Piddle.

“Well, he *thought* he got an e-mail from Gordon Govoni. Actually, he had said it was from someone with an e-mail address ending in dot-gov. I tried to tell him that just meant it was a government address, but he wouldn’t listen. He clicked on an attachment and said he got a jolt of static electricity. About an hour later, he started going berserk at Ye Old Carcasse Inn and destroying the restaurant’s files.”

“Do you know who else he had contact with between the time he got the static electric charge and when he was finally taken into custody?” asked Zyzzyx.

“Well, there was the restaurant staff. Oh, and Chad.”

“We’ve interrogated the staff of the restaurant,” said Fassbinder. “They were no help of course, completely delusional. I don’t remember anyone named Chad.”

“He goes to school here in Manhattan. He works in the restaurant a couple weekends a month to help out his uncle, who owns the place. He takes the Greyhound up on Friday afternoons and back down on Sunday nights after the restaurant closes.”

Zyzzyx scowled, “There’s your transmission vector, General.”

“I still want to know how on earth this virus ended up being e-mailed to someone in Ethelman, New York,” said Piddle. “And where it came from in the first place.”

“Can’t you just look at his computer?” asked Penny.

“We wanted to, but the hard drive was completely erased,” said Pock.

“Completely erased? Oh, dear. So much for my doily patterns.”

“Your what?” asked Zyzzyx.

“Doily patterns. I make lace doilies. I had started designing my own patterns on the computer and selling them through my Web site. Actually,” she lifted up a small potted plant from Pock’s desk and picked up the doily that had been underneath it, “this is one of mine.”

“Excuse me?” said Zyzzyx. “Do you mean to tell me that Dr. Pock has a doily that you designed?”

“Yes. And it’s a fairly recent pattern, too.”

Zyzzyx turned to the general. “General, we now have a connection between Patient Zero and this base. Pock, where did you get this doily?”

“Where did I get it? Actually, I didn’t. This plant was on the desk when I inherited this office two months ago. Remember? My original office was the one that got flooded when the bathroom had that plumbing problem.”

“That’s right,” Piddle remembered. “This office had been empty for a few months before then. Who had it before that?”

“Beats me,” said Fassbinder.

“Actually, I think Poindexter had it.”

“Did I?” asked Fassbinder.

“Right...when you got promoted, you moved to the office upstairs,” said Piddle.

“Where did you buy that doily?” asked Zyzzyx. “And, perhaps more to the point, why?”

“You know, there’s no shame in buying doilies,” Penny

Harbinger hastened to interject.

“I’m telling you, I know nothing about lace doilies, and I don’t know a damn thing about how Lance Harbinger got the virus.”

Zyzyx snapped his finger. “I have an idea. Pock, where is Patient Zero’s computer?”

“He had a name, you know,” said Penny, annoyed. “*Lance*.”

“In the clean room where we left it, but I told you, the hard drive has been completely reformatted.”

“I think I know someone who can help.” Zyzyx picked up the phone and dialed. “Major Barbara, please escort, Mr. Meineke and Jet down to Clean Room #3.” He hung up.

“What are you up to?” asked Fassbinder.

“Meineke told me that he uses Jet to troubleshoot his own computers and that Jet is able to recover lost data. If that’s true, we may be able to get at what was on that computer.”

“Pshaw!” exclaimed Fassbinder.

“That sounds like a reasonable plan” said Piddle.

“‘Pshaw?’” asked Dr. Pock.

They all reconnoitred in the clean room. The computer sat idly on the bed where Dr. Pock’s assistants had left it. Major Barbara led Meineke and Jet into the room. Claudia, not having anything better to do, tagged along. They were followed by Piddle, Zyzyx, Dr. Pock, Fassbinder, Penny, and Doris. By the time they had all filed in, there was no room for anyone to move.

“Okay, this isn’t going to work,” said Piddle.

“It’s like Groucho’s stateroom in here,” said Claudia.

“I’ll have three hard-boiled eggs,” said Dr. Pock, doing a respectable Groucho Marx impression.

“I want everyone except Jet, Meineke, General Piddle, Dr. Fassbinder, and myself to go to the anteroom,” said Zyzzyx, gesturing to the mirror on the far wall. “You can watch us from behind that two-way mirror. Doris, would you take everyone there, please.”

After the crowd had thinned a tad, Meineke sat Jet on the edge of the bed and grabbed Jet’s right hand. He unscrewed his index finder and handed the fingertip to the person standing next to him, which happened to be Fassbinder.

“Here, hold this, please,” Meineke said.

Fassbinder took it and grimaced. “Eww...”

“It’s only plastic,” said Meineke.

Protruding from Jet’s finger was the head of an Ethernet cable. Meineke pulled it out, unspooling 18 inches of cabling, and plugged it into the computer on the bed.

“You don’t need to remove his pants for that?” came Claudia’s voice over the intercom.

Meineke looked around for the voice. “No, only for USB, FireWire, and serial connectivity,” he said to the air, mistaking the sarcastic remark for a serious question.

Meineke booted up the computer. Jet sat patiently. “If the hard drive has been wiped clean, there’s probably no operating system on it, so Jet will act as the host computer and connect to this computer as if it were just a network drive.”

“This isn’t going to work in a million years,” said Fassbinder.

“Could you be less helpful, please?” said Zyzzyx.

“No, I mean we have a hard enough time accessing our own network drives in this place. If this works, I’m going to have our IT department flogged with a network cable.”

“I think we’re ready,” Meineke said. “Jet, Command-Disk Recovery.”

“Disk Recovery in progress,” confirmed Jet, and there were whirring noises coming from both the computer and from Jet. “This operation will take several minutes.” At that point, Jet started singing, accompanied by a tinny electronic musical accompaniment that wasn’t far removed from the music some greeting cards play.

“Is that Celine Dion he’s singing?” asked Claudia.

“Yes,” said Meineke. “One of our senior programmers used to develop automated telephone systems.”

“He’d be great to have along on karaoke night,” said Dr. Pock.

“No, he really wouldn’t,” admitted Meineke. “Trust me on that.”

The singing stopped. “*Bong!*” chimed Jet. “Disk Recovery complete. J Drive accessible. Total capacity, 37.2 gigabytes. Used space: 30.4 gigabytes. Free space: 6.82 gigabytes.”

“Holy crap, it worked,” came Dr. Pock’s voice over the intercom.

“O ye of little faith,” said Meineke.

Meineke and Jet accessed the Harbingers’ e-mail program and located the message from “Gordon Govoni.”

“Message received Sunday, June 12, 20—, 5:59 P.M.,” said Jet. “Sent from *secret\_project@ecvtf.gov*.”

“There is no such address,” said General Piddle.

“Sent to ‘Evil List’,” continued Jet.

“‘Evil List’?” asked Zyzzyx incredulously. “Was the virus sent to a mailing list?”

“Jet, Command-Trace,” said Meineke. “Jet has a wireless networking card built-in and can access the Internet.”

“General, maybe we should get us one of these robots,” said Dr. Pock over the intercom. “He seems to work better than the equipment we’ve got.”

“Can the robot also act as a bartender?” muttered Fassbinder.

“As a matter of fact, yes,” said Meineke. “Jet has been programmed to mix more than 250 different types of cocktails.”

“I’ll take ten of him,” said Dr. Pock eagerly.

“*Bong!*” Jet chimed. “Message traced. Would you like the long version or the ‘in a nutshell’ version?”

“Nutshell, please,” said Meineke.

“Message was sent Sunday, June 12, 20—, 5:57 P.M., from originating address *giantmutants@aol.com*, spoofing fictional address *secret\_project@ecvtf.gov*. Message was sent to ‘Carl Mehlman’ at the address *lance@pennyslacedoilies.com*.”

“Who is Carl Mehlman?” asked General Piddle. He spoke loudly toward the two-way mirror at the back of the room. “Mrs. Harbinger, who is Carl Mehlman?”

“Carl Mehlman?” repeated Penny. She thought for a moment. “Wait a minute! That was the typewriter guy.”

“The typewriter guy?” asked Zyzzyx.

“Yes. Lance sold typewriters and typewriter supplies. He had one customer, who I believe was named Carl Mehlman, who was in once a week buying ribbon. Lance always thought it was because he was some kind of nut writing a ‘manifesto.’ What I don’t understand is why Lance would

be getting e-mail messages intended for him.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” said Zyzzyx. “Frank, can you have Jet search out Mr. Mehlman’s phone number and then call him?”

“Oh, suddenly Jet’s built-in telephony capabilities aren’t so disconcerting, eh? Very well.” Meineke gave Jet instructions and within a few seconds Jet was able to search the Internet and obtain Carl Mehlman’s phone number.

“Do I need to have Jet dial 9 to get out of this building?” asked Meineke.

“If he’s a cell phone, no,” said Zyzzyx.

Jet dialed the number.

“Jet, Command-Speakerphone,” said Mehlman.

“On speakerphone,” said Jet.

“Yello,” came a tinny sounding voice from Jet’s mouth.

“Is this Mr. Carl Mehlman of Ethelman, New York,” asked Zyzzyx.

“Yeah. Who’s this?”

“This is General Armstrong Piddle calling from the Elite Computer Virus Task Force,” said Piddle. “Do you know a Lance Harbinger?”

“General whosit from whatsit? Yeah, I know Lance. He sells me typewriter ribbon. Why, is he in some kind of trouble?”

“Actually, he’s dead, Mr. Mehlman,” said Piddle.

“Dead? You’re sure he’s just not being all quiet the way he can be sometimes?”

“This is his wife Penny,” said Penny over the intercom. “No, he’s not just being all quiet.”

“Mr. Mehlman,” said Zyzzyx, “we were wondering

how an e-mail message intended for you happened to be delivered to Mr. Harbinger.”

“How many people are there? Is this some kind of party line?” asked Mehlman.

“Not by any stretch of the imagination,” said Dr. Pock.

“Mr. Mehlman,” continued Zyzzyx, “your name was on a mailing list that somehow received top secret government files, but the e-mail address it corresponded to was Lance Harbinger’s. Do you know anything about that?”

“Goddamn,” said Mehlman after a short silence. “Those clowns promised they wouldn’t sell my name.”

“Who?” insisted Piddle.

“Some company called E-Vill Co. They had an ad I saw looking for folks to test out a new kind of typewriter that typed automatically. It sounded like a neat idea, so I signed up for it. The application form needed an e-mail address and I didn’t have one of my own, so I happened to have Lance’s business card nearby and used his. I didn’t think they would use it. I mean, it’s pretty dumb to expect that someone who’d be interested in a typewriter would have a computer, isn’t it?”

“That explains it, General,” said Zyzzyx. “Mehlman gave Lance’s e-mail address to a company called E-Vill Co. to get a typewriter. E-Vill Co. apparently sold their mailing list to someone who then sent copies of the virus to either some or all the names on that list.”

“Hey, if you catch this E-Vill Co., tell them I don’t want their damn typewriter anymore,” said Mehlman.

“Why not?” asked Zyzzyx.

“Damn thing won’t stop typing! They call it the ‘Self-Ranting Typewriter’ but I thought it was just a catchy name.

