

FUTURE TALES
AND
OTHER SUCH RUBBISH

Michael Moreau

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DEDICATION

To all of the poor souls who spent time wearing hot latex costumes so that classic science fiction films could inspire generations of writers and filmmakers to want to make fun of them.

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PROLOGUE

I suppose if you're already familiar with The Futureman Adventures then you will know precisely who I am. If not then I would imagine you are quite curious as to who is speaking to you via the ever-so-cheap writer's device that is italic print. My name is Orion, and I am the narrator of this series. You will see me frequently called upon to fill in gaps left in hackneyed stories, or to provide insight into the events. Curious, since I wasn't even present for large bits of them. Oh well, that's writers for you. Still, having allowed myself to be the personal pet of one evil space lord Zarkov for many years...mostly due to the fact that he possessed a rather comfy couch on which to nap, I did get around quite a bit and can provide some first-person insight into at least some of these ridiculous little tomes.

Anyway, as is my fashion I find myself running on when the writer of this book no-doubt has page after questionable page of material they'd rather you be reading instead of my prattling. So please, by all means, get on with it. Just remember to take it all in with a grain, or rather a shaker, of salt. Off we go...or whatever the proper idiom is in this case.

(IT'S A GIANT) RADIOACTIVE SPIDER, MAN!

Ah, Capitol City, a nauseatingly stereotypical small metropolis of the American 1950s. Interestingly enough it was supposed to be named "Capital City", not because it was the capital of anything...but because the founder, Roger Haywood III, really liked money. Sadly Mr. Haywood, though quite a brilliant businessman, had dropped out of school at age seven so he was also remarkably awful at spelling. For fearing of losing their jobs, since most of the town worked for him in one fashion or another, no one had argued when he'd put up an improperly spelled sign.

Carl had worked at the Capitol City nuclear power plant for two years. He was a short and swarthy little fellow of Lithuanian descent. He'd long-ago gotten accustomed to being mistaken for an Italian, however and no longer reacted to jokes about "ethnic food" whenever he brought a bowl of his wife's left-over spaghetti for lunch. He peeled the tin foil off of the top of the container she'd packed for him that

morning and groaned in disappointment when he saw that it was meatloaf. Being one o'clock in the afternoon it was now quite cold and of course the cheap-asses that ran the plant wouldn't spring for a Radarange for the employees' lounge.

"What's wrong Zukas?" came the voice of the ever-irritating professional chair-warmer Ken Douglas.

"Dry meatloaf for lunch. It's nice and cold too." he stabbed a fork into the left-overs, so dry and dense that the fork easily stood straight up.

"Pop it in the oven ya dip stick."

"I don't feel like waiting twenty minutes to eat Douglas. I only get thirty minutes break as it is, remember?"

"Oh yeah, you're still only a level three." he chuckled, "I forgot." then pulled out the chair next to Carl and put his foot up on it, placing his crotch at an uncomfortable eye-level with Carl. "Say Zukas, don't feel bad huh? Level three's really good for an immigrant."

Carl let out an exasperated sigh, "Ken, I told you before. I'm from Minnesota."

"Heh, Minnesota, Italy maybe!" he laughed and turned as if looking for some other meat-head to high five but the only other person in the room was a lowly core-scrubber who was quickly gobbling his lunch with his head down while simultaneously setting off every Geiger counter in the room.

"What you got for lunch Ken? I'll trade you some meatloaf for it, you've got a full hour, you can reheat it."

"A couple of ham sandwiches and some left-over bacon from breakfast, but forget about it Zukas."

“Aw come on Douglas. You could at least swap me for one of those sandwiches. Didn’t your mom teach you to share?”

“Sharing,” Ken scoffed, “that there’s commie-talk. You’re not a pinko are ya Zukas?” the man laughed as he prodded Carl with an ink pen he pulled from Carl’s own pocket.

“Cut it out Douglas.”

“Don’t get your feelings hurt Carl. I heard all you I-talians are pinkos.”

Carl sighed and hung his head. “I’m not Italian you dingus. My parents are Lithuanian.” and with that he snatched the pen from Ken’s hand and promptly pointed the sharp end straight at the man’s privates.

“Whoah, Zukas! Hey no hard feelings eh?”

“Whatever Douglas. Fuck off and let me eat my cold meatloaf please.”

“Fine ya commie,” Ken joked, “have a sandwich.” he pulled one from his brown paper bag and slid it to Carl. “I was gonna help you out buddy, just had to razz ya a bit first.”

Carl gave him a half-hearted smile and slid his bowl of meatloaf over to Ken, who was taking his seat a couple of chairs down. Just then there came a banging at the door to the little portable building that served as the employee lounge.

“God dammit!” Ken shouted as he rose, “If those higher-ups don’t get a friggin’ locksmith to fix that damned door I’m gonna...” he trailed off as he walked over to it. “You gotta jiggle the handle, kick it twice, THEN pull on it numb-nuts!” he shouted through the door as he pushed it open. He had reckoned on seeing some fearful little underling clutching a brown paper bag to his chest but instead was greeted with

eight probing eyes attached to the largest damned spider he had ever seen.

There was an evil streak in Carl Zukas that would have made Lord Zarkov proud. The hairy little Lithuanian man, instead of helping his co-worker, sat there and took bites of his ham sandwich as he watched that spider tear into the office bully. In retrospect that may have been a bad decision...as it did not allow him enough time to escape once the arachnid turned its attention to him. Oh well, lesson learned I suppose.

With a startling flash of light the visage of Futureman appeared in front of Sam Hill. He'd been entrusted with the future-buzzer, a small black box with a big red button and an emblem in the shape of a lightning bolt. He knew nothing of it, other than that it'd been given to him to summon the hero whenever the city was in need. Futureman wasn't always terribly prompt, usually arriving some fifteen or more minutes after the button was pressed, but still Sam Hill felt grateful for the time-traveler's assistance.

"Greetings Citizen." our hero beamed, the sun directly behind his head from Sam's perspective, nearly giving him the appearance of a glowing aura.

"Futureman, thank goodness!"

"What is it Citizen? You pressed the button on the future-pager didn't you?"

Sam Hill looked confused, "I...I thought it was called a future-buzzer."

"Yes! That's what I said." the hero just continued to beam with a large smile.

Sam shook his head, "Futureman there's a terrible threat to the city!"

"Excellent."

“That’s not excellent.”

“I mean...that’s terrible, but *also* excellent.”

“How?”

“If you’d pressed the button for no reason I’d have to break your thumbs.”

“I...I can’t tell if you’re serious or just joking.”

Futureman stared him down intently for a moment, huge grin unwavering. Finally he slapped Sam on the arm and laughed, “Of course I was kidding.”

Sam returned a hearty smile.

“Seriously though, don’t ever press that button without an emergency.” his intense stare once again made Mr. Hill uncomfortable.

“Um...anyway. There’s a monster rampaging through town endangering lives and causing lots of property damage.”

“Property damage! How terrible. What kind of monster is it?”

“It’s a giant spider!”

“Do you have any idea where on Earth it came from Citizen?!”

“It was first reported at the nuclear plant but I’m going to have to assume that it came from the spider farm *next door* to the nuclear planet.”

“After the incident with the giant radioactive toddler and the resulting closure of the nuclear plant’s daycare center no one thought it was a bad idea building a spider farm right next to it?”

Sam shrugged, exasperated. “Apparently not Futureman.”

“When will you people learn that radioactivity will turn *anything* into a giant and evil version of itself?”

“I wish I knew Futureman. I tried to speak out

against it at the town hall meeting but everyone just threw shoes at me.”

“Very well, enough of your uninteresting story. I am off to fight the monster!” Futureman proclaimed as he raised his future-stick into the air dramatically then took off running down the hill.

“Futureman!” Sam yelled after him, “Futureman!”

“What?” the hero asked in an annoyed tone as he turned around.

“That way.” Sam pointed toward the city, “Town’s that way.”

The streets were eerily quiet. Newspapers, dropped to the pavement in a hurry, now blew around in the slight early afternoon breeze. Futureman listened closely and heard a faint noise over the rustling sound they made. It was a soft whimpering. He approached Sally Mae’s Beauty Shop, as that was where it seemed to be coming from. Through the front windows there appeared to be no one inside but as he drew close enough to look through the open door he could make out a woman in a floral-patterned dress cowering under a shelf full of beauty products.

“Ma’am, are you okay?” he asked in his normal boisterous tone.

“Shhh!!!” her eyes bulged with terror, “You’ll make it come back!”

“So then it *was* here?” he asked in a much softer tone.

“Yes! Now get out of here and leave me be before it comes back!”

“Are you Sally Mae?”

The lady said nothing but instead pointed to one of the upper rear corners of the room. Futureman was shocked by what he saw.

“A giant cocoon?” he said to himself. He thought he heard the lady whimper some more in the background but he paid her no attention and made his way over to where Sally Mae was stuck to the wall, held there by a nest of spider silk.

“Have no fear Madame. I shall save you!” and with that he swung his future-stick in a slashing motion that tore the cocoon apart. He put his arms out, ready to catch a helpless and terrified young lady who would be eternally grateful for his assistance. As it turns out all he caught was the desiccated remains of what at one time had been a blonde.

“Ah!” he yelled then promptly dropped the dried-up corpse to the floor where it shattered into several pieces. “Oh...I am so sorry...” he began as he knelt down to put the pieces back together.

Yes, it did indeed take our hero a moment to realize that he was apologizing to, and attempting to mend, a dead woman.

“Oh, right.” he muttered under his breath. From somewhere outside the beauty shop he heard the shriek of something terrible. The speed at which the woman, previously cowering under the shelf, jumped up and ran to the back door told him that it had been made by the creature he was looking for. In a dash he ran out into the street and shielded his eyes against the glare of the sun as he scanned building after building, half expecting to see it perched on top of one of them. He saw nothing.

“Hmm. Where would I go if I were a giant

radioactive spider?” he thought to himself. “Where is there lots of people to eat and lots of places to string up webs?”

He rubbed his chin for a moment in thought.

“Run! There’s a monster at the park!” a lady screamed as she burst from a nearby alleyway.

“That’s just what I was about to say.” he said to her.

“What?!” she looked at him queerly before running off in a complete panic.

“Thank you strange woman!” he yelled at her back. She said nothing in return so he darted for the park at full sprint...for all of about fifty feet.

“Holy shit,” he said to himself as he bent over, attempting to catch his breath, “if I’m going to keep doing this superhero thing I really need to start working out.”

Nearby there was the burbling sound of an idling motor coming from an old yellow Packard that’d been abandoned in haste. Futureman ran his hands over the roof as he approached it, noting the large holes that’d been made through the steel. No blood inside...apparently whoever the spider had been after had escaped. Well, at least had not died in the car, who knows what happened after he or she ran for their lives. Radioactive monsters seldom gave up easily.

Futureman sat in the driver’s seat and lifted the adjustment lever underneath it to give himself some more legroom. He then looked at the dash, down to the floor, then back up. It was an old-type manual with column-shift.

“Shit.”

Oh you should have seen the curious look on that monster's...face I guess you call it...when a lurching yellow Packard sputtered into the park. Wait a minute, I wasn't there either. Damnit, I should have seen it too. Now I feel gypped.

“Stop right the...” Futureman started to say then noticed that he'd slammed the car's door shut on his own cape. With a grunt he yanked it hard and it came free. “Stop right there evil monster!”

The beast was atop the merry-go-round, prodding its razor-sharp legs at a couple of teenagers it had pinned down there. It looked as him questioningly with eight beady eyes then turned back to what it was doing. It jumped in a start a moment later when the future-stick bounced harmlessly off of the side of its hard carapace.

“Hey! I was talking to you. The people of this city are under the protection of me...Futureman!”

“I don't think it understands you...” the girl on the merry-go-round yelled at him, “I think it's a spider.”

“Oh, right.” Futureman muttered to himself.

“What?” the girl asked loudly, dodging the sharp legs as she did so.

“Nothing. Hey spider boy take...” he looked around for anything he could throw before settling on the car's hood ornament, “this!” he yelled as he ripped the part clear of the hood and tossed it. Once again his projectile simply bounced off of the exoskeleton of his enemy. “Oh god dammit.”

He then leaned into the car and started blaring the horn. This, finally, seemed to get the creature's attention.

“Come and face justice foul monster!”

The beast moved with astonishing speed and before he knew it the beast was upon the car. It slammed its two front legs down onto the roof. One of them went clean through and Futureman only managed to save his face from being ripped off by deflecting it with the future-armor on his left wrist. He tensed, waiting for the second attack but it did not come. It seemed as though the monster’s leg was stuck in the thick American steel of the Packard’s roof.

“Let’s go for a ride.” Futureman spoke through the crack in the window at the screeching animal. With that he slammed the car into first gear, revved it up hard, and popped the clutch. The old car shot forward so fast that the spider could not keep up and our hero was greeted with a warm blue-green ooze that dripped down from the piece of leg still stuck in the ceiling.

“Haha. That’s what you get for messing with the citizens of Capitol City.” he boasted, looking through the rear window at the monster writhing in pain. He turned back around just in time to see the elm tree that he was about to hit. For someone accustomed to the flying cars of 1999 with all of their safety features and crumple zones Futureman was quite shocked at the violence of the relatively low-speed collision. His vision went blurry and he spaced out for a few minutes before being brought back to reality by the voice of the girl from the merry-go-round.

“Futureman! Futureman you’ve got to get up it’s...” her words were cut short by the smash of a two-ton arachnid’s leg kicking her clean off of the merry-go-round. Its anger was now directed at

Futureman and in an instant the radioactive beast was upon the car, gripped the door of the Packard and ripped it from its hinges. The power with which it was capable of flinging the door was astonishing, as it flew well over a hundred feet and completely pulverized the park's statue of Roger Haywood III as it slammed into it.

The spider tossed its good front leg at Futureman's face like it was a spear. Only a well-timed deflection by his future armor managed to send it ripping in the car's dash. Ducking to avoid snapping fangs Futureman rolled out of the automobile and darted in the direction of the girl who'd been thrown. He pulled her to her feet and yelled for her and the boy to leave the park immediately. With no innocents in the way he would be free to fight the monster to the best of his ability. Unfortunately those abilities were mostly defensive in nature and he had no idea how he was going to bring down a gigantic god damned radioactive spider.

He glanced over at his future-stick, still lying on the ground, but before he could even contemplate going for it the monster was on top of him. He ducked and rolled several times, trying to keep himself from getting shish-kabobed on those terribly sharp legs. At one point he got an all-too-close view of the underside of the creature.

"Holy crap that's disgusting," he said as he rolled under a bench which would buy him a couple of seconds to get to his feet. No sooner had he done so than the monster kicked him hard in the chest and he went flying backwards...luckily right into one of the playground swings.

"Hey, neat swings," he remarked flippantly, "Oh

crap.”

Mere nanoseconds from becoming spider-kabob he managed to flip himself backwards out of the swing and the beast’s wild thrashing only served to entangle it in the chains of the swing-set. Futureman saw his opportunity. In a flash he darted for his future-stick and performed a diving roll to grab it. Still laying on the ground, covered in the loose dirt of the playground, he fired off a bolt of lightning at the creature’s rear end. The radioactive giant twinged as many of the hairs on its Yugo-sized abdomen were burned off. Unfortunately the blast did little else.

“Shit, gotta think.” Futureman muttered to himself as he jumped to his feet. He spotted a nearby telephone pole that had a transformer on it. He tried to quickly judge the length of wires from it to the next one to see if what he had in mind would work but he was shit at geometry. “Oh well, here goes.”

He fired off a blast aimed right at where the transformer mounted to the pole and he hit it spot-on. It came swinging down, perfectly in the direction of the ensnared beast, which seemed to become increasingly startled as it tugged more frantically at its chains. Futureman could have sworn he’d heard it make some kind of “yipe” noise.

Being a 9th grade dropout, however, our hero’s geometry was indeed very off. With a disappointing “thunk” and a shower of sparks the transformer crashed to the Earth some twenty or so feet from its target. Despite being quite the baboon at times, however, our hero reacted decisively.

Futureman spotted a tree off to his right and fired a blast. It was an elm that leaned heavily to the side so

when the future-stick's blast snapped its trunk it promptly fell over, landing on the other telephone pole that the transformer was still tethered to. As the pole collapsed the transformer shot forward across the ground, making sparks at it went, until it slammed right into the giant spider. The impact wasn't enough to kill it but it certainly did a good job of pinning it in place against the top of the swing-set. There was definitely juice from flowing through it because the creature writhed in agony but Futureman was never one to take chances.

"Time for you to taste justice giant bug!" Futureman swung his future-stick in a graceful sideways arc and let loose a blast aimed right at the transformer. With a tremendous and deafening thud the device exploded in a flash of pure white light.

Okay I'll admit it. I like to think myself more a fan of intellectual pursuits but I wish I could have seen that. One gigantic explosion and then Futureman covered in bug goop. Don't judge me.

When finally his eye-sight began to return Futureman became keenly aware that he was absolutely drenched in monster slop. It was *not* the first time and it likely would not be the last. Monsters had a habit of doing that, especially when Futureman dispatched them.

"He tasted justice..." Futureman said to himself as he cleared some of the gore away from his mouth. He nearly retched. "Just wish I hadn't gotten to taste him."

"Futureman you did it!" a young boy yelled excitedly as he came running up.

“What?”

“You saved the city!”

“What?” Futureman repeated as he poked a finger into his ear and jiggled it around. He could still barely hear a thing.

Finally the boy gave up and mouthed “THANK YOU”, to which Futureman smiled and simply gave a thumbs up...still no wiser as to what the boy had said.

“You might want to get the police and the fire department young man.” Futureman said at the top of his voice, not realizing how loud he was speaking. “Tell them to bring some Hefty bags...or whatever the hell you call them in the 1950s. Oh and a fire hose.”

With that he began to walk away. The boy tried yelling at him again but still Futureman could not hear. Finally the young man picked up a small clod of dirt and threw it at the hero’s back. Futureman turned and looked down at the boy.

“Yes?” he asked, still inappropriately loud.

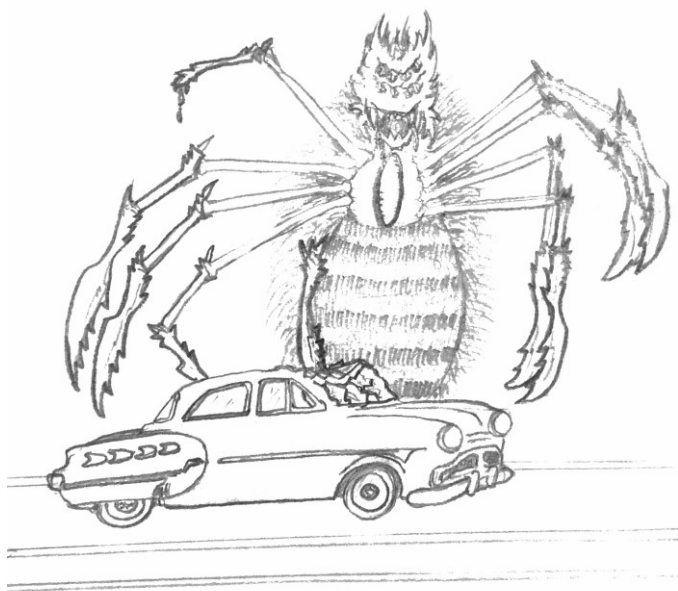
The boy didn’t bother to speak, he just pointed at all of the blue-green crap all over Futureman.

“Oh this? Don’t worry, in my time we get more radiation from talking on our phones than this is gonna expose me to.”

FUTURE TALES AND OTHER SUCH RUBBISH



The Giant Radioactive Spider – by Jeremy Kraven



The Old Packard – by Stephanie Parria

THE GRAND GALACTIC OPERA HOUSE

Zane's cybernetic implants rubbed uncomfortably against the starched fabric of the ridiculous getup he was forced to wear in order to carry out this particular mission. His work had brought him to the Grand Galactic, the oldest and most elegant theatre hall in all of Telosian space. The opera house's majestic lobby was packed but already he'd located his target. She was the Countress of Duboon, as beautiful as she was rich and betrothed to the Telosian crown prince, Zarkov. Zane had met Zarkov once before, in another life, at least he thought he had. Such a snivelling worm didn't deserve a prize like the Countress. That didn't matter though, because soon her life would be snuffed out.

