

There was only one thing I could do. I had no choice. I kicked his face once and his grip loosened. Twice and he let go, snagging the hatch edge with his fingertips. On the third blow he dropped into the tiny details of the land far below. Maybe he landed safely, maybe on the stone stairs. I don't know. I hope so.

"You idiot," I said, as the line of light narrowed and disappeared with a pneumatic thump. I clambered up and brushed myself off. I heard, as I said, the rumbling mutter of far away engines. Condensation or lubricant dripped somewhere. The light fixtures popped and buzzed. The Doctor and the princess were discussing something in urgent whispers. But there was a missing sound, something I couldn't quite identify.

In the dim light ahead I saw two figured kneeling by a third. "Don't move him, not an inch!" warned the Doctor. I was sickened by the realisation of what sound I'd been missing.

"It won't stop singing until it makes a kill," I thought.

The song was over and the spear was silent."

The Rallax Operation – part the second

by Al B Dickerson

"Mr. Garron was dead," stated Bob Sunny Day.

"Dead as a doorknocker, Bob. Yes, he was dead."

I found it interesting that the security robot did not refer to Garron as the Graff Vynda-K and chanced a glance at my fellow prisoners to see if they'd noticed. The princess raised a perfect eyebrow. The Doctor was deep in thought, eyes closed and fingers moving like he was operating an invisible calculator. Then his eyes popped open and he grinned. Yes, they'd noticed.

Bob Name Your Poison broke the intermission. “Announcement. Announcement. Correlation of multiple verifier data and witness testimony confirms the individual known as Buckminster Garron is not the Graff Vynda-K. All charges of the detainees being associates of this individual are hereby dropped.”

“Also,” said Bob Sunny Day, “We’re very sorry for the loss of your heterosexual life partner. Please accept our sincerest condolences.”

“The stated expression of regret is a courtesy expression only and in no way an admission of legal culpability on the part of the Parallax corporation or its partners and subsidiaries,” added Bob What A Deal.

I blinked, scratched an ear. The Doctor cleared his throat.

“That’s it, then? We aren’t under arrest?” he asked.

“Regretfully, Doctor, we must insist on your continued detention. We have yet to find the register, though we have ascertained an 87% probability that it is inside this tesseract device you spoke of, and therefore is with the body of the regrettably deceased Mr. Garron.”

The Doctor snapped his fingers. “Of course! That explains why you’re so intent on tracing our path! It doesn’t explain why you don’t just dial up a map, though.”

“Regrettably, that function is inaccessible.”

Whose interrogation was it anyway? I broke in. “All right, all right. We’ll try to help you find the way back to Garron’s... body!”

“That is to be desired.”

“Agreed, Bobs. And after that, we fix everything, crisis averted, we all go home. Right?”

Bob Name Your Poison shook his head. “There are additional charges of unauthorized entry into staff-only zones, multiple counts of willful destruction of corporation property, unauthorized operation of corporation systems, conspiring to create civil unrest, inciting civil unrest, theft and unauthorized operation of a company vehicle for nefarious purposes, resisting arrest and failing to use proper body disposal protocols.”

Bob Sunny Day asked, “Do you understand the new charges?”

“Yes, I understand the new charges. And no, we aren’t guilty. I mean, we are, I suppose, but it wasn’t our intent to cause trouble. I can’t recall resisting arrest but I suppose we must have. We just wanted to find the Doctor’s ship and get out of here.”

“We shall consider all extenuating circumstances as we determine your degree of guilt. Now, please continue your story.”

“So, you really want to hear it all, huh? Well, all right.

There was an artifact from old Earth in the community center at the Darwin colony. It was an old style game, just loose pieces, cards and a faded board in a plain box, but I spent hours with it. Wish I knew what it was called.

Anyway, if you hooked it up to a power slot it was endless fun. The board was a funny picture of an unhappy man on an operating table. Parts of the surface were cut out, with a sensitive metal rim. Under the cutouts were holes in which you placed plastic joke organs, like a funny bone or a bucket signifying water on the knee. The goal was to earn money by pulling the plastic pieces out without touching the sides. You got a little pair of tweezers to do that. You had to be extremely careful not to touch the sides. If you did, a buzzer would sound and you didn’t earn your fee.

Sometimes we’d play for real money like the grown-ups. I did very well after I discovered that a sonic pulse temporarily disabled the conductivity of the rim. Here, Doctor, why don’t you play that pulse for our robotic friends here?”

“What is that device?” squawked Bob Name Your Poison.

“Don’t be alarmed, fellows, it’s only a screwdriver.”

“This sound has invasive sonic properties! We demand it be stopped now or we will call the guards!”

“Relax, Bobs. It’s not going to hurt you. Doctor, that should be enough. See? All done!”

“I must protest! Again your diversions seem irrelevant!”

“All right, all right. Don’t pop a breaker. No harm done.”

I looked at my communicator, yawned and stretched.

“Say, Bobs, I’m getting tired. Why don’t we take a break? If I don’t sleep I’m liable to forget the story, maybe miss an important clue you need.”

“Very well. We will recommence the interrogation in twenty-four cycles.”

On the way back to the interrogation room the next day I heard something. “Was that a shot?” I asked the guard.

He did not respond.

“I’m sure I heard a shot. Is there something happening?”

“It is none of your concern. There has been an incursion from below. It has happened before and will be dealt with. Here is the interrogation room. Have a fun day!”

The Doctor and princess were in their seats. I smiled at them and took mine.

“Good morning, Bobs. Shall we begin? We’re about to discover your certain doom.”

“We left Garron in Intercell Maintenance Corridor 12,675H. It was stenciled on the wall.

The Doctor said that it looked deserted for hundreds of years. He really seemed fascinated, like he was in his element. He tapped gauges and fiddled with control panels, scanned conduit junctions and yodeled down air shafts.

At one point, not far along, we skirted a small hole in the deck. The Doctor peered down, whistled softly, then pointed up. There was a corresponding hole in the ceiling. It wasn’t natural; something had smashed through.

“A meteorite?” suggested the princess. The Doctor shook his head.

“No, see the edges? This was something very heavy, not something moving fast.” He looked worried.

I peered down the hole. Far below I saw a tiny pinprick of light, and another far above.

“Let’s keep moving. *Andele, andele!*”

Then the corridor split. Up a ramp, down a ramp, straight ahead.

“Which way?” asked the princess.

“Feel that?” asked the Doctor, “there’s a breeze. *Ariba, ariba.*”

‘Up’. An hour ago we’d climbed through the sky. “Doctor,” I said as we trudged upwards, “where are we, really? Rallax is supposed to be a planet, but this is a spaceship, isn’t it?”

“It’s a planet-sized spaceship.”

“That control panel... it said ‘wild adventure’, like for tourists...”

“Yup.”

“Then why haven’t I ever heard about it? Something this big, you’d think they’d advertise.”

He stopped at a panel. “Look. Mind the wasp’s nest there.”

(Incidentally, you Bobs need an exterminator. The tunnels are infested with vermin.)

He unscrewed the panel and set the lid aside. “Lots of big, standard industrial metal out here, right?” he said, gesturing to the corridor. “Now take a gander in there.”

“What on Earth?” Under the panel the circuitry was totally unfamiliar, a dense assemblage of tiny geometric shapes in a glowing lattice.

“That, Unstoffe and Verne-Burroughs, is one of the most dangerously silly engineering

designs I've seen. And believe me, I've seen my share. This is a hypersolid gravity circuit. Instead of manipulating energy, it uses gravity to manipulate matter. Now, see how the circuit doesn't touch the sides? It's held suspended by a mass nullifying inner cell. Can you tell me why that's necessary? Of course you can't! It's because those little doodads are dwarf star alloy and the connecting framework is plasmatic antimatter."

"I follow what you're saying, but I keep up with new tech and this is all unfamiliar to me. Is it alien?" I asked.

"No, not at all. See the nameplate there? 'Made in Oslo'."

"But..."

"Peter, don't strain yourself," said the princess, calling me 'Peter'. "I have an insane notion. Doctor, those numbers there: One-nine-zero-eight-four-eight... is that a serial number or a date?"

"Oh, very good!" He beamed at her (she seemed pleased), then cleared his throat and continued. "It all fits. The language, the robots, the staggering hubris. Hypersolids! Hypersolids! Those idiots!"

He replaced the lid. "Let's keep moving."

He hurried off. I trotted to keep up.

"Doctor, you didn't answer her question."

Ignoring me, he said, "Remember the hole back there? What happens to dwarf star alloy when its mass nullification field collapses?" Correctly interpreting our silence as understanding, he continued, "In fact, what happens to a mass nullification field when its environmental parameters change and there's no-one to adjust the frequency?"

He skirted a second hole in the deck without a pause. I stopped and peered down. I saw sunlight far below. With a shudder, I pictured what had happened. With the decay of the null field, each tiny bit of circuitry regained its weight. And a mere grain of dwarf alloy weighs tons. Before the field failed totally it would rip loose and crash down through endless layers until reaching the center. And if this was happening all over Rallax, that meant that a solid mass of hypergrav material was accumulating at the core. And that was affecting the remaining, functioning null fields in turn... I studied the ceiling, thought of all that weight overhead and cringed when it creaked.