Now it just won't stop typing out pages and pages of filthy, evil things. Every time I run out of ribbon, it makes a hell of a racket and yells profanities at me until I replace it."

"Well, they *are* called 'E-Vill Co.'," suggested Dr. Pock.

"Thank you, Mr. Mehlman," said Zyzzyx. "Jet, Command-Hang Up."

Jet's telephone connection went dead.

"Thank you for using JetTalk," said Jet.

"Thank you, Jet," said Zyzzyx. "Now, how—"

"Total time of call: two minutes, nine seconds," added Jet.

"Thank you, Jet," said Zyzzyx.

"Total cost of the call, including airtime and roaming, is—"

"Jet, Command-Shut Up," said Zyzzyx.

"Hey, how did you know that command?" asked Meineke.

"Wild guess."

The entire group left the clean room and gathered in a large conference room. Piddle was the last one in and closed the door behind him.

"Anyway, we're still back at square one," said Piddle, joining the others around a rectangular conference table. "Who bought the mailing list?"

Zyzzyx thought. "There may be a connection between the lace doily in Pock's office—the one that had belonged to Fassbinder."

"So what are you accusing me of?" asked Fassbinder, a tad more shrilly than was probably necessary.

"Nothing yet," said Zyzzyx.

“Good. Because there’s nothing to accuse me of, except liking lace doilies.”

Fassbinder started to sweat, and visibly, too.

“Your human endocrine system is giving you away, Fassbinder,” said Zyzzyx.

“At least I *have* a human endocrine system.”

“Oh, bite me, Poindexter,” said Zyzzyx.

“Yeah? Go burst out of someone’s chest,” snapped Fassbinder.

“I’m assuming that if you’re behind this whole mess, you’re not stupid enough to have unleashed such a virus without having a vaccine somewhere.”

“Perhaps,” said Fassbinder. He got to his feet. “Perhaps I *have* developed a solution.” With that, he produced a small black device from his pocket and pointed it at them.

“Uh, pardon me, love of my life,” said Claudia, with no small amount of sarcasm. “That’s a garage door opener.”

“What? Damn. Wrong pocket.”

He replaced it, then stuck a hand in his other pants pocket and whipped out another small black device. “Now we’ll see who’s the boss.”

“What the heck is that?” asked the general.

“So you really want to know?” said Fassbinder with more than a tad of menace in his voice. “Okay. You will all die. Why? Because I’m going to kill you.”

He retreated to the doorway, grinned maniacally, and pressed a button.

They all screamed and a bubble of multicolored light enveloped each of them. They found themselves unable to move—even Jet, although he wasn’t trying all that hard.

“Damn it, Poindexter!” barked the general, struggling

to move. “What have you done to us?”

“You are each encased in a force field,” said Fassbinder. “It draws its energy from your own. The more you struggle, the stronger the force. Ah ha ha ha ha! I’m the god! I’m the god! You will bow down before me, son of Jor-El!”

“You know,” said Zyzzyx, “the evil is one thing, but it’s the gloating that I really hate.”

“Yes, I shall leave you to your agony,” said Fassbinder. “I must now go pay my respects to the Multiple Masters.”

“Oh, no. Don’t tell me *they’re* involved in this,” groaned Zyzzyx.

Fassbinder paused and looked down at the device.

“Damn,” he said and reached into his pocket. He took out a small booklet. “Now, which button is the transport mechanism?” He flipped through the booklet. “What?! ‘For a guide to button functions, log onto our online help system at [www—](#)’ Goddamn it!” He stuffed the booklet back in his pocket and began poking at the device.

“Ha ha ha ha,” he resumed. Finally, he disappeared in a shimmering light.

“This is the last time I’m coming to Manhattan,” said Penny. “You’re all nuts down here.”

“What are the Multiple Masters?” asked Pock.

“They’re a super-intelligent race of beings from the planet Manutius, which is a class Mmmm planet orbiting Rigel.”

“What is a ‘class Mmmm planet?’” asked Dr. Pock.

“They have the best restaurants in the galaxy. Anyway, the Multiple Masters have evolved beyond the need for physical bodies, as you and I know physical bodies. Essentially, they’ve evolved into just elbows.”

“Say what?” asked the general.

“Elbows? How does something evolve into just an elbow?” asked Dr. Pock.

“Don’t ask me,” said Zyzzyx. “I merely describe the phenomenon, I can’t explain it. How does a race of beings evolve into just brains? And why would such a race force William Shatner to strip to the waist and wear a leather training harness? There’s a lot of weird stuff going on in outer space, believe me. Some things just defy rational explanation.”

“Anyway,” said Piddle, “what specifically are the Multiple Masters up to and how would Fassbinder have gotten involved with them?”

“That’s a good question. Or two of them, actually.”

They struggled against the force field some more.

“An even better question is how do we get out of this?” Piddle asked, gasping from exertion.

“What did Fassbinder say? It draws its energy from our own, so the more we struggle, the stronger it gets. So don’t expend any energy, just relax completely,” Zyzzyx advised.

“I haven’t relaxed since the mid-1960s,” said Piddle.

Pock’s force field immediately disappeared and he took a hip flask from his back pocket and took a swig. “No problemo, amigos.”

Zyzzyx’s force field popped off next, followed by Penny’s. At last, Piddle managed to relax enough that the energy powering the force field ran out and he was freed.

“That’s a pretty ineffective type of force field,” noted Piddle.

“Especially if you tell people how to get out of it,” said Pock.

“Well, I think we established some time ago that Poindexter is not the brightest star in the firmament,” said Claudia.

“We still haven’t solved the problem of how to defeat the virus,” said Piddle.

“If I may offer a suggestion, once again Jet may be able to be of assistance,” said Meineke.

“We’re listening,” said Zyzzyx.

---

## TWELVE

---

TRAFFIC IN THE INTERSTELLAR WORMHOLE WAS BACKED UP TO Crenshaw Boulevard. As Fassbinder hovered there, suspended in time and space, he watched all the individuals with multiple personality disorders cruising by in the brain-pool lane. He was tempted, but knew enough not to risk a brain-pool lane violation. The überlords of the universe could be most unforgiving. Once he was caught speeding through the wormhole and was sentenced to 30 days' non-stop usage of Microsoft Word. He emerged a changed man. Infinitely more evil, as you would expect, but changed.

Traffic cleared and he continued his trip to the planet Manutius. Before the wormhole was discovered, it would take a spaceship traveling at or close to the speed of light 50,000 years to get to Manutius, although they had built a toll road that cut three hours off the trip. The wormhole since reduced the trip to ten minutes, when there wasn't traffic.

When Fassbinder reached the Manutius Boulevard exit off the wormhole (which continued on to much further constellations and star systems), he was near the end of the trip. He held up his right hand and gave the interstellar signal for a right turn which, as it happened, was actually an obscene gesture on the planet Bronxia where, come to think of it, everything was an obscene gesture.

At the end of the exit hole, he was dumped rather unceremoniously in a dark cave. He clambered to his feet and took in his surroundings. The walls were carved out of a dark, greenish stone, and the occasional stalactites and stalagmites protruded up and down (Fassbinder couldn't remember which was which). There was the sound of something dripping far off in the distance, but Fassbinder couldn't determine what its source was. He walked forward and came to a wall on which was a doorbell. A sign next to it read, in Manutian, *Ring Bell for Service*. (Manutian is nearly identical to English, except it's in italic.)

Fassbinder did. There was a blinding green light and almost immediately a large stone altar appeared, above which hovered the three Multiple Masters.

"I am Soutar of the Multiple Masters," one of them intoned in a deep, stentorian, James Earl Jones-esque voice.

"I am Goldar of the Multiple Masters," boomed the second one.

"And I'm Timmy," chirped the third.

"Who has disturbed the deliberations of the Multiple Masters?" asked Soutar.

"We were contemplating the oneness of the universe," said Goldar.

"Actually, I had no meld and Soutar made spades trump, so interrupt away," said Timmy.

"It is I, Fassbinder. I have transported here from Earth. And boy, are my arms—"

"Don't even try it," said Soutar.

"And what specifically have you accomplished?"

"I have created a computer virus that can be transmitted from machine to man. People all over are getting

infected and destroying information. It's a hoot!"

"Intriguing. Tell us more," said Goldar.

"In my position as head of research for the Elite Computer Virus Task Force I was able to take a virus we had been developing, make a few tweaks, and unleash it into the wild. I bought a mailing list from a company called E-Vill Co. and sent the virus in bulk to all the addresses on it. Only one recipient out of 500 actually opened the message."

"Not a bad response rate," said Soutar.

"Better than some of our catalog mailings," said Goldar.

"That one respondent was probably the only one that used spam-blocking software," suggested Timmy with more than a hint of sarcasm.

"Anyway, the virus was transmitted to a college student who went to Manhattan shortly after infection. It then got transmitted faster and to more people than I could possibly have imagined! As I predicted, General Piddle immediately found Patient Zero so I had to kill him by injecting him with another virus. And despite what Zyzyx thinks, it was perfectly possible for me to fit through the passageway I created between Utility Closet 54A and Harbinger's room. I had originally dug that hole because that room had been one of our clean rooms and was how I got access to these viruses in the first place. Those racks weren't that heavy. Zyzyx is such a damn show off."

"We have no idea what you're talking about," said Soutar.

"Anyway, it won't be long before the virus spreads all over the Earth, destroying information of all kinds. Now if that isn't evil, I don't know what is."

The Multiple Masters whispered among themselves

for a few moments.

“Um,” said Goldar, “you’re sure that your plan is foolproof.”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“How, then, do you explain this?”

The air between the Masters’ altar and Fassbinder rippled and a three-dimensional representation of the ECVTF conference room appeared.

“That’s a pretty ineffective type of force field,” Fassbinder heard Piddle say.

“Especially if you tell people how to get out of it,” said Pock.

“Well, I think we established some time ago that Fassbinder is not the brightest star in the firmament.” said Claudia.

“Those dorks! They’ll pay!” shrilled Fassbinder.

The conference room scene continued.

“We still haven’t solved the problem of how to defeat the virus,” said Piddle.

“Get to the good part,” said Timmy. “Does this thing have a fast forward?”

The shimmering light diminished in intensity as the scene sped forward.

“Stop here,” said Timmy.

“Most everyone in this city seems to have a cell phone, right?” Meineke was asking the group.

“Yes, which is why everyone keeps bumping into each other on the sidewalks,” grouched Claudia.

“One of the products we developed before we started working on Jet was antivirus software,” said Meineke. “I can have Jet write an applet that will remove the lines of

code—or DNA—in the bloodstream.”

“That’s right, the virus is based on ones and zeros infiltrating the bloodstream and merging with human DNA,” said Dr. Pock. “We’ve already started working on new code.”

“I can have Jet broadcast that applet to every cell phone in the city. The new code will reinfect the host and strip the old code from the host’s DNA. We can even make it so that it’s transmitted from host to host in the same manner as the original virus, so even those people who don’t have cell phones will receive the new code.”

“That’s brilliant. Will it work?” asked Piddle.

“There’s only one way to find out,” said Zyzzyx, “and we’re running out of time.”

“Oh, crap,” said Fassbinder.