As he pushed his way through the crowd the master assassin made sure to keep the Countress and her party in view at all times. His mechanical enhancements made that task a simple one. He was capable of tracking up to fifty independent targets at

once. Zane already knew that they had a seventh floor viewing box. This would be his only opportunity to eliminate her before the royal wedding. Success was critical. If anything were to go wrong his employers would likely take great pleasure in torturing him for his failure.

After what seemed like an eternity of chit-chatting with random snobbish guests the Countress' party finally made its way through the sea of people and entered the grav-tube in the corner of the lobby. The lobby had eight grav-tubes, all of which arced up toward the vaulted ceiling nearly a hundred feet from the ground floor. His eyes stayed locked on them as patrons annoyingly continued to bump into him. He watched as the group stepped from the tube on the seventh floor and headed left. His intel had been reliable.

By this time Zane had made his way to the opposite side of the hall and stepped into a grav-tube of his own. It was a simple device, just an elegant clear glass tube with a circular floor plate that lifted passengers to their destination. No controls, no doors. Fine for everyone else but it would not take Zane where he wanted to go. He'd studied the layout of the building and knew that there was a traditional, and quite vintage, lift on the fourth floor that servants used to ferry food and drink back and forth to the spoiled patrons. Zane felt contempt for these people, they could never understand what suffering and hardship he had gone through...that *most people* go through. They were soft and smelled of expensive perfumes that had been ferried in from all corners of the galaxy at great expense. A wicked smile flashed across his scarred face at the thought of these

aristocrats soon being ground under the heel of his employer. They would learn suffering, all of this decadence smashed to pieces.

The fourth level was empty save for a few patrons quickly making their way toward their seats. No one even saw him step from the grav-tube. Zane quickly and quietly made his way toward the service lift. Coming around the corner with a tray full of drinks the poor servant girl didn't even see Zane until she crashed right into the assassin. She immediately began to apologize but suddenly jumped back with a start as Zane's bio-mechanical implants were now visible through the front of his very wet shirt. Everyone in the galaxy knew that only assassin's and other types of criminals had bio-mech implants. Without hesitation, before the servant could call out, Zane muffled her scream and waved his other hand over the girl's face. A calm, serene look replaced one of terror as the spray of atomized tranquilizer wafted over her, drifted down into her nostrils. The server would be out of it for a while and then would remember nothing, just one more handy tool he'd been provided with as part of his assassin's toolkit. The implants weren't just for show. Stealth was always the preferred method but occasionally one had to be seen. In those cases it was best if the witness did not remember the encounter, lest the assassin be forced to leave a string of corpses in his wake.

Leaving the now-drooling and babbling girl behind the master assassin stepped into the lift. He pulled a connector from under his shirt and plugged it into the control panel. The lights on the panel blinked repeatedly then went dark. A moment later the panel came back to life with a chime that acknowledged the

system reboot. Zane had removed the security lockout. His gloved finger pushed the button for the eighth level and the lift lurched into action. When the door opened Zane was presented with a vast maze of ventilation ducts and wiring conduits. Any normal man would have been lost in such a labyrinth but within moments he had located exactly where he needed to be thanks to his built-in positioning system which was currently tied into his ship in orbit. It was accurate down to a few inches. The assassin knelt to the floor and removed a small gadget from his belt, he pushed it into the floor and it began to whirl. The sound of applause from below signaled that the performance had begun and it easily overpowered the minute amount of sound coming from the device.

As the small machine finished burrowing through the floor it lowered a microscopic camera into the ceiling below and connected remotely with Zane's visual cortex. When he'd first received the implants it had been a very disconcerting feeling but over the years he'd grown accustomed to it. As the connection completed and the camera found focus he could see everything that was happening in the Countress' box. The aristocrats were sipping spirits from elegant crystal glasses and watching the performance below intently. On stage a man dressed as a Voxxl Cat sang love songs to a woman dressed as a street urchin. Zane had never been one for opera, even before he became...what he was now, but he especially could not understand the draw of these new-age operas. They were bizarre and seemed to have no substance that he could discern. Whatever, the rich people seemed to adore them.

The Countress of Duboon was indeed beautiful;

her sparkling eyes stared out at the stage. Her eyes reminded him of...he wasn't sure. The memory wipe that he'd been given when they'd turned him into what he now was hadn't been 100% effective, things leaked through at times. He could never seem to put names to the faces, but he remembered people and occasionally places.

Stop. The mission must be fulfilled.

With no more hesitation Zane locked the device on its target and disconnected his visual cortex. He pulled another small device from his belt and placed it onto a nearby power conduit. It locked magnetically into place and produced a green light to acknowledge its readiness. With a quick slap to the comm unit on his arm he vanished in a shimmer of light.

Back in the cockpit of his small one-man ship Zane sat in the pilot's seat and began to plot a course. Amongst the sea of ships in orbit the fiery glow of his craft's engines could be seen stood out, had anyone been looking for it. They were not. The vessel made a steep bank and turned toward open space. Zane began to unbutton the shirt that hid his armored and implant-imbued chest. He slid his protective visor back into place with one hand as his other worked the control console. He was sending a coded message in plain text.

IT IS DONE.

Below, on the planet, the course of galactic events was about to change. The opera hall would soon plunge into darkness and the drone would fire a microscopic poison capsule into the Countress' neck before disintegrating itself. Two days later the capsule

would release the poison and they would find her dead, in her wedding dress. Without her the crown prince's claim to the throne would weaken, the Telosian Empire would fall into civil war, and the last great threat to the Creams would be eliminated. *They* would rule the galaxy.



Zane the Space Assassin – by Jeremy Kraven

ZORK THE OKAY

Creams are a thing, a species I mean.
And Zork was a Cream, a Cream with a dream.
Long had the Creams yearned for new spaces,
not for knowledge or adventure but mostly to enslave
other races.
For you see they were vain and selfish it would seem,
no matter what you were, you were never as good as a
Cream.
Once they had stepped on every bug and every lizard,
they turned their gaze to the sky...and their moon Gil-
Gun-Glizud
They built them a rocket and fired off one Cream,
who landed on Gil-Gun-Glizud...Part One of their
scheme.
But where their plans were concerned they'd just have
to settle,
for their homeworld Flonker had only so much metal.
For you see there were billions of Creams,
so many so that Flonker was bursting at the seams.
No way could they build rockets for so many,

not without things like aluminum and titanium aplenty.

Then came Zork, the hero of our rhyme,
he's the main focus who we forgot about on the second line.

Zork was not content teasing lower life-forms on Flonker,

he thought that Creams should be free to go out and conquer.

So in a stroke of brilliance he lopped of his head,
making sure to figure out the mechanics, lest he be dead.

At first they said, "Zork, you're a mad-man it seems."
"Ah, yes." he replied, "But a mad-man with means."

For you see Zork, being now so small,
could build himself a rocket, one not so tall.

Laughter quickly faded as Zork took to the sky,
and the other Creams realized that they too wished to fly.

So off went their heads, in droves with a whack,
they built their rockets, left Flonker, and never looked back.

I'd like to tell you that to this day, Creams sing songs
of Zork-the-Okay.

But they don't because he was near-sighted and ran
his rocket right
into an asteroid.

Yes that last part, ended without a rhyme,
it's okay you know, it happens some time.

Now back to the Creams, one might wonder you see,
were they happy as heads, of course, they were free.

Bodies covered in cream, were not such a loss,
no more dry-cleaning bills at ridiculous costs.

MICHAEL MOREAU

So that is the tale of Zork-the-Okay,
considered a hero, at least for one day.
So next time your planet is being conquered by
Creams,
think of Zork, and his beheading-day screams.



Zork's Flight – by Jeremy Kraven



Zork the Okay – by Stephanie Parria



A Cream – by Stephanie Parria

THE QUAIN'T LITTLE MUDBALL OF SECTOR K

Zarkov watched as stars zipped by on the viewer of his ship. Red dwarfs, blue giants, all of them like little blurs of light whizzing by at unbelievable velocity. The new cruiser his father had given him for his coronation as first prince of the Telosian Empire was so fine that even at hypermark velocities he felt not the slightest of vibrations through the deck-plates. In his lap sat Orion, his Voxxl Cat and constant companion since the age of six. He had no idea how old the beast was, nor did he care. It liked to sit in his lap and make comforting noises when he stroked its head, that was all that mattered.

Would you be surprised if I told you I was one-hundred and twenty-three years old at that time? I'm a Voxxl Cat and we hail from Nova Six. We live to an average age of about four-hundred Earth years and are completely sentient. Ages ago our race did all of the piddling things that most species do. We built cities, went into space, fought ferociously cute little wars...then

we figured out that it was much easier to just shut up and let someone else take care of us. So when the Telosians landed on our planet we kindly rubbed against their legs and made pleasant noises and until they picked us up and gave us food.

With his free hand Zarkov rapped his lean fingers against the arm of his chair as he awaited the arrival of his right-hand-man, er...right-hand-bug, Flyx. The door at the back of the bridge whizzed open with its typical little hissing noise, accompanied by the familiar clattering of six little legs as they came running through, half-tripping over themselves with nervousness as was typical of the little moron.

“My prince!” the insect squealed in a fearful tone.

“What is it Flyx?” Zarkov asked without turning his head.

Flyx took a deep breath, or whatever it was that he did to respire that ugly little body of his.

“Sire one of our probes has detected a massive anomaly!”

Zarkov stopped petting his cat and rotated his chair to face Flyx, finally catching sight of that recognizable face with its large compound eyes and drooping proboscis. He’d served Zarkov faithfully for about five years now but was still terribly excitable and timid in the presence of his master. The Telosian prince had no particular love for the creature but it followed orders without question and made a decent cup of space coffee.

He watched as Flyx scratched one of his hind-legs against the other nervously, shedding flakes of exoskeleton onto the floor.

“Flyx you little pest stop that! You’re molting all over my shiny new deck-plates!”

The little bug jumped back in terror, he nearly fell but managed to catch himself at the last moment.

“Apologies my prince!” he blurted out in his typical raspy little tone.

“Whatever. You were saying something about one of the probes?” Zarkov asked as he waved his hand in the air uninterestedly.

“Sire? Oh, yes! The readings!” Flyx blundered out, “It would seem that one of them had a malfunction in its navigational system and ended up far off course. In Sector K.”

Zarkov cracked a patronizing grin.

“Flyx, please explain how this interests me in the slightest before I have you put into a blender and made into a smoothie.”

The little minion winced, “Your highness, the probe wandered into a system thought to be of little interest and has returned readings consistent with massive quantities of synergium! We’re talking on a planetary scale Sire!”

“Nonsense. You know as well as I do, from history class, that the Chaxxelvaldennic Empire scoured this part of the galaxy eons ago and used up all of the large deposits.”

“I know sir, that’s why it’s so amazing!” Flyx exclaimed, but then hesitated, “But there is a problem your highness.”

“And that would be? You miserable little insect.”

“Not only is the planet orbiting a sun that could go nova at any time but it appears to be inhabited.”

“Our probes are designed only to scan for valuable resources around main sequence stars, not dying ones. This one certainly *did* have a malfunction.” he slapped Flyx over the head with the galactic newspaper he’d

had in his lap, “Did it ever occur to your pathetic little brain that the probe has just completely malfunctioned and is reporting a false-positive?”

“Bu...bu...but Sire. If it is true this could mean great things for your father’s empire.”

Zarkov paused for a moment and rubbed his chin in thought. His father’s empire would someday be *his* empire. It wouldn’t really hurt anything to waste a small amount of energy investigating the probe’s readings. Zarkov stood up so fast that Orion screeched as he fell to the floor.

I must say that it has on occasion been difficult to keep from revealing myself as a sentient life form. There are just some times when you’d really like to give someone a piece of your mind or tell them to bugger off! I managed to keep my head on this particular occasion and decided to simply retire to my master’s quarters to lie about on his incredibly comfy couch. So with a snarky whip of the tail and my head held high I departed the bridge.

“We must go to this planet Flyx, right away!” he proclaimed with a wicked smile.

“What of the natives master?”

“What of them? They’ll either give up that synergium or we’ll vaporize them.” he glared down at Flyx, “It’s a really simple concept.” he said in a patronizing voice, “Hang around me for a few more decades and I’ll get it pounded into your ugly little skull.”

“Yes sir.” Flyx replied meekly.

“Now, have the engine room spin the engines up to maximum.” with that he turned to his helmsman, “And you, set course for this world immediately.”

“Yes your highness.” Flyx said respectfully as he took a six-legged bow and turned to leave.

“Aye sir.” came the helmsman’s response.

Zarkov plopped down into his exquisite captain’s chair and turned back toward the viewer. He followed the stars as they began to shift with the changing direction of the ship.

“Flyx!” Zarkov called back to his minion who was almost to the door.

“Yes Sire?” Flyx asked.

“You never told me what the planet is called.”

“Ah, yes of course. It is uncharted but has been given the designation of TONDU-47.”

“Very well, you’re dismissed.” Zarkov stated without even turning around.

Suddenly he was startled by a crashing thud. He spun in his chair to see the horror of poor little Flyx smashed beneath a ventilation duct that had fallen from the ceiling.

“Dammit!” he yelled, “I’m going to have to talk to my father about the build quality of this ship...and I’m going to have to find another peon to do my bidding.”

He spun around to his right and pointed angrily at one of the crewmen manning a nearby console, “You, tell engineering to get up here with some tools immediately!”

He paused.

“Oh...and tell them to bring a mop!”

“You...um, whatever the hell your name is, can you hurry it up a bit?” Zarkov barked at the minion who

was working hard to unload the hover-pads.

“It’s Number 6 sir, I’m Minion Number 6.”

Zarkov looked at him with disgust. “What, did you think I actually cared?” and with that he slapped the man’s helmet.

“Sorry sir, they’re wedged in behind this crate labeled ‘Nectarines from Planet Z’.”

“My betrothed, the Countress of Duboon, has a soft spot for Z-tarines and what baby wants baby gets.” the space lord smiled.

Number six looked at him questioningly. Zarkov broke off from his brief reverie and once again slapped the man’s helmet. “Mind your own business.”

“Yes sir.”

A few minutes of impatient foot-tapping by the evil space lord saw another minion come down to help remove the hover-pads. Once freed the two men rolled them down the ship’s ramp and dropped them onto the red-soiled ground. It looked dry but it was not, for no puffs of dust came up as the heavy devices, which looked a bit like man-hole covers, landed with an audible thud. As Zarkov walked down the ramp and set foot onto the surface he made a peculiar face.

“Ugh. It’s really damp.” he lifted a boot to look under it, “Oh great, I just *got* these boots and now their caked with TONDU-47.”

He watched as the men scrambled to attach the handles, which basically looked like giant letter T’s, to the hover-pads. With the flick of their switches, each in turn, the craft began to hum and lift several inches off of the ground. Their anti-gravity fields left visible depressions in the soft mud of the planet.

Zarkov stepped onto one of the devices, the metal

cleats of his boots making a clanking sound against it despite the layer of filth. He looked back at his men, now running up the ramp to grab some sidearms from the weapons locker, and chuckled to himself at the ridiculous armor that his father insisted all Telosian soldiers wore. It did little to stop laser blasts, did much to impair vision, and made so much noise that every enemy within a 500 foot radius would be well aware of their presence.

“Oh well,” he thought, “they’re the ones that have to look like idiots.”

Still, he couldn’t help but think that when he came to power he’d have his men wear more practical uniforms. Shortly he grew tired of waiting for the two slow-pokes, Zarkov revved up his hover-pad and shot off into the distance, cackling as he flew over the alien landscape. Surprised, his two henchmen clamored for their hover-pads. They were barely able to secure their firearms before taking off after their leader. They didn’t have far to travel, however, since he was waiting just over the next rise with an irritated look on his face.

“Sorry sir!” one of the henchmen spoke.

Zarkov reached over and slapped him on the helmet yet again.

“Do you want me to slap you for a fourth time?”

“You were slapping *him* before sir.” the minion stated as he pointed to his colleague.

Zarkov looked over at the other man, then back. “Well how in the hell am I supposed to know which one of you I was slapping?”

“We have numbers on our uniforms sir.” the man pointed at his.

Zarkov scowled and slapped the man again.

“Don’t ever correct me!”

“Yes sir!”

“Now, this hover-pad has a laggy throttle, swap with me.”

“Right away sir.” the man did as commanded and he and the evil space lord swapped vehicles.

“Minions get the crappy hover-pads.” he smirked.

“Yes sir!” both men chimed and saluted.

“Now, let’s go and verify these readings and put these natives in their place.” Zarkov cracked a smile then twisted the throttle on his hover-pad and zipped off into the distance, his long black cape flapping in the wind. The azure sky provided a stark contrast to the reddish landscape which was only sparsely dotted with blue-hued plant life. Little did the prince and his men know but they were being watched from a distance by a tattooed stranger.

About two miles from where the saucer had put down Zarkov slowed down and jumped from his craft, which abruptly circled itself around and came to a rest near him. “You...” he looked at the henchman’s uniform, “Number 8. Do you have the device?”

“The device sir?”

“Yes...the device.” he began to cackle maniacally as Number 8 jumped down from his hover-pad and pulled free the object strapped to his back. It was a seismic lance. Zarkov watched as 8 pulled free the ends of the tube that contained it and pushed its pointed end into the soil. As soon as it touched the moist ground its circuits activated and it stood straight up all on its own, appearing to nearly hover there, its point only an inch or two into the ground.

“Move aside.” Zarkov barked as he flapped his cape and walked over to where the lance was

positioned. Its top was nearly flat and was hexagonal in shape with a small display and a couple of buttons, both of which were now glowing with an eerie blue color. He pressed the button marked “begin” in Telosian script and instantly it shot into the soil and disappeared from sight.

“3...2...1...” he counted off, then raised his hand over the hole. He held it with fingers open and slightly over his head. Less than a second later the lance jumped back out of the ground and into Zarkov’s grasp. He lowered it to chest level and looked at the readout. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

“By the great Weasel-Headed Serpent of Thanik VI! That’s impossible!”

“What is it sir?” Number 6 boldly asked.

Zarkov turned to him with a smirk, “Did I give you permission to speak?”

“No...no sir.” the henchman nervously replied.

“I didn’t think so. Number 8...vaporize him.”

“Beg your pardon sir!” Number 6 blurted, “But didn’t you need two guards for protection against the natives?”

Zarkov rubbed his chin, “Hmm...I suppose so. This may be your lucky day Number 6.” he then turned to Number 8, “Vaporize him when we get back to the ship.”

The henchman saluted, “Yes your highness.”

“Now...as I was saying.” he glared at Number 6 with a you-know-what-you-did look, “Before I was so rudely interrupted. This planet’s entire core is made of synergium! The Telosian Empire will have unrivaled power in the galaxy!” and with that he burst into his characteristic cackling laugh. The men joined in, as

they usually did, too afraid to leave their master laughing all by himself.

"Flyx, send word at once to my father."

"Flyx is dead sir." Number 6 reminded him.

Zarkov turned and grunted, "Mmm, that's right. Thank you for reminding me 6. Oh and by the way that's *two* strikes against you now."

"But you already said you were going to have me vaporized your highness."

"Yes!" Zarkov snapped, "But now I'm going to make you look at my vacation slides for like ten hours before Number 8 here does you in."

Number 6 just hung his head.

"By the way 6, put 'Find a new somewhat inept yet totally loyal servant' on my to-do list."

"Yes Sire." he replied under his breath.

"Oh I'm sorry, I didn't hear you 6. What was that?"

"Yes Sire!"

"Better...you don't even *want* to know what strike three is."

"Incoming!" Number 8 screamed and threw himself on top of his commander.

Zarkov, winded but okay, looked around for what he expected to be a missile barrage or a convoy of tanks only to find what looked like a tattooed teenager sliding down the nearest hill.

"Get off of me right now." he muttered through clenched teeth. Number 8 did not hesitate and as soon as he'd found his own footing he helped his leader to his feet as well.

"Hey there!" the stranger said in a friendly tone as he approached and picked up whatever it was that he was riding on. "Welcome to Plebis."

“Uh-huh,” Zarkov said, staring the youngster up and down, “...wait a minute. How do you know we’re not from this planet?”

“Simple.” the native chuckled, “I saw you come down...in your fire chariot.”

“Yes...fire chariot. Say do you know anything about synergium?”

The stranger looked baffled, Zarkov could already tell that he liked the cut of this boy’s jib. A total buffoon, easy to manipulate.

“Yellow rock...glows...makes you very sick if you lick it. Ring a bell?”

The boy rubbed his forehead in confusion, “No I don’t think so. Maybe the elders know what you’re talking about.”