"Doctor!" I called as I rushed after them, "How long? How long until it all goes?"

Back in the interrogation room, all three robots turned to the Doctor. He pretended to study

the ceiling until their steady gaze became too much. “Oh, all right! But I’ve already told you once.”

“Nevertheless, we are keenly interested in our long term prospects.”

He pyramided his fingers. “I’d say – and this is just an educated guess – you’ve got about, oh, two Earth years. You’ll be glued to the deck by then. Anything living will long since have died except for the cockroaches. Cheeky little buggers. Things will accelerate after that – in about six months the whole lot will implode and this will become a small star. Or a black hole; I’m not sure. Something bad at any rate.”

“A star, Doctor? How is this possible?”

“It’s possible because your foolish architects built this world using quadrillions of tons of dwarf star matter held suspended in unstable NG grids. Where on Earth did they find that much dwarf alloy? Well, not on Earth, obviously, but where? That’s what I’d like to know.”

“But what do we do?”

He peered at them. A shadow of a sneer crossed his lips.

“Do? What do you do? Unless you lot suddenly become engineers instead of re-purposed cruise directors, you do nothing. There are millions of circuits to be calibrated. Unless there are more of you than we’ve seen, it would take you decades. Assuming you had the proper tools and knew how to use them.”

He slumped in his chair. “You’re doomed. I’m so sorry.”

Bob Sunny Day said, “Fiddlesticks!”

“Indeed. Although...”

“Yes, Doctor?”

The interrogation room was silent, but I heard syncopated running in the corridor. A distant boom sent mild vibrations through my shoes. Somewhere people were shouting. Our captors ignored it all, intent on the Doctor’s next words.

“If I had the registry, I could stop the warps. That will buy you some time. And maybe, just maybe, I can use its control circuits to jump start your self-repair systems. So let’s take care of finding Garron, shall we? Unstoffe, it’s time to continue.”

“At the top of the ramp we found a larger passage and continued down it. After an hour or so we began to hear a distant, steady roar and a breeze began to push at our backs. This intensified as we advanced until it became a struggle to keep our feet. The Doctor hardly

seemed to notice; the princess had to clutch my arm to stay upright. I didn't mind.

"Follow me!" cried the Doctor over the howling wind. "It won't be bad after we pass the intake!"

He pointed to another ramp that terminated at a huge baffled grill. We could easily walk upright through the vanes. Well, that is, if they weren't crashing open and shut in unison with each variance in the airflow.

"Are you mad, Doctor?" I shouted. Here atop the ramp the roar and crashing was deafening.

The wind snatched away his response. I asked again and he indicated his ear – 'I can't hear you' or 'Look! Mine are smaller than yours.'

We resorted to shouting, mime and charades. The result was something like this-

"We'll be crushed!"

"Nonsense! It's all in the timing! Watch!"

At that, he stood at the vent, inches from the snapping vanes. I got the sense he was counting, then he casually stepped through. I hated him a little for that.

"Our turn!" yelled the princess, tugging my arm.

I dared not show cowardice, so I let her pull me forward. This close, I could feel each resounding bang in my bones. The random motion of the huge objects and the intermittent glimpses of a huge, bright gulf on the other side made me light-headed. The princess thought she saw an opening but I wouldn't be moved. She frowned up at me, irritated. "Any time now!"

At that moment the concert of disconcert reached a climax in my poor brain. My cowardice and my burning desire to appear brave reached some harmonic resonance and suddenly a deep calm seeped into me. The wind faded to a whisper and the vanes moved very slow and without thinking I knew I could anticipate their movement. I wish I could claim credit for what happened next, I really do. But I don't remember. Did I begin to faint and merely stumble forward? Did the princess pull me? Did a gust of wind push me? Did I achieve harmony with the universe of time and movement? I don't know... but suddenly I was on the other side and jogging easily out of the current into a steady and not unpleasant breeze.

And then I saw our surroundings and was struck awestruck. Awestricken.

It's funny how our minds comprehend scale, isn't it? The jungle below was a single huge room but it was so well disguised its proportions didn't really register. But this! The

princess and I simply stood and tried to drink it in. In sips.

We looked out from the lower curve of a tunnel that spanned the horizons. No, 'tunnel' doesn't do. It was an expanse, an extent, a gulf. It was easily an orbital mile in diameter. An endless artificial sun sent dancing shafts of gold through the misty clouds that scuttled along the ceiling.

Vines and creepers climbed the terraced walls and flocks of parrots dipped and darted among them. This puzzled me at first, then I realized the tunnel was landscaped. There were trees, ponds, fountains, steppes and levels built up the curving walls. More than a functional air vent, then. This was meant to impress visitors. I saw the unmistakable signs of a thoroughfare; huge holosigns and service buildings arrayed in a straight line near the lowest point of the curve. I saw no real road, though – just an unmaintained strip of grass. I envisioned it as it must have been before service ended and saw that it would have been quite lovely, like an endless green valley.

It was humbling. I felt the princess's hand find mine.

"Well, this is something to tell the grand-bears," she whispered.

Well, stagger me speechless. Luckily the Doctor called and I didn't have to respond.

"Are you two going to stand there like newlyweds seeing the Niagara Nebula for the first time or are you coming with me to, I don't know, use these pods to escape?"

He waited a bit further down the curve by what I saw was a decrepit maglev transpod station. When we moved toward him he turned to the open hatch of a pod and I heard his sonic screwdriver trilling. The side of each dingy pod was labeled 'Parallax'.

"Hey, we wondered about that; is Rallax a corruption of Parallax? Did the name degrade through the centuries until the lost inhabitants here forgot its very meaning?"

"No. Parallax is the corporate entity, Rallax is the resort. There is no corruption," said Bob Sunny Day.

"Oh, okay. That's rather disappointing."

"It may please you to know that escapees from Viking Bay believed they lived on a world named Raw Ox."

"Oh! Thanks, Bob. There's hope for you yet!"

"Anyway, the Doctor soon had us humming along. The maglev rails were buried beneath the

grass strip but the giant holosigns and the pod's onboard pop-up display showed us the routes. I don't know what was more distracting – the section designations on the signs or the scenery we traveled through. I'm afraid we were distracted by the signs at first. They gave estimated arrival times to resort environments and showed little scenes of the fun a tourist could expect. Can I just say that some tourist's idea of 'fun' is not what I'd choose?

We read the names on the signs as we passed entry ports.

A visitor to "Armagideon Time" apparently fought giant bugs and atomic zombies in a post-apocalyptic ruin.

In "Suburban Sprawl" one could experience an endless, sunny weekend in a setting of old Earth's 1950s, which apparently were 'family friendly' and centered on something called a bar-b-q.

The politically-minded could fight for capital independence in "Colonial Conflict".

"Wizards and Warriors" looked fun, though. I rather fancied being a wizard.

"Destroy All Daleks" is pretty self-explanatory. The Doctor frowned after he noticed it was marked, 'Out of Order'.

Come to mention it, a disturbing number of the destinations were Out of Order. At Shawneequa's suggestion the Doctor checked Wild Adventure on the pod computer and found it to be considered operational. I shuddered as I pondered what constituted Out of Order. Was it total loss of life support? I imagined lights or heating failing, madness and panic erupting among the residents. Was Suburban Sprawl, designated Out of Order, inhabited by roaming mole-people, scavenging blindly in the frozen ruins for the last rancid scraps of bar-b-q? Or was it merely a vast, dark crypt now? How much of this world was dead, for that matter? Despite gliding through a tube so gargantuan it had its own weather, I felt mild flickers of claustrophobia.

But that wasn't all. The vent (we later learned it and dozens like it were called, 'Garden Highways') showed every sign of habitation. Here and there we spotted clear evidence – a herd of sheared sheep, wagon ruts in the mud, abandoned campsites. I wish I could tell you more about the natives, but we never saw them; were they peaceful traders, maybe traveling between different sections of the ship? Or were they roving marauders, attacking wherever they could gain egress?

My pessimistic reverie was interrupted by a cry of, "Whoa!" from the Doctor and a deepening of the maglev hum. He'd seen something and slammed on the brakes.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, but he’d already climbed out. The princess shot me a glance and followed. The pod’s screen said we were near the entrance to “Red Revolution”.

Wishing I didn’t have to, I left the vehicle. Then I wished I hadn’t. The machines here had broken down.

It was freezing. Mist hugged the icy ground. Snowflakes drifted toward us from the darkness.

We’d stopped close to the holosign for this area. It flickered and popped but I saw the depicted scene clearly enough – a mob of commoners fighting antique soldiers in front of a burning palace.

Past the sign a portion of the light strip had failed. Far ahead beyond the tunnel’s horizon I saw normal illumination resumed, but here all was murky twilight. In the gloom I could see flickering orange lights moving toward us – people (I hoped) carrying torches.