The conference room scene vanished in a flash of light.

“You’re a real yutz, you know that, Poindexter,” said Soutar.

“You are the most tepid, mediocre incarnation of evil we’ve ever seen. And we’ve been in middle management,” said Goldar.

“Now beat cheeks,” said Timmy.

Professor Fassbinder slunk back to the wormhole. He ended up in a dive bar on the west side of Manutius where, after 8.63 Aldeberan fizzes, he finally hit upon the plan that would restore him to favor with the Multiple Masters. Then he passed out.

*The following is reprinted from the February 20— issue of Omnipotent Being Monthly, a business and technology publication that contains news and information for those seeking to develop supernatural powers and put them to evil use. It is a publication of Rigelian Business Media and reaches a qualified, BPA-audited circulation of more than 100,000 omnipotent or potentially omnipotent beings on 35 different planets. To advertise, call Rigel 5-7085.*

## A Little Elbow Room

Don't Let Their Abbreviated Physiology Fool You—The Multiple Masters are a Force to Be Reckoned With

**BY** ☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆

How a creature evolves into just an elbow is not all that hard to explain, at least not after a few drinks anyway. Soutar, Goldar, and Timmy—the three beings who eventually became the Multiple Masters—began life on the planet Taback XIII, almost universally considered to be the rudest planet in the galaxy.

Thus it is on Taback XIII that not only is it fairly typical to always be cut in front of while on line but also invariably addressed in an unflattering or downright insulting way. Take this writer's word for it: if you have any kind of unusual physical attribute, you'd better learn to be completely comfortable with it because it will be called attention to. So, for example, it would not be unusual to find yourself addressed on Taback XIII as "Hey, fatso," "Nice one,

---

\* Or, in English, "John Smith." The writer is from Zapfonia, where the written language is based on dingbats.

baldy,” or “Get out of my face, two eyes” (Tabackians have four eyes). On Taback, the citizenry think nothing of not only smoking in all public places, but will also, shall we say, fail to control their flatulence in public (I’m not quite sure which is worse). Everyone drives huge-ass SUVs and tailgates, and conducts loud cell phone conversations in public places. In a nutshell, Tabackians are the most self-centered beings in the galaxy. As a result, Taback XIII doesn’t have a very high tourist trade, and in turn they rarely find themselves welcome on other planets.

The concept of rudeness is built in to the whole Tabackian cultural ethos and whereas everyday inconsiderateness is paid scant attention to, there are, and always have been, those who aspired to “ultimate” rudeness.

“Tabackians get a bum rap a lot of the time,” says Multiple Master Soutar of his homeworld. “But then again, when you’ve spent a great deal of time on other planets and then go back, the differences really come into sharp focus.”

These days, the Multiple Masters call Manutius home.

“It’s really the best planet we’ve yet found, especially when you’re trying to get a whole career of omnipotence off the ground,” says Goldar. “The people are generally friendly and hospitable, and the cost of living is very low.”

“Much of the Manutian economy and service industry is based on catering to a telekinetically active populace,” adds Soutar. “They really make a lot of things very easy.”

“And the bars are open all night, too, which is a definite plus,” says Timmy with what this writer assumes is a smile.

So what about the elbow business?

As the story goes, several million years ago, a small

group of Tabackians, not content with everyday rudeness, decided to take it to the nth degree. The most notable manifestation of their ultimate rudeness was that they excelled at elbowing people out of their way. Over time, in classic Darwinian fashion, those among them who had the largest elbows were the ones that succeeded—at whatever it was they were doing. And, over the millennia, the descendents of this initial group evolved bigger and bigger elbows. Over the generations, the elbows became quite large indeed, and soon these beings' internal organs migrated to within the capacious elbows. There eventually was little need for the rest of the body, as they had overcome the mobility issue, first by coercing other Tabackians into carrying them around, then by evolving the ability to produce helium biologically via a kind of "helium bladder" that allowed them to float about of their own accord.

Scientists studying the evolution of this group—which was very much the minority as there is only a small subculture of about 25 "Elbonics," as they have come to be known—are flummoxed, to say the least.

"I've heard of the concept of the 'selfish gene,'" says Dr. Czdonpulgora Estrungulum, a prominent Tabackian biologist and a researcher at the Taback Sciences Institute, "but the Elbonics take this concept to a degree completely unheard of in evolutionary biology." Dr. Estrungulum is presenting a paper on the Elbonics next month at the 508th Annual "Say What?" Symposium, the premiere Tabackian science conference.

"And if anyone dares look at my data before I publish, I'll beat the living crap out of them," he adds.

Some habits are very hard to break.

Not content to cast their lot with the general Elbonic population (such as it was), the three beings who would become the Multiple Masters wanted to go even further than the Elbonics themselves had gone. Soutar, Goldar, and Timmy thus left Taback for Manutius, where they honed their telepathic and telekinetic powers until they had achieved a kind of omnipotence, although it's pretty easy to become omnipotent on Manutius just by picking up the bar tab.

But the thing about omnipotence is that it can get kind of boring after a while. So three months ago, for kicks the Multiple Masters launched a "How Evil Are You?" contest, in which beings from all over the galaxy were invited to send in their evil schemes. The winner will receive funding from the Multiple Masters to develop the evil scheme and deploy it on the planet of the winner's choosing.

So far, the Multiple Masters estimate they have received more than 3,000 entries from at least 50 different planets.

"Naturally, we're based here on Manutius, so most of the entrants are Manutian," says Goldar. "But we've received entries from as far away as Proxima Centauri IV, and believe it or not we even got one from Earth. That took us completely by surprise. We didn't think we had any name recognition on Earth at all. But, yes, a Professor Poindexter Fassbinder from Earth has entered our contest. We haven't read his proposal yet, but it should be interesting. So we're buoyed by the level of excitement the contest is generating."

There is still no word on whether the contest will become a yearly event.

"It's far too early to tell," says Goldar. "But we haven't

ruled out the possibility.”

“This still could completely blow up in our faces,” adds Timmy.

---

## THIRTEEN

---

Eep put the magazine down and thought for a moment. *That has to be the Professor Fassbinder that Zev used to work with,* she thought.

She finished her Slurpee and was considering taking a drive to get another one when she decided to make another pastrami sandwich instead. It would be her fifth of the day and it was only just past two in the afternoon. Fortunately, just as Zyzzyx's body could efficiently process huge quantities of alcohol, so could Eep's process huge amounts of fat and carbohydrates without her gaining any weight. This is just one more reason why life is not fair.

Zyzzyx had spoken to her of Fassbinder often and not always in glowing terms. For some reason, there had always been friction between Fassbinder and Zyzzyx, though Zev could never quite figure out why. When Zyzzyx thought about it a while, he once mused to Eep, he figured that it all probably boiled down to Claudia. It's always the way, isn't it? *Cherchez la femme*, right? Well, not really, no. There had never been anything going on between Claudia and Zyzzyx, Eep was sure of that. (Another of the advantages of having the ability to read other beings' minds.)

But Fassbinder apparently was convinced that there was something between Zev and Claudia. As Zev had explained it, the last ECVTF staff meeting before Zyzzyx departed went something like:

"All right, this meeting is called to order," said General

Piddle. “Dr. Fassbinder, where do we stand on the Visual Basic Deterrence Project?”

“Assuming Zyzzyx hasn’t *stolen* my labor of *love*, it’s right on track with that list of action items we had devised at last month’s meeting. Unless someone was being devious and went *behind my back* or something.”

“Poindexter, I get the sense that you have another agenda here. I think we’d all appreciate it if you’d leave your personal life outside of this complex.”

“Hell, yes,” said Dr. Pock, refilling his martini glass.

And so on.

Eep had to admit, she was glad when Zyzzyx left the ECVTF not long after that. Not out of any dispute, but because Zyzzyx’s father had died and bequeathed to his son his immense bread collection, an enormous quantity of money on Gargleplax. Zyzzyx had no interest in moving back to Gargleplax (he had met Eep shortly before his father died) and the Gargleplaxian Loaf was weak in the U.S. economy. But as it turned out, Gargleplaxian bread was actually phenomenally good bread. He had the supply shipped to Earth, and the few people there who tried it were impressed. He began to sell it and his initial supply was sold out in less than a week. But Zyzzyx had an ace up his sleeve: he knew the recipe. His cousin worked for the Gargleplaxian Bureau of Kneading and Rising and after much pleading, he finally relented and gave it to Zyzzyx. The recipe is not appreciably different from any other kind of bread, but it does have a secret ingredient that acts as a counterfeiting deterrent.

Anyway, to make a long story even longer, Zyzzyx moved to Syracuse, went into the bakery business, and

made a killing. His bread was so phenomenally successful that Jack Nicholson even has regular shipments of it flown to Los Angeles.

Eep layered the pastrami on some of Zev's bread and slathered on a generous helping of mustard. She took a bite. It was delightful bread, she had to admit.

She drifted out of the kitchen into her studio and stared at the sculpture she had barely started. Back on Festeria, Eep had been described as a "meteoric young artist" and that was meant quite literally: she used an electronic hyper-mesh net to snag meteoric debris entering the atmosphere, brought the chunks of space rock back to her studio, and carved them into busts, statues, and other random *objets d'art*. Her current project, a bust of Zev, was causing her no end of trouble. "How do you sculpt a bust of a shape-shifter?" was what she kept asking herself. Her dilemma: to sculpt Zev's birth shape or his current incarnation? Or, she mused, perhaps a third option?

She thought back to the trouble she got herself a few months earlier. She had been commissioned to sculpt a life-size statue of the mayor of a small town in Mississippi. Unfortunately, the guy was not a handsome man by any stretch of the imagination, so Eep thought she would flatter him by basing the statue on one of Gargleplax's most famous actors and sex symbols (whom Eep had always had a crush on). Unfortunately, that meant that the mayor ended up resembling a large, five-eyed squid-like creature. A slight miscalculation on Eep's part. The unveiling was a disaster, to put it mildly. She thought she was paying the guy a compliment, but needless to say, it didn't go over very well. Which was a shame; she thought it one of her best works.

She would have loved to have been able to add it to her portfolio, but sadly, the residents of the town destroyed it mere nanoseconds after the unveiling. The whole episode struck her as funny in retrospect, but she had barely been able to flee the state with her life.

Now, on top of everything, her concentration kept getting disrupted by the whole Zev/Fassbinder thing. She thought about her options. Zev probably knew all about what Fassbinder was up to by now, and yet there was something nagging at the back of her mind. He was too far away for her to be able to read his mind, but she was definitely picking up *something*.

---

## FOURTEEN

---

“THIS VIRUS THING IS WORSE THAN I THOUGHT,” SAID CLAUDIA as she huffily entered Dr. Pock’s computer lab. “No one has refilled the snack machine.”

Dr. Pock was busy helping Meineke attach cables to Jet.

“There’s a commissary on the next level,” said Dr. Pock.

“Nah. I’m really in the mood for some Combos,” she said.

Meineke pulled up Jet’s trousers. “That should do it,” he said.

Dr. Pock stared at Jet. “Do we have to do all of this verbally? As lousy a typist as I am, it would actually be easier that way.”