Excellent, the natives may not even know about the synergium. Perhaps mass-vaporizations won’t even be necessary.

“So, about these elders. Where can I find them...and how many people live on your planet?”

“Whoah there Mr. Spaceman. I only know about *my* village and the areas nearby.”

“Fine. Can you take me to speak with your elders?”

“Sure.” the boy smiled.

“Would you like to ride with...” he looked around, “Number 6 here?”

“No that’s okay. You can just follow me.”

“That’s nice but we’d really like to get there before your geriatric star decides to go nova and wipes out all life on this miserable rock.”

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing. We want to get there quick, you can ride with us.”

"No thanks, I can stone-surf all the way from here to the village in no time."

"Stone surf?" Zarkov asked, his eyebrow rose sarcastically.

"Yes..." he held forth the rock that he'd come down the hill on and beamed a big smile.

"So sliding on a rock then? Lovely."

"Greetings strangers and welcome to Plebis!" the chief said as he strode toward Zarkov and his men. He was comically round around the middle, bald on top and wore the biggest god-damned grin any of them had ever seen. Zarkov raised his eyebrows and recoiled at the amount of happiness in the man's voice, "I am chief of this village, you may call me Blubahles."

At that the evil space lord cracked up and had to use every bit of self-control to keep from bursting into laughter.

"I see that you have already met my son, Aslik."

He could contain himself no more. He slapped Number 8 on the shoulder and turned away from his host so that he would not see the tears of laughter welling up in his eyes. Out of sight of the natives he chuckled, quietly and to himself, but so hard to that a drop of drool ran down from his mouth and plopped onto the distastefully wet soil.

"Is your chief okay?" Blubahles asked of the henchmen, "He appears to be choking. Quickly! I know remedy for this!"

He put out his arms as if to perform the Heimlich maneuverer but Zarkov turned around, wiping the

tears from his eyes. "I'm okay, I'm okay." the Telosian prince demanded. He took one look at the chief's ridiculously large smile and again turned to laugh.

"Are you sure?" the chief asked, "I can help you, or my wife if you prefer a woman's touch to that of a man."

Zarkov attempted to straighten himself and turned to face the short little chieftain, "And your wife's name is?"

He clenched his bladder, waiting to lose control of it at the absurd name of the chief's wife, "Her name is Natala."

Zarkov rolled the name around in his head but could think of no way that it was funny. "Oh." he said, at last gaining composure. "No thank you, I am fine. It is a pleasure to meet you Chief Blu..." he almost cracked up again but managed not to, "Chief."

The two shook hands and the native man gave a small bow of respect.

"What brings you and your friends to our village?" the chief asked.

Zarkov thought to make some comment about the henchmen not being his friends but he didn't even want to waste breath on it. "We have come from far away looking for a type of stone that exists on this planet. We call it synergium."

The chief looked around at the other villagers gathered around and all shrugged.

"We do not know of this...synergium. What possible use could men who have flown down from the stars have for rocks anyway?"

"These are special rocks Chief. In fact they power our..." he felt foolish just saying it, "fire chariot."

The villagers gasped and the chieftain spoke, "We know of no rocks powerful enough to do something like that. If we did would we not ascend to the heavens ourselves?"

"Well..." Zarkov started, "there's a lot more to it than...you know what? They're yellow, they glow..."

The villagers gasped once again but this time dropped to the damp ground with a collective wet plop. They began chanting something that neither the crown prince nor his men could understand.

"What are they doing?" Zarkov asked the chief, now totally silent and eyes wide with fear.

"You...you speak of the Kava-Stone. It is sacred and no one may touch it...not even those born of Plebis, let alone men from the stars!"

"Let's just say I *wanted* to touch it...lots of it, and take it away in fire chariots like my own. Would you peasants just stand aside and keep up with the chanting or would you try to resist me?"

"Resist? Do you mean fight you? Of course we would not do such a thing."

"Excellent, we'll begin extracting the ore..."

"There would be no reason for us to. Our god, Tamiritus, protects the sacred stone."

Zarkov looked at the short little man skeptically, "Excellent. So then we have nothing to worry about."

"You doubt the power of Tamiritus?!"

"Well now that you mention it...yes."

"You should not! Tamiritus watches over our sun Shoram, this world Plebis, and all things upon it."

Prince Zarkov slapped the communications device on his left collar and spoke into it, "Zarkov to the Star Prince."

The space lord always was a bit narcissistic. Naming his ship after himself was just one more example in a long line of such displays of arrogance. Many years later, however, the ever-so-humorous Emperor Creamface would forcibly rename Zarkov's ship the Princess Star. The Telosian prince would spend decades trying to get the much more humble name, Zarkov One, to stick...to little success I might add.

"Star Prince acknowledges your highness. What are your orders me liege?"

"I want you to ascend to one mile in altitude and fire a 500 terawatt laser into the planet's crust. You are then to send a probe into the cavity to retrieve a sample of synergium."

"Aye sir." came the crackly reply.

"We'll see who is more powerful Chief, *your* god or *my* laser." with that he burst into a heavy cackle.

Some distance away the Star Prince engaged her engines and lifted gently off of the surface. Once reaching the specified atmospheric height the weapons' officer charged the main laser array and fired at the planet's surface precisely as he'd been instructed. Much to the surprise of the ship's crew, and little surprise to the natives, the beam penetrated only a short distance before being reflected right back at the Star Prince.

"What the hell?" Zarkov scoffed. He could only watch as his ship, only a small speck in the distance, began to spiral out of control toward the surface. "How did you do that?!" he demanded.

"We have told you Mr. Zarkov..."

"*Prince* Zarkov!"

"Prince Zarkov...that our god, Tamiritus, protects this place."

“Hmm.” the prince grunted to himself then rubbed his chin in thought. It certainly would explain why such an old star had not gone nova, but certainly there were no such things as actual gods or goddesses. It must be some sort of technological trick. The natives certainly did not seem capable of anything on that scale, however. With the flap of his cape Zarkov turned for his hover-pad, intent on returning to his ship to survey the damage and collect his thoughts.

“Where are you going?” Chief Blubahles asked but the alien overlord said nothing. He and his men boarded their craft and roared off into the distance.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Zarkov yelled as they began to make out the Star Prince in the distance.

“What sir?” came Number 6’s voice through the communicator, “It just looks like some scuffed paint to me.”

“Yes 6, it *does* look like scuffed paint. Scuffed paint on my brand new cruiser! Oh, and by the way, now you’re going to find out what strike three is.”

Men were already outside assessing the damage as they closed in and Zarkov jumped from his hover-pad so quickly that it continued on and slammed into some pathetic little engineer, likely breaking more than a few bones.

“Status?!” he barked.

One of the armor-clad henchmen nearby snapped to attention, his number was 2. “Minor damage to the auxiliary power systems, moderate damage to landing strut number three, a bunch of scorched paint...and

the ice-maker is out.”

“Really? Is that all...Number 2?” Zarkov would have giggled at the name had he not been so thoroughly upset about his ship.

“Yes sir.”

“When will we be fully operational again?”

“Looks like three to four hours sir.”

“Excellent. In the meantime we’ll call in reinforcements. If this planet wants to play rough we can do the same.”

“Wait!” came a voice from over the nearest rock face. It was the native boy, Aslik.

Zarkov turned to him with a ferocious scowl. He drew the sidearm from Number 8’s holster and pointed it at the intruder. “If you have something to say boy you’d better say it quickly. In about three seconds you’re going to be carbon atoms.”

“I know where Tamiritus lives!” he shouted out.

“Oh really? Now that *would* be useful information. What is your price?”

“My price?” the boy asked.

“For selling out your people! You do realize that if we destroy this god of yours your star will go nova and wipe out all life on this planet don’t you?!”

The boy seemed taken aback. He’d not considered that. He stood there, deep in thought for a few minutes.

“I don’t have all day boy!” Zarkov yelled as he waved the pistol in Aslik’s general direction.

The boy scrambled down the rock face and approached the aliens. He was still every bit as wide-eyed as when they’d first met him. “I want...to ride in your fire chariot!” he paused then looked over at the poor engineer receiving medical treatment for

crushed ribs and a fractured pelvis, “Ooh, and those beads!”

Zarkov looked back at the fallen man and noted the tacky necklace that he wore. “Done!”

With that he patted the boy on the back and escorted him up the ramp of the ship. He gave a quick glance back at Number 8, motioned for Number 6 to be detained and stripped of his weapon, which he promptly was.

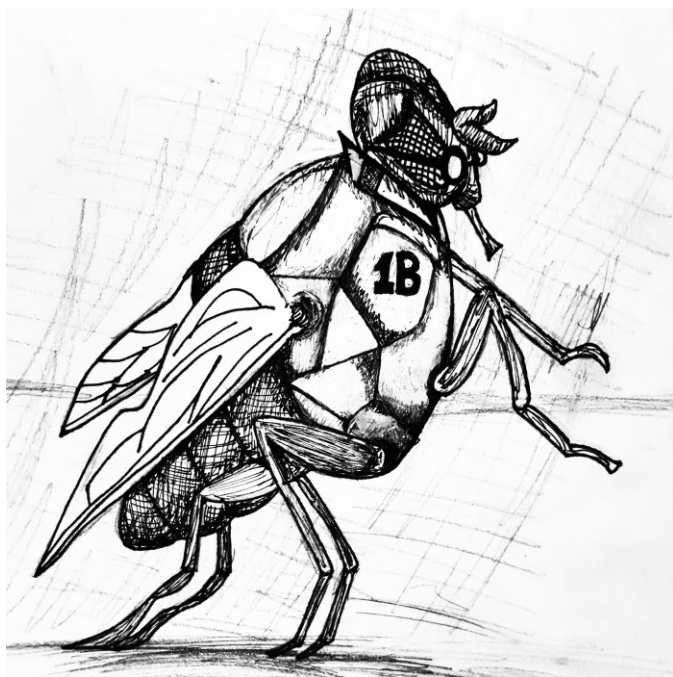
“Okay boy. So you tell me where this god of yours lives and we blow it to smithereens, the star goes boom, peels away the outer surface of this mud-ball, and leaves a nice shiny glowing hunk of synergium.”

The boy only smiled.

“Oh there is one more thing.” Zarkov paused at the top of the ramp. “We have to do something about that name of yours. You *do* know that it sounds like I’m saying ass-lick don’t you?”

Once again the boy smiled and shook his head in agreement.

The Telosian prince gave him a quick slap across the face, “Change it by tomorrow or I’ll brand a new one on our forehead. Okay?”



Flyx – by Kirsten Russo



The Bridge of the Star Prince – by Jeremy Kraven



Zarkov and His Men – Michael Moreau

DESPERATELY SEEKING HENCHMEN

Wanted: Henchmen/Minions

Qualifications: Blindly follow orders of evil overlord no matter how dangerous or suicidal the command. Must be able hold a weapon, firing with any accuracy not necessary. No prior experience required. Incompetence is a plus.

Compensation: Comically low, but excellent dental.

All interested applicants should apply in person at the corner of First and Blaag Streets. Look for the large and massively impressive ship parked there.

Rando had been laid off from yet another spaceship construction job for his incompetence and, as the bills continued to pile up, was quickly running out of options. His wife did not want him anywhere near their home during the day so he had to sit in a cafe and sip space-coffee while looking through the job ads on his tPad 16. It was such a convenient device, only 9 pounds in weight and the battery lasted well over forty minutes! “What an age to live in.” he

thought, wondering how they'd gotten along before such things existed.

Why let your brain do the work when the iPad can do it for you? That was the marketing slogan and I must say that it makes a compelling argument. Still, there are those of us, I'll call us non-mouth-breathers, who prefer to keep our grey matter where it belongs, in our heads. Then again what do I know? Intelligent as we may be my species is one of the laziest in the universe. Besides, who doesn't love a good game of Furious Fowls from time to time? Anyway, back to the matter at hand.

What kind of employment could a guy like Rando, incompetent and with no experience, ever hope to get? He just needed a job where he would be given a task and wouldn't have to *think* about anything, only do exactly what he was told. Thinking was for chumps. Rando didn't like to think about anything. In fact his favorite pastime was just sitting in his chair by the window of his apartment and staring blankly out at the street. That was, of course, whenever the Mrs. wasn't screaming her head off at him about one thing or the other. He'd not thought much about school when he was there, or about dropping out either, for that matter. He'd definitely not been thinking when he'd left his grilled cheese sandwich inside the particle reaction chamber of the Altairis 1, the ship he'd been working on before he'd been fired from his latest job. Four hundred and thirty three souls aboard, such a tragic loss. He scratched his head.

"Maybe there *is* something to this whole thinking thing," he thought briefly then got distracted by a shiny object on the sidewalk. "No, I need to find a job." this time aloud.

“I’m sorry, what?” the Plagzarian sitting next to him asked.

“Huh? No I was...never mind.” he blurted then shyly turned back to his drink.

He scanned several of the ads and saw that they all had big words, which was enough of a turn-off, but they also required experience, all of them. Then, just as he was beginning to feel defeated he came across an ad that seemed right up his space-alley. The more he read, slowly sounding out the words like the dimwit he was, the more excited about the opportunity he became. He could blindly follow orders! He *could* hold a gun! No prior experience was necessary and incompetence was a plus! It seemed like it was too good to be true. Staring longer at the ad, rolling it around in his mind while sipping from his cup of space-coffee, he began to become discouraged.

“Excellent dental? It’s got to be a joke, right?” he thought.

Rando looked down at the reflective glass surface of the table that his cup sat on, cracked a big smile and noted the condition of his teeth. Horrifying described them best. It was then that he decided that there was little to lose other than time, of which he had plenty at the moment. So after finishing his space-coffee quickly he made his way over to First and Blaag Street to apply for the position.

Upon arriving at the new, state-of-the-art space ship, callously double-parked right where the ad had indicated, Rando got excited at the idea of working on such a fine craft...and having excellent dental of course. His wife’s teeth were little better than his own. Being a spaceman...not *working* on ships but

actually flying around in one. It was a dream he didn't even realize he had until less than an hour ago. He glanced over and noted a "No Parking" sign. The ship wasn't double-parked, it had disobeyed proper parking etiquette altogether.

"Whoever owns this thing must be loaded...and really important." Rando thought to himself.

If he could just get the job, could be the provider he'd wanted to prove to his wife that he *could* be all along. He knew she didn't love him, that was a given. Their marriage had been required by antiquated laws designed to ensure that no man was left to fend for himself. For most men of his race were complete idiots and if not watched after on a regular basis, they would surely set themselves on fire and die. That or end up the victim of some crazy pyramid scheme and lose all of the family's money. The dullness of the Katraxi male was the stuff of legend, or at least fertile ground for endless jokes.

Rando thought to himself about being able to provide excellent dental for his wife and how it would make him a real man in her eyes. She would *have* to love him then, right?

There was a long line of other men and assorted creatures waiting to be seen. It took almost four hours before Rando was shown into a really nice room with a remarkably comfortable couch. Across from the couch sat the intimidating form of the evil Prince Zarkov of the Telosian Empire. Rando recognized him from the news, an announcement of his engagement to some Countess or something like that. The lean man, younger than Rando himself, was sitting in his chair and petting a very content looking fluffy white cat that had fallen asleep in his lap. When

the cat briefly opened its eyes to acknowledge the stranger, they showed themselves to be a vibrant purple. A Voxxl cat for certain. Orion simply wanted to see if this visitor was anyone worth his time or attention. As with all of the others he had seen that day, Rando was not, and so he promptly went back to sleep.

“The cat looks really happy.” Rando thought to himself, “Maybe this guy isn’t so bad after all. You can tell a lot about a person by the way they treat their pets. Maybe I’ll even *like* this boss.”

“What are you grinning at you expendable Katraxi peasant?”

Rando immediately lost the goofy smirk he’d been wearing. “Be serious Rando.” he told himself, “Even if this prince *is* a jerk you still need the job.”

“Name?” Zarkov spat. “Oh I’m sorry, did I interrupt your string of unimportant thoughts?”

“Rando Bergsplatz.” he said with as much authority he could muster, which sadly was very little.

Zarkov just rolled his eyes in disinterest.

“Maybe this guy has had a rough day conducting all of these interviews.” Rando thought.

“Age?”

“34.”

Zarkov tapped the screen of the tPad he was holding, entering information into it.

“Ooh is that the 16?” Rando asked, forgetting himself, his child-like demeanor returning.

The space prince’s lips curled into a snarl. “If you must know it’s the 18.”

“I thought the 17 just came out.”

“Yeah well you’re not personal friends with the owner of the company are you?”

Rando shook his head nervously.

“That’s right, because I’m a crown prince and you’re...” he looked back at the info he’d just put into the tPad, “Oh who gives a crap? You’re some peon who’ll get shot out of my ship’s cannon if he back-talks me again. That’s who you are.”

Rando had no idea what to say so he said nothing.

“IQ?”

“71.”

Zarkov’s face morphed into an impressed expression.

“Maybe this *would* go well after all.” Rando mused.

“Incredible.” Zarkov thought to himself, “I’m impressed that this miserable meat-sack was even capable of dressing himself and walking down the street unsupervised this morning. That’s the lowest score I’ve seen all day. He may just work out.”

“Job training?” Zarkov demanded loudly then added softly, under his breath, “not that it matters.”

“What had he meant by that last part?” Rando mused.

Oh well. He went into explaining the plethora of menial jobs that he had held in the last ten years or so. He did this in a slow, stuttering manner that caused Zarkov’s eyes to roll and his skin to crawl. He needed numbskulls like this one for his operation but that didn’t make them anymore pleasant to deal with.

“Silence.” Zarkov commanded, he stood so abruptly that it caused Orion to lose his comfortable spot in the gaunt man’s lap. The cat deeply disliked disruptions to his nap time so he flicked his tail at his master sarcastically then ran to his little bed, tucked into the far corner of the office, and went back to sleep.

Rando swallowed hard and worried that Zarkov would vaporize him right then and there. What had he done wrong?

“What?” the prince asked, noticing the potential employee’s gaze fixed on the small device he was holding in his left hand. “Seriously?” Zarkov asked, “If I wanted to kill you I’d choose something a little more deadly, and a lot more painful, than a stylus.”

With that he shook his head in dismay, reminded himself that henchmen were actually better when they were nincompoops. He thought to prolong the man’s suffering but was beginning to have a powerful urge for a space-cigarette. “You’re hired...as long as you stop talking.” Zarkov said as he rubbed at his temples with his long thin fingers.

“Really?!” Rando jumped up excitedly.

“Yes, yes, yes. You start immediately. Now go to level 24 and get fitted for your uniform.”

“What about the excellent dental?” he smiled and Zarkov cringed at the sight, the moron’s mouth looked like a science experiment had run over a deer during a mudslide.

“The what?” Zarkov snapped at Rando, becoming more annoyed with the *thing* standing in front of him by the minute.

“The ad said that there would be excellent dental. Will I need a card or...?”

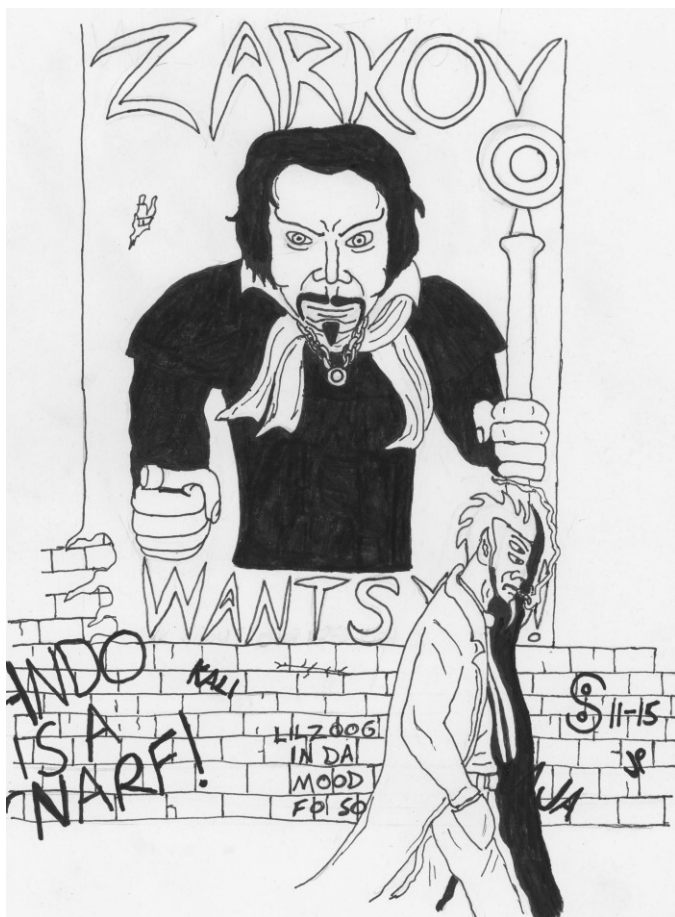
“Oh, yes! You are correct. We’ll see about that dental insurance right away.” Zarkov smiled in his typical sinister fashion.