A vehicle – an old combustion-engine ground-car, black and shiny – was parked on our path. It was riddled with holes and I heard the tick of a cooling engine. I heard the Doctor tell Shawneequa it hadn’t been there long.

I had a bad feeling. This looked like an escape attempt and believe me I know an escape attempt when I see one. “Doctor,” I said, “people are coming. I’m not sure we should get involved here.”

In my experience, the pursuers are always a dodgier proposition than the pursued. I’m invariably the latter.

He didn’t respond for a moment, then turned from where he’d been peering into the vehicle. His expression was strange. “Walk away or stay and help? That’s the question, isn’t it?” I could tell he wasn’t thinking about the current situation. But then he looked back inside the car. “I haven’t been very wise lately, Unstoffe. I broke some rules, some bad things happened and now I’m running from the consequences. Just like this poor man.”

I saw that a dying man was lying down across the front seat, caught by lightbeams shining through the bullet holes in the chassis. He was twitching, coughing blood. It was ugly.

“Can I really just leave him to die?”

The door was locked, so the Doctor slapped the glass. No response – the man was insensate. Deciding he couldn’t hear us, I knocked four times on the door. The Doctor twitched and glared at me but it did the trick. Very slowly the man grasped the steering wheel and pulled himself up. He blinked up at us, exhausted, then willed himself to unlock

the door.

It swung open and he spilled onto the frozen grass before we could catch him. He stared up, his eyes unfocused. “Sir,” he said, with gasping pauses between each word, “you must turn back. Yaka pursues.” I studied the approaching torches with new trepidation. The princess seemed to sense my disquiet and jogged a few paces toward the darkness. I saw her shade her eyes and cup her ear.

“The revolution,” the man continued, “begins. The bells have rung.”

The princess returned. “It’s about a dozen men on some sort of animals. Armed with rifles and swords. We’d better decide what we’re doing,” she began, “they’ll be here in...” She trailed off, her eyes widening. I glanced down and saw the dying man’s eyes had focused. He glared at her.

“You! How can you be here?” he snarled. “I have renounced your master and I will not be taken!”

He reached into his coat with shocking speed and aimed a pistol at the Princess. I grabbed his arm as he pulled the trigger. The gun banged and with sheer disbelief at the unfairness of it all I saw one of the approaching torches fly back and down, swatted by an invisible hand. An angry clamor arose and I heard shouted orders. Their mounts roared and bellowed. By the gods, what were they? As they surged toward us I had an impression of hulking, shaggy bodies and great, ice-crunching paws. Then a bullet ricocheted off the car’s fender and another caused a grass eruption at the Doctor’s feet. The princess leaped and deftly plucked the gun from the man’s hand. She smoothly rolled behind the car and returned fire. Another torch fell with each shot, four in all.

“What are you doing?” cried the Doctor. “Stop that!”

“Too late for that!” she replied. Then the pistol clicked. “Never mind! I’m out of bullets! Now what?”

“Back to the pod!” I called from halfway there.

The Doctor made an anguished, exasperated groan and said, “Yes! That’s a good idea! Run!” The princess followed him and we reached the pod at the same time, the thundering pursuit drawing closer and closer. Gruff voices demanded we halt and a few more shots were fired.

We tried, Bobs, we really tried but we couldn’t outrun bears. That’s what the Doctor called them, ‘bears’. Actually, he called them ‘great honking huge grizzly bears’, though I

never heard one honk.

No sooner had I a leg in than we were surrounded. The massive creatures encircled us, their riders aiming rifles and glaring at us from behind fierce beards. They wore rough tunics with fur collars and bandoliers. One called back, “Outlanders, sir! Should we kill them?” and waited hopefully for a positive reply.

A man in a smart uniform approached on the largest bear of all. He took his damned time, too, pausing to shoot the man on the ground (who was crawling away with surprising energy) and direct a man to collect him. From his bearing (excuse me) I could tell he was a soldier. He wasn’t dressed like the others, though. I recognized his uniform from the *Indomitable Prince’s* laundry and had seen it in action on Ribos only days before. This was another of the Graff’s men.

“Yaka, I presume?” asked the Doctor.

The officer removed his cylindrical helmet and regarded us coldly. Saying nothing, he slowly reloaded his gun. When finished, he holstered it and rested his hands on the bear saddle’s pommel. Then - “You’ve spoken to Spidrick, then. Yes, I am Yaka. Perhaps you would do me the courtesy of identifying yourselves? You, woman – step out from behind the peasant so I can see you.”

“Hello, Yaka,” said the princess. “How have you been?”

I lack the stomach to dwell on what happened next. Yaka leaped from his bear, the princess swept by me and suddenly they were embracing. I had to turn my head when they kissed. The Cossacks (the Doctor told me the name later) all looked in directions that didn’t include their leader playing tonsil hockey, though the bears watched with confused fascination. I saw the Doctor’s eyebrow trying to hide under his hairline. Our eyes locked. His expression wasn’t far off from the bear’s.

I saw him resolve to say something. “Well! It’s nice to be among friends for once, isn’t it, Unstoffe? The land downstairs was terribly unsocial. Now, if you’ll point the way to the upper decks we’ll be on our way and you two can carry on getting... reacquainted and... stuff. Won’t that be nice?”

Yaka came up for air, murmured, “Shoot them,” and dived in again.

And that’s what they did.

In my career as a freelance realtor I've had the opportunity of visiting numerous clinks, jails, detention areas and prisons. I've been in suspended animation, solitary confinement and chain gangs. Run the gamut, I have, from titanium megasec cells to mud huts.

The sound of hammering woke me up and added another to my catalogue.

This one was what I consider your average low tech holding cell. Brick walls, bars on the window, stout door with two little sliding panels; one up high to taunt you through and one at floor level for your gourmet swill of the day. A bunk bed, a cot, a water toilet and a sink. Classic.

After dismissing the possibility of an ironic afterlife I noticed the Doctor seemed to still be alive as well. He turned from the window and said, "Welcome back, Unstoffe my boy! You aren't going to believe this!"

"We aren't dead," I noted. "I distinctly remember a hail of bullets."

The Doctor resumed his delighted inspection. "Amusement park bullets, Unstoffe. Probably packed with nanotech assemblers; you get shot, they start healing you right away. Can't have the tourists really offing each other, can you? It'd be murder on repeat business. Let's just be grateful they didn't set those great honking huge grizzly bears on us."

"That is a relief, though I'd rather not be hurt at all."

"Yup. I hear ya. You're lucky, though. For a few more days you'll probably be nearly immortal. Thing is, my own healing properties and these nanos aren't getting along. Ouch."

"Are you all right?"

"I will be."

I warily probed my injury collection; shoulder, head. All healed. All my physical injuries, at least. One thing still hurt.

"The princess seemed to know that man."

"Told you she was a princess, did she?" said a voice from above, "Convincing little minx, I'll give her that."

A man reclined on the top bunk. I disliked him immediately. I'm a sloucher with a simpleton's face; this man was a romantic action hero in the Levithian mode – chiseled features, proud mustache and rippling muscle.

It was the man from the car, Spidrick. He wasn't dead, either.

"Explain," I said, "What do you mean?"

"I mean she's an actress with a face-job. One of the Graff's schemes."

I felt anger boiling up but didn't know where to direct it. The princess wasn't a princess? She was in league with the Graff Vynda-K?

"Easy, Unstoffe," said the Doctor.

"Why was she in storage in a cryoglove, then?"

"His Highness didn't need her after the real princess was rescued, did he? Girl on a ship full of soldiers? Bad for morale. Look at what happened to Yaka." He noticed my obvious distress. "Oh, she suckered you good, didn't she? Regular little con artist, she is. Sorry, lad."

The princess was a con artist? She'd lied to me? Wait! That wasn't necessarily a bad thing, was it? My mind raced. Potential futures began to repopulate my mind. Um, never mind why, Bobs."

Bob Sunny Day said, "Mr. Unstoffe, your continued pretense at living a lawful lifestyle is quite unnecessary. We know you have attempted to mislead us."

"Oh, fine, then. But why did you let me carry on?"

"We are programmed for humor, human. Our circuits were tickled. Now enough of this. Garron and you were criminals. You were confidence men,"

"Hucksters," That was Bob What a Deal.

"And swindlers," said Bob Name Your Poison.

"What Huey, Dewey and Louie are trying to say is that I already told them," said the Doctor. "A top security agent holds no secrets from his peers, after all." He winked at the princess.

"All right, all right. Very well. I immediately started fantasizing what it would be like if the princess joined me and Garron. Well, then I remembered Garron was dead. Replace Garron, then. A girl's a real asset on a team, you know. Garron can pour on the charm but he isn't pretty. Having the princess as a front woman... imagine the possibilities. I resolved to mention it to her. And then I remembered Yaka.

"What happened with Yaka, then?" I asked Spidrick.

"You have to ask? She was off-limits. Yaka disobeyed orders. Being the Graff's cousin, he's always felt a bit more entitled than the rest of us. She goes to the freezer and he's suddenly point-man. And I'm his partner so I'm point-man, too."