Meineke smiled. He removed Jet’s shirt. In the center of Jet’s chest was a plastic tab. Meineke inserted a finger in it and Jet’s abdomen folded down to reveal a keyboard.

“You guys thought of everything,” said Dr. Pock.

“And in the most disturbing ways,” added Claudia.

Meineke opened Jet’s ear door and inserted a memory card. When the card was loaded, Jet snapped to attention, then began typing on himself.

Claudia chuckled. “If he keeps that up, the saints will cry.”

“Thank you, young lady,” said Meineke, not amused.

“Jet will now finish writing the applet automatically. It may take some time.”

“Uh, oh,” Said Claudia. “Does that mean—”

Jet immediately began singing.

“Is that Madonna?” asked Dr. Pock.

Meineke nodded. “Sadly, yes.”

“I have to say, he doesn’t quite have the voice for female singers,” said Claudia.

Meineke had to agree.

A thought occurred to Dr. Pock. “What are the chances that Jet could become infected by the virus?”

“About the same as the chances that each of us will.”

“I don’t know if that’s comforting or not,” said Dr. Pock.

At that point, Jet was seized with a powerful convulsion, as if shocked static electrically. He jumped to his feet and lurched around the room, knocking objects and papers off tables and desks, and smashing objects in his path.

“Frank!” yelled Dr. Pock. “Jet’s got the virus! We’re all doomed!”

Meineke sat idly by, unconcerned. “Relax. He doesn’t have the virus. He just gets mad because he’s a very bad typist. He’ll calm down in a minute.”

Dr. Pock took a deep breath. “Fortunately, he only demolished some old computer equipment that sucked anyway.”

As Jet walked back across the room, he swept his arm over Dr. Pock’s desk and knocked a bottle of vodka to the floor, where it smashed.

“That does it,” seethed Dr. Pock. “The robot is toast. Let me at him!” He charged at Jet; Claudia had to restrain him.

“Calm down. The bottle was half empty,” said Claudia.  
“No, it was half *full!*” moaned Dr. Pock.

Several hours later, everyone gathered in the conference room.

“Are we ready?” asked Piddle.

“Ready,” said Meineke.

“The number I gave you is what’s known as a ‘skeleton key code’ which will let Jet dial every cell phone in a 50-mile radius simultaneously,” said Zyzzyx.

“Wow, I never knew the government made such things,” said Meineke.

“Actually, we don’t,” said Pock. “We got it from a marketing company.”

“Jet,” said Zyzzyx, “Command-Dial.”

Jet dialed.

“Jet, Command-Upload Payload.”

“Connected,” said Jet. “Uploading...”

“Well, here we go,” said Dr. Pock. “Let’s hope this works.”

“This may take several minutes,” said Meineke.

The humans in the room looked at each other. Then they looked at Jet.

“Love, soft as an easy chair...” crooned Jet.

---

## FIFTEEN

---

THE MORNING FOLLOWING HIS ILL-FATED AUDIENCE WITH THE Multiple Masters, Fassbinder sat in a coffee shop at the Manutius wormhole depot, awaiting the 10:45 A.M. opening of the wormhole back toward Earth. Galactic scientists had discovered some time ago that wormholes tended to cluster in certain interstellar locations, so although you can conceivably take a wormhole to just about any solar system in the galaxy, certain places—like Manutius—were focal points where many wormholes converged. You could take a wormhole direct to Earth from Manutius (and vice versa), but in order to get to, say, Gargleplax, you needed to transfer at Manutius to another wormhole that led in the direction of Gargleplax. There were about six other known “wormhole hubs,” for want of a better term, though sadly, Taback XIII was one of them and most beings tended to take long, unwieldy routes so as to avoid having to transfer at Taback, for reasons that have already been explained, or at the very least hinted at.

The Manutius wormhole station was another cave-like location. Indeed, most places on Manutius were cave-like, but the wormhole station in particular was quintessentially cave-like. Given its status as a major transfer point, it was also one of the most cosmopolitan places—let alone cosmopolitan caves—in the galaxy. The vast numbers of beings that passed through it also meant that it was one of the galaxy’s major advertising hubs.

Fassbinder entered the wormhole station and stood in the line that wended its way through what he thought was the security checkpoint. It consisted of a single guard waving a wand over the body. Most people passed through without triggering any alarms, except, naturally, for Fassbinder.

“Sir, you do not have a marketing chip installed,” said a purple-skinned alien of indeterminate gender.

“No, I can’t imagine that I would,” Fassbinder replied, not sure what he, she, or it was talking about.

“No one is allowed in the Manutian wormhole station without a marketing chip. Please step over this way.”

He followed her around a corner, where a computer workstation was set up. The being sat at the computer and asked Fassbinder a series of questions, including his name, home address, planet of origin, phone number, e-mail address, blood type, average yearly income, type of car/spacecraft driven, favorite color, favorite food, religion, sexual orientation, physical attributes he found the most sexually alluring, and so on. After every aspect of his personality was fed into the computer, the being took from the table what looked like a staple gun tethered to the computer. Before Fassbinder could protest, the being had pressed the device against the skin on his neck and pulled the trigger. There was a piercing pain that lasted only a second.

“There,” said the being. “That’s better.”

“What was that?” he asked, rubbing his neck.

“It enables all of the marketers and advertisers on this planet to target you directly. Everything about you has been fed into the computer and encoded on this chip. The vendors now know exactly how to best serve your needs.”

“Is jabbing me in the neck with a staple gun really best serving my needs?”

“I’m just following orders. You may go now.”

“Thank God for small favors.”

He rushed quickly away.

“Poindexter Fassbinder,” said a female voice behind him.

He spun around. “Yes?”

A hologrammatic pop-up screen appeared. On it, was a human female that bore a startling resemblance to Claudia, only far more alluring and not quite as abrasive.

“Poindexter, I’m so glad I found you.”

“Claudia?”

“I can be whoever you want, just be sure you buy LubriSol brand motor oil. I know that 20— Ford Behemoth you have has only 28,000 miles on it, but by using LubriSol motor oil, it will run reliably up to 128,000 miles.”

“Go away!” he said and continued toward the terminal.

“Son,” said a voice he could have sworn was his father’s.

“Huh?” He spun around again.

Another pop-up hologram did indeed have his father on it. “Son, I know I died three years ago and I always thought of you as a complete disappointment. I just want you to know that I love you, but I would find you less of a disappointment if you used Stinkaway brand underarm deodorant. Stinkaway is tough on odor and wetness—much tougher than you ever were in high school.”

“Good grief!” Fassbinder ran.

“Poindexter, this is your mother, I know what you had for dinner last night and I am appalled. What you need is Portly Man frozen dinners.”

“Poindexter, you took my virginity in the back of your van when I was 16. Let me tell you, if you had used PeeWee brand contraceptives then, I would never have...”

“This is your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for IntelliTalk Wireless Communications...”

By the time Fassbinder arrived at the proper gate, he felt like he was having a nervous breakdown. He was besieged by hologrammatic pop-up ads he couldn't get rid of. He was spinning and pirouetting, tearing at his hair and whimpering. He sat down and the being next him stared.

“Are you all right, pal?”

“Can't you see them? Can't you hear them? The ads! The ads!”

“Wow, you must've just got the chip implanted. Hey, I know what it's like. On many planets now, marketing chips are required by law. All the ads are beamed into your own head; no one sees another person's ads. It's absolute one-to-one targeted marketing based on your own thoughts. The chip has been programmed based on a series of questions, but the chip actually taps into your own unconscious memories and produces a series of hallucinations, depending on what companies have paid to market in a certain area. You'd be amazed at the ROI these companies have seen since these systems went into use.”

“You mean this is actually effective advertising? Most of what it is dredging up is not what I would want to be reminded of.”

“Hey, advertising only has to be memorable, not necessarily likable. By associating products with your most painful or joyous private memories, it's instant brand recognition.”

“But it's truly maddening!”

“You’ll get used to it, the way you got used to TV commercials and other types of ads.”

“Is that possible? You mean this never stops?”

“Not in public places, no. And some folks have been known to lose their cookies and have to be kept in an asylum, but that’s very rare. There is actually medication that can help people who can’t handle the hallucinations, but ironically, it’s never advertised.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I used to be an advertising account executive here on Manutius. I’m writing a tell-all e-book about the whole process. You’ll be getting some hallucinations about that pretty soon. You know what the scariest part is? When ad agencies and marketing firms started programming the chips so they would transmit the thoughts of those in which they had been implanted to the government, for surveillance purposes. Pretty creepy, huh?”

“I’m just glad that nothing like this could ever happen on Earth....”

While they all waited for the elevator to take them back up to the lobby, Claudia spied a FizzeeCola machine and decided that a FizzeeCola would be the ultimate in carbonated refreshment at the moment. The other humans (and organically-based humanoids) waiting with her agreed. Well, everyone except for Dr. Pock, as you would expect. A swig of vodka seemed to hit his particular spot.

They left Penny Harbinger in the capable hands of Doris, who escorted her down to the commissary-cum-bar where a thousand troubles had been known to have been drowned, all of them Pock’s.

“What is up with Poindexter?” asked Dr. Pock, as they headed toward the reception area. “He’s being like really uncool and heavy.”

“What, more so than usual?” sighed Zyzzyx.

“Good point.”

“If he’s in league with the Multiple Masters, we are in very deep trouble,” said Zyzzyx.

“These are the elbow dudes, right?” asked Pock.

“Yes, but don’t that fool you. They’re quite powerful, believe it or not.”

“You know I trust you, Zev, old pal, just tell me what you need.”

The elevator arrived and they rode up. Piddle’s cell phone rang. He snapped it open, listened for a few seconds, then snapped it shut. “We’re in luck. The destruction in the city seems to be ebbing. The cure seems to have worked.”

They all cheered.

“Now we just have to find Fassbinder before he unleashes something else,” said Zyzzyx. “Who knows what else he has planned?”

“How do you propose we find him?” asked Claudia.

“Hey, you guys gotta check something out,” said Dr. Pock, as the elevator opened into the lobby. “We’ve actually been working on some really cool stuff, too.”

He led them out of the building and into the parking lot.

“What the heck is it?” asked Zyzzyx.

“Did I approve this?” asked Piddle.

“It is a Wormhole Coalescence Attractor. And, no, you didn’t specifically approve this, but I inflated my bar tab to account for it.”

“I don’t know whether that’s good or bad,” said Piddle.

He led them across the parking lot to what looked like an old-style telephone booth, but with the windows opaqued. Pock pushed open the door and inside, where there was room enough for two people so long as one of those people was not General Piddle, was a small black control panel.

“It lets us tap into the wormholes that exist around this planet and travel elsewhere. Pretty cool for us dorky humans, eh, Zev?”

“I am impressed. Does it work?”

“‘Does it work?’ he asks. Feh!”

“Okay,” said Piddle, “*how* does it work?”

Dr. Pock paused. “I dunno,” he said. “I haven’t actually seen it in action, but it has been described to me in various e-mails. Unfortunately, our engineers can’t type, spell, or write with accurate grammar, so I really had no idea what they were saying to me.”

“What about the engineers who are from this country?”