“Thank you sir!” Rando saluted his new boss and hurried out of the room, eager to find level 24.

“Oh the dental...” Zarkov quipped, speaking to the door as it closed, “they always ask about the

dental. It's a shame they never live long enough to use it."

The brilliance, as well as the hilarity, of the marketing ploy he used when hiring caused him to burst into a riotous cackle. Orion opened an eye briefly, shook his head, then went back to sleep.



Job Hunt – by Jason Foster

LITTLE PRINCES

“It’s *my* ball!” the little prince screamed at his younger brother as he pawed at the object of his desires with one hand while simultaneously pushing his other hand into his sibling’s face.

“No fair Zee! You get all of the good toys. I’m going to tell Dad!”

“No you will not.” said a firm voice from above as a hand reached down and plucked the object from the elder brother’s grip. “This is a Nectarian Faberge egg and it is a gift from your father to the Dominar Prime of the Galactrons.

Time for your old buddy Orion to step in. The author has just assaulted you with some big words that I feel need explaining. Not all of us are so well-traveled as I after all. Seeing as how you’re sitting on Earth reading a book by a little-known author I’m going to assume that you are not. Nectarians, you see, are a race of vacuum-dwelling creatures from the Helix Nebula, a beautiful place with a lovely tour if you’re ever in the neighborhood. Anyway, they ride swirling

drafts of plasma and live off of the organic molecules they are able to filter from the gas. As adults they grow to enormous sizes, some with such terrifying wingspans as 200-300 feet across. Yikes! It is for that very reason that few souls are brave enough, or stupid enough, to venture into the nebula in search of their eggs, which are often deposited on any small solid body the adult Nectarians can find. Were you to be careless enough to get caught raiding one of their nests, filter-feeders or not, they would likely rip you to shreds. Therefore their eggs carry an extremely high price and make for perfect gifts from one reigning monarch to another.

As to the Galactrons they appear to be some sort of mechanical species left behind by creators unknown. After making contact with organic races all over the galaxy and visiting their planets the Galactrons decided that their own world was missing something very important...an animal ecosystem. They tried desperately to engineer their own fauna but failed miserably. Imagine large metal birds constantly crashing into skyscraper windows and mechanical monkeys attempting a revolution to overthrow their makers. It was all quite a kerfuffle. Needless to say all of their metal animals were decommissioned shortly after the experiment began and the Galactrons decided it better to collect organic species from other worlds instead. Knowing nothing of which animals would eat other ones this too was a complete catastrophe at first but that is a story for another time...

Anyway, back to the Faberge egg. Decorated in all its splendor it still contained the fetus of a developing Nectarian. One that would, in the cosmologically minuscule time of only 160 years or so, hatch into a creature that would be content inhabiting a planet's northern or southern pole, flying often into the upper atmosphere to bathe itself in the solar radiation of the aurora. It was certain to bring a smile to the shiny metal gob of the Dominar Prime...assuming it survived the antics of the

spoiled little Telosian princes, that is.

“Zarkov! Tang!” came their father’s booming voice from the hallway. Both children straightened up at the sound and quickly sought shelter amongst the folds of their mother’s flowing dress.

“Dear is my collar stiff enough?” Emperor Kladd asked as he entered the room.

“Yes it looks perfect my love.” their mother responded. “I would expect nothing less of Nyzlix and neither should you. Has he ever let you down before?”

“Well there *was* that once...”

“You mean the one time we don’t talk about in front of our children?” she glared at her husband as she pushed the boys into her dress and attempted to cover their ears.

“Darling, really? If they ever expect to be rulers of the Telosian Empire they’re going to need to learn about vaporizations sooner or later.”

“Yes.” she smiled sarcastically, “But can it please wait until after Tee’s sixth birthday please? I would like my children to think their father a decent man at least that long.”

“I had Nyzlix’s wife vaporized when he failed to notice a loose stitch on my dinner coat! Had the same happened with my father he’d have had the servant’s entire family loaded into a catapult and shot into the heart of a dying star!”

He was right. Discipline had grown lax amongst the great houses of the Empire. Centuries ago there were entire workforces dedicated to vaporizations and catapultations. Why the emperor’s own uncle once had an elephant, its trainer, his

family and the entire staff of a travelling circus catapulted simply because the beast sneezed in his general direction. A hard man to please old Duke Plaxnod. Plaxnod the Unsympathetic, as he became known.

“Dear.” she smiled, “You’re getting upset and that makes your eyebrows ruffle. Calm down then come here and let me fix them.”

“Fine.” he grumbled and appeared to relax just a bit.

The Empress released her grip on the children as he approached. The emperor gave them each a quick glance that said “If you break that egg I’m going to break you!”

He was man of great presence, still the boys did love their father, even if he had a habit of terrifying them. They ran up and each hugged one of his legs.

“Ah...Mayrin, they’re doing it again!” he pleaded with his wife.

“That’s because they *love* you, you fool.” she said through clenched teeth and a forced smile, “You’re a world-crushing bastard but we *do* love you.” she pinched his cheek and gave it a quick shake.

“Just please...” he began but was interrupted by his wife attentively trying to fix his wild-looking eyebrows, “Just please, none of you embarrass me tonight. The Galactrons can churn out ships and war-bots faster than any other species in the galaxy and with them as close allies we can expand the influence of the Telosian Empire to frontiers my father and those before him never even dreamed of!” he raised a fist into the air and stared off into space.

“Yes dear, we will do our best not to be an embarrassment.”

The Emperor's cold grin, one that would someday be mirrored almost exactly by his eldest son Zarkov, temporarily melted.

"Mayrin I'm sorry, boys come here." he said as he knelt to pick them up. He lifted them into his arms and with the help of his wife they enjoyed a big family hug. He did what he did to protect his power and secure a legacy for his children. If she could not see that, if it in any way diminished her love of him, he had long-ago come to terms with that. Theirs had been an arranged marriage, one for political purposes, but Kladd had come to truly adore his wife.

The view from the balcony was quite spectacular. The ballroom of the palace detached during special events and floated off into the night sky of Telos to give party-goers a fantastic view of the planet below and the stars above. On this particular evening it had nestled itself into an orbit at a high enough latitude so that the entire ballroom found itself inside of the planet 'Telos' northern aurora. The floor was of course opaque, so as not to terrify guests beyond belief, but the walls were crystal clear and provided an astonishing view of the blue-green world outside. Small transparent diamond-shaped portholes in the floor ringed the dance floor and gave the more adventurous guests a chance to get their adrenaline pumping. Neither of the little princes would go anywhere near them, they didn't trust the transparsi-steel.

The ballroom featured a grand balcony that ran like a ring around the interior of the entire structure

and from their viewpoint on it the two little princes could look down at all of the strange alien visitors enjoying the amazing spread of exotic foods and dancing the night away. Looking up from the ground level the lights that hovered over the dance floor looked like stars but from where the boys stood they simply looked like things to play with, little blue-white orbs that hung, suspended by anti-gravity fields, in mid-air a few meters above the crowd below.

It's at about this point that you're probably thinking logistics...I know I am. Just how, exactly, does one bring in food for the party if the ballroom detaches itself and floats away like a bubble caught in an updraft? Not only that, but what about any late arrivals? Surely you wouldn't just say, "Oh well, you should have made it here sooner. Have some cheese and crackers and wait in the study."

No. For you see my Telosian friends could be rather clever when they put their minds to it. So fond of vaporizations was the long line of Telosian kings and emperors that eventually someone stumbled across the idea of de-vaporization. Sadly that proved quite impossible but the mere notion did eventually lead to teleportation.

Personally I never fancied the idea of being atomized only to (hopefully) be reconstituted somewhere far away but I often had little choice in the matter. When you're resting in the arms of a Telosian royal you just kind of go where they go. No way was I going to verbally protest and break my cover. I'd be breaking the Voxxl Cat Code and that's something that's simply not done.

So anyway, perhaps the authors of these stories are beginning to rub off on me, as I find myself rambling more than I used to. I believe my original point had something to do with food and drink, as well as inconsiderately late-arriving guests,

easily being teleported up to the ballroom, straight into the waiting arms of servers and attendants.

“Hey, watch it you little snots!” one of the servers, pushing a cart full of tarts that had just been ‘ported up, bumped into little Prince Tang.

The boy looked up and raised a questioning eyebrow. “I’m sorry, what was that you just said to me food-slave?”

The server, barely an adult himself, cringed in terror when he realized who he’d just mouthed off to.

“I uh...I...” he lifted the lid off of one of the food trays, “Would you care for a tart my lord?”

“Hmmp.” Tang scoffed, “Yes I would love a tart.”

The server smiled nervously.

The little prince plucked one from the cart and popped it into his mouth. Still chewing he uttered, “I also want your shoes.”

“My shoes? Why?!”

“Because,” Tang began as he swallowed the last bite of tart and reached for another, this time a Brillberry one, “it will get you into trouble.”

“I should think so! If I go down there and start serving dignitaries in my bare feet I’ll be fired!”

Now on most planets “fired” would simply refer to the termination of one’s employment but on Telos, especially in the service of the royal family, it carried with it a slightly more ominous overtone. To put it simply you were loaded into a magnetically accelerated cannon and fired into the sun. Very unforgiving sorts, the Telosians. Still...they knew how to make one hell of a couch. Their futons weren’t half-bad either.

“So just what are you going to *do* with those?” Zarkov asked his little brother after the doomed young man headed for the lift that would bring him down to the dance floor and immediately to the attention of his superiors.

“I don’t know. Why?”

“Because if you took them for no reason then you were just being an unimaginative jerk. We need to do something with them, then it’s more funny.”

“Switch them out with Dad’s shoes?” Tang asked.

“No.” Zarkov waved him away, “Dad has like fifty pairs of shoes in his closet, he wouldn’t even notice.”

“Then what Zee? We’re gonna get to watch him get fired anyway. Isn’t that good enough?”

Zarkov looked around the room. “What about...catching a couple of the sprites?”

Remember those hanging orbs of light that were mentioned earlier? Well they’re actually tiny little beings from the planet Drall that possess the remarkable ability of anti-gravity flight as well as bioluminescence. Is it any wonder that they were captured in droves and put into what were basically hamster-balls to light rooms all across known space? By the Great Yarn-Ball of the Galaxy who knows what foul purposes they would have found for my kind were we ever stupid enough to reveal our true abilities. I cringe at the very thought.

“Why? Sprites are stupid, they just like to float there.”

Zarkov raised a mischievous eyebrow and gave his brother a wicked smile, “How well do you think they could float there if we got them drunk?”

Tang immediately began to undo the laces on one of the shoes. He tossed the other to his brother.

"This is going to be hysterical." he giggled.

"Of course it will be," Zarkov smirked, "*I* thought of it didn't I?"

"Oh shut up. You're not as smart as you think you are."

"Preposterous. I'm a genius."

"I genius who gets his butt kicked by his little brother." Tang beamed.

"Just shut up and snatch a sprite." the older brother snapped.

The party-goers below were so busy putting on airs and attempting to impress one another that they did not notice the two boys, hanging half-way over the balcony railing, flailing a pair of shoes about in the air. Tang slapped his hands to his mouth to muffle a terrified scream as he lost grip on the laces and his went flying across the room where it landed with a wet plop into a bowl of punch. Luckily it had been a rather unpopular punch and no one was even in the vicinity of it to notice.

"You moron." the older brother snapped.

"Shut up Zee, I don't see you doing any better."

"Hmph." he scoffed then made another attempt, "Got one!" Zarkov gloated loudly. He glanced at the floor below to see if anyone had heard him but the Space-Sax music, being played by the one and only Bozrel-Blith of Zanktan V, had easily drowned him out.

Once Zarkov had removed the sprite Tang grabbed the shoe from his brother and began to fling it about wildly, trying to catch one of his own. He was beginning to get frustrated.

"Dammit! It's not that easy."

"Was plenty easy for me."

“Shut up Zee!”

“Oh stop your whining and put down that shoe. We’ve got *one* of them, that’s enough.” he held the glowing orb in both hands and showed it to his brother, “Go and get some alcohol.”

“Fine!” Tang said in a frustrated voice as he let the shoe drop onto the balcony and turned to walk toward the kitchen.

“Teel!” Zarkov yelled at his brother.

“What Zee?!”

“Make sure it’s something really strong okay?”

The boy hunched his shoulders. “How am I supposed to know that?”

“Oh I forgot. You’re only five.” Zarkov smirked.

“You’re only seven!” was the response.

“Yes, and I’ve been sneaking booze from Dad’s cabinet since I was your age.” he signaled for Tang to return to him. “You take this and crack it open.” he placed the orb with vaguely audible squeaks emanating from it into his brother’s hand, “I’ll go and find some of the good stuff.”

With an air of absolute authority the little prince strode bravely through the kitchen and into the storeroom at the back of it. The alcohol was on the high shelf.

“Nothing that a crate of strategically placed Trillian escargot can’t solve.” he thought as he gave the large box a push. It was extremely heavy, but he managed.

“Damned snails weigh a ton.” he thought as he began to paw through the bottles of liquor.

“Ooh,” he said aloud, “Lactating Helgamot, the strongest, and most strangely named, beverage in the entire galaxy.” It was micro-molecular ethanol,

capable of exceeding 200 proof yet still tasted like a mild mixture of milk and macka-nut juice. At least that's what the label proclaimed.

"This should do just fine." Zarkov smiled.

"Hey what are you...oh, I'm sorry my lord I did not realize it was you."

The boy turned to see one of the chef's assistants standing in the doorway.

"Forgive me my lord, but would your father approve?"

"Why?" Zee asked, "Are you going to tell him?"

"Absolutely not your highness!"

"That's what I thought." he scoffed as he dismounted the large box of smelly alien snails.

"If I may be so bold sir..." the assistant started.

"Yes?" the boy asked as he strode for the door, paying little attention to the woman as he passed, as was his typical attitude toward servants.

"I would...uh...keep that away from open flames, electrical current...and uh...don't drop it."

"Uh huh." Zarkov said dismissively as he pushed the door open and left the room.

Would I have been present at the time, instead of taking a nap back at the palace on the lady of the house's new Chesterfield, I would have been tempted to break my vow of silence should I have seen the young master daring to toy around with a bottle of Lactating Helgamot. I will not go into details, suffice it to say that it was banned on the casino planet of New JanJanga after a rash of late night elevator explosions.

Not that he paid any attention to the goings on below but by the time Zarkov returned to the balcony his father had begun to make a speech.

“Did you get it open?” Zarkov demanded, raising his voice to speak over the noise coming from the floor below.

Tang turned slowly to his brother with an expression of shame on his face.

“Dammit did you kill it?”

“No.” he said, shaking his head. “But I broke the orb pretty bad.”

“Well...how did you open it?”

Tang hung his head.

“You hit it with the shoe didn’t you?”

Silence gave him his answer.

“You *do* know that there is such a thing as finesse don’t you? There’s a button on the backside, idiot.”

“I didn’t know. You didn’t tell me.”

“So you smashed it with a shoe?” Zarkov put his palm to his face. “Let me see it.”

The younger brother lifted up the broken orb, the tiny sprite standing in his hand among the shattered pieces looked absolutely terrified.

“Oh, I’m so sorry he scared you.” Zarkov said in a friendly voice as he leaned in to the creature. His wicked smile belied his true feelings. “You must be terribly thirsty having been stuck in that ball for several hours.”

The tiny being, shaped like a fat upright frog and with skin of sparkly white, peered up at him with eyes so large they seemed as though they would fall out of their sockets at any moment. It shook its head, or at least what would be its head if it’d had a neck, in acknowledgment.

“I’ve got just the thing,” Zarkov snickered as he pressed the button that opened the top of the blast-proof and lead-lined bottle. A vague scent of licorice

emerged from it, nothing at all reminiscent of the flavor claimed by the packaging. He poured a little into the palm of his hand, trying desperately to ignore the sudden and intense tingling sensation that it caused upon touching his skin. "There you go little fellow."

"Mreh!" the creature bellowed in protest.

"Oh I'm sorry...little...lady?"

"Myeh." it beamed and rocked side to side in approval.

"Anyway...here you go." he wanted the beast to hurry, it felt as though the liquor was beginning to eat into his flesh.

Gingerly it stooped and lapped at the noxious concoction. Both boys expected it to recoil in horror at the taste but instead it seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the stuff. When it had cleaned up every drop from Zee's hand it looked up at both of them with a queer smile on its little face.

"How do we know it's drunk?" Tang asked.

"Put it on the floor." Zarkov commanded.

Tee did as his brother ordered and upon placing the little animal onto the cold metal floor of the balcony it began to walk toward the edge, straight at first then almost immediately in a zig-zag fashion. They watched as it neared the drop-off and for just a moment forgot that it could fly. Zarkov reached out and grabbed it as it toppled over the edge but felt its anti-gravity field tingle in his hand. Good, it was drunk but could still fly.

"Tee, get the orb."

"But it's broken."

"Just do it jackass."

Tang complied and began to gather up the pieces.

“Take the laces off of the shoe.” Zarkov followed up his previous command.

“Oh, I get it.” Tang smiled.

The boys worked with the laces to haphazardly stitch the ball back together. The little sprite let out a funny sound that reminded them of a giggle as they closed it up inside. Zarkov lifted it up above the balcony’s railing and could feel the vibration, but not hear the sound, of the creature inside it hiccupping.

“Watch this.” the elder prince smiled at his little brother before dropping it from his grasp.

They both watched in surprise as it fell like a rock. Only about a foot from the floor did the little inebriated animal inside finally realize what was happening and decide to do something about it.

“And that is why, Dominar, I feel that our alliance will not only be one that greatly benefits our two cultures financially, but also secures our borders against the encroachment of the ambitious Creams.” Emperor Kladd spoke into the microphone that was hovering directly in front of him, “Together we will...”

His eyes darted to the ceiling where he saw a stray sprite bumping into it repeatedly.

“As I was saying,” he recomposed himself, “Together we...”

Trying to maintain eye-to-lens contact with the Dominar of the Galactrons Kladd couldn’t help but notice the rogue sprite in his peripheral vision as it dropped in altitude and bumped into several of the other ones who were doing exactly as they’d been instructed. What was wrong with this one? A cursory glance around the room revealed two snickering little princes on the balcony above him. As his gaze met

theirs' they straightened up then turned and ran from his sight, terrified of that piercing stare.

"Is...something...wrong?" the Dominar spoke from his position, seated at the table across from the Emperor, in his mechanical tone.

"No." Kladd responded, returning his gaze to his guest. "I..."

Just then the sprite completely lost control, knocking several of the other sprites around the room and then diving down into the crowd, which erupted into an instant clamor.

"What...is...the...meaning...of...this?" the Dominar asked, dramatically raising the volume of his voice modulator.

"I'm terribly sorry Dominar, we shall get this under control." the Emperor replied, then signaled angrily at his men along the outer edges of the room. They jumped into action, chasing the rogue sprite through the aisles in an attempt to catch it. Watching from the shadows the two boys couldn't help but laugh when it banked quickly, causing two of the guards to slam face-first into each other. Still, they knew they were in deep shit.

"Get my boys!" Emperor Kladd growled at his nearest Lieutenant in the lowest voice he could manage. He turned back to look at the scene unfolding before him and his eyes went wide as he watched the little creature take a sudden dive right toward the Dominar. With a rattle of tableware it smashed into the setting at the center of his entourage's table and exploded with a brief, but fiery, blast. The shockwave, though not strong enough to injure anyone, still managed to send the oil soup and grease goulash that the Galactrons had been dining

on splattering in a miniature mushroom cloud that doused the officials thoroughly.

Kladd could only watch as the Dominar rose from his seat, futilely wiping the mess from his face and body with his napkin. “This...is...unacceptable!” he roared then gestured for his entourage to stand.

The Emperor tried to plead with him but it was to no avail, the Galactrons walked, clanking loudly the entire way, to the back of the room and stepped into the ‘porters.