The Doctor interrupted. "Unstoffe, forget about the princess for a minute. Spidrick,

how did you and Yaka come to be here? We heard the Graff attacked Rallax?”

The man Spidrick climbed down and drank from the sink. Then he sat on the bottom bunk and studied us.

Uncomfortable under his appraisal, I had a quick look outside. It was a high-walled courtyard, built in the popular ‘brooding edifice’ style but with touches of the alien. The minarets reminded me of Ribos, for instance. Near our position the view accorded by an open drawbridge teased of a gloomy city beyond. On the opposite side a gate led to the grounds of a magnificent palace. Beyond the wall I saw snow-topped pines, spires and curling smoke. Above it all the low sky hung grey and featureless.

The courtyard buzzed with life. Men in uniform practiced on parade, tended to bears and as indicated, hammered wood. I wondered, not for the first time, why those keen on executions don’t just keep scaffolds on hand. They always have to build them outside your cell window. Contractual sadism, I suppose.

This was just a glance, mind you and not being an astute student of early Earth history I must confess I didn’t realize the bears and the ornithopters were anachronistic. I was most impressed by the colossal patriotic statues I saw looming above the skyline.

I was burning with questions about the princess but I knew misdirection when I heard it. I realized the Doctor didn’t want Spidrick wondering how and where we’d met her. That would lead to awkward questions about the Graff, wouldn’t it? I kept my peace and let him talk.

“All right. I suppose you did try to help me,” he said, “Maybe if I give you a sitrep we can help each other. First, the Graff didn’t attack Rallax. He answered a distress call. A delegation of people and robots met us. Some of the people were aliens, ones we’d never seen. They told us something had happened to their ship. Ship! We thought it was a planet.”

“So did we,” I said.

“It’s big. I knew the Graff was already sizing it up as a potential asset to the war effort, but he acted his part as the valiant rescuer. He listened while they told us that soon after her inaugural launch the warp engines had come on line. They were in permanent orbit around some star, you know, and the engines were for emergencies only. But the engines fired, they warped and suddenly they were here and everything was wrong. They couldn’t raise their headquarters and the few signals they could receive were strange. And then a passing farm freighter told them the date. You aren’t going to believe this, but...”

“But Rallax is a product of the Fourth Great and Bountiful Human Empire. One hundred and eighty-seven thousand, six hundred and seventy years in the future. Give or take a few centuries,” said the Doctor. We stared.

He shrugged. “What? I read it somewhere.”

Spidrick continued. “I don’t know anything about a bountiful empire, but yeah, you’re right. 200,000 years, they told us. Somehow that warp made them move in time. Crazy, huh? Time travel’s one of the greatest weapons ever and a bunch of tourists discover it by accident. Thing is, it messed up the ship. There was supposed to be an orbital bridge; that’s where all the technicians and officers were stationed. It didn’t survive the trip. They showed us the wreckage, strewn over half the northern hemisphere.”

“Surely there were some technicians here,” I said.

“Just a handful. Fewer by the time we arrived. They tried to jury-rig the garbage disposal system as a substitute for the busted transmat but no-one returned.”

I thought about gods falling from the sky and shuddered.

“But what about the robots? Couldn’t they do the repairs?”

“We asked the same thing. They were insulted at the idea. Some future custom or other. No robot technicians and no robot security. Just tour staff, historical reenactors, bartenders... that sort of thing. Menials.”

“Spidrick,” the Doctor asked, “we were attacked by armed Rallaxan robots in armour...”

“Yeah, I seen ‘em before, upstairs. They must have been reprogrammed after the Graff left.”

“Why did the Graff leave?” I asked. It seemed to me he’d have valued a mobile planet. Why was he bothering with Ribos?

Spidrick’s face darkened. He was reluctant to talk about it.

“See, the thing is... Listen, I’m a proud citizen. I willingly serve the Levithian throne. And like it or not, that’s the Graff Vynda-K. May the gods forgive my treason, but I was coming to doubt my Lord’s fitness... I hate to say it, but - “

Suddenly there were four loud knocks. I swear, the Doctor almost hit the ceiling. I didn’t remember him being this twitchy on Ribos.

“You may hate to say it, but I have no such reservations!” declared a voice through the door panel, “the Graff was a tyrant and a fool.”

“Yaka!” snarled Spidrick, rushing to the door. “Open this and face me, you coward!”

“Back, dog!”

“Better a dog than a traitor!”

“Better a traitor to a madman than a dog to an lost cause!”

“Better a dog to a lost cause than a mad cyborg monk’s lickspittle!”

They both snarled at the Doctor, “What are you laughing at?”

He beamed at them affectionately, with crinkly eyes and a huge smirky smile, then burst into laughter again.

“Oh,” he said, “I’m sorry, gentlemen...”

Then I began chuckling, too. “Lickspittle!”

After a moment Spidrick joined in and I decided he was all right. Yaka just glared and bristled his mustache. “Stop this at once! You are prisoners of the Tsar Nick and you will demonstrate proper respect!” He, on the other hand, was all wrong.

“Gone a bit native, hasn’t he?” I whispered to the Doctor, who nodded.

Spidrick spoke calmly to Yaka, as one would to an old friend one has realized is a few sandwiches short of a picnic. “Oh, Yaka. Stop playing this game. The park is closed, brother, and you must stop persecuting those who wish to leave.”

“Foolishness. They have everything they need. Under the Tsar, all men are fed and cared for. There is no want in this land, no conflict save that which you and your underground rabble have instigated.”

He leaned close to the window. “Spidrick, we could have ruled here! I will rule here! I will raise an army and march on the other lands! Then, when they are subdued, we will move out into the galaxy!”

The Doctor rolled his eyes. I tried not to chuckle.

“The robots won’t let you,” said Spidrick, “Rasputin and the Tsar will put you in the garbage chute before they allow you to raise an army. You know that!”

“Excuse me,” said the Doctor, “Your exquisitely detailed plans to conquer the universe are compelling and all but, well, there’s this snag.”

“A snag? What snag is this?”

“It’s just that everyone on Rallax is going to be dead within a year. Maybe two.”

“It’s true,” I added, “Have you seen the holes in the decks? It’s this gravity circuitry they use. It’s made of dwarf alloy and it’s slipping out of containment.”

“I’m just a soldier,” said Spidrick, “What does that mean?”

“It means the gravity here is going to keep getting stronger until the whole thing implodes.”

“What lies are these?” scoffed Yaka, “I will hear no more of this. ‘Gravity circuits’! Lennonist nonsense! Enjoy your last evening, gentlemen and dog. At dawn you die!”

The panel snapped shut. His brisk boot steps receded. A distant outer door clanged.

Spidrick said, “This is true? We are all doomed?”

“Never mind that!” I said, “‘At dawn you die’, remember?”

“And never mind that!” said the Doctor, “Spidrick, how did the two of you come here? Obviously the Graff left you, I understand that much, but why? How?”

“We may as well sit. We have until dawn.”

“Oh, I’ve no intention of being here at dawn.”

“You have an escape plan, then?”

“Well, not as such, no. More of an expectation. But I promise you we’ll get out of here. I just don’t know how, yet. Unstoffs? Any ideas?”

It was nice to be asked. “Not yet, Doctor. But even if we get out of this cell, there are bears. And after the bears there’s a wall and a city filled with who-knows-what. Say, Spidrick, how many of these people are robots?”

“Oh, let’s see. The royals and the monk are robots. Lennon and his advisors; Starr, Sverdlov and the others, are robots. The Cossacks are robots (this impressed me greatly, by the way, remembering their authentic body odor) and so are the bears. Everyone else is human or alien, though the aliens have all been sent north. The loyalists, that’s Yaka’s crowd out there, are mostly descended from the tourists; the freedom fighters are descendants of crew. They remember where they are, who they are, keep the knowledge alive. They’re looking for a way out. Thought I’d found it too, back where we were captured – sorry about the gun, by the way – but Yaka’s spies sniffed me out.”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself,” said the Doctor.

“Oh, yeah. Right. Where was I?”

“You said the Graff made a mistake.”

“Yes... remember I said the bridge was destroyed? Well, the Graff found out that the ship’s registry had been salvaged and was in a repair bay. He volunteered to look at it, see if one of our tech boys could do something. Well, we discovered that the thing was still functioning. With a bit of fine-tuning and some servers, the planet could be controlled

remotely. We'd had a shore leave on Aye Aye a few months before. Ever hear of it? Rogue colony of scientists for hire? We'd made some trades, forged some contacts. Old Sholakh told us the Graff planned to hack – ”

Back in the interrogation room, the Doctor interrupted my telling of Spidrick's story. “Oh, we don't need to get into all the details, do we?”

“Oh, right. Anyway, Bobs, Spidrick told us that the Graff stole the registry...”

“That is correct! We must have have the registry if we are resume control of this vessel!”