“They *were* the engineers from this country. Where’s the robot? Get him over here.”

“Oh, this should be good,” said Claudia.

Meineke gently led Jet into the booth. Jet looked at the control panel.

“What do you want me to do with this?” asked Jet.

“Well, like, can’t you interface with it or something?” asked Pock.

“I require the proper cabling,” asked Jet.

“Come on, dude,” urged Dr. Pock, “R2-friggin’-D2 didn’t need the proper cabling. He could plug into everything.”

“Apparently, in that galaxy far, far away, they have ef-

fective standards committees who make every outlet the same size as every plug. On Earth, alas, we have no such thing,” said Meineke, opening his laptop case. “Here, Jet, let me see what adapters I have.”

“I thought you invented this thing,” said Zyzzyx.

“Well, the engineers did,” said Pock. “Since I’m now in management, I don’t know how anything we develop works anymore.” He found a small folder underneath the control panel. He took out a CD. “Let’s see: oh crap. The documentation must be in PDF form. Here, Mr. Meineke, have Jet load it and see how we can get this thing to work.” He handed Meineke the CD.

Meineke pulled down the back collar of Jet’s shirt to reveal a CD-sized slit in the back of the robot’s neck. He inserted the CD.

“What’s a PDF?” asked Claudia.

“An electronic document,” said Pock. He handed her another CD from the folder. “There’s a PDF that explains it.”

“But...”

“They’re software companies,” said Dr. Pock. “They’re run by people who got beat up a lot in high school. This is their revenge. Don’t argue with them.”

“Main menu,” said Jet, who then proceeded to read off a list of all the files and folders in the primary directory of the CD.

Meineke said, “Command-Open-Folder-Documentation.”

“Documentation folder,” responded Jet, who then read the list of folders and files in the Documentation folder.

Meineke said, “Command-Open-Folder-PDFs.”

“Ay-yi-yi,” said Pock. “This could take all day.”

“PDFs folder,” said Jet, listing the folders and files in the PDFs folder.

“Good grief,” complained Pock, whose hip flask was getting empty.

“Jet,” ordered Meineke, “Command-Open-File-Instructions.”

Jet said, “Opening file.... File open.”

“Jet, Command-Read File,” said Meineke.

“Thank you for purchasing the BJC-891750286755T v2.1 Wormhole Coalescence Attractor,” Jet read. “We hope this unit will provide you days of wormhole coalescence before we upgrade it and discontinue all support for the earlier model. Please read the following license agreement—”

“Skip it,” interrupted Zyzzyx. “Command-Find-Getting Started.”

“You’re getting the hang of him, aren’t you,” asked Meineke, beaming.

“‘Getting Started With Your Wormhole Coalescence Attractor’ found” said Jet. “Page 153. ‘These instructions pertain to model Q-345. If using model Q(R)-345, the documentation is the same, except wherever it says “five” substitute “three,” And when it says, “launch software,” you should instead quit the software, check the time, calculate the exact value of pi, and cluck like a chicken.’”

“Oh, for crying out loud!” said Zyzzyx. He walked up to the control panel and pressed a confusingly marked button. A blinking yellow light came on.

“What does that mean?” he asked. “Jet, Command-Find-Console Light.”

“‘Understanding Console Light’ found,” said Jet. “Light

states are ‘blinking red,’ ‘solid green,’ and ‘solid yellow.’”

“It’s blinking yellow.”

“Not flashing yellow?” asked Jet.

“Is there a difference between blinking and flashing?”

“‘If console light is *blinking* yellow,’” recited Jet, “‘unit is charging and will be ready in two minutes. If it’s *flashing* yellow, unit will explode in 30 seconds.’”

Thirty seconds elapsed, and there was no explosion. One minute and thirty seconds later, the blinking yellow light turned solid green.

“That explains that,” said Zyzzyx.

Zyzzyx pressed another button, and there was a piercing, high-pitched squeal. Then unexpectedly, the sound and light quit. There was a deafening silence.

“What the hell happened?” asked Zyzzyx.

“It appears that a Type 1 error occurred,” said Jet. “The program quit. You’ll have to reboot.”

“Oh, for crying out loud! We could *walk* across the galaxy in less time!” exclaimed Piddle.

“Well, the engineers told me this was cool,” said Pock, draining his flask.

---

## SIXTEEN

---

AFTER BEING SNUBBED BY THE MULTIPLE MASTERS, FASSBINDER spent a few days wallowing in Pity. Pity was the name of a dive bar on the west side of the naughtiest city on the planet Manutius. One night, while in the Pit of Despair (a low-key Manutian dance club), he was handed a business card and told that “an important entity” was interested in his work. *Finally!* he exulted to himself. He was in Ecstasy (Ecstasy is not the name of a bar or nightclub; the capital “E” is a typo). After being driven insane by the advertising-driven hallucinations, he finally leapt into the wormhole and in a few minutes found himself in a conference room high atop an office building in downtown Denver, Colorado. It was good to be back on Earth, especially as the hallucinations had stopped.

The black conference table shone like obsidian. Fassbinder studied its smooth, highly polished surface curiously. He leaned his head over the table and looked down. He could see reflected in its surface the fluorescent lights overhead, and even the photographs on the wall behind him depicting a variety of natural and manmade disasters—the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the sinking of the *Titanic*, the 2000 Presidential election—and yet he could not see his own reflection. He thought that odd, but then he remembered where he was and it seemed to make sense.

Suddenly, the black table began to vibrate and Fassbinder rolled his chair back from it. The surface of the table became transparent and opened into a dark, infinitely deep pit. Fassbinder could see stars within. The table was turning into some sort of portal. Fassbinder knew he shouldn't have put his cup of coffee on the table; now it was gone, floating through time and space, apparently.

"What is it with supernatural beings?" grumbled Fassbinder. "Must they always make a splashy entrance? Can't they just use the door?"

Fassbinder watched as a large leather chair rose out of the table. In it sat a middle-aged man in a well-tailored black suit. The chair floated over to the head of the table, and was followed by another chair, then another. There were six in all, and all the men—or beings, or whatever they were—floated to various positions around the table. The table returned to its normal state, and the first being to emerge from the portal began to speak.

"Dr. Fassbinder, thank you for meeting with us on such short notice. I am Edgar Doughey, chairman of the Corporate Entities and the board of E-Vill Co. How familiar are you with what we do?"

"I saw a press release on PR Newswire a few months ago. Oh, and I've used your mailing list services."

"E-Vill Co. was originally founded as e-vill.com and was designed to, as the tagline went, 'empower the electronic village.' No one could figure out what exactly that meant—including the company's original founder—and it failed. It was acquired by us, the Corporate Entities, and is the R&D arm of our parent company, Hell Industries, which is currently run by Satan and his minions. They're

based in Orange County, California.”

“I see,” said Fassbinder. He looked around and noticed that none of the other board members were saying anything or even moving. No nodding, no grunts of agreement, not even a “splunge.” They didn’t seem alive.

“Basically, we acquire, develop, and market technologies that have been enabled by the preter- or supernatural. Say, for example, that you find a stopwatch that lets you freeze time, or you come across a demonically possessed doll. Perhaps you have developed the ability to travel inside paintings. Maybe you’ve built a giant tuning fork. Whatever. Sure, you could probably exploit the evil yourself and maybe even do all right. But it’s very hard to run a small business these days, let alone one based on tacit pacts with the Dark One. I mean, let’s face it, contractual negotiations with Satan can be a real bitch. It’s best to leave that up to corporate lawyers, who are used to it. So E-Vill Co. acquires such small concerns and builds them into valuable profit centers.”

“I had no idea,” said Fassbinder.

“We never get decent coverage in *Business Week*.” Doughey paused. “We’ve been following the computer virus incident with great interest, and through our sources have learned that you were involved in its creation. Is that true, Dr. Fassbinder?”

“Yes. I had been a researcher working with the Elite Computer Virus Task Force, a joint venture by the military and software companies designed to battle computer virus threats. I was with them for two years and was feeling unfulfilled. I felt I was at a career dead end. I was a scientist, yet my capacity to inadvertently blow things up and bring

about hideous, giant mutants prevented me from landing a job at any research facility outside the protective sphere of the military.”

“Did you try posting your resume at Monster.com?” asked Doughey.

“Yes. I even tried posting it on the side of their blimp, but to no avail. So, I got more and more despondent, and then my girlfriend started seeing this alien shapeshifter, although she swore they were ‘just friends.’ For revenge, I unleashed a strain of computer virus that could be transmitted from machine to man and it ended up causing no small amount of carnage in New York City. But, you know, it provided a sense of satisfaction I had never experienced before. To see something I created take on a life of its own and destroy a major city—it was great. I then had to feign total lack of involvement and think up ways of defeating it, which I had no intention of doing, so I just made a variety of soups and gumbos and claimed they would help.”

“Well, Dr. Fassbinder, it sounds like there is a valuable synergy here. As you would expect, we have no authority to make decisions on the spot. We need to have a number of long meetings over the course of several weeks to determine if indeed we are going to go ahead and acquire your computer virus technology. But I can safely and completely unofficially say that I can envision you helping us exploit our core competencies.”

“Pock! How does this damn thing work?” screamed Piddle.

They had all piled into the Wormhole Coalescence Attractor, like some weird 1950s fraternity stunt, and Zyzzyx pressed what he thought was the correct sequence of but-

tons, but they only ended up in Manhattan on East 4th Street.

“Where the hell are we?” asked Claudia.

“Hey,” said Pock. “We’re right outside Swift’s Hibernian Lounge, my favorite pub. Now that’s sweet. The engineers knew that and made this the default destination location. Those guys are all right in my book.”

“All right, we need to figure out how to get this thing to take us to Manutius,” said Zzyzyx. “If Fassbinder is meeting with the Multiple Masters, that’s where he’ll be.”

“Zuppa is right,” said Piddle.

“That’s Zzyzyx.”

“Whatever.”

“What we have to do is...” Zzyzyx stopped and began to sway.

“Zev? Are you all right?” asked Claudia.

“I don’t know. I feel dizzy and nauseous.”

“Don’t you mean ‘nauseated’? Remember your Strunk & White,” said Claudia.

He glared at her. “Whatever it is, I haven’t felt this wretched since I was dragged to a Britney Spears concert.”

At that point, Zzyzyx shapeshifted into an armadillo.

“What the hell!” yelled Meineke.

Abruptly, Zzyzyx turned back to his human incarnation.

“What was that about?” asked Piddle.

“I don’t—”

Suddenly, he shapeshifted into a squirrel, then back again.

“I hope you know what’s going on, because I do not want to try explaining this to an ER doctor,” said General Piddle.

“Someone or something is forcing me to shapeshift.”

“But how?”

“Wait, hang on a minute,” said Zyzzyx as he abruptly shapeshifted into a Tibetan yak, then back again.

“Among the Sklor, the race of Gargleplaxians to which I belong, the shapeshifting ability isn’t entirely biological or organic, it’s controlled electronically through a microcomputer implanted in our brains and wired to our DNA. Kind of like the next edition of Windows, now that I think about it. It has its advantages, but it does leave us vulnerable to outside interference.”