“Boys!!!”



Drunken Sprite – by Jeremy Kraven



Looking for Trouble – by Stephanie Parria

TIME CRACKS

(OR HOW I BROKE THE SPACE-TIME CONTINUUM)

It started with a crack, a small one. Something that was more like a yellow line, it seemed to just float there before me. I stretched my hand, if that's what you could call it, out to touch it, thinking it was just a figment of my imagination. Maybe an illusion, I haven't slept since the change...but I guess that's to be expected isn't it? I think I should explain. The words are hard to find so let's go back a few steps. My name is Emily. At least that's what it was when I was human. *Am* I still human? Does a human mind constitute a human soul? You see I *was* a human, up until a few months ago at least.

I lived on a world called Xavion, one of dozens of human colonies within 20 light years of Earth. Our grandparents had settled there about sixty years before but something truly terrible had only recently come to light. The early probes registered a planet where human beings could live and thrive but they failed to detect something very important, Xavion's

existing residents. The early scout craft were attacked and their crews slaughtered in their base camps. It became apparent to the leaders in orbit that they faced a terrible decision. They had neither fuel nor supplies to return to Earth nor would they even be welcome there since they were mostly political and religious outcasts. They *had* to settle on Xavion but with an intelligent and fiercely territorial native race protecting it from invaders the choices were either a protracted war of attrition, one the colonists would likely lose since their numbers were far fewer than that of the natives, or a genetically engineered virus designed to cleanse the planet of its original inhabitants.

I can't help now but wonder if those nosy young journalists should have ever gone poking into business that was considered long buried. The entire colony erupted into complete turmoil at the discovery of what had been done by our ancestors in order to safeguard our future. Many felt that their lives were somehow tainted, that *none* of us deserved to breathe Xavion air.

Some were so extreme that they became radicalized and acted on it. A group of fanatics calling themselves Native Sun engineered a virus of their own and released it into the general population. Our numbers dwindled from over fifty thousand to less than three thousand in just one year. Society completely collapsed and those of us still alive knew that the end was near. First my friends got sick, then my family. I watched as all of them fell into the fever and stupor and slowly wasted away.

It seemed as though it'd never come for me and when I'd been reduced to rummaging through the

remains of the colony, searching for anything left to eat, only occasionally catching sight of another survivor moving through the shadows, that I began to feel warm. Two days later, at least I think that's how long it was, and I remember lying in a pile of rubbish and staring up at the yellow-orange star overhead. Death was so close I could taste it.

Irony most definitely has a twisted sense of humor. When I came to I was in a place that I did not recognize, and it's hard to describe but I did not recognize *myself* either. None of the familiar sensations of being human were present, yet I could think and conceptualize. I could see something, a rack of equipment in a dimly lit room, but I could not move my eyes. The Founders went to their graves never knowing it but some of the native inhabitants of our world did indeed survive the original virus. They went underground, they scavenged from our colony...they learned. They'd only managed to stay alive by isolating their populations as much as possible but even those survivors were still slowly falling to the man-made plague. Their most brilliant individual, Hark, had single-handedly pulled them from the late Bronze Age into the Space Age in the span of only 60 years and he'd been hard at work trying to save what was left of his people, which he called "Grinn".

With no way to measure time I couldn't tell you how long I stared unblinkingly at that rack of equipment before his strange alien face stepped into view. Some hours at least, I think. He talked to me, *showed* me the plague. Theirs was different. It wasn't a fever, it was a condition that began with a tingle in the extremities and slowly progressed into paralyzation,

eventually causing death by suffocation. Hark had finally contracted it himself and could no longer use his left hand so his daughter assisted for some days but she too began to have trouble using her fingers. They explained to me that biological bodies would never be able to escape the plague, that mechanical ones were the only salvation. They meant to save me, but not purely out of pity. I was a lab rat you see, the first to undergo the process. How does it feel? Well, I *look* human but I do not *feel* human. Imagine your whole body being asleep yet you can still move, if that makes any sense.

With my help we managed to finish the transfer process for both Hark and his daughter but it was too late for any of the others in his group. He told me that now that they were immune to the virus they'd go on, search the planet for other survivors who they could add to the ranks of their new mechanical species.

There was an old transport ship back at the colony but it had been sabotaged by radicals toward the end. Little chance I could ever get it going again, especially since I knew nothing about how a starship worked. I suppose I was now immortal and that I could learn, but the guilt that my generation felt for what our ancestors did to the Grinn made me decide to go with them instead, try to help put it right. Maybe then, and only then, with the help of Hark and his people I'd eventually set off to find another human colony. Then again...would they accept me? I'm not *really* human anymore am I? Synthetic skin, artificial eyes...they only look real until you stare too long and then it hits you. Even though it is my own body I still avoid looking too long in the mirror lest I be in horror of

myself.

I ceased keeping time in any human measurement so I could not tell you how long I wandered with Hark and Sen before the day I found the crack. Months maybe? We'd found only one small group of survivors. My new mentor barely had time to download their minds before they faded away. Eventually we'd make our way back to the laboratory and revive them in synthetic form but we carried on in search of others before turning back. Hark had data storage for, and wanted, at least ten. Ten who could go out and find a hundred who could in turn go out and find a thousand...assuming that many Grinn even still drew breath on the entire surface of Xavion.

We'd camped in a little gully one night. We didn't sleep, we didn't require it, but it still felt good to just lay there and stare at the stars in silence for a few hours. With your eyes closed and all of your extraneous sensors deactivated you could *almost* feel like your organic self again, just for a moment, at least. That night I laid against a rock and rested for some time before seeing it. It seemed that despite being mechanical our minds could still wander and create things like mirages or illusions if we allowed them. That's all this was, surely. I ran my index finger along the crack. It was warm. I felt the physical sensation of being pulled in. I closed my eyes and leaned into it.

I fell and kept falling for what seemed like forever. My eyes were closed tight and there was a great warmth that wrapped around me like a blanket. It was soothing and something I had not felt since I had been parted from my dying organic body. Then, without warning, something sharp broke my fall.

There were new sounds all around me, things I had not heard for months...no, for over a year. There were birds singing, my senses were synthetic but would recognize that noise anywhere. They didn't sound like the birds I knew however, their songs nothing like the ones I'd heard on Xavion growing up. My sensors banged off flashes of data all over my electronic mind. The new input came as a flood of information. I forced my eyes open. I was on Earth! There was no doubt about it, I'd seen countless holograms of old Earth and this was definitely it!

I looked around and found the crack to be gone. My excitement was palpable but I suddenly felt very alone. I was on a planet that I'd never seen with human eyes and I had no idea how I'd gotten there. I looked skyward and instinctually activated my mapping sensors. Star maps...stellar drift...the data flooded in. It was indeed Earth, but Earth of 1957. I had fallen through time and appeared to be somewhere in the middle of what used to be called the United States of America.

A moment later I managed to get to my feet and began to feel a little less numb, as "awake" as I could feel in my new body. I didn't recognize the trees or any of the plant species but I made my way through the woods and reached an area that appeared to be part of a colony. No...that's not right, a town. They were called towns. I recognized a 20th century fueling station. I allowed my electronic sensors to kick in and I scanned everything in sight but no living things save for the plant life. Even the birds I had heard in the forest seemed to be absent. As I approached the building my foot landed on something that quickly gave way with a crunch. It was a human skull! I

stepped back and looked at it more closely. It had been picked clean of every bit of flesh but did not appear to have been weathered by long-term exposure to the sun and the elements. A noise from behind, the snapping of a twig, drew my attention back to the forest but I turned to see nothing there.

“Halt!” came a deep voice off to my left. I turned to see a human man standing there. He was wearing a cape and a silver mask. I also recognized what they used to call “blue jeans” and a “t shirt” that bore on the front of it a large letter F, a large letter M, and the symbol of a lightning bolt. I tilted my head to the side, no-doubt in a stiffly mechanical way, confused at what I was seeing.

“What are you supposed to be?” I asked him, to which he only grunted and pointed his index finger at me.

“How did you get here Citizen?” again, he spoke with the deep voice that seemed as though he was attempting to sound like someone from an old superhero film. I couldn’t help it, I snickered slightly. He went to step forward but I quickly put up a hand to stop him. I had never seen another human in my new form and did not want to frighten him if he saw me too closely and noticed that I was not exactly what I appeared to be. Then again he wasn’t exactly normal either, as my sensors were picking up all kinds of strange energy readings from his mask, his belt, and several of the other devices he was wearing.

“Okay...Fantastic Man.” I said, crossing my arms to my chest and giving him my best “fuck off” stare. “That’s close enough.”

A beeping sound came from the metallic looking mask that he wore. His face tensed and he lifted the

object in his left hand and pointed it at my chest. It was something like a metallic looking rod or stick. It started to glow.

“What is that?” I asked, somewhat nervously, raising a questioning eyebrow.

“This is my FUTURE STICK!” his voiced boomed into the condenser microphones that now served as my ears. “You don’t belong here.” he said as he pressed the end of the stick into my chest. “You’re some kind of robot or something. Did you come here to fight the Gobblers or are you their master?” his eyebrow arched up almost comically as he posed the question and squinted his eyes at me accusingly.

“Gobblers? What the fuck are Gobblers?”

“Ha! That’s just what I’d expect you to say!”

“What?” I asked, now becoming genuinely annoyed with the guy.

“Where is the control node?!” he shouted.

I sighed, lowered my hands, then turned my back to him. “You’re right Mister Fabulous. I do not belong here.” I let my voice trail off and waited a moment before turning back to him. “But if I tell you where I come from will you drop the comic book hero shit, seriously?”

“Oh.” he said, straightening up. “Well then...” he grunted and cleared his throat then switched to a more normal tone of voice, “Nathaniel...” he said as he walked closer and extended his hand.

I instinctively turned my head so that my hair mostly obscured my face from view. I tried not to stare back but his eyes, now that I could see them, were such a bright blue that I could hardly help myself.

“Well?” he said, taking my hand into his. He

noticed the temperature of my skin, recoiled, but only for a second. It was as if he sensed my fear and so responded by *increasing* his grip rather than loosening it.

“What *are* you?” he asked. I stole a glance at him and was met with a look of genuine concern.

“I’m...” I started but quickly lost my words, “I’m not sure what I am anymore. Just like you though I’m not from here...or from this time. I’m from way, way far away. The year 2215 and the planet Xavion to be exact.” I looked up at him with a quick and instinctual girlish smile then caught myself and looked away as quickly as possible. “I saw this...crack. I touched it and fell through something and ended up here.”

“Shit.” was his only response.

I found myself more confused than anything else so I turned my head just enough to look up at him.

“What?” I asked.

“Well, I was afraid of this. I’m not the one who built the time device that lets me travel through time but I *did* read some of his journals. He said that it made a ‘rip in space-time’. I was afraid that the more I used it the more there might be some side effects.”

For a minute he didn’t speak. We stood there in the silence of our bleak surroundings, autumn having turned leaves all around us orange and many of them having fallen from their branches. A slight breeze kicked up and blew through my hair. I couldn’t register it in any poetic fashion like I could when I was truly human but I’d gotten used to my mechanical senses and in just some small way it felt “refreshing”.

“You’re not the first person...well...thing, I’ve run into that encountered one of my time cracks.”

“Really?” I asked, this time looking up right into his eyes. Much to my relief he did not even flinch at my appearance.

“Yes. I met a Dilgrok...kinda looks like a short little toad-thing with a toupee and six fingers. He said he’d touched a yellowish crack in space and fell through time to me. It was in my apartment though so it was really uncomfortable for both of us. He had these crazy googly-eyes that made it hard not to laugh at him and he was also really...gassy.”

I giggled and covered my mouth. I became very sad when I realized that it was the most genuine laugh I’d had since becoming...whatever it was that I am now.

“But you got him back home?”

He shook his head and rubbed his hand through the beard on his chin. “I wish I could tell you ‘yes’. Truth is I don’t really know.”

“What do you mean?”

“I couldn’t think of anything else since I didn’t know what time he was from or how to get him to his home planet so I just had him hold my hand when I time travelled back here. I showed up...he didn’t.” his look turned more serious, “I can only hope he got drawn back to his own time and place.”

“Wow...” I muttered. “That stinks.”

“Yes, but I’ve got something even worse to worry about right now.”

“And that is?”

“The Gobblers, remember?”

“Oh yeah, and what exactly are Gobblers again?”

“Gobblers are pan-dimensional beings from Dimension R.”

I rolled my eyes as he began to speak in his cheesy

comic book voice once again. "Uh huh. That's odd. Isn't it usually something like Dimension X?"

"You'd think so..." he started, "Dimension X is really nice though, all cute fluffy things with big eyes and bulbous heads. They're pretty useless but absolutely adorable."

"Okay, Dimension R. Whatever."

"Right." he proclaimed, "Gobblers come from a universe in which they have consumed all organic matter but were saved when they found a series of portals leading to new dimensions. They're disgusting creatures that look like furry beach balls with a mouth. No eyes, no ears, no feet...just a mouth full of razor sharp teeth and the ability to digest an entire goat in like thirty seconds."

"Wow, that *does* sound really bad."

"I can handle the ones that have already come through but I need to find their transport node and close it. For some reason though my future-visor is having trouble locating it."

"Future-visor? Really?" I said snarkily. "What year are you *from* anyway."

"Why the *future* of course. The year 1999!" he said proudly as he lifted his hand into the air.

I let him stand there for a minute until he felt like the fool he was. Eventually he put his hand down and returned to his normal voice. "So can you help me? If you're a robot I thought maybe you could locate it for me."

"Hmm, let me see." I said very sarcastically then glanced around at the nearby buildings. "Post office."

"What?"

"It's in the post office. Either that or they've got an automatic letter sorter that emits Alpha-K

particles.”

He seemed quite surprised at my dry sense of humor.

“Well thank you Citizen. Now you stay here and I will deal with the monsters.” he ran off but made it only a few feet before I called out to him.

“Oh no you don’t, I’m coming with you.”

He turned and put his hand in the air as if to tell me to halt. “I insist ma’am, you’re safer staying here.”

“Yeah that’s okay.” I said as I walked past him, pushing his hand aside. “I’m not organic remember? They won’t eat me. *You* on the other hand are literally stuffed with meat.”

“Wait is that a comment about my weight?” he asked, jogging to catch up with me. “And can you slow down?”

“Hah!” I laughed, “No I wasn’t commenting about your beer belly...you might want to get in better shape if you’re going to play superhero though.”

Just then three of the furry meatballs came around from behind the fueling station and headed straight for us. They moved quicker than I would have thought, rolling at first and then bouncing as they got closer. I saw my new friend’s hand go up and his weapon began to glow once again. It shot out what looked a little like a bolt of lightning and to my horror one of the creatures burst into a terrible display of gore. Who knew that they could possibly contain so much in the way of guts? It exploded outward and all that was left was a ring of fur on the pavement glued down by spray of blood.

He fired another bolt but the second Gobbler bounced to the left and it missed him, instead vaporizing a rack of old tires. The third charged

forward and jumped at him. Knowing I could not be eaten by the thing I jumped in its way and threw my arm up. In mid-air the rolling mass of meat and fur suddenly grew a gaping mouth that opened as wide as the entire thing's body and latched onto me. Its teeth quickly tore through the synthetic skin on my arm and exposed some of the wiring and fluid conduits below. I had seen the components before, when building Hark and Sen's bodies, but I'd never seen my own. At that moment I felt fear, something that was normally accompanied by a surge of adrenaline, but it was not there. That coupled with the physical evidence of my mechanical nature right in front of me made me feel extremely artificial and I really didn't like it. Perhaps only a second or two actually elapsed but my machine brain was capable of replaying and analyzing it to infinity.

My new companion jumped to my aid and brought his first down hard onto the spot above its mouth that could be called its head. It grunted and dropped to the ground where my friend promptly brought his weapon down, impaling it and pinning it to the road. By that time the third had circled around to the side and jumped into the air, its giant maw grabbing onto Monsignor Future's shiny cape.

"Shit!" he yelled and started tugging at the fabric, trying to free it from the grasp of the fat, angry little monster.

I had no idea what kind of strength my robotic body truly had. I mean I knew some of it on paper, but not in practice. I decided at that moment that it was time to find out. I took a few calculated steps, cocked my right leg back, then kicked the beast with all of my might. To my surprise I heard a meaty

crunch and the Gobbler screamed as it flew 22.75 feet and smashed into the station's brick wall at 52.95 miles per hour. I had done all of that math without even thinking about it.

I thought I heard my friend about to say something but I didn't give him a chance. I walked over to make sure the deed was done. As I got within five feet of the thing, which I now assumed to be a corpse, I got my answer. It snarled and jumped at me full-force. I managed to grab it in my hands and my brain calculated its weight as 202.4lbs. Heavy little meatball. It wriggled in my grasp and snapped at my face. Without the adrenaline, without the fog that it created in the mind, killing seemed so much more brutal. My mind recorded every nanosecond of what I did. With a quick exertion I pulled the creature in two parts and dropped it onto the ground. A terrible mess. I would need to clean my shoes.

"Whoah..." I heard from behind me, "...that was...awesome!"

"Just get to the post office!" I yelled at him.

"Right!" and with that he pulled his weapon from the Gobbler corpse still stuck to the road and turned to run, I quickly followed. As we ran up to the post office the door of a car, Oldsmobile it said on the back, popped open and a Gobbler leapt from the bloody front seat where it had been eating some poor soul. Nathaniel's weapon glowed white-hot and with a quick slash he split the animal in two, sending a spray of blood across the other cars in the parking lot. I didn't stop running. Without even thinking about it I jumped through the plate glass and landed inside the building. I looked back to see my friend standing there looking quite surprised. He took a couple of

steps to the side and simply pushed the door open.

"I'm guessing you watched a lot of movies?" he asked.

"Oh shut up. Come on."

There it was, an eerie green glow between one of the aisles at the back of the post office, behind the main counter.

"That's it." Nathaniel nodded. "Transport node."

He walked up to the counter, lifted the little door, then walked through. He motioned for me to follow. I think I was even more surprised than he was that it was completely unguarded. It was just a metal ring barely larger in diameter than my head, floating right there in the aisle a couple of feet off of the ground.

"Wait a minute. How do they fit through there?"

"Dimensional quantum matter shift."

I looked at him skeptically.

"I'm just making things up."

"Really?"

"I just know that they pop out of it really small but get to their full size within a second or two. Anything going into it gets really small too...see."

He reached out his right hand as if to place it into the portal.

"Whoah what are you doing?"

"It's okay. This is how I can stop it."

"And you figured that out *how* exactly?"

"Would you believe that I just wanted to see what would happen if I stuck my hand in it?"

I shook my head, "Yes. Yes I would."

He positioned his hand in line with the center of the portal and then suddenly plunged it in. He stopped just as the shiny metal bracer on his wrist broke the event horizon. The device began to crackle

and spark intensely.

“Oh yeah. I should have mentioned that this part sucks.”

I don't remember much from the next few minutes save for hearing several of the Gobblers as they smashed through the post office's windows. A split second later there was a terrible blast and when my sensors began to register again we were standing in the middle of the rubble pile that had seconds earlier been a building. All around us I could hear bricks settling as they collapsed and the air was full of pieces of paper all slowly drifting down to the ground. Looking over at my new partner I immediately burst into laughter.

“What's so funny?” he asked.

If he could have seen himself he wouldn't have had to ask that question. His face was black and his hair, what little of it he had, was blasted backwards. He looked like one of the old cartoons I had seen ages ago.

“You look like a cartoon.”

We had a good laugh together but a few minutes later we began to hear sirens in the distance and Nathaniel explained to me that now that the Gobbler transport-node had been sealed we should leave the clean-up to the people of the time. I still don't know if that was him trying to avoid tampering with the timeline or just not wanting to do any actual work.

“A little bit of column A, a lot of column B.” I thought.

He saw me looking at the gashes on my arm and put his hand on my shoulder. “We're all different in our own way. I don't know your story but you seem to be upset about what you are.”

“It’s a long story...” I started, “I used to be human. This is...difficult.” I turned away from him again, trying to hide my face with my hair. Partly to disguise my emotions, partly to hide my artificiality.

He patted me on the shoulder and pushed the hair from my face. “What’s your name?”

“Emily.” I said, looking down at the ground.

“It’s not that bad.” he said, “I think you’re quite pretty.”

I couldn’t tell if he was just saying it to make me feel better or if he actually meant it. He smiled his characteristic simplistic smile and reached for a device on his belt.