“Yes, we've established that. Unfortunately, in their state of disgrace, Yaka and Spidrick were ordered to cover the retreat and were stunned by your predecessors. No sooner had the Graff blasted off then Rallax warped again.”

“Yes. It is hundreds of annual time measurements since the attack. The two soldiers were put in stasis and forgotten.”

“Spidrick told us they woke up a few years ago. I guess the system failed. They explored a bit, got lost in corridors and then found themselves in Red Revolution. Hundreds of years later, as you say, but only weeks for them.”

I stood at the window as Spidrick described how the two had attempted to blend into the society they found here. Yaka, attracted to power, ingratiated himself to Rasputin the mad cyborg monk and rapidly rose through the ranks. Spidrick, after failing to rediscover the remote cave they'd entered through, had gone the route of vodka and dissolution, sinking until he met the revolution. That is, the few descendants of the crew who knew they were still on a starship and refused to participate in the mandatory annual revolution.

“They didn't want to live lives of indolence,” he said, “They craved real life, real risk. They wanted the stars. I agreed to help and before I knew it John Lennon himself declared me their leader.”

“Good grief! Where did these people learn their history?”

“Why? What's the matter, Doctor?”

“I wouldn't know where to start,” muttered the Doctor. “All right. You got in good with the Bolsheviks. Then what happened?”

“Suddenly Yaka and I became opponents.”

“You were friends before?” asked the Doctor softly.

“We were blood brothers. Now we are enemies, but not by my choice. I would save him if I could. His ambition will kill him.”

The Doctor did not reply. Our questions exhausted, our common ground plowed, we retreated to our own thoughts. The night settled in.

I lay on the bunk and watched the artificial stars reel across the artificial heavens. Far away, wolves howled at the same sky. I envied their perspective.

The Doctor shook me awake. I blinked at the morning sun, wondering where I was and mildly pleased I didn't know. Then I heard a familiar voice cry, “Prepare for inspection!” and I remembered.

I stumbled to the window. Spidrick stood aside and I peered out.

The Tsar's carpenters did a good job. A three-man gallows stood in the courtyard. Already a small crowd was gathering; some escorted at gunpoint. Above them Yaka stood on the high platform, inspecting the trap door mechanisms and tugging the nooses. My heart leaped when I spotted the princess, flanked by hulking Cossacks, at the gallows steps. She seemed very small there, resplendent as she was in a white furred coat and hat. She seemed to sense my presence or maybe it was just a coincidence or maybe she just assumed we'd be watching; she turned, looked at our window and raised her hands. They were bound.

“Doctor, do you see that?” I asked.

“I saw it earlier. The Tsar's carpenters did a good job.”

“Doctor, no. It's Shawneequa. She's a prisoner, too.”

“Oh, really? That's interesting, innit?”

“We have to save her!”

He considered this. “Well... Normally I'd agree, certainly...”

From outside we heard, “Fetch the prisoners!”

“... but I'm terribly sorry to say, she's on her own.”

I watched a delegation of troops march toward our prison.

Spidrick grunted. “I'm wouldn't worry, my new friend. I suspect she is playing some game even now. Her aptitude for manipulation will serve her well, I think.”

That was rather unfair, I thought. The princess was a genuine, warm person, not someone playing a game.

And then something struck me. A game? We'd been forgetting something.

Games. Bullets that don't kill. Robotic Cossacks. Annual revolutions. *Games*.

"Doctor? Spidrick?"

I guess the Doctor heard something in my voice.

"I have had a thought."

"I gather this is an event of note?" said Spidrick. I ignored him.

"This is all fake, correct? Oh, these walls are real brick and these bars are steel, but this wasn't built as a prison, was it?"

The Doctor shushed Spidrik. "Go on."

The outer door clanged open. Marchers approached. I spoke rapidly.

"What I mean is, it's fictional, right? It's built for people to play a game in. And who wants to play prisoner – "

The Doctor leaped to his feet. " – if there's no hope of escape! Unstoffe! You're brilliant!" he said, "Now, tap those flagstones! Spidrick, check the walls for hidden panels! I'll inspect the sink!"

Not to blow my own stuppelhorn, but I am brilliant, you know? The sink and the platform beneath pivoted to expose a dark opening, a ladder leading below. We wasted no time. I went last, replacing the sink as I went. The tunnel below, forgotten for centuries, was warm, dry and dimly lit by oil lamps. We were at its very end. Every cell, I saw, had an egress here. We stood at the bottom, grinning at the cries of consternation above.

"We'd best not linger," cautioned Spidrick, "they aren't total fools."

Judging by the rapping sounds from above, he was right. I glanced right and saw the Doctor was studying the floor. "Look, Unstoffe," he said. A line of royally petite footprints were clearly visible in the dust. They led to a small table at tunnel's end and back toward the palace. They were overlaid by another, larger pair, and there were signs of a scuffle. Our equipment – my communicator, the Doctor's Sonic, Spidrick's gun – was arranged on the table.

"She knew we'd escape," I said, "and she was caught! Now we have to save her!"

"Right!" said the Doctor, and, "Honor demands it," said Spidrick, reaching for the gun.

"I wonder why this is still all here, though, if she was caught?" I wondered.

Quick as a Happy Harbor Mirthscorpion, the Doctor grabbed Spidrick's arm and motioned for us to freeze. A thin cord, nearly invisible, ran from each object and over the

table edge. He bent at the waist and peered underneath. “Oh. Good question, Unstoffe. Here’s your answer.”

Garron had this thing for old-style flatties. He said they were more believable than holos. I don’t know about that, but some of them were fun to watch, even if you couldn’t pick your perspective and had to watch from a fixed vantage point. There were the classics, like ‘Agent Ex’ and ‘Brillig’, but Garron’s favorite was ‘The Deviant Trio’, a psychological study of violent mental instabilities. The three main characters suffered from a wide variety of developmental syndromes and emotional problems. I found it rather distressing viewing but Garron, for some reason, thought it was hilarious. Anyway, there was a scene of the three of them trying to dispose of an explosive, a round bomb they tossed to each other as its fuse burned lower and lower. Finally, their sadistic leader, Moe, pretended he wanted the bomb and the masochist Larry and the holy fool Curly took it from him and were caught in the explosion.

So there’s Spidrick, myself, the Doctor and a bomb under a table. We looked at it and each other and reached the same unspoken conclusions. We didn’t have time to defuse it. We couldn’t just leave our stuff. But if one of us grabbed the equipment, shielded it with his body and ran as fast as he could... well, there was a chance. But who would do the noble deed?

Blessing Garron’s questionable taste, I remembered Moe.

“I’ll do it,” I said, with my most earnest, ‘umble sincerity. “You two run down the corridor. I still have active nanos, so I’ll survive. Doctor, you said your nanos were wonky so it’s too dangerous for you: you might die. And Spidrick, if this doesn’t work the Doctor will need your knowledge of the area to escape.” I grasped their arms in manly supplication. “Just promise me you’ll save the princess.”

Flush with the certainty of their noble objections, I airily dismissed them.

Once again proving life is crueler than fiction, they legged it.

Spidrick grasped my shoulders and kissed my cheek. “Good man!” he said, and sprinted away. The Doctor grinned, clapped my arm and trotted off. Over his shoulder he said, “Good plan, Unstoffe, good plan!” Then, I swear, he said ‘Woot-woot-woot’ as he retreated. Just like Curly.”

“Oh I never! You’re just imagining things!” laughed the Doctor. The three Bobs looked him, curious.

“Honestly... I’ve never heard of these ‘deviants’. Anyway, Unstoffe, you survived, didn’t you? I knew you would, anyway. No way would Yaka have blown up his own prison. Honestly, ‘Curly’!” He crossed his arms and slumped in his chair and muttered, “Everyone knows Shemp was funnier.”

“Hummph! Yes, I survived. I took careful hold of the communicator and the sonic (ignoring the sturdy pistol), braced myself and leaped away. My feet had not touched the floor when I saw the flash. Then I was picked up, hit the ceiling head first and mercifully blacked out. I was getting good at blacking out, wasn’t I? Hope it never comes up again, but still... handy in a crisis.

For example, I apparently slept through yet another thrilling series of dangerous adventures, which suits me fine. With Spidrick lugging me on his back, they made their way through the maze of palace tunnels and secret passages. They had several close calls with the Imperial forces but finally found an actual secret entrance to the Rallax service tunnels. In short order they found the central control complex and emergency medical bay and that’s where I woke up a stiff neck, a sore back and a firm resolve to never, ever again attempt reverse psychology.

I lay there, lulled by the comforting bleeps and beeps of technology, when I began to discern the Doctor and Spidrick’s voices. Reluctantly, I began to climb off the auto-doc when I was gently restrained.

“Hold your horses, hero,” said a familiar voice, and the princess loomed into view. “Let the table decide if you can get up.”

“You mean ‘hold my bears’, surely,” I said.

She shushed me with a finger to my lips and spoke to a console. “Scan for release,” she said, and the unit hummed.

“Approved,” said a kindly, mechanical voice, “Have a healthy day!”