“Wait,” said Piddle. “You mean someone has hacked into your brain?”

“Yes, someone must have breached my personal firewall. I knew I should have picked a better password. Uh-oh—”

And with that, Zyzzyx shapeshifted into a ringtailed lemur and he didn’t shapeshift back.

“Oh, this is not good,” said Pock. “Someone broke him. What do we do now?”

“Who’d want to hack into Zoology’s brain?” wondered Piddle.

Zev the Lemur climbed up Piddle’s torso and screeched in his ear.

“Whatever.”

“Fassbinder!” exclaimed Claudia suddenly.

“*Gesundheit*,” said Pock.

“No, I bet Poindexter—wherever he is—is behind this.”

Zev the lemur jumped to the ground and hopped along the sidewalk, beckoning Piddle and Claudia to follow him. He scabbled out to the curb and attempted to hail a cab, but to no avail.

“Perhaps we should give him a hand,” said Claudia. She easily summoned a cabdriver and they clambered into the back seat.

“Where to?” asked the driver.

Zev the lemur did an admirable job of miming “the airport.”

“JFK, LaGuardia, or Newark?”

Zev the lemur also did an admirable job of miming “La Guardia,” no mean feat, let me tell you.

“You want me to take the Triborough?”

Zev the lemur mimed, “I want to avoid the toll on the Triborough Bridge. Take the 59th Street Bridge to 31st Street in Long Island City, then go up to Hoyt and pick up the Grand Central Parkway. Outbound traffic on the bridge shouldn’t be too bad at this hour.”

“That’s one smart monkey you got there,” said the driver and took off.

“Where is he taking us?” asked Claudia.

“I guess we’ll find out.”

Meanwhile, in a small office high atop a skyscraper in downtown Denver, Fassbinder was staring at a computer monitor and giggling maniacally. One of E-Vill Co.’s prototype devices was a satellite/software combination that allowed users to hack into people’s brains, especially the brains of aliens with implanted microcomputers. And there were more of them than you would think, too. Fassbinder had quickly figured out how to make Zyzzyx shapeshift randomly.

“I’ve got you now, you extraterrestrial sack of—”

The door burst open and CEO Edgar Doughey

charged in, followed by two security guards.

“Dr. Fassbinder, we have checked your references and I’m afraid we find that you are just not evil enough for our purposes. In fact, most of your nefarious deeds have been quite inadvertent. I’m afraid I must rescind what can only be described as my complete lack of any offer. Although, I must add that your ability to use a short interval of waiting to uncover a computer room and immediately hack into another being’s brain is impressive.”

Fassbinder reached into his pocket and took out another prototypical E-Vill Co. device, this one also resembling the remote control for a garage door opener.

“We’ll just see about that.”

“Oh, dear hell,” said Doughey. “You don’t want to mess with that. Believe me, it does not do good things at all.”

The security guards, in a grave moment of miscalculation, charged at Fassbinder and he pushed the button on the device. There was a blinding flash of light and Fassbinder, Doughey, and the two security guards vanished from the room. Even more significantly, since there was an open Internet connection to Zyzzyx’s brain, Zev the lemur was also beamed away. And since Zev the lemur had been scabbling back and forth across the laps of General Piddle, Dr. Pock, Meineke, Jet, and Claudia, they, too, were beamed into the unknown.

“Hey!” yelled the cabbie as his three passengers vanished. “You owe me \$13.50!”

---

## SEVENTEEN

---

THE MIST SWIRLED AROUND CLAUDIA'S FEET. SHE ASSUMED SHE was standing, but all around her was dense white fog, so all she had to go by was the sense of gravity. She had no idea where the others were.

"Zev?" she called. "General Piddle?"

No response. Not even an echo. She inched forward, hoping she wouldn't blunder into some sort of pit.

A few yards on, the mist began to clear. She appeared to be in a dentist's office; she definitely recognized the equipment.

"Claudia! Thank goodness I've found you!" came a familiar voice from behind her. She spun around and a jolt of adrenalin shot through her entire body but primarily, "down there."

"Julian? But you were dead. And by all rights should still be. Not that I'm not glad to see you, of course."

"No, I understand. I get that a lot. No, Claudia, I am dead."

"Damn it! That can only mean one thing: that little shithead killed me. That does it! How do I become a poltergeist?" She balled her hands into fists. "I've got some serious haunting to do."

"No, Claudia, you're not dead."

She paused. "Ah. But *you* are."

"Yes."

“Okay, I am seriously missing something here.”

“Yes, that would be a safe assumption to make,” Julian Moller said, then laughed maniacally.

“Jeez, Julian, I haven’t heard you laugh like that since the last time you did your billing.”

He spat at her, and a small white object bounced off her shirt. She reached down and picked it up. It was a tooth. She screamed and threw it down.

“You think I don’t know your greatest fear?” said Julian.

He spat another tooth at her, then another.

“Julian! What are you doing?” She covered her face and turned her back, as Julian spat more teeth at her.

She started running and could feel dozens of teeth bouncing off her back.

“Well, you’ve got to be running out of teeth by now!” she yelled back at him.

At that point, as if an immense stormcloud burst, hundreds of thousands of teeth rained down from above. She stopped. She looked up and watched the torrent come down.

“This is actually pretty ridiculous,” she said. She marched back toward the recreation of Julian, who seemed to be gloating.

“Are you absolutely terrified, Claudia?” he said, and laughed maniacally again.

At that point, Claudia kned him in the groin.

“No. And call me ‘Clau.’”

He crumpled to the ground.

“Zeitgeist!” barked Piddle into the mist, to no avail. “Where is everyone?”

He walked forward a few yards, then heard a child's voice behind him call his name. He turned around.

"Armstrong!" said the voice again.

Despite the high voice, it was not a child. It was...

"Pop?"

Aloysius Piddle shambled out of the mist, wearing a ratty bathrobe, a pair of striped pajama bottoms, and pink, fluffy slippers. He clutched a rubber tube that was connected to a large green metal tank that he wheeled behind him. He put the tube in his mouth and inhaled deeply.

"Yes, my son," he said in a very high squeaky voice.

"Even in the afterlife, you're still hooked on helium? That's pretty sad, Pop. If you'll excuse me, I have more pressing problems than your apparent reincarnation."

"But I'm not dead."

"Yes, you are. I buried you myself."

"But how do you explain my presence now?"

"How do I explain half the things that have happened today? I don't. I order others to explain them for me. Now, please excuse me."

"Armstrong!" squeaked the elder Piddle. "Armstrong!"

"Jet! Jet!" shouted Meineke into the mist.

"Mr. Meineke?" said a voice behind him. Meineke spun around.

"Yes?"

A suited man approached. "We have Jet," the man announced.

"Who are you? And why do you have him? Is he all right?"

"Oh, he's fine." The man stopped six inches in front of

Meineke. "We're acquiring him."

"You're what?"

"Acquiring him. And Sy Borg Enterprises. It's all ours."

"That's impossible."

"Oh, it's very possible. We are one of the biggest technology companies in the world and we can do whatever we want to do. So nyah."

"We're a privately owned company founded by me and two other individuals. There is no way the company can be taken away unless you physically send armed troops into our building."

"Well, suppose we did that."

"What?"

"Yes, consider it a very hostile takeover. We sent in 50 drunk, armed soldiers who right now, as we speak, are seizing your assets."

"How do armed soldiers seize our assets?"

"With their hands, I would imagine. How else are assets seized?"

"I'm sorry, but what you say makes no sense whatsoever." Meineke turned around. "Jet! Jet!"

Jet shuffled through the mist emotionlessly.

"Jet the robot!" boomed a menacing voice. Jet stopped. "Jet, this is your creator. Prepare to have your hard drive eras—"

"Do you want to register me right now, or wait until later?"

"Jet! Prepare—"

"By registering, you can receive valuable update information, technical support, and other important services."

“No, I don’t want to register right now. Now, prepare—”

“Registration can be accomplished very easily with Sy Borg Enterprises’ online registration system. To register me now, please say, ‘Command-Register.’”

“No! Prepare to have your hard drive completely reformatted! Now, I am going to—”

“Stay current with automatic updates,” interjected Jet. “Activating my AutoUpdate feature will allow you to automatically update my firmware, as well as any software applications you may have installed on my internal hard drive. All it requires is an active Internet connection. To check for updates, please say ‘Command-Download-Updates.’”

“No! Now, speaking of your internal hard drive, Jet the robot, prepare to have your memory erased. In mere moments—”

“My antivirus program’s virus descriptions are out of date,” said Jet. “Updated virus descriptions are your first line of defense against the very real and potentially catastrophic effects of Internet-borne computer viruses. To download the most recent virus descriptions now, please say, ‘Command-Download-Virus-Descriptions.’”

“No, shut up!” the voice shouted. “I will destroy you—”

“To deactivate my Voice-Cue Update Prompts, say ‘Command-Deactivate-Voice-Cue.’”

“Yes, yes, fine,” said the menacing voice. “Command-Deactivate-Voice-Cue.”

“Voice-Cue prompts deactivated,” said Jet.

“Thank God. Now, I am going to erase your hard

drive, rip out your wiring, sell your metal parts for scrap metal, and melt down your plastic parts just for fun.”

Jet stared blankly ahead.

“And then, I will skip your random access memory chips across the East River like stones.”

Jet remained silent and unmoving.

“Eh? Pretty terrify—”

“You have deactivated my Voice-Cue Update Prompts. To reactivate, say, ‘Command-Activate-Voice-Cue.’”

“Ahhh!” screamed the voice. “I can’t take it anymore! Go away! I give up!”

“Nice one, Poindexter,” said Edgar Doughey, as the lights came on in E-Vill Co.’s third floor conference room. Strewn around the room were the unconscious forms of Piddle, Claudia, Pock, Meineke, and Zev the lemur. Only Jet stood standing, staring blankly into space.

Fassbinder, sitting at the head of the conference table with a laptop and a headset, had his head in his hands. “The robot...the robot...” he moaned.

The others began to stir.

“Oh, my head,” said Piddle, clutching his arm.

“Now, Fassbinder, your behavior is truly counterproductive at this stage.” He pulled out a gun and aimed it at Poindexter. “As CEO of this company, I order you to relinquish all the devices you have taken from us and come with me to our executive brig. Well, not so much a brig as a cubicle in our accounts receivable department, but still....”

Fassbinder removed the headset, stood, and held up his hands.

“Hey!” he shouted, pointing behind Doughey, “Look! Stock options!”

“What?” asked Doughey, spinning around.

While Doughey’s back was turned, Fassbinder knocked the gun from his hand and it slid across the floor, far out of reach of both of them.

“That does it. You are so not hired,” said Doughey.

“I never thought I was anyway.”

“Well, maybe I’ll just hire you and then lay you off immediately.”

“You bastard.”

As the figures lying on the floor began to stir, Fassbinder pulled a familiar black device from his pocket.

“Not again,” said Doughey. “Look, you’ve already screwed up the E-Vill Co. brand Individual Personal Hell-O-Matic System. You don’t know all the functions of that device, so I’d suggest you leave it be.”

“Oh, do you now? Well, what if I pressed *this* button?”