“Hold my hand.”

“Wait...what’s your name?”

“I told you already, it’s Nathaniel.”

“No...your superhero name?” I smiled.

“You can call me...Futureman!”

I grasped his hand and with the press of a button we were surrounded by a swirl of light that enveloped and then closed in on us. There was a brief moment of darkness and without any type of input I quickly became disoriented. It was brief, as less than two seconds later we “poofed”, for lack of a better term, into somewhere much brighter. My tactile sensors registered the rushing past of wind but I didn’t need them to tell me that, as my clothing was rustling all about. I also noticed my hand still interlocked with that of Futureman. Looking up I suddenly realized that I was staring at Earth’s sun and that my back was to the ground. We were falling! I turned to see a river beneath us rapidly growing larger as well as some sort of stone structures I could barely make out, even with my enhanced telescopic vision. Immediately

surrounding the river was a lovely band of green plant growth but in the distance all I could see was barren desert.

“Does this happen all of the time?”

“Um...” he said as he shook the time device with his free hand. “Not really. I mean yeah, but not very often.”

“Are we going to hit the ground?!” I yelled over the roar of the rushing air.

“No no...just gotta reboot.” he held one of the buttons for several seconds and I watched intently, all the while plummeting to the Earth, as the device’s lights went dark and then lit up again just a few seconds later. A quick glance back revealed just how quickly the ground was approaching.

“How long does this take?!”

“Just a few more seconds!”

I turned back to the ground and analyzed our trajectory. We were headed straight for the feet of what looked to be a giant statue of a lion’s body with a man’s head. The great Sphinx!

“We’re going to hit!” I screamed.

Futureman stashed the time device on his belt and reached for his future-stick. He swung it toward the statue and unleashed a powerful energy blast which slightly altered our descent. My computations showed that we’d hit the river, not the statue or the ground. As the distance between us and the Sphinx opened up I watched as the blast cleanly took off the nose. With my robotic vision I could see several men working below run for cover. None of them were hurt. Good.

“Impact in 7..6...5...” I started calling out almost instinctively. I pulled Futureman to me and put myself between him and the water, which was going

to be nearly as bad as slamming into concrete at terminal velocity.

When my internal chronometer read off one second to impact there was another swirl of light and once again the darkness. I no longer registered anything. No light, no sound, no body against mine. Just the warm embrace of whatever form of scientific magic allowed for time travel. Then with a nearly sickening pulse of light and sound I felt myself hit the ground.

I opened my eyes, and realized I was back on the Xavion. My alien friend Hark was standing over me, his huge black robotic eyes blinked.

“What happened?” he asked.

I looked up at him and smirked. “This might take a minute to explain...”



Futureman vs the Gobblers – by Jeremy Kraven

CAPITOL CITY COMRADES

“Oh Mary Sue you’re just so gosh darned shy!” the girl’s mother exclaimed, “I swear if I didn’t drag you out of the house for grocery shopping you’d never leave that room of yours.”

The daughter shuffled her feet, clad in the popular black and white saddle shoes, looking down at them to avoid her mother’s sanctimonious stare.

“It’s not that mother I promise. It’s...it’s that Bethtown Betty...”

“Go on.” her mother said, lifting her daughter’s face with her left hand. Mary Sue didn’t like the dry feel of it on her tender chin. Dish pan hands, there was no mistaking it. She hoped that when she grew up and got married it’d be to a fella with a good enough job to spring for one of those automatic dish washers so that she wouldn’t have to suffer the same fate. She turned her hands over each other, feeling how soft they still felt. Her mother, Abigail Marshall, took notice and pulled her hand away from her daughter’s chin, feeling somewhat ashamed.

“Well?” she asked.

“She gives me the creeps mother.” Mary Sue blurted out, momentarily locking eyes with the older, but still very attractive, lady.

Mrs. Marshall laughed in the soft and sweet tone that’d been taught to her by *her* mother, one suitable over polite conversation and cocktails.

“That’s just silly dear. With a smile like hers...” she picked up a home and beauty magazine from the kitchen table that bore the celebrity’s face on it, “Why how could she possibly be anything other than delightful? She teaches young ladies, and some not so young,” she winked, “how to keep their homes beautiful and their husbands happy.” she giggled then gave Mary Sue the biggest grin she could manage before putting down the periodical and proceeding to straighten up her daughter’s collar.

“Now. Let’s get that list of ingredients together darling, We’ve got shopping to do. I just know that your apple fritters are going to knock Bethtown Betty’s socks right off!”

The girl grumbled under her breath then straightened and attempted her best “You win Mother.” smile.

Nathaniel Hawkins stood on the sidewalk staring at the menu for Greasy Bob’s Hover-Dogs.

“C’mon pal.” Greasy Bob, or at least the man that Nathaniel had always *assumed* was Greasy Bob, sighed. “If you haven’t noticed I’ve got other customers.” he

motioned to the crowd.

“Oh, sorry.” Nathaniel said to the man in the dirty apron. “I guess I’ll go with a classic. Give me the Laser Lard, heavy on the relish please, and an Atomic Cola.”

“What size?” the stubbled jowls of the man flapped as he spoke disinterestedly. “Kiddie, Regulation or Olympic?”

“Um...Olympic please.”

“One hog dipped and double-zapped with a diabetes bomb.” Greasy Bob called over his shoulder at the woman who was working the grill behind him. She wore a pink apron stained with grease and condiments and held a cigarette in her mouth with what must have been three inches of ash hanging from its tip. She simply grunted in acknowledgment. Bob raised his eyebrows questioningly and said in a smug voice, “Will that be all for you sir?”

“Yep.” Nathaniel gave a partial smile.

“Good. Swipe your thumb and step to the right please.”

He did as was asked of him. The food wagon’s thumb-reader was old and the wording on it was faded from thousands of swipes but he knew the drill; swipe your thumb, enter your five digit code, press the green button.

“Next!” Bob called out.

A young lady with two bratty kids quickly took Nathaniel’s spot at the counter as he moved aside. He watched as the lady at the grill, Marjory, he seemed to remember Bob calling her during some other visit, pressed a button on the dog dispenser and one plopped from the machine’s latex sphincter into her gloved hand. She pulled the lid off of one of the three

vats near the grill and he saw steam rise from it. In the dog went, once , then twice. After a nice solid coating of lard the woman tossed the slippery frankfurter into a metal chute next to the grill and Nathaniel watched as it slid into the laser chamber, coming to a sudden halt in the small glass box as it bumped into the back side. A moment later metal skewers punctured it from each end and lifted it to the center of the container. A bright flash of red light came from the box and in an instant his dog went from raw to well-done, only the slightest hint of charring on the skin, just like he liked his hotdogs.

He'd intended to watch the rest of the automated process but was disturbed by the sudden beeping of the device he carried in his left front pocket, the future-pager.

Greasy Bob looked around trying to identify the source of the sound, then looked directly at Nathaniel. "Hey check it out, he's got one of them old-style pagers. What is this kid, the '80s?" and with that he laughed. He was soon followed by several of the customers waiting in line.

The food and 124 ounce cola slid out of a nearby shoot. Nathaniel snatched them up, making a face at Greasy Bob. "Yeah, well at least I don't sell hover-dogs out of a non-hover cart."

"Hey you take that back kid! That's slander! I've been in business for twenty-five years. If it's gotta hover, don't look no further."

"Yeah I know the jingle." the younger man replied. He took a big bite of his dog then spoke again, this time with his mouth half-stuffed, "The best hotdogs in the world come from hover-carts, that's why yours aren't the best...they're just the closest to my

apartment.”

“Excuse me ma’am.” Bob said to the lady who was still trying to place her order while also wrangling her annoying children before turning his full attention to Nathaniel “You wanna come down here and accuse my dogs of not being of the hover-variety buddy? Where do you get off?”

Nathaniel grabbed one of the yellow mustard bottles from the counter and aimed it at the bottom of the cart. With a quick squeeze he shot a stream of it forth where it seemed to stick in mid-air partway under the cart. “See, no hover, just mirrors.” he smiled.

Greasy Bob didn’t know what to say. He was terribly angry but also felt like he had to apologize to the line of customers, at least half of which were quickly dispersing and grumbling under their breath about being lied to.

“Don’t you ever come back! You hear me kid?” the man yelled, waving a spatula at Nathaniel as the young man walked away, casually eating his hotdog.

“Christ, I’m ruined.” he could hear Bob say to himself as his voice faded into the background noise of the city.

Then one more voice, this one louder and resonating with more authority. “Sargent Allen, C.C.P.D., what’s this I hear about you misrepresenting your *stationary* dogs as those of the *hover* variety?”

Everyone in the galaxy, well the civilized bits of it anyway, knows that the only real hot dogs are those that’ve been hovered. Call it one of those quirks of physics but something about the flavor and texture of a tube of pig by-product is fundamentally

altered for the better once it's interacted with an anti-gravity field for some time. Either that or we're all suckers that will fall for clever marketing schemes.

Futureman, now suited up in his characteristic lightning-bolt t-shirt and silver mask wiped the last bits of laser-dog from his mustache and pressed the button on his time device. The familiar swirling flash of light engulfed him and in a moment he was standing near the large radio tower that acted as an amplifier for the intra-time communication device that he'd left with that helpful fellow who always alerted him to danger. What was his name? He must remember to ask it this time.

The gentleman's instantly recognizable mug appeared as he came around the corner, out from behind one of the soaring tower's metal legs.

"Damn it," Futureman thought, "I *just* had a question I wanted to ask him. Now I can't remember what it was. Oh well."

"Futureman, thank goodness you've come!" the man said.

Were it not for the fact that his surroundings actually *were* in color Futureman swore that he could easily forget that he wasn't in a 1950's b-movie with the way these people talked.

If it helps, for the benefit of your engrossment in the story, don't be afraid to imagine everything happening in black and white. I was alive during this time period and even I do it from time to time.

"Of course Citizen. I apologize for being a few minutes late." he thought about the laser dog, how

he'd not rushed eating it...then he thought about how he'd used a time machine to travel to *when* he now was. He could have simply set it to materialize him only a couple of minutes after the S.O.S. had been sent. He rubbed his chin in thought.

"Futureman?"

"Oh, yes. How can Futureman serve the people of Capitol City on this fine day?"

"Well, it all started two days ago..." the man began, rubbing his left eyebrow in thought, "folks just started acting...funny."

"Since you sent me a distress signal I will assume you don't mean they started throwing pies at one another and spraying each other with seltzer." Futureman boomed in his heroic tone.

"No, I mean they started sharing things with their neighbors and not even asking for them back!"

Futureman furrowed his brow in confusion. "And?"

The man leaned in close, though there was no reason to do so as they were completely alone atop a hill. He swallowed hard. "They even started *wanting* to fund public things like libraries, post offices and..." he choked up for just a moment, it seemed as though he might retch, "...health clinics!" He looked Futureman right in the eye and spoke angrily. "My *own brother* offered to trade his services as a mechanic to his neighbor who's a dentist."

"I'm still not following." Futureman admitted, backing away to give the man a strange look. "Those sound like pleasant things."

"They're..." he nearly shouted, then lowered his voice, "they're acting like...like...communists!"

Nathaniel remembered something about a "red

scare” (or was that a red scarf?) from history class but he’d paid little attention. He knew that people of the 1950s were terrified of “commies” but wasn’t really sure why.

“So I guess I should...” he gestured toward town, “investigate?”

“Yes Futureman, right away before any more of that sharing take places. What’ll be next? The rich redistributing their own wealth to the poor?” the man’s face filled with horror, “Ah, I can’t even bare to think about it! I think I’m getting faint.” with that he collapsed into Futureman’s arms. He wasn’t exactly a lightweight and Futureman grunted under his weight.

“Please do something.” he whispered to Futureman, who nodded and leaned him up against one of the tower legs for support.

“Um...okay.” was the hero’s response. “You just rest here, I’ll do what I can.”

He turned and ran down the hill in the direction of town.

The man who watched him as he went, Sam Hill, which you as the reader would know had you bothered to read the first book in this glorious series, could not help but wonder why the fate of his city seemed to constantly rest in the hands of such a peculiar man-child as Futureman. Luckily for our hero most people, however, simply mistook his idiocy for bravery.

“Yeah, 22 cents for a gallon of gas. You believe that shit?” Agent Sanders of the FBI asked his partner as they sat atop the roof of Harvey’s Drugs, watching over the town center.

“Tell me about it.” Agent Denkins replied, “The

world's a crazy place. Next thing you know we'll be buying water out of bottles."

Both men smiled at each other and chuckled.

"Cut the shit!" came an ordered barked over their radio. "You morons keep leaving the button pressed down and the rest of us are actually trying to work."

Denkins made a surprised expression, straightened up, then replied, "Of course sir. Sorry sir."

"Whoah whoah whoah." came Sanders, who'd been looking through the scope of his rifle the entire time. He waved his hand for the other agent to kneel down next to him. "You seeing this Denkins?"

The agent dropped to his knees, grabbed the binoculars that were slung around his neck, then put them to his eyes, resting his elbows against the ledge of the building. Through them he could see a girl, young but not overly so, perhaps sixteen, making her way toward the town center with a strangely dressed man beside her. He looked like something out of one of those science fiction serials that Roger Denkins remembered reading as a child.

"Yeah I definitely see *something*, damned if I know what it is though."

"Girl Scout and a fruitcake in a shiny cape?" Sanders quipped.

"I can see that the guy is dressed like a nut-job Sanders, but what are they doing? Everyone's been told to stay indoors until we've got this threat under control. The order went out on every television and radio station."

"Could they be...? Agent Sanders started to ask.

"No way, the rest of them have been wearing those funky pink outfits with the arm bands. This just looks like a kid and her dim-witted brother."

“Mary Sue.” the girl said shyly, “You’re that Futureman guy aren’t you? Our parents try not to let us hear too much about you, they don’t want us getting distracted from our school work and all, but rumors say you were the one who stopped that giant toddler...oh and that giant spider too!” her face lit up as she spoke.

Futureman smiled, tried to hide his embarrassment from the giddy school-girl.

“Think nothing of it. It’s all in a day’s work for a superhero.”

“Wow.” she said, more to herself than to him. She tried not to smile too big, an attempt to hide her braces.

“I’d really love to know what’s going on here Citizen. I can’t seem to find anyone around to answer my questions. Sure there were a bunch of Jehovah’s Witnesses in pink outfits on one block but they looked too pushy so I ducked into an alley before they could see me.”

“Okay.” she said, “It all started with that gosh-darned competition!” realizing that she’d cursed she put her hand over her mouth, a gesture which Futureman only briefly noticed before dismissing it.

“Better to put her at ease.” he thought, “What *fucking* competition would that be?”

The girls eyes went wide and she blushed before turning her head away, cheeks instantly as red as beets. His comforting gesture had not worked.

“I apologize...” he said in his heroic tone, “I sometimes forget that I am a stranger to your ways. What *damned* competition would that be?”

Mary Sue giggled, holding her hand over her mouth, then said without looking up at him, “The Bethtown Betty Junior Homemaker’s Bake-off Bash.”

“Jeez,” he thought to himself, “I’d hate to be the guy painting the sign for that one. Well I unless I got paid by the letter...”

“I never liked that Bethtown Betty!” the girl exclaimed, snapping him back to attention. This time she actually looked him square in the eye, “She always gave me the heebie-jeebies.” and with that she mocked a chill going down her spine. “Right after the competition folks started acting weird all over town.”

“Can you tell what they’re saying?” Denkins asked his partner.

“Of course I can. You think I’d be an FBI sniper if I couldn’t read lips?”

“Well, what are they saying?”

“The guy’s talking now...butter jars, where do you hide the butter jars?” he said, “Okay now the girl’s responding; the feed store usually carries my size but this time of year quadrangles are hard to come by.”

“Are you sure that’s what they’re saying?” Denkins asked.

“Look, *you* wanna do the lip reading? Sheesh. Maybe it’s some kind of commie code or something, I don’t know.”

Denkins scoffed, "Just watch that trigger finger of yours Sanders, don't need you taking out innocents."

"Hey," Sanders snapped, "you said that pack of nuns on the back street, the ones I opened fire on earlier, checked out...but who was right about them eh? I was. If I'd listened to you they'd have gotten away." he took a moment to adjust his sights, "Card carrying pinkos, the whole lot of them were. Would you just trust me?"

"So you're convinced this Bethtown Betty has something to do with all of the strangeness, all of the folks giving away their belongings and such?" Futureman asked.

"Oh absolutely. This is America mister, where the sweat of your brow earns you something, it isn't just given away!" she opened the pale yellow box that she was carrying in her arms, "Care for an apple fritter Futureman?"

"Sure!"

Denkins dropped his binoculars, "Mother of God she's sharing! She's a god-damned commie! Take her down! Take her the fuck down!"

Futureman's mask registered the shot as soon as the rifle's hammer struck the pin. Instinctively his arm came up and his future-armor deflected the bullet with less than a nanosecond to spare.

"Holy shit!" Sanders yelled, shaken to his core, "Special commie armor! He's a damned super soldier!"

The two men dropped to the roof, hiding behind the ledge, and Denkins fumbled for the radio.

“Air support, we’re gonna need some god-damned air support up here! We’ve got contact with a Ruskie super-soldier!”

The response took a moment.

“What are you two nincompoops going on about?” Director Chandler hissed over the radio.

“You’d better run for cover.” Futureman directed the young lady. She did as he ordered and ducked behind a rusty old Plymouth that was illegally parked near a fire hydrant.

“Just stay down.” he ordered then began to stroll across the town square, in the direction where the shot had come from.

“You look.” Denkins said in a hushed tone.

“No way in hell, you look.”

Both men refused to lift their heads up over the ledge.

“Yoohoo.” Futureman called to them. They did not answer. “Hey I know you’re up there.”

He stood in front of the drugstore for a few moments waiting for a reply. When none came he raised his future-stick into the air and fired a lightning blast at the upper part of the front fascia. It exploded in a cloud of brick and stucco, so pulverized that not a single piece was larger than a quarter. From each side of the newly formed hole a head peaked out at him then quickly retreated.

“I’d really like to know why you were shooting at a little girl.” our hero belted out at them. Again they didn’t respond. “Don’t make me level this building, I’m sure Mr. Harvey would prefer that it stay in one piece...” then he added, “...more or less.”

To his surprise a couple of badges appeared above the top ledge, the men were waving them frantically.

"F...FBI." came a shaky voice.

"I'm afraid that doesn't answer my question." Futureman returned.

"We know what you are ya freak!" came a different voice.

Futureman smirked, then spoke sarcastically in a heavy Russian accent, attempting to joke with the men. "I am Russian super soldier sent by President Stalin to eliminate capitalist pigs!"

"Damned right you are!" one of the men screamed then jumped to his feet, leveled a sniper rifle, and snapped off a quickly aimed shot.

Were either the two men hiding atop the roof or our hero a little smarter they would have known that Stalin had been dead for nearly three years and that his title had been General Secretary of the Central Committee...not President. Oh well, I never claimed to give humans, or any non-feline species really, much credit in the form of intellect.

Even more deftly than with the first shot, having this time seen its point of origin more clearly, Futureman batted away the bullet like it was child's play. In the past he had defended himself against projectiles that were traveling at or near the speed of light, many orders of magnitude faster than the pathetic velocity of just over 2,800 feet per second that the .308 rifle round was moving at.

"Your weapons will have no effect on me." Futureman proclaimed loudly.

"Fire!" Denkins screamed. Another shot left Sanders' barrel, this one aimed so haphazardly that

blocking it wasn't even necessary. With a deft flick of the wrist the hero let loose a blast of energy that fractured the rifle, leaving Sanders holding two separate pieces of what had once been his prized weapon. Tossing it to the ground both agents went for their sidearms. Futureman simply sighed. A couple of wrist flicks, a couple more weapons rendered into dust.

"What the hell *are* you?" Denkins cried.

"I'm a janitor from the future who travels back in time to protect the citizens of Capitol City from radioactive monsters and other bizarre dangers." he said very frankly.

The men looked at him in disbelief. Their eyes then raised, began to slowly scan the entirety of the city center. Futureman was surprised when they suddenly bolted for the ladder at the rear of the building.

"Good riddance." he scoffed.

"Oh hi." he said as he turned to see about a dozen middle-aged ladies in pink dresses exiting a nearby alley and walking directly toward him. They were carrying what looked to be boxes of confections. He waved happily at them.