“Let’s go see what those maniacs are up to,” said the princess, helping me up, “You’ve missed quite a bit.”

“Princess, ‘a bit’?”

She laughed. “A lot, then. I’ll bring you up to speed. Mind the step, there.”

I'd been out for nearly half a day, it transpired. The Doctor had taken one look at the control room and gleefully gone to work. He'd taken a census (You have over 120,000 living residents there, Bobs. Did you realize that?), pinpointed the princess's location by the process of elimination and remotely ordered two robotic Cossacks to escort her here.

After assuring themselves of her integrity they'd allowed her to sit with me.

Spidick grinned over a cigar. "Here comes trouble, then. Feeling fit, lad?"

I drank in the room. Consoles and monitors were everywhere; on one wall was an interactive map of the entirety of Red Revolution. I saw weather machines, robot override switches, food distribution controls. Two hulking Cossacks guarded the door. On one on screen I saw Yaka pacing and shouting at Tsar Nick, who stroked his long white beard and tickled the ear of a large deer, one of a small herd lounging prettily about the throne room.

Distracted though I was by the princess's proximity, I immediately saw the possibilities.

And what possibilities! From this single room a clever man could control the world.

The Doctor read my expression. "Oh, he likes it, doesn't he?" He spun his chair. "Now that we're all here, down to business! What shall it be?"

Shawnee said, "A surprise abdication by Rasputin and the Tsar?"

The Doctor sneered. "Trust a princess to think of that. No, there would be a run on the throne. It would be chaos."

I said, "Not if their replacement is seen to have the support of the Cossacks."

Spidick nodded. "It's true. None dare oppose the Cossacks, not even the army. Not since Yaka supplied them with swords."

The Doctor tapped a console with his index finger, thinking. I smiled when I saw Rasputin, his steel skull glinting in the torchlight, in the same pose on a monitor behind him. He even looked a bit like the previous Doctor who, if he'd been here, could have impersonated Rasputin to a tee, just like -"

"Unstoffe! Will you please stop wasting these good robot's time and get on with it? You're practically finished!"

"Please sit, Doctor," said Bob Name Your Poison, "We do not require your input."

"Now, Peter Unstoffe," said Bob What a Deal, "Please continue. You were saying?"

"Sorry, Bobs. What I was saying won't help you regain control of Rallax. My mind was just wandering. Won't happen again.

“We were talking about how to conquer Red Revolution, but I was wondering why we were bothering...

“Of course...” I ventured, “we could do nothing.”

Seeing their expressions, I added, “I’m serious. Aren’t we trying to find your ship and escape, Doctor? Why get involved here when we’re in a hurry? Just hack the schematics in the console there and find us a way to the surface.”

“You’re forgetting something, Unstoffe,” said Spidrick. “This is the first revolution since Yaka became captain of the guard. He’s armed the Cossacks with swords and they haven’t the wit to question their orders. Thousands will die unless we act!”

“Oh, that damned Yaka!” I said. “Why is it always the least qualified who seek power?”

“As far as Yaka’s concerned he is qualified. Don’t forget, he was in the line of succession. Way down there, but a royal, nonetheless. Still, he’d be a miserable administrator. All he really enjoys is shouting down at people.”

On the screen, Rasputin, the Tsar, eight deer and the imperial guard were leaving Yaka alone in the throne room. He bowed stiffly until they were gone.

The princess said, “Don’t forget, we control the Cossacks. If we tell them not to kill...”

“The regulars are also armed with swords...”

“But if Yaka’s out of the picture they’ll obey the royals...”

“I’m not convinced of that. He’s kept them well-supplied with women and vodka...”

“Then Yaka himself will have to give the order to stand down,” said the Doctor, “and he has to be persuaded to do so...”

“No he doesn’t,” I said.

On the throne room monitor I saw Yaka gazing at the empty throne, hands clenched.

“Just look at him,” I said. “Doesn’t he look sad? Let’s give him what he wants.”

Directly east from the former Tsar’s palace, deep in the forest, at the end of a wide trail, is a clearing at the base of the Western cliff. There is no stairway to the stars here – that was a secondary entry for staff. Instead, a grand waterfall fills a deep clear pool. A road runs behind it and the rock wall there lifts on a pivot. Beyond is the Garden Highway.

This is where Spidrick made his failed escape attempt.

To the north the land turns to frozen tundra and icy seas. To the south rears an

unscaled range of mountains.

To the East lie vast stretches of grey prairie broken only by crumbling colossi, meandering black rivers and the occasional grim village. The only light in this dismal landscape reflected from the silver tracks of the railroad. Belching black smoke, we rode east. The Doctor never left the engine; all through the day we heard his whoops, carried back by the wind. The princess and I shared a carriage. We talked, but not about anything important. Once, she visited the new Tsar, Yaka, who rode with his silent Cossack guard in the coach ahead; he was seething with impotent rage. Spidrick had stayed behind to explain the new regime to his followers while the new Tsar ‘inspected the provinces’.

We arrived at the Eastern sea an hour before dawn. The cossacks were given final orders and the train returned to the west. We found the docks and the sailboats moored there. The princess had skill with rope and canvas and soon we were gliding across the still waters.

We sailed into the sunrise and came to the wall of the world. A blue tunnel, invisible against the sky, led to an interior dock. We scraped the mold and salt crust from the machinery there and the Doctor went to work. He finished as the light of the setting sun filled the room with warm light and shadows. “They call this the magic hour,” said the Doctor, throwing a switch. A platform hummed. “Presto!”

“Is it safe?” I wondered, “I don’t want to appear a mile above ground.”

“No, it’s all fixed. Perfectly safe. Stand right there and I’ll show you.”

“Doctor, ‘stand right there’?”

“Never mind, Peter, I’ll be the penny hog,” said the princess.

“I’m only kidding! We all go,” said the Doctor, extending both elbows so we could take his arms. “*Allons-y!*”

We took one step toward the transmat when the green light turned puce and the pitch changed.

“There’s someone coming through!” cried the princess.

“Can you stop it, Doctor?”

“Yes, but why would we want to? We’ve been kicking around the basement long enough! It’s time to go upstairs and-”

Three figures in battle armor appeared on the platform. More or less in tandem, three large blasters were leveled at us.

“- meet the landlords.”

I sat back and pretended to study my fingernails. Bob Name your Poison looked at his partners.

“Wait! Are you done?” he asked me.

“Hmm? Of course I am. The three of you brought us up here, locked us up and interrogated us. Story over. Told you everything I know.”

“But what happened to Yaka? Why is he the Tsar and why did the princess kiss him?” asked Bob What a Deal.

“Are you in love now?” Bob Sunny Day wanted to know.

I suddenly adored these idiot machines and wondered if I could keep them. “I’m pleased you’ve become so engrossed in the story-”

“Oh, yes, yours was the best. The Doctor has no sense of continuity and the princess kept explaining her emotional state. She likes you, by the way but isn’t sure you meet her male ideal as exemplified by her father.”

“Oh, that’s very kind of you to say. But aren’t you forgetting something?”

“How did the princess know about the tunnels? She told us.”

“No. Have you forgotten the entire reason we had this little chat?”

“Why we are being attacked by Cossacks and humans? You haven’t explained that.”

“No, the other thing. Think ‘slabby’.”

They held a silent conference as gunfire erupted outside, surely a mere corridor or two away.

Bob Name your Poison leaped to his feet. “Registry! You’ve told us where to find the ship’s registry!”

“They aren’t half dim, aren’t they?” murmured the Doctor.

The inaudible conference recommenced. I turned to the others and smiled. The Doctor had been running his sonic on stealth mode and the verifier had let some whoppers pass. Well, no, that’s not quite true. Just been a few strategic omissions, is all. You have my complete assurance that over ninety percent of what I told the robots is true.

I realized they were now staring at me. “Yes?”

“To verify – One must travel in a western direction from transmat station Red Revolution 2212 to the Garden Highway 47 exit 4550G, exiting through filtration vent GN-

78463, proceed in a rightward direction down to the termination point of Intercell Maintenance Corridor 12,675H? This is correct? This is where we will find the unfortunate Mr. Garron?”

I heard a rapidly intensifying beeping just outside the door. The princess and the Doctor ducked and covered. “Well, I suppose you could go to all that trouble,” I quickly said as I dove for the floor. The door concussed off its frame and knocked the robots flat. A figure in full Levithian armor strode into the room through the billowing smoke.

“Then again,” he said, removing his helmet, “I suppose I can spare you the effort.”

“It’s the Graff Vynda-K!” came an awed whisper, quickly shushed, from under the wreckage.

“Garron!” I cried. Unaccountably overjoyed, I leaped to my feet and embraced him.

“Stop that, boy, you’re spoiling my entrance!”

The princess laughed.

“You took your sweet time,” said the Doctor, “How many bloody hints did you need?”

Martial music swelled and someone else stepped into the room and looked around wonderingly. “I abjure you not to dishonor Mr. Garron. He showed great fortitude as he lay with this spear transfixing his magic pocket.”

“Chief! You made it!”