At that point, the grate covering a ventilation shaft slid aside and two dozen bats flew into the room, flapped around for a few moments, then flew out through the same shaft.

“Interesting. Kind of like living in the country.”

“Indeed,” concurred Doughey.

“How about *this* button.”

Twenty-five small openings in the ceiling slid aside and everyone in the room was pelted with slices of luncheon meat of various types.

“What the hell is that?” asked Fassbinder.

“That’s how we provide lunch when we have our blue-collar workers in for a meeting.”

“Okay. Well, what about *this* button?”

As soon as Fassbinder pressed the button, the building began to shake violently, and there was a thunderous roar apparently coming from the basement.

What none of them knew, save Dughey it's safe to assume (but you know what happens when you assume), was that the 34-story building that housed E-Vill Co. had blasted off and was heading upward, out of the Earth's atmosphere, on a direct collision course with the moon.

---

## EIGHTEEN

---

THE CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER OF E-VILL CO. SAT IN HIS OFFICE, staring intently at a series of tiled spreadsheets on his computer monitor. His phone chirped and he pressed the speaker button.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Sir, someone has launched the building,” said a panicked female voice.

The CFO didn’t take his eyes from the monitor. “That would explain why I sense motion. Hm.”

“Sir, the Steering Committee was completely unprepared for this launch. They’re a little spooked.”

“Have the Steering Committee look into it immediately. I want their report on my desk first thing tomorrow.”

“Sir, we could all be dead first thing tomorrow.”

“Well, make sure they put that in their report.”

“Yes, but—”

“Fine. Thank you, Susan.”

At the same time, the 25 E-Vill Co. employees assigned to the Haunted Silverware-Based Vexation Team gathered in the 10th-floor conference room for their weekly staff meeting.

“Gary,” said the team leader, “how do we stand on the Menacing Spoon Project?”

“We conducted an initial round of tests this morning. The report from the field researcher runs as follows...” He

tapped his handheld computer a few times, then read from the screen. “At 8:53 A.M. Mountain Standard Time, the Model XJ23 Menacing Spoon was placed on table number 23 at the Vile Eats Diner on Andy Devine Boulevard in Kingman, Arizona, where I am advised to try the pie. Huh. Anyway, the first phase of the experiment was the ‘General Nuisance Test.’ At 8:55 A.M., waitress ‘Maude’ was observed trying to keep the Model XJ23 from moving about the table of its own accord, and became quite flustered when it refused to remain still. The Model XJ23 performed this initial experiment flawlessly, instinctively knowing when to be an irritant and when to remain perfectly still, such as when waitress Maude summoned a colleague over to ‘Check out this messed-up spoon.’

“During the second phase, nicknamed the ‘Orgy of Death Test,’ in which the Model XJ23 Menacing Spoon initiates a—”

“Excuse me,” interrupted a staffmember, staring at her own handheld computer.

“Yes, Gayle?”

“I just got an instant message that the building has been launched into space and is on a collision course with the moon. Unless we can divert our course, our complete destruction will take place in 20 minutes.”

The department head sighed heavily. “Gayle, do we have to go through this *every* meeting?”

“No, but—”

“Every meeting, you love to be the prophet of doom. ‘Oh, but the market could shrink,’ or ‘Third-party economic forecasts don’t support our in-house forecasts.’ ‘This company is so mismanaged.’ ‘We’re going to crash into the

moon.' Gayle, we need you to be a team player here."

"But—"

"No. No buts. I only want to hear about the results of your latest experiments, not where *you* think this company is headed."

Elsewhere in the building, the inert forms on the floor of the third-floor conference room began to stir.

"Now look what you've done, you yutz!" yelled Doughy. "You launched the building. We're on a collision course with the moon!"

"Did someone just say that the building has been launched and is going to collide with the moon?" said General Piddle, who had been the first to regain consciousness.

"Yes, I'm afraid someone did," said Doughy.

"Good one, Poindexter."

The others began to struggle to their feet.

"Only I know how to stop this building," snarled Fassbinder, clutching his black remote control.

"No you don't," said Doughy. "Only *I* know how to stop this building."

"That has to be a lie. You're a corporate executive. Like you know how to do anything useful except stare at spreadsheets and lay people off."

"I resent that."

"Good. I happened to hack into your building maintenance server and do a little snooping. Not only do I know how to change this building's course, I also happen to know that there are three fire extinguishers on the eighth floor that haven't been recharged in two years. I should tell the fire marshal on you."

“You son of a bitch.”

“Jeez,” said Claudia, slowly rising to her feet. “Who knew that Poindexter was so computer-literate.”

Meanwhile, Meineke sat up groggily. “Have our fortunes changed to the point that it’s worth regaining consciousness?”

“No,” said Claudia.

“Fine.” He collapsed on his back.

At the same time, Dr. Pock stirred. “Hey, no headache. Cool.” He looked around. “Where am I?”

“Why do I get the sense that’s the first thing you ask every morning?” asked Claudia.

“Well, meow,” said Pock. “I’ll have you know my first question is usually, ‘Where did my pants go?’”

They were interrupted by the chattering of a somewhat familiar primate.

“Damn, Zev’s still a lemur. That’s no good,” said Pock.

“It’s even worse than that,” said Claudia. “Poindexter has launched the building and we’re on a collision course with the moon.”

“All right!” snapped Poindexter. “Now that you’re all awake and up to date on our current situation, shut up!”

Doughey sighed. “So what specifically do you want?”

“Want? I thought it should be obvious by now.”

“Oh, let me guess. Some quantity of money, a passport, a helicopter, amnesty on some deserted island with topless nymphs bringing you an endless stream of tropical drinks? Am I getting close?”

“I’ll have what he’s having,” said Pock.

“Basically,” said Poindexter, “I want to crash this building into the moon. That’s it, really.”

“But we’ll all be killed!” said Doughey.

“Bingo.”

“More to the point, *you’ll* be killed.”

Fassbinder shrugged. “Big deal. I’ve failed at just about everything I’ve ever attempted, be it for good or evil. So I want to succeed at one last thing in my life: I’m going to crash an office building into the moon and kill just about everyone that has ever caused me inconsolable grief.”

“Oh, give me a friggin’ break. Is *that* what this is about?” said Claudia. “Besides, that waiter at that Italian restaurant you took me to on our first date isn’t here. You remember the grief *he* caused you.”

Poindexter stiffened, stared into space, and his face went scarlet. He shook his head and snapped out if it.

“Maybe in the next life he’ll get his. By my calculations, we have 17 minutes before we hit the lunar surface. So say your prayers, unless of course those prayers involve exhorting a deity to rescue you.”

“I want to hear more about what this waiter did,” said Pock.

Meineke bolted upright. “Jet! Command-Control-Alt-Option-Tab-Hunter!”

“What the hell?” blurted Fassbinder.

At that point, Jet sprang to life and launched himself into a karate stance.

“Jet! Attack Fassbinder.”

With flawless martial arts moves, Jet lunged at Fassbinder, who was taken completely by surprise, as you would imagine. Jet kicked the remote from his hand and it skittered across the floor. Jet then swung his hand up and cold-cocked Fassbinder on the side of the head. With

a lightning-fast series of kicks and chops, it was as if Fassbinder was caught in a wheat thresher. The professor collapsed to the floor in a bloody heap.

“Jet! Control-Alt-Delete!” yelled Meineke, getting to his feet. Jet stopped cold and stared into space blankly.

“Whoa! Crouching tiger, hidden robot. Wicked cool,” said Pock.

“What the hell was that about?” asked Claudia.

“It’s called an ‘Easter egg,’ a hidden, undocumented feature of computer software that is invoked by pressing a certain combination of keys or invoking a certain sequence of commands. Our engineers built such an Easter egg into Jet’s operating system. As it turns out, they’re big Jet Li fans. Go figure.”

Doughey sighed in relief. “Thank Satan that’s over. Now, if you’ll just hand me the control device...”

“I don’t think so,” said Meineke. “Just stay right where you are.” He walked over and grabbed the remote. He stared at it.

“You realize, of course, you don’t know how that works,” said Doughey.

“What the hell are you up to?” asked Piddle.

“General, keep an eye on Mr. Doughey. Jet and I are going to get us out of this.” Meineke led Jet over to a computer workstation.

“I see Zinfandel is still a monkey,” said Piddle.

“I’ll take care of that, too.” He reached in the back of the workstation and unplugged a network cable. He pulled down Jet’s trousers. The robot’s derriere was festooned with a wide variety of computer input and output ports, serial (Mac and PC), parallel, SCSI, USB, FireWire, and

video out, among others. Meineke inserted a cable into one of Jet's ports.

"So basically he's pulling data out of his ass," said Claudia.

"Sounds like our market research department," said Doughey.

"Yes, yes, yes, we're working on the interface," said Meineke annoyedly. "Jet, access central Building Maintenance server."

"You've got mail," said Jet.

"No, I didn't say go to the Internet and check my e-mail."

"Message 1: 'Important message from Mr. Mbotto of Nigeria.'"

"Jet, Command-Delete-Message."

"Message deleted. Message 2: 'Increase your penis size by up to four inches.'"

"Jet, Command-Save-Message."

"Message saved."

"Do you have to do this now?" asked Piddle.

"You realize we only have about 15 minutes before we smash into the moon," said Doughey.

"Right. Jet, access central building maintenance server."

"Connection to server failed."

Meineke thought. "Jet, Command-Logon-www.google.com."

"Page loaded."

"Does this place have a snack bar or something? This could take a while," said Claudia.

"Command-Search: 'E-Vill Co. AND crash into moon.'"

“Receiving 5,974,926 hits. Hit number one: ‘password for E-Vill Co.’s Building Maintenance server.”

“For crying out loud,” said Doughey. “the password is 83059, my birthday. To halt the building’s progress, simply hold down the Function key on the remote and press 6-7-9. That’s it. To turn your lemur back into your friend, hold down the Function key on the remote and press 6-1-6-0-4.”

Meineke stared at him.

Piddle grabbed the remote from his hand. “Give me that.”

“Fine, fine. We would have done it with plenty of time to spare,” said Meineke.

Piddle pressed the Function key. “6-1-6-0-4.”

Zev the lemur popped back into his earthly form and gasped. “Thanks! Now, ‘Function 6-7-9.’”

At that point, the building shook violently and everyone was thrown against the wall. The remote flew out of Piddle’s hand and hit the floor, where it broke into several pieces. Two AA batteries rolled across the floor.

“Oh, that had to happen, didn’t it?” said Claudia, rubbing her head where it had struck the edge of the conference table. “What did we hit?”

Zyzyx looked out the window. “A space shuttle.”

“Don’t you have to stop and exchange insurance information?” asked Pock.

“I’m afraid that wouldn’t help,” said Doughey. “It’s very hard to get collision insurance for an office building. Just what we need, a hit and run accident in space. The press is going to love it—Enron is nothing compared to this.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Zyzyx.

At that point, the power went out.

“Uh oh,” said Doughey. He took out his cell phone and dialed. “Hortense? What’s happening. Oh, dear Satan. Thank you.” He snapped the phone shut. “Um, the impact has knocked out the central building maintenance server which, as you would expect, controls all building functions.”