"Comrade Futureman. We are so glad you could join us." came several voices in unison from the opposite direction, he turned to see more ladies in pink dresses, young ones this time, likely not much older than Mary Sue.

"Okay, the talking in unison thing is a tad creepy." he thought.

"Futureman look out!" he heard a voice come from behind the old Plymouth.

"What? Why?" he asked, "I think they may be

Jehovah's' Witnesses but they *do* have cookies."

"Those are the Commbies!" she screamed in a voice that shook like leaves in a heavy breeze.

"The what?" he asked, looking from one group of women to the other in complete confusion.

"The communist zombie things...the ones that started popping up after Bethtown Betty's Junior Homemaker's Bake-off Bash. The ones I was *telling* you about!"

"Cute, you made up a name for them." he said to himself, "So I'm guessing they're the reason the FBI are here in Capitol City." Futureman yelled, pulling himself into a defensive stance as the two groups of women slowly approached.

"I don't know." she yelled back, temporarily looking over the fender of the Plymouth. "I didn't even know the FBI was here...but I've also been hiding in that tree where you found me since yesterday morning."

"Well, they *are* apparently starting to form large, menacing groups. I guess that could draw a little attention."

"Just watch out, they might try to make you into one of them!"

"Comrade Futureman." one of the younger women in the crowd spoke in a gentle voice so sweet it could have been poured directly from a jar of Bolshevik honey. He turned to face her. "Are you truly above the suffering of the plebeian classes Hero?"

"I have no idea what that means." he said honestly.

The girl who'd spoken decided to dumb it down for him, "Are you rich or poor?"

“Well...poor I guess. I’m a janitor.” he thought.

They took his silence as an answer. “You *know* the suffering of the lower classes. Help us. Help us bring equality for all to this den of capitalist swine.”

Futureman knew next to nothing about politics. Even if he had, however, this wasn’t his time and he didn’t have the right to make decisions for others. He’d protect the city from a threat, nothing more, nothing less.

“Commie propaganda Futureman, don’t listen to it!” Mary Sue yelled.

Tired of her interference a couple of the commbies broke off to go after her.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to decline ladies!” the hero proclaimed. “Now leave her alo....”

He’d become distracted and had forgotten about the middle-aged women approaching from behind, one of them clubbed him over the head with a frying pan.

“...ends out for the tie that binds. Because you’re mine, I walk the line.” a radio in the distance played the familiar melody.

“What?” Nathaniel thought, “Does Ellie have that oldies station on again?”

He opened his eyes, tried to stand as he was greeted by the image of a broadly smiling woman dressed in all pink. It was of no use, his hands were bound firmly behind him, the rope interwoven into

the metal supports of the chair back.

“Well hello there sugar.” the woman’s voice said in a deep southern accent, “Welcome back to the land of the living.”

They were in what looked to be a large storeroom. Flanking Futureman on each side were small tables arranged in neat rows. At each table sat a woman, also dressed in pink, working on cakes or cookies or some other form of confection. A couple of others dashed back and forth up the aisles, bringing fresh supplies to the women who were seated. They also took the finished trays away, presumably to an oven somewhere nearby. The woman he could only assume was Bethtown Betty leaned against a large desk that’d been placed at the front of the room. The entire place seemed to be some strange mixture of sweatshop and classroom.

Futureman’s head was still a bit foggy when he decided to speak, squinting his eyes against the harsh overhead lighting. “Really?” he said, unimpressed. “You’re plan is to take over the U.S. with communist cookies?”

“People *do* love cookies.” she smiled.

“You don’t think anyone’s going to notice what you’re doing and try to put a stop to it?”

“Well they already have, or did you not notice the FBI men shooting at you in the town square? Why they’ve already taken out a couple dozen of my little test subjects.”

“So then the word’s already out. Your scheme is at an end, you might as well just untie me.”

She raised a questioning eyebrow.

“I’ll protect you from government bullets until you can turn yourself in, okay? That’s the best deal you’re

going to get out of me. I don't take kindly to anyone who threatens the lives of the good people of Capitol City."

"Mr...?"

"You can call me Futureman!"

"Uh huh. Well Mr. Futureman, do you actually think that any of this is the real, actual plot?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, suddenly very confused.

She walked up, heels clacking against the concrete floor as she went, then slapped him across the face. It felt as though she'd hit him with a steel gauntlet.

"This city is just a sample audience darling." she said as she walked back toward her desk, "Product testing if you will. Little capitalist lab rats." she leaned on her desk, turned, smiled, "When my associates decide to start slipping U23A into the food and water supply of the entire country the FBI will be none the wiser. In fact we *wanted* them to find out about this little operation."

"So they'll think they crushed your Soviet plan, won't be expecting it again?" he connected the dots.

"Exactly." she sighed. "But this little plan isn't a Soviet one. Let's just say that I work for someone a little...higher up the food chain. Now the real question is, what do I do with you? You're an anomaly Mr. Futureman. You shouldn't be here at all and you sure as shootin' shouldn't have all of those fancy toys that you were carrying."

Futureman took stock of what he still had on him. His visor and future-stick had been taken and were lying on a table about ten feet away, but his belt was still in place.

"Should you decide to help us, help the noble

cause of global Socialism then I'm certain that we can make it more than worth your while."

Futureman bit his lip, stared her down for a minute.

"You really think that ridiculous smile is gonna sell me that truckload of horse shit you're peddling?" he blurted, "Besides, if it's not the Soviets you're working for then why bother turning Americans into communists in the first place?"

Slowly her smile disappeared.

"Now that's for me to know and you to never find out." she said in a sassy tone of voice, "Oh well. If you're going to be so stubborn I guess I don't have much of a choice. I'm not sayin' that you wouldn't be useful, but we can just as easily toss you into one of the confectionery ovens and make future-fritters out of you."

Futureman laughed.

"You think that's funny do you sugar?"

"No no, I was just thinking about December 25th, 1991."

Had it not been for him having the recollection of unwrapping Christmas presents, in particular receiving the special Blast 'Em Johnny action figure with kung fu grip that he'd been asking for all year, with the news on in the background, our poorly educated hero would have never remembered such a date. Amazing what little details the mind holds onto isn't it?

Her brow furrowed in confusion before a scowl washed over her pretty face.

"You see Bethtown Betty..." he said in his confident hero voice, "there *are* things that I know

that you do not.”

“Such as?” she spat.

“The date the Soviet Union falls...well *that* and the fact that my future-stick can be summoned on command.”

He opened his right hand and without warning the stick shot from the table where it laid straight into his hand. Pointing it off to his left he fired a blast into the row of tables. Wood splintered, commbies screamed, and Futureman’s chair went spinning across the cement floor. When it came to a stop his hand, still bound behind his back, was pointing straight at Bethtown Betty. Despite being a bit dizzy he beamed a huge smile at her, “Your bake-off days are over!”

He fired a blast that, to his utter amazement, she managed to dodge. Her desk, however, was not so lucky. It shattered into a million fragments and sent up a cloud of particulates that filled the air of the warehouse.

“Now that wasn’t very nice of you sugar.” came Betty’s voice, her deep southern accent so thick that it seemed almost rehearsed. He’d barely heard her over the sound of falling debris and the roar of tables and chairs being pushed aside as the women around him fled.

“Not very good zombies if they won’t stick around for a fight.”

“They’re are not zombies you simple boy.” she said, pulling herself to her feet, “They have all the free will in the world. I just went ahead and let them see the inherent flaws of your society.”

The dust that had been her desk, the smoke from the blasts, they choked the air and made it difficult to see. The light from the overhead lamps now barely

reached the floor. As Bethtown Betty stepped forward Futureman's attention dropped to her right hand. It was metal!

"You're a...a..." he stuttered.

"A robot darlin'!" she smiled. "And I don't give a rat's patootie about that Soviet Union you seem to be so intent on believing that I come from. There are higher forces at work sugar." she cocked her head, "You should know that, being a time traveller and all yourself."

Her typical charming smile melted away, replaced by no emotions at all that Futureman could read. She ran straight for him. Too close to risk a future-stick blast and still tied to the chair he was incapable of fighting back. Futureman could think of only one thing. He smashed the button on his time device and in a whirl of spinning light vanished. Bethtown Betty crashed to the hard concrete floor after tackling and splintering into thousands of shards the chair in which he'd been sitting only a split-second before.

A moment later she registered a flash of light behind her. She brushed the broken pieces of chair from her blouse and turned to see. There stood Futureman, wearing an ancient Mayan headdress, his future-stick held out and pointing down at her head.

"Sorry I took so long." he laughed, "Had to make a little pit-stop in 500 B.C."

His levity infuriated her. She slapped the future-stick aside, sending it clattering against the wall at the far side of the room, and jumped to her feet.

She looked down at her clothing and shook her head. "Oh now you've gone and ruined my favorite outfit."

"Really? *That* was your favorite outfit?" Futureman

asked snarkily.

The woman did not find it amusing. "Now that's just not polite." she tilted her head mechanically, "I'm afraid I'm gonna have to rip you a new asshole sugar."

"That's not very polite language for such a lovely...lady...bot...thing."

Her face contorted into one of pure anger, "No more talkin' darling."

With that she charged him full force, her metal body slamming into his relatively fragile human one like a ton of bricks. Her arms wrapped around him so tightly that he could not even reach a hand out to summon it his future-stick. With tremendous force the two slammed through the heavy wooden door at the back of the large room. Futureman could feel the heat on his back instantly. The ovens!

"I'm gonna roast you like a pig on a spit." she said, her face mere inches from his, the forced smile having returned.

"Have to reach my belt." Futureman thought to himself, but it was no use. His entire body was being squashed by the awesome power of the pinko robot's mechanical arms.

Then, when he thought he was on the verge of taking his last breath, her crushing grip released and she tossed him like a rag doll into the right rear corner of the room. He hit the warm brick wall so hard that his gasp for air was interrupted and it took him a moment longer to begin to catch his breath.

"Now then, what should I make out of you?" she asked, mostly to herself. "I was thinking some kind of sausage." she turned to him and smiled then walked over to a table full of cooking implements. It was

apparent that her hand wasn't the only body part to have been damaged in his attack, the right side of her neck and what he could see of her back also showed signs of injury, small bits of mechanical working visible through the torn cloth and shredded faux-flesh.

"Why a sausage?' You might be asking. Well that's simple darling, I like the idea of using the meat grinder on you." she glared and cracked a wicked grin.

"Hope you like a lot of preservatives." he coughed, "People in my time are basically *made* out of them."

She didn't even respond. Her hand touched the grinder, caressed its crank softly. Just then a timer dinged.

"Ooh. Our pies are done!" she said in her heavy accent. Amazingly she'd snapped back into her media persona the instant the kitchen timer went off. She pivoted around to the large industrial oven directly behind her. The thing was old, probably a century or more, and had a door on it well over five feet tall and two feet wide. It was made of heavy cast iron no doubt, but the robotic Ruskie, or whatever she was, swung it open like she'd been pulling the tin-foil off of a TV dinner.

"My, these look positively delicious!" she squealed.

This was it. Futureman knew he'd never have a better chance. From somewhere deep inside he summoned the strength to jump to his skate-shoe clad feet. He reached out a hand and called the future-stick to him. It shot through the door and into the room at speeds approaching that of a bullet but the evil robotic southern wench reached out a hand and caught it as it zipped past the table.

"Shit." was all that Futureman could mutter.

"Now now, no more playing with your toys until after supper." she said, putting the stick down onto the table. "And don't bother trying that again, I'm simply too fast sugar."

He looked around, spotted some large cast iron pots hanging from hooks above the table. A quick glance to his left revealed a small table with a few spatulas and stirring spoons lying on it. With little else to lose he grabbed the biggest spoon he could find and threw it, not at the woman but at the pots hanging just over her head.

BANG

By some miracle he'd actually managed to dislodge one of them and it fell down directly onto the media icon's head. The impact must have disrupted her visual sensors, as she put her hands to her eyes and screamed. It was only momentary he knew, so Futureman jumped into action. Forcing a blind, angry and very dangerous mechanical woman into an industrial oven was no easy task, but with the little strength he had left and only a modicum of tickling (who knew robots were ticklish?) he managed to do so, slamming the heavy cast iron door shut on her.

At first there was wailing. Could she feel pain? He thought not, but then again he knew very little about robots. If some designer did indeed give her the ability to suffer they were some special kind of sick bastard. He was relieved when her cries ceased but the relief was short lived.

BANG...BANG...BANG

"God dammit." Futureman muttered under his breath then darted for the exit. No sooner had he passed through its threshold, back into the larger work room, than did he hear the tearing sound of

metal as the antique oven door came flying off of its hinges, smashing into and no doubt destroying, the table with the kitchen implements where the meat grinder had been mounted. He turned to see a hellish vision of the once lovely lady-bot-thing stepping from the fires of the oven, her metal skeleton covered in a grotesque smattering of liquefied artificial skin.

“Oh *now* you done did it sugar.” her accent remained but it sounded metallic and raspy, likely from her voice modulator being partially melted by the intense heat.

Without a thought Futureman summoned the future-stick to his hand and snapped off a quick blast at her. The dense Soviet, alien, or whatever it was, metal of her left hand brushed the electrical attack aside as if it were nothing.

This is likely the point where one would assume that an assault of the electrical nature would be precisely what the doctor had ordered, being that the mad woman was a robot and all. Surely not though, as the author no doubt has an even more clever way of dispatching the killer machine and shall simply ignore the fact that our hero's attack should have in fact worked.

Glancing about the room Futureman's eyes darted to large steel drums up in the rafters. They were painted a dark matte green and emblazoned with the large white letters “U23A”.

“I'm gonna rip out your spine darling.” the machine voiced, now smashing its way through the tables near the back of the room. “Mmm, bone-in baby back ribs. That gives me a great idea for my next cookbook.”

Thinking quickly Futureman propped the future-stick against a chair, pointing directly at the barrels of U23A, and set it for a five second delay.

“You look cold my dear, let me warm you up!” he shouted then ran for the door at the front of the room, opposite the homicidal lady-bot, quite pleased with himself for the snappy one-liner. He slammed into it with all of his might, nearly dislocating his shoulder in the process. It failed to give way. He looked back just in time to see the future-stick fire its lethal beam directly at one of the drums. Tossing his cape over his face he ducked into a crouching position just in time for...

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I wasn't even there, these events having been relayed to me some years later, but to be honest I don't even know what he thought was supposed to happen.

Bethtown Betty, the woman known across the nation for her helpful household hints and delightful recipes, or at least the machine that she'd revealed herself to be, lifted her head to look up at the now-leaking barrel. Futureman, peering out from behind his cape, could have sworn there was an audible “Huh?” that emanated from the robot but it's possible he could have imagined it, for even without eyebrows the machine looked thoroughly confused.

“Now what was that supposed to accomplish my dear?” the robotic face attempted a smile, it was utterly terrifying.

Futureman stood up slowly, brushing himself off and attempting to recover his bravado, “I was going to...well, blow you to kingdom come.”

The woman's metallic feet clanked against the concrete floor, making small splashes through the U23A that was beginning to cover it, as she approached him. "You *do* know that the chemical is food grade right?" she said in an ultra-thick southern accent.

Futureman raised an eyebrow, bit his lip nervously.

"That means that it's not flammable you moron!" she screamed through her damaged vocoder, her artificial eyes glowing a fierce red as her anger boiled over.

"Well you have to admit," Futureman said, beginning to back away and attempting a nervous laugh, "it *is* the 1950s, pretty much anything could be in the food. Lead, asbestos, battery acid..."

"Shut up!" the mechanical monster roared then charged forward and grabbed him by the shirt, lifting him off of the floor. "We'll see how resistant you are to our cause after I force a little U23A down your throat."

"I thought you said it wasn't mind control, that it could only bring someone around to seeing your side of things?"

"In small doses yes," she said, then gave another one of those pants-shittingly horrifying smiles, "but I'm going to virtually *drown* you in the stuff sugar."

CLANK...CLANK...CLANK

The metal feet of Bethtown Betty-Bot rang out against the floor as she carried the hero towards the ever-deepening pool of chemicals pooling up on the floor.

"Hey you...bitch!" the words escaped Mary Sue's mouth. Her head was poking into the only open window at the side of the room, one of the old-style

ones that had to be lifted up and propped open with a rod. As soon as she'd said it her hands clasped to her mouth. "Pardon my French." she said through her fingers.

Betty turned to the sound, "What do *you* want girl?"

"You'd better drop him!"

"Or what?"

"Or I'll...I'll"

"That's what I thought."

Mary Sue, allowing her temper, one that'd been kept in check for years through her mother's lessons in polite manners, finally surged out of control. She reached in and grabbed a fan that was sitting on top of a filing cabinet. With a single hefty throw she tossed it across the room and into the pool of communist chemicals. It was still plugged into the wall outlet. Being built long before the 1950s the building, of course, had no electrical grounding whatsoever and therefore the fan shorted out in the liquid and sent voltage coursing up through the metal legs of the mysterious robot. She screeched in agony and dropped Futureman onto one of the tables.

Oh how convenient, NOW the use of electricity actually does something to her.

Futureman seized his opportunity. "Run Mary Sue!" he yelled to the girl then stood up on the table he'd landed on before jumping to the next one, using them as stepping stones so as not to fall into the vile concoction covering the floor below, the very same one that was also now electric as well as overtly communist. As he jumped from the last desk he

reached out, summoned the future-stick once again and used it to blast open the heavy door that his shoulder had earlier found no luck in breaking down. It shattered into splinters. He turned around, just for an instant, to see Betty-bot still writhing in pain before he dashed through the exit. Frightened for her life, running full force, Mary Sue ran straight into Futureman.

“Are you okay?” he asked, grasping her by her shoulders.

“I’m fine Mr. Futureman, I’m fine. Is she...?”

“No! She’s not dead. I have a feeling that the current will only hold her for a few minutes.”

Just then the sound of air conditioning compressors all going silent at once could be heard for blocks around.

“And that would be the entire grid shutting down.” Futureman said. “C’mon, run!”

“Raar!” the sound of the communist machine had an even more tormented tone to it than it had after its time in the oven. The duo turned at the sound of the factory’s front door swinging open to see Bethtown Betty’s mechanical figure stumble from it. She appeared to be damaged badly, as she moved very clumsily, but her eyes were now glowing a steady red and she seemed to be out for one thing, their blood. Well, Futureman’s especially.

“Just run. Don’t stop!” he commanded.

As they fled the clank...scrape, clank...scrape of their pursuer could easily be heard in the distance. She was apparently limping, dragging one metal foot against the asphalt as she went. Running as fast as they could the two rounded a corner and came face to face with an olive drab Army tank, the men atop it

quickly raising their rifles to meet the hero and his companion.

“Hold it right there!” screamed a man wearing a helmet and Sargent stripes. “Put down the weapon and identify yourselves immediately!”

The hero did as he was asked, laying the future-stick on the ground. “This is normally the part where I’d say ‘I am Futureman. I’ve come here from the future to save the people of the past.’ but I don’t have time for that. There’s a really angry communist lady-bot about to come around that corner any second now and you’re going to want to put a cannon round right through her chest.”

The Army man looked terribly perplexed at the strangely dressed hero’s words but slapped the man to his left and snapped off an order, “Keep a rifle on them Private.”

He then motioned for Futureman and Mary Sue to move to the side. With a slap on the top of the turret he called down to the gunner, “Put that gun street-level and prepare to fire on my command!”

“Sir, yes sir!” came the muffled voice of the gunner from inside the tank.

“Raar!”

“You hear that?” Futureman asked, his hands still held in the air. “That’s the sound of a really angry lady robot. You’re only going to get one shot, so make sure it counts.”

The sergeant nodded, only just, as an acknowledgment, his eyes fixed on the street corner. Another mechanical screech and then a Chevrolet convertible came flipping into view. It smashed into a light-post.

“That would be her.” Futureman remarked. The

sergeant put out a hand to silence him, his gaze never blinking.

“Who the hell just said ‘clankety scrape?’” the man asked confusedly.

CLANK...SCRAPE

Bethtown Betty, the hideous mechanical abomination, came into view through the windows of the diner situated on the street corner. There was a quick ratcheting sound as the tank’s turret began to track her. It did so until she’d cleared the building completely and was out in the open.

“Fire!” the sergeant screamed.

The tank’s barrel belched fire as the shell blasted forth and tore right through the midsection of its target. At such close a distance its explosive warhead hadn’t been granted time to arm itself so there was no explosion, just an impact that shattered the robot’s body, fragments flying in all directions before clattering to the street. It had impacted almost dead-center of her chest, tearing her lower half away as well as her right arm. For a moment all of those gathered around the tank thought her surely done in, but it was Futureman that caught sight of her eyes flashing back to life.