“Evidently, observant one. Greetings and thank you again, my savior.”

“Please, I couldn’t let that hatch cut you in half, could I? Besides, you’ve more than repaid the debt, sitting with Garron that whole time, holding the spear steady.”

A weak voice drifted from under the door. “Mr. Garron is not dead? What infamy is this, Peter Gulliver

Unstoffe?”

“Infamy? *Infamy?*” said Garron, “I’ll hear no talk of infamy! You’ve been conned, my dim-witted plastic friends, fair and square.”

“Conned?” said Bob What a Deal.

Garron peered down at him. “Yes, conned. Tricked. Fooled. Deceived. Swindled. Defrauded.”

“Garron, please,” I said. “I’m sorry, Bobs, but it had to be done. Surely you understand. Now we can save Rallax. Come on, up off the floor with you. Help us.”

“You’re too soft for this work, boy. I’ve said it before.”

The three Robots, servos whirring, painfully struggled to their feet. The chief leveled the singing spear at them. “Make no hostile moves, bloodless ones,” he said, “We require your cooperation.” They meekly raised their hands. Bob Sunny Day’s nose dropped off and he sighed.

“We surrender,” he said.

All right. I suppose a bit of explanation is in order. As you’ve guessed, the chief didn’t plummet to his death. Maybe I am too soft, like Garron says. I don’t know. It’s not as if I made a decision, you understand. I hauled him to safety without a thought for my own. But the universe likes a fool, I suppose, because the chief then demonstrated that even the most primitive Draconian has a hide of honor. He swore an oath to repay his debt and to follow my orders until then. Well okay, I thought.

I didn’t expect the debt to be discharged so suddenly, though.

Garron sat against the wall of the corridor, as I said before, but he was far from dead. Sure looked like he wished he was, though. He was pale and sweating. The princess stood away, looking as if she might bolt at any second. The Doctor was urging Garron to keep still while he made readings with his screwdriver. “Don’t move a micrometer,” he said, “or that shaft is going to touch the edge and short out the tesseract’s safety protocols. You know what that means. You did read the manual, I hope.”

“I regret to say that this is, in fact, a second-hand tesseract and the manual was not included in the, shall we say, transaction,” said Garron, “but yes, I know what will happen.”

I was horrified. The shaft protruded from his chest a mere arm’s length, a tiny corona of sparkling energy at the entry point. I immediately guessed what had happened. Garron had ordered the tesseract to close at the same instance the chief threw the spear. The tesseract’s safety features worked as advertized and the portal did not close around the spear. So far, so good.

“But this genius didn’t follow basic maintenance routines and the tesseract developed a leak,” the Doctor said, “Now the portal rim is supercharged with negative void energy. If that spear touches the sides it will act as a conduit to the positive void inside.”

“Won’t they short each other out?” I asked.

“They’ll equalize, Unstoffe. Implosively.”

“Oh. Can you fix it?”

The Doctor frowned. “Maybe. What I mean is, I have all the readings I need to create a sonic pulse that will dampen the negative void ring and allow the spear to be removed.”

“That’s wonderful! Do it, then!”

“Thing is, I need either a quantum computer or the equipment on my ship to compute the exact frequency. One micro-octave off either way and...”

The chief surprised us all. “Do I understand correctly that the fat one’s invisible pouch will kill us all if the spear is moved?”

“That’s right, chief.”

“But you have the means to save us if you are allowed to leave this place?”

“Yesss...”

“Then I will stay with him. My hand threw the spear. My hand will hold it steady.”

Was that pride in the Doctor’s nod? “Thank you, Chief. You are a true son of Draconia. We’ll be back as soon as we can.”

I’ve never been fond of retracing my steps.

“Doctor,” I asked, “Could we transmit the frequency? Even if we weren’t here?”

“If we had a receiver, sure.”

“Garron and I have a set of communicators.”

Garron groaned, “Had. Had a set. One of those savages nicked mine.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Say, wait a minute.”

I’d recently seen something, somewhere, hadn’t I? Ah!

“Chief, I need your headband.”

We synchronized the frequencies of chief’s headband and my communicator. The Doctor fiddled with both and declared we had a constant, clean connection. Garron would hear everything that happened to us and when the time came we could transmit the pulse from anywhere (from orbit, I hoped). The only thing the Doctor couldn’t do, frustratingly, was allow Garron to transmit to us. “I’m a genius, no doubt,” he said, “but even I can’t fix a microphone after someone’s stuck a decorative feather through it.”

Did you wonder at the coincidence of our meeting the Graff’s men on a ship the size of a small planet? Well, don’t. As we left Garron the Doctor picked up two transponder signals

matching the Graff's signature. He didn't tell us, so we didn't know we weren't wandering. We were following a signal we hoped would lead us out.

In the Garden Highway the Doctor disabled the vents and repaired two transpods.

In the palace control room he programmed the Royals to abdicate after proclaiming Yaka the new Tsar. The Cossacks were programmed to never leave Yaka unattended and to kill him immediately if he made a single selfish or non-humanitarian decree, the compilation of which was a lengthy process.

A swift motorcar was dispatched to wait at the western waterfall.

From the eastern sea the train was sent back to await Garron's arrival.

In the secret chamber under the wall of the world the Doctor finally managed to access Rallax's central computer. He set it to work analyzing his tesseract readings.

In his cell, after the Bobs captured us, he hacked into the computer again. The information wasn't ready. We had to stall.

Near the end of my first interrogation we sent the signal, the chief removed the spear and Garron was saved. Now it was his turn to save us.

And he did. He and Spidrick were soon leading a waiting army of Cossacks, bears and adventurous Bolsheviks out of the only land they'd known and beyond the sky. They'd battled the robots (who, truthfully, showed a marked tendency toward surrender) through corridors and compartments, gaining deck by deck, until reaching our location in Auxiliary Control. Then, on the communicator and through the door, Garron heard me say, "Well, I suppose you could go to all that trouble."

"We surrender!" said Bob Sunny Day and his nose dropped off. "Oh, pardon me!" he said, retrieving the stray organ, "I seem to have been damaged in Mr. Garron's melodramatic entrance. As we are now category 2 compatriots, may I excuse myself to the repair bay?"

"Is this really the time for vanity, Bob Sunny Day?" said Bob Name Your Poison.

"No, no. Go ahead, Bob. In fact, Bob and Bob – why don't you accompany Bob? You're all looking a bit discombobulated," said the Doctor. After offering polite assurances to rejoin us soon, the robots trudged off.

No one spoke after they left. I suppose there should have been cheers, handshakes and if I was lucky a kiss or two. We'd won, hadn't we? We should be celebrating. But the chief settled on his haunches, the princess and Garron sank into chairs and even the tireless

Doctor leaned on a support column. Spidrick entered the room, nodded to us and found a bench.

I felt I should say something but, gentlemen, I was well and truly talked out. Instead I settled against a wall and removed my Crewbooties, enjoying the feeling of cool metal on tired feet.

I could almost taste the quiet, the commonplace sounds of a functioning ship. Unstoffe, I said to myself, you have to get up. There's still so much to do. But Unstoffe, I countered, I could happily seclude myself in a Lull-D-Sack for a week. No, food first. Then a shower with real water.

"Oh, a shower!" said the princess, "that sounds wonderful."

Garron chuckled. "He does this when he's tired. You're doing it again."

My embarrassment faded when I saw no malice in their eyes, just weary understanding.

"Young Unstoffe is right!" said the Doctor.

Garron groaned. "Yes, I suppose we should conclude this welcome siesta and return to the task at hand."

"What?" said the Doctor, "With all due respect for your new found and mildly worrisome sense of responsibility, Garron, I'm always famished after conquering a planet. Let's round up a Bob and find the canteen."

It was a nice dinner. The bobs were pleased to reinstall their old programming and Bob Name Your Poison turned out to be quite the alchemist. Our collective poisons kept him happily engaged as we plotted our next moves.

First and foremost, the Doctor insisted, we had to retrieve his capsule from orbit. Our next step, returning stability to Rallax, depended on the equipment inside. Bob Sunny Day, smart new nose firmly attached, mentioned that a nearby cargo dock was equipped with tow beams, so that was sorted. The Doctor was eager to be off but we prevailed upon him to explain what we needed to do.

"Well, we have to disable the warp engines, and to do that we need the ship's registry to reinstall the data and cognizance core. Remember how I couldn't access the main computer from the palace control room? Well, it's like that all over this ship. Hardly any of the millions of systems are talking to each other. Once we install the registry, they will. You do still have it, Garron?"

Garron tapped his chest. “Right here, Doctor.”

“And you can still access your tesseract?”

“Where do you think these fine olives came from?”

“Anglesey.”

“Oh! A fellow *connoisseur*?” Garron rubbed his hands briskly and leaned forward.

“That’s a good guess, considering you haven’t even eaten one. Yes, while many opine that the tartness of an Andalusian olive...”

Oh, dear gods of alcohol. We didn’t have time for one of Garron’s discourses on olives. Hadn’t he already begged and cajoled until everyone except the Doctor had eaten one?