“So that means?” said Claudia.

“We have no power, nor any way of changing our course. Forward momentum is carrying us quite briskly along our original trajectory. On the plus side, we will have crashed into the moon long before the air runs out.”

“I take it there is no back-up server?” Zyzzyx asked.

“Of course not,” said Doughey. “So we have about 10 minutes before we hit the moon.”

On the floor, Fassbinder stirred. “How much blood have I lost?”

“Not as much as you’re going to lose in seven minutes,” muttered Zyzzyx.

“Ah, so no one else could change course. Cool. My plan is actually working.”

“Oh, shut up, Poindexter,” said Claudia.

In her office, Gayle was staring out the window, watching the surface of the moon get closer and closer. “Come on...come on...” she said under her breath.

In the 10th floor conference room, the Satanic Ladle group was soldiering on with its latest experiments, oblivious to the impending crisis.

“You should see what this thing does with pork gravy,” said one researcher to the project leader.

\*\*\*

Back on the third floor, everyone—friend and foe, protagonist and antagonist alike—was gathered round the conference table. Since Pock always brought a supply of booze with him, spirits weren't entirely down in the dumps.

"I guess the question that remains is: why do you have a default launch trajectory that involves crashing into the moon?" asked Zyzzyx.

"The Steering Committee came up with that one," said Doughey. "Basically, the idea of a random launch into space confused and frightened them. They needed some concrete destination to aim for and the moon had been suggested. We were scheduled to debate the merits of deceleration at next week's meeting." He glanced at his watch. "Well, it appears we have about 30 seconds left."

"I only wish Jet had stayed on Earth," said Meineke. "This will destroy our company."

"Tell me about it," said Doughey.

"I know I've said this many times before," said Claudia, "but this time I can't stress enough that you're a real yutz, Poindexter."

"Fifteen seconds...."

"Oh, if we have that much time, I have another liter of gin," said Dr. Pock.

"Ten seconds...."

"I do hope I've managed to accrue enough points," said Zyzzyx. "Old Grandmaster Trump didn't assign me nearly enough meld."

"Five seconds...four...three...two...one..."

At that point, the building shook violently, but it was nothing like a crash. To Zyzzyx, it felt like almost being

caught in a net. *Yes!* he thought. An electronic net. He looked out the window and saw a spaceship bearing the name *Deus ex Machina*. It couldn't be...

"Yes, it could very well be," said Eep, walking into the conference room. "Such a clever alien." She beamed. Zyzzyx ran over to her and they kissed passionately.

Poindexter grimaced. "If this is the afterlife, can I get a refund?"

"No, this isn't the afterlife," said Zyzzyx. "Thanks to Eep, we've managed to stave off visiting the afterlife." He turned back to Eep. "I didn't know you could read my mind through the vastness of space."

"I can't. My cousin Gayle works for this company. She e-mailed me 15 minutes ago. I got my meteor-hunting ship out of the U-Store-It and raced up here. I figured the electronic mesh field I use to catch meteors would work on a flying building, and so it did."

"Eep'?" said Claudia.

"That's my name, don't wear it out."

"By the way, I don't believe that anyone has thanked Jet for disarming Mr. Fassbinder in the first place," Meineke mentioned, pointedly. "Or for defeating the virus, for that matter."

Dr. Pock took a long swig from his gin bottle. "*Domo arigato, Mr. Roboto.*"

---

## EPilogue

---

“WE’RE SO HAPPY EVERYONE COULD COME,” SAID THARBAX CANNUTUU. “This is quite an historical and unprecedented event.”

We thank you for hosting this celebratory gathering,” said General Piddle.

“It’s what we do.”

Piddle, Zyzzyx, Claudia, Pock, Meineke, Jet, Eep, Edgar Doughy, and even a freaked-out Penny Harbinger were standing around the drawing room of Cannuutuu’s immense spaceship.

“So what became of Poindexter?” asked Claudia. “Hopefully he’s been burned at the stake and his ashes shot out of a cannon.”

“Not quite yet,” said Piddle. “We turned him over to the FBI. He has a lot to answer for. I expect he’ll be in federal prison for the rest of his life, probably beyond.”

“Can they do that?” asked Zyzzyx.

“Oh, yes. Back in the early 2000s, the Ashcroft Bill stipulated that dead flesh could be reanimated for the purpose of prolonging punishment for crimes against the state. The bill also authorized the government to wiretap the phones of individuals suspected of having overdue parking tickets.”

“Orwell that ends well,” said Zyzzyx.

“You didn’t tell them our news,” said Eep.

“That’s right. Eep and I are going back to Gargleplax. We’re going to be married.”

“Well, congratulations,” said Piddle.

“You’re leaving Earth?” asked Claudia, more than a hint of disappointment in her voice.

“It’s not our scene,” said Eep. “It’s a nice place to visit, but I wouldn’t want to live here.”

“You’re all welcome to visit, and you’re all invited to the wedding, needless to say,” said Zyzzyx. “In fact, we’ve arranged to for Tharbox to host the reception.”

“It’s what we do,” said Cannuutuu.

Pock was finally able to tear himself away from the bar. “Hey, what’s this blue liquid?” He pointed to his glass.

“Denebian Hydroponic Twangel,” said Cannuutuu. “It’s rather like Scotch, the primary difference being that it’s not Scotch.”

“It’s very good, whatever it is.” He sloshed it down.

“Does Pock know about your impending nuptials?” asked Piddle.

“Of course. He’s the best man.”

“I bet that’s the first time he’s ever been referred to as ‘best man,’” said Claudia.

“Jeez,” said Pock. “Why are you picking on me all of a sudden?”

“Poindexter isn’t around anymore,” replied Claudia. “I have to rag on *someone*.”

At that point, the lights dimmed and a mist formed along the ceiling, growing thicker by the second. Eerie green lights became visible within the congealing fog.

“Woo hoo,” whooped Pock. “This ship has a Laser Floyd show.”

“It most certainly does not,” said Cannuutuu, growing rather flustered. “This is completely unplanned.”

Three disembodied elbows emerged from the mist and hovered above the partygoers.

“I am Soutar of the Multiple Masters,” intoned one of them.

“I am Goldar of the Multiple Masters,” intoned the second.

“And I’m Timmy,” sang the third.

“Multiple party-crashers, I’d say,” said Cannuutuu. “How very Tabackian of you.”

“We have not come to crash your party,” said Soutar.

“We’re really not the party types,” said Goldar.

“Is that dip French onion?” asked Timmy.

“Anyway, we have come to tell you that we’ve taken it upon ourselves to deal with Poindexter Fassbinder,” announced Soutar.

Goldar added, “We have removed him from your Earth-bound holding cell and have taken him to Manutius, where he will be dealt with in a way befitting the actions he has visited upon your planet.”

“Basically, we’ve appointed him to the Manutian Senate,” said Timmy.

“What?!” exclaimed Piddle. “He nearly destroys a major city and you appoint him to your government? What a miscarriage of justice.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” said Soutar. “Before you get your panties all in a knot, General, let me point out that on Manutius, government officials are held one-hundred-percent accountable for their actions while in office.”

Goldar added, “Officials who perform against the will

of the people are removed from office by a large pulse weapon that turns all the cells of the body into a substance you might find reminiscent of guava jelly.”

“We think it’s far more effective than term limits,” said Timmy.

“Oh, okay, that’s acceptable then,” said Piddle.

“Yes, we thought you’d approve,” said Soutar.

“Given Poindexter’s penchant for screwing things up, he’s doomed!” laughed Claudia.

“Jeez, that’s harsh,” said Pock. “You didn’t have a very good relationship with him, did you?”

“Did anyone?”

“So, we will leave you to your party,” said Soutar, as the mist began to ebb.

“We just wanted to deliver the news in person,” said Goldar.

“If you’re going to bring out the Twister mat, though, we could be persuaded to stay,” said Timmy.

“We will be doing no such thing,” Cannuutuu hastened to add.

“The Multiple Masters playing Twister,” said Pock. “Now that would be worth watching.”

And as quickly as they arrived, that’s how quickly the Multiple Masters vanished.

Meineke and Jet, who had been talking with Penny Harbinger, wandered over to the group.

“I hear you are getting married,” said Meineke.

“Yes. You are of course invited to the wedding,” said Zyzzyx.

“Can I bring a date?”

“Of course,” said Eep.

“Does Jet count?”

“That’s getting into a really weird area, but, essentially, yes,” said Zyzzyx. “We’ve scheduled he wedding for what you would consider August 30, 20–.”

“Jet, Command-Date Book.”

“Date Book opened,” said Jet.

“Command-Schedule Date: August 30, 20–.”

“Date sche—” Jet began, then stopped.

“Jet?” asked Meineke. “Uh, oh. He froze again. I’ll have to restart him manually.”

“Mm-hmm,” said Claudia. “I’ve had dates like that.”

After the party ended, Zyzzyx and Eep sat in her ship, the *Deus ex Machina*. Eep was holding an immense pastrami sandwich.

“You know you want to eat that,” said Zyzzyx.

“I know. I guess I’ve just been on Earth so long I don’t think twice about indulging all my selfish urges anymore.”

“There are worse urges you could be indulging.”

“This is true.”

“And of course there are better ones, too.”

“Any suggestions?”

“Think squid,” said Zyzzyx.

“That’s the sexiest thing you’ve ever said to me,” said Eep.

Oh, you just don’t want to know.

“You know what’s really odd,” said Eep. “The whole ‘evil virus’ thing was in many ways the Multiple Masters’ idea. Why would they suddenly want to punish Fassbinder for it?”

“That’s a very good question, but one I don’t feel like answering right now.”

“I think those elbows have something up their sleeve.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Now, finish the sandwich and we can get on with our lives,” said Zyzzyx.

“Yes I said yes I will yes.”

“Thank you, Molly Bloom.”

“OK, Earth has *three* things going for it: pastrami, Slurpees, and James Joyce.”

“For some people, that could be enough.”

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

---

RICHARD ROMANO HAS BEEN INVOLVED IN THE GRAPHIC ARTS SINCE before birth. Romano is currently a writer and analyst for TrendWatch Graphic Arts, for which he writes market research reports on various aspects of the graphic arts, printing, and publishing industries. He is the former executive editor of *Cross Media* magazine, and the former managing editor of both *Micro Publishing News*, a now-defunct news-monthly for electronic designers and print buyers, and its then-sister publication *Digital Imaging*, for which he had reviewed graphics hardware and software and wrote regular features and news stories on various graphic arts technologies.

Romano is the co-editor of *The GATF Encyclopedia of Graphic Communications*, a compendium of more than 10,000 graphic arts terms published in 1997 by the Graphic Arts Technical Foundation. As if that weren't enough, he is also the author of several books on graphics hardware and software. He also does freelance graphic design and editorial work.

He has vague recollections of having graduated from Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Public Communications in 1989. In his spare time (huh?), he is on the board of directors of the Saratoga Film Forum, a non-profit arts organization dedicated to bringing quality cinema to downtown Saratoga Springs.

A former resident of New York City and Los Angeles, he now lives in Saratoga Springs, NY.