“Look out!” he screamed.

It was too late. The robot, using her left arm to propel herself, launched what was left of her body at the tank commander. Mary Sue gasped as the shattered remnants of the killer android flew through the air and landed atop the war machine that had nearly done her in. A lightning fast blow to the sergeant’s sternum cracked several ribs and sent him toppling backwards off of the tank. The private who’d had his gun trained on Futureman and Mary

Sue turned to fire at her but she caught the gun's barrel in her hand and bent it like it was made of modeling clay. Using what was left of it she cocked back and slapped the poor private across the face with the butt of his own gun, likely breaking his jaw in the process.

No longer wanting to stand idly by Futureman called the stick to his hand and clambered atop the tank. Bethtown Betty had pulled what was left of her torso on top of the barely conscious private and was in the process of wrapping her remaining hand around his throat to strangle him when Futureman's blow came. Charging the blade of his future-stick with electrical energy he brought it down like a sword and cleaved the Soviet terror in half. The Army man, clutching at his face, stared up with a mixture of terror and awe.

Futureman extended a hand and pulled him to his feet. He was very shaky and in need of medical attention. "We need to get you and your sergeant to a hospital Private."

The man could only nod in agreement. The gunner emerged and helped Futureman get the private down from the tank, kicking aside one half of the former Betty-bot that was stuck on the tank's treads. Once they were standing on the street again Futureman raised his weapon and with two quick blasts disintegrated the largest pieces of the robot he could find.

"Why'd you do that?" Mary Sue asked. "I'm pretty sure she was dead."

"This is technology that has no place in the 1950s." he said, "I know this *looks* like a Soviet plot but she mentioned other masters. Soviets wouldn't

have the kind of know-how to build something like her. That leaves me with the interesting task of figuring out exactly who she *was* working for.”

“Hands up Commie!” the familiar voice of Agent Denkins came from behind Futureman.

“I don’t think so.” he said in a calm voice, not turning to face the FBI man.

“Excuse me?” came Sanders.

Futureman spoke to Mary Sue in a soft voice, “Make sure they know about the chemicals in the factory, and tell them that Bethtown Betty admitted to a plot to spread it all over the country. Can you do that for me?”

She shook her head in agreement, her big brown eyes glowing with admiration.

“Agents, you might want to look behind you!” he shouted.

They did as he suggested. Mary Sue watched as Futureman touched something on his belt and disappeared in a whirl of light. When the G-men turned back he was gone.

“Where’d he go?” Denkins demanded, raising his gun to the girl.

“I don’t know, he just...vanished.” she said, attempting her most innocent doe eyes on the man.

“Uh huh. I’ll bet.” he took a few steps forward, “And how do we know you’re not his pinko partner? Maybe a lady super soldier?”

“Um...” Sanders started.

“Be quiet Sanders, I’ve got this.” Denkins insisted. His brow furrowed and he cocked his pistol.

“Why mister, I’m as American as apple pie.” Mary Sue smiled.

“Yeah, I’ll bet. Just like the rest of those commies

we picked off. This town is under the influence of some kind of...red plague.”

“Uh...” Sanders tried again.

“Dammit Sanders, I said I got this. Now tell me what’s going on here!” he shouted at the girl.

Just then his commanding officer walked up behind him and slapped him on the back of the head.

“Put that gun down you numb-skull.”

Pushing the trigger-happy agent aside he looked at the girl with sympathetic eyes.

“You wanna tell me what happened here?”

“Why yes!” she said, relieved. “It was Bethtown Betty, she was a communist robot!”

“A comm-bot.” Sanders chuckled.

“A marxi-droid.” Denkins chimed in.

“Would you morons shut the hell up?” Director Chandler snapped.

The two immediately went silent.

“She was putting some kind of chemical into the stuff from the bake-off. It turned half of the town into communists!” Mary Sue shouted. “I *never* trusted that lady but nobody would listen to me.”

“Oh my God.” the FBI director gasped.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I just invested my entire life savings into Bethtown Betty’s new line of TV dinners and homemade-style confections! I need to get to a phone!”

“Wait.” Mary Sue grabbed the dark-haired man’s arm. “What about all of the people who’ve already been affected? You need to save them from your trigger-happy goons here.”

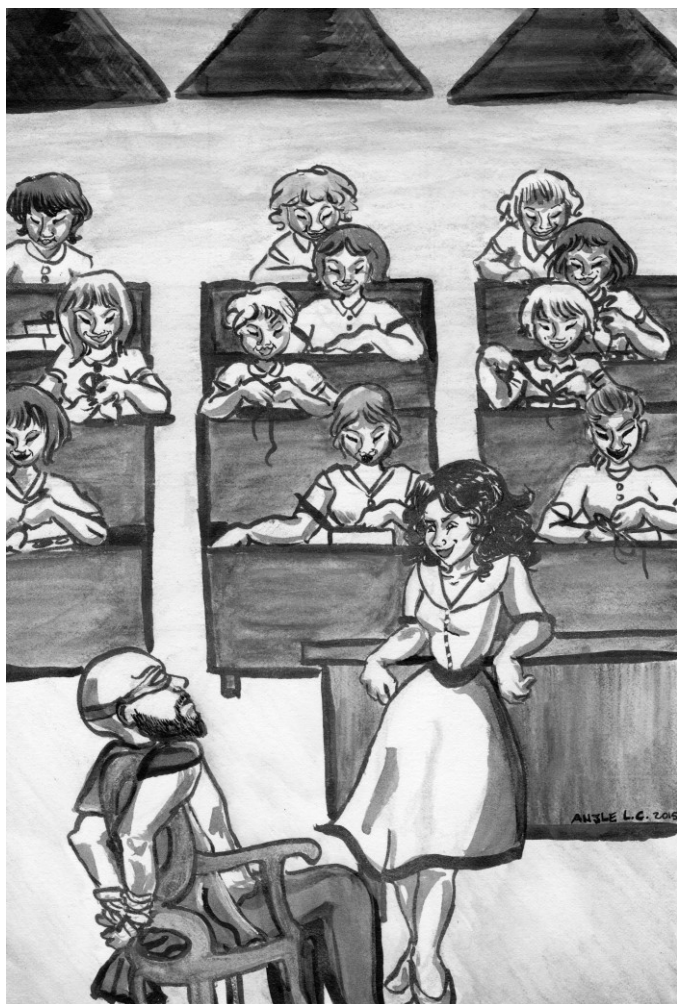
“You’re right.” the man said, rubbing his chin in thought. “Denkins! Sanders!”

The two jumped to attention.

“I want you to round up all of the people who’ve been exposed to the chemical...with your *hands* please not your *guns*.”

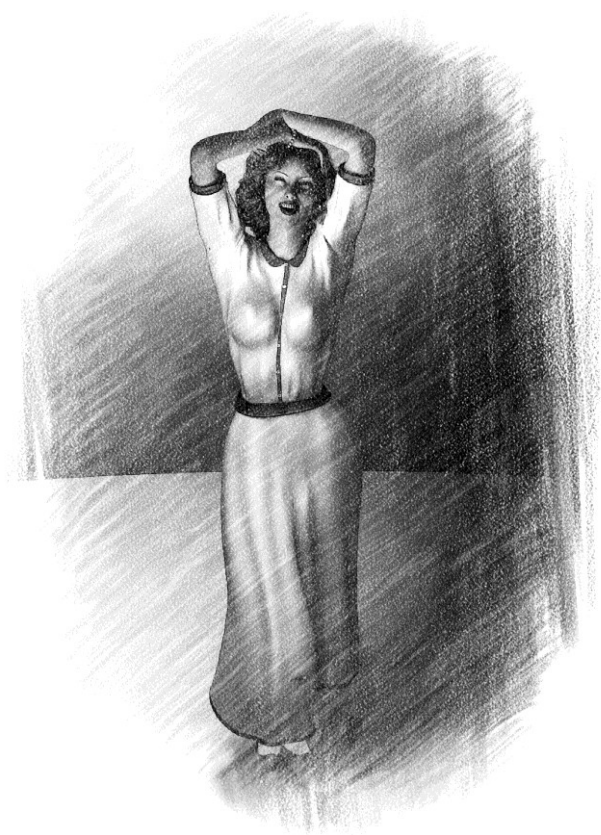
“Then what?” Denkins asked.

“Just tie them up in front of some televisions for a week. A hundred dozen cola and cigarette commercials forced into their eye sockets and they’ll be right as rain.” he smiled, slapped Denkins on the shoulder, then walked off to find a telephone.



Captured! – by Anjle Coleman

MICHAEL MOREAU



Bethtown Betty – by Michael Moreau

GEARING UP

Well, there goes the future-pager. Looks like...December 1st, 1955 at 2:02pm. Looks like this one's gonna put me further back than any of the other jumps I've ever made to the '50s. How weird, this'll be the "first" time the people of Capitol City get to meet Futureman. Well, maybe. Unless I'm already destined to jump even further back someday. Maybe I need to ask somebody one day when the first time they ever saw me was. Wait, no, this can't be the first time. How would they have the future-pager if I'd never been there before? Damn, this stuff makes my brain hurt.

I can only wonder what kind of crap the people of Capitol City have gotten themselves into this time. You know I really don't mind helping them against things that are out of their control but at times it can get really tiring fighting monsters and disasters that are their own doing.

Three years, has it really been that long? It doesn't seem so. Seems like it was only a few months ago that

I found Dr. Miller's stash of high-tech goodies and decided to put them to good use, helping out those in need, and boy Capitol City of the 1950s sure does need a lot of help.

I used to wonder why none of that stuff ended up in the history books. I mean surely my having saved the city from a giant spider or an evil space emperor's death beam would catch a little attention no? Well, I don't wonder anymore. Not after what happened in space, not after what happened with Ellie.

I don't need to think about that stuff right now. Futureman doesn't need to be overly complex. His simplicity is what always guided him toward the right path. I just need to gear up and go and do my job.

Visor or mask? I sure wish I knew what kind of bad guy I was going to be facing this time. Wish the future-pager could tell me that. Sure the visor is a lot better if I need to track a monster down, but the mask is better at deflecting energy blasts. Shit, guess I'll just go with the visor like usual.

Cape, check. This one's getting a little ratty. Might have to stop by the materials lab and "borrow" a little more fabric. What's Futureman without his cape right?

Bracers, check. Can't go anywhere without these bad boys. They've saved my life more times than I can count, deflecting bullets, energy beams and all kinds of other attacks. They're definitely looking worn. Oh well, as long as they work.

Future-stick. Hmm, which one do I go with? The

“summon” feature on the advanced model has been giving me trouble lately and I think I’d rather get it working 100% before counting on it in a life or death situation. Besides, the classic one has always packed a little more punch anyway.

Belt. Think I’ll take the original. It doesn’t have as many holders for extra gizmos but the material is the same as the cape, virtually indestructible. Can’t forget the important bit, the time device itself. This thing’s definitely seen it better days but I’ve always managed to keep it working. Besides, the gash left in it by the teeth of that megamouth groundworm works as a bottle opener in a pinch.

Shoes. Slacker classics, good old skateboard shoes. Jeans, yep, just my plain old jeans. Can’t say how many pairs I’ve gone through. Shirt, looks like the last one. Guess I’m going to have to get some more iron-on decals with the FM/lightning bolt. Been through dozens of these suckers in the last three years. White t-shirts don’t tend to hold up too well to monster blood, monster puke, monster drool, monster acid and all of the other nasty things that monsters have a habit of emitting.

Look in the mirror. Hmm, think it’s time to go with the shaved-head look again. Comb the beard. This bad boy is well past “sea captain” now. Think I’m gonna just let it keep growing and see where it goes. I’m sure it won’t be too long before some creature gnaws it off or it gets burned off in an unexpected explosion.

Okay, that looks like everything. Time to say goodbye to the empty pizza boxes and pyramids of beer cans. So long apartment, here I come 1955!

--CLICK--

God dammit. Stupid time device. Just needs a good smack on the side and a little shake.

There we go.



I Am Futureman! – by Michael Moreau

NABERDEEN

A light, red in color, slowly rises in intensity to illuminate the backdrop of the commission member. Across from him, yellow. Then around the room; purple, green, blue.

“How symbolic.” Red muses.

“Welcome.” comes Purple’s voice, soft and feminine. “As you can see Phase 1 of our plan has been successful.”

“Indeed.” Yellow acknowledges.

“So long has it been...” Blue begins, “that I hardly recognize the sensations of a *physical* form.”

There was good reason that the perceptions of his new body, *all* of their bodies, were unfamiliar.

“Agreed. There is a quality to it I do not recall from before.” says Green, another female voice.

Purple pauses, a sign that idle chatter is not welcome in this place.

She speaks, “The passage of time is difficult to ascertain within the nether, but I have calculated the length of our exile at one million four hundred-

thousand and six years, seventy-six days, four hours and nine minutes.”

“Surely not!” gasped Red, but inwardly he reasoned that such a long stint absent of physicality could be the cause of the strange sensations.

“You doubt my calculations?” Purple asks.

“No. It is simply difficult to grasp.”

“Agreed.” said Green, “However we have managed a phenomenal feat; the beginning of bringing our kind back from the nether and into normal space-time.”

“We should proceed at once, there are a billion more of us trapped in that formless void.” Blue spoke up.

“Do not speak as if we are not aware of that fact.” Red chided his colleague. Then to Purple, “When *can* we begin?”

“There is a...complication.” she replied.

“Speak.” Red commanded.

“Though the Ever-Eye was indeed capable of pulling the five of us from the nether, as we had predicted, our physical forms appear to have been lost forever.”

“What?” Yellow demanded. “That makes no sense. Are we not here, now at this very moment?”

“Yes.” said Purple, “But is one and a half million years all it takes for you to forget your own body?”

“Something’s not right!” Yellow gasped, “My face...what *is* this?!”

Back-lit, only his silhouette visible to the others, they could see his shape trying to figure out what it was.

“Given a moment I shall explain.” Purple spoke again, “As you all know we chose this world as our

bridge from the nether to normal space because it is the point where the two exist in the closest proximity, where the veil is the thinnest. We could not know that it was inhabited.”

“Are you telling me...?” Red asked in the deep voice of his host body.

“Yes. In order to exist in the normal universe once again we required physical forms. Ones that this planet was luckily able to provide.”

“So we are what?” Blue asked, “*Wearing* these beings?”

“In a manner of speaking.” Purple acknowledged, then snarkily, “Don’t tell me that a few hundred millennia in the void has made you squeamish about taking life.”

“Certainly not.” Green spoke for Blue, “But the thought of occupying the bodies of lower lifeforms... it is repugnant!”

“Are they still in here?” Yellow asked.

“No.” Purple replied, “When our essences entered these vessels the original hosts ceased to exist.”

“You were the first to cross the threshold,” Red asked Purple, “did you think this is what we would want? We seek to restore the glory of the Naberdeen, not live as parasites!”

“If I may be allowed to speak frankly.”

“By all means, please do.”

“There *were* no other options. We searched for over a million years to find a way, *any* way at all, to escape the nether. Now that we’ve found one you want to, what? Ignore it and leave the others stranded there for all eternity?”

“That is not my intention.” Red snapped at her, “This is simply not how I envisioned our return.”

“On that point you will get no argument.” Blue chimed in.

“Nor from me.” said Green.

“There are over a billion of us,” Yellow interjected, “are we to *steal* bodies for all of them?”

Purple spoke up, “From here? No. These forms are too weak and limited. If we are to exist in such a fashion we should at least seek out a species that is more formidable. Something closer to our original bodies.”

“What of cloning our original forms?” Red asked. “Would that be possible?”

“From what source material?” Purple asked, “The Alsayyid would have made it their duty to assure that not one scrap of Naberdeen DNA remained anywhere in the universe.”

“If we *are* to leave this planet, to find other species...then we will need more than just the five of us. May we assume that you’ve already begun bringing over others?” Green asked Purple, her voice insistent.

“There is a problem.” she replies.

“Besides the obvious?” Red asks.

“Yes. The Ever-Eye is having difficulty in pulling any more of our kind from the other side of the veil.”

“How can that be?” Blue asked.

“Agreed. Does it not possess inexhaustible energy? Is that not why we sought it out in the first place?” Red questions Purple.

“It does, and therein lies the mystery. It’s almost as though someone in another dimension is tapping into it as well.”

“How can that be possible? We have it in our possession.”

“Indeed Commissioner.”

“Then where does that leave us? Our plans were to restore the Naberdeen to greatness, not to free five of us to live out our lives in fragile alien bodies.”

“I foresee one possibility.” Purple speaks deliberately, “There are no things, save for crossing dimensional barriers, that we know of capable of draining the Ever-Eye’s power so. We may not have the energy at our disposal to search for whoever is tapping into it, but if we disrupt this time-stream, cause massive disturbances that result in continuous dimensional shifts...then maybe, just maybe we can lure this person to *us*.”

“I know you.” said Red, “You have already run calculations. If it even comes to pass at all how long do the probabilities say it will take?”

Purple remained silent for a moment.

“There is one other possibility, albeit a very remote one. By doing precisely what I have already advised we may be able to thin the barrier between the nether and normal space-time, allowing us to use what power we *do* have to free the rest of our kind.”

“*How* remote?”

“One in nine billion, five hundred thirty...”

“Enough.”

She quieted down.

“Answer my original question.”

Again she hesitated. “Probabilities say that such an endeavor would take between twenty five and two hundred years to cause enough disturbances that someone in a remote dimension might take notice and come to investigate.”

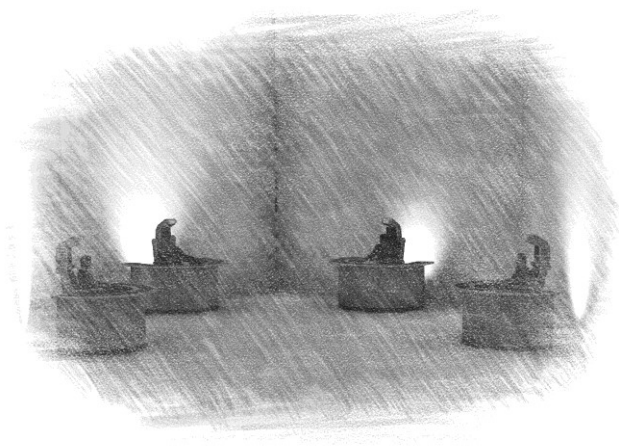
“And how long do these bodies that we now inhabit live?”

“From birth, sixty to eighty years on average,

however ours had already expended a decent fraction of that time before we took possession.”

“Well then.” Red muttered, “It looks like we have a lot of work to do and far too little time to do it in.”

MICHAEL MOREAU



Naberdeen Commission – by Michael Moreau

EPILOGUE

To be perfectly honest I cannot comprehend why they insist on me doing these prologues and epilogues. As a matter of fact I'm not even certain why many writers feel them necessary at all. Here's my book, but before you read my book I'd like you to read an introduction to my book. All just seems like silly nonsense to me.

Regardless, since I'm tasked with it here's the epilogue. What, did you expect some kind of great resolution to any of the loose threads in the book? That's just silly. Firstly it's a book of short stories. They're meant to fill in a few details but also introduce some new story elements. Secondly, and most importantly, I simply can't be bothered. I can hear a tuna tin being opened in the kitchen and I'm about due for my 4:15 snooze, to be followed shortly by my 4:45 doze, which is then capped off with a nice little sun-bathe and a quick grooming before supper.

So with only fifteen more words I will say this; thank you for reading, I sincerely hope you enjoyed our fantastic, and often ridiculous, tales.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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FUTUREMAN

OTHER WORKS BY THE AUTHOR

-The Futureman Adventures-

It Came From Tomorrow (2012)

-Rocket Riders of the 27th Century-

No Time Like the Future (2014)

Where the Stars Fall (2014)

The Yesterday Dilemma (2016)

-The Robert Carson Files-

A Case Most Peculiar (2015)

-Other-

Call Me Ogi (2015)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Michael Moreau is creator of series such as 'The Futureman Adventures, Rocket Riders of the 27th Century, and The Robert Carson Files. He is a life-long fan of science fiction and always dreamed of writing books of his own. He is a supporter of pulp-style fiction and a staunch advocate for self-publication. He is also a prolific filmmaker, photographer & artist. More information can be found at: <http://www.mmoreau.net>