“Not now, Garron.” He looked hurt. “I know you’re an expert and I’m sure everyone would find it compelling and I’m sorry but I think we should hear the Doctor’s plan.”

“Why thank you, Unstoffe. Anyway, all we’ll need to do is crack the security protocols and we’ll deal with that when the time comes.”

“Excuse me,” said the chief, who was drinking something out of a reconstituted pineapple, “but what are these ‘security protocols’?”

“You see, chief, a ship’s registry is more than just a brain. It’s also an ideally tamper-proof record of ownership,” I said, “Think of it as the ship’s totem.”

“Ah. And the ship’s spirits will only speak with their master’s leave?”

“So much smarter than humans,” murmured the Doctor. “That’s it exactly, chief. Top marks.”

Bob Sunny Day set another platter down. “And then we will be safe? We will not become a star?”

“Not automatically, no. That’s where you lot come in.”

“Sir?”

“The ship’s auto-repair systems will fix some faults but the broken circuits will need hands-on repair. That’s you. I’ll have to alter your programming a bit. Show you what to do. Then you can start recruiting survivors from the recreation cells to help. Start with that lot over there,” he said, meaning a nearby table of drunken Bolsheviks. “They’ll pick it up, train others. You’ve plenty of time.”

“We’ll do our best, sir.”

“Course you will,” said the Doctor. He rose from the table. “Me, I’m off to the cargo hold. I’ll see you all in the morning. Try not to stay up late.”

Not long after, Garron insisted I help him to bed.

“Come right back,” said the princess, “I may need your help, too.”

I hauled Garron to his feet, swearing he’d gained weight. The old man was quiet on the way to the his commandeered stateroom. But when we reached it he seemed recovered.

“You know,” he said, “I think I may go for a little stroll instead. There are interesting opportunities here, don’t you think?”

“I think you’re going to get us in trouble. That’s what I think.”

“Oh, I’d say you have that well in hand yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not really drunk, boy.”

“I know.”

“That’s not all you need to know. And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

He produced a pair of ear buds and a tuning device.

“Here,” he said. “Let’s see what our friends are up to, shall we?”

If ignorance is bliss, then the past few days were the happiest of my life.

When I returned to the canteen two harried Bobs in medical white were carrying out the chief, who was swiping at them playfully from his stretcher. He winked at me as they passed.

Bob Sunny Day sprawled at the bar, looking for all the world like an exhausted *maitre d* after a space regatta *soiree*. Bob Name Your Poison polished glasses behind him (It fleetingly occurred to me I hadn’t seen Bob What a Deal since the three had left for the repair bay. Maybe he was busy reopening the duty-free?). Other than the two ‘bots, the canteen was abandoned.

Where was the princess? The ‘bots didn’t know. They hadn’t seen her leave. I ran through the empty corridors to her stateroom. She didn’t respond to the call button. Her door was unsealed.

Inside, the only light was a flickering wall monitor displaying the nearest parking dock’s manifest. Her bed was not slept in. Her few belongings were missing.

A passing Bob gave me directions, adding that the Princess and a man in armour had passed this way. They’d been with two Cossacks who were carrying a sick man he didn’t recognize.

In the immense parking dock I ran past hundreds of ships, scarcely noticing their exotic contours. My destination was the small, sleek cruiser under the cavernous bay's only bright light. I closed the distance, straining too hard to shout, as two large figures carried a burden up the ramp and disappeared inside.

I crashed to a halt at the base of the ramp, supported myself on the handrails and wheezed like an old bear. A dark female silhouette appeared in the hatchway. "Took you long enough," it said.

"Princess... why?"

She stepped back into the light. She'd changed into a practical coverall and tied her hair. Her eyes glittered.

"Get on board, Unstoffe, if you're coming."

I climbed up the ramp and stepped into the fanciest ship I'd ever seen, but I was immediately distracted from the posh interior by three things. The first was Garron, trussed up, gagged and sprawled on the deck. The second was the pair of Cossacks standing guard over him. The third was the sharp click and whine that told me a blaster was charging an inch from my ear.

"You remember dear Yaka, don't you, Unstoffe?"

"Hullo, Yaka."

"Greetings, boy. My mistress informs me I am not to kill you. Why is that, I wonder? Have we unfinished business, you and I?"

"Your breath stinks of onions. Would you mind terribly?"

"Do not be impertinent with me, cub. You, I suspect, do not fully comprehend your situation."

His mad eyes rolled toward the princess. "Can it be you have no idea who this woman truly is?"

I gave him my best supercilious smirk and dismissive wave combo. "Don't be a fool. She's the Mongoose, Alliance Security's greatest secret operative."

This was the truth. She was a cop.

"I've known for ages," I added, with a dismissive wave.

This was a lie, by the way; Garron had told me a few hours ago, but I'd be damned if I let Yaka know that. Garron had known since he found her on the *Indomitable Prince*, though not by any extraordinary insight; someone had taped a sign over her cryo-sleeve..

I thought I saw regret cross her face but it didn't linger.

"Oh fine, you know," she said, "it doesn't matter."

She told Garron, "I'm going to count to ten. If you don't agree to follow my instructions to the letter, Yaka there is going to execute your employee. Do you understand?"

Garron nodded.

"Do you agree to cooperate?"

Garron paused, then shook his head.

Outside in the parking bay, far away, something clattered.

"Investigate!" ordered Yaka, "Whoever it is, gut them."

The Mongoose watched the Cossacks go. Incidentally, I've no idea what happened to them and I've forgotten to ask. I did spot Bob What a Deal sporting a fur coat, so maybe you should ask him. Anyway, the princess, that is, the Mongoose, started counting.

"One."

I couldn't believe this was the girl with whom I'd shared so many adventures. We'd talked. We'd smiled. We'd *cuddled*. She'd beaten me at my own game and that was irritating but okay. I'd been fooled before. But never this completely. Garron was a rank amateur compared to her, and I was a rank amateur compared to him. She was the complete and utter deal. The perfect con. I'd gazed into her eyes and utterly believed she was who she claimed.

"Two."

Imagine! The perfect con was a rhino!

But that wasn't the worst of it. She'd put me in my place, made me look at myself and there, looking back, were all those people *I'd* lied to and cheated.

"Three!"

Damn her!

"Oh, don't look so indignant, Unstoffe. With the Graff dead Garron was next on my checklist. I can't begin to imagine how two inept, two-bit hustlers such as yourselves managed it but you've earned quite a reputation. Alliance Security will be well pleased; I might even get a promotion for this. 'Captain The Mongoose.' I like it!"

God help me, she was *adorable*.

"Four."

"Why do you persist on making this arrest?" Yaka wanted to know. "After the fat one

gives us the registry we need only install it, persuade that Doctor to effect repairs and then, with this mighty ship at my command, I will retake Levithia in the name of the Vynda dynasty and make you my Queen!”

“Five, six. I’m arresting them because it’s my job, you imperialist oaf! What makes you think I want to marry you, anyway? Honestly, I can’t stand you. The thought of marrying you.”

“Your words were lies?”

Oh, brother. “Excuse me? I hate to interrupt this lover’s spat...”

“Unstoffe, don’t call us that. I have never, ever...”

“There is no need to tell him that!”

Considerably cheered, I continued. “As I was trying to say, aren’t you both forgetting something? Something rather important to the success of *your* plans and *your* career?”

“Seven!”

“We forgot to gag you, I’ll own.”

“No, you lugs. My goodness, it’s so obvious.”

“Eight, nine. What? What’s so obvious?”

“*We warped.*”

Yaka stared at me blankly, but comprehension and something else, relief or hope, dawned on the princess’s face. I could actually see all her doubt drop away and her loyalties shift.

I continued, speaking seriously but laughing inside. “We could be anywhere in time and space. There is no Cyrrhenic Alliance Security. There is no Levithian Throne. Don’t you see? It’s all gone or it hasn’t happened yet.”

I looked right into the princess’s eyes and tied the knot. “All we have is each other.”

Yaka roared and struck my jaw with the blaster. I fell hard and the former Mongoose knelt and cradled my head.

“I’m so sorry.” She smoothed my hair. “I convinced Yaka the best way to find the surface was to follow the Doctor. I wanted to arrest you, he wanted to take command of Rallax. We faked that bit below the palace, knew you’d survive. Didn’t expect you to take so long to figure it out, though. Sure as hell didn’t expect you to blow yourself up. That was very gallant.”

Well, who was I to contradict her? Especially as she was kissing me? On, might I add, the lips?

“How did he escape the Cossacks?” I asked, more weakly than I actually felt.

“Shhh. I just added a line to their command list so he could convince them that finding the exit was in the country’s best interests. He followed Spidrick and Garron up through the levels, contacted me here. You know the rest.” She frowned. “Somehow.”

I gazed at her, as soulfully as I could. “Are you... still going to arrest us?”

“No. I’m through being an agent. It wasn’t about the law anyway. It was about tricking people and collecting bounties. Truth be told, I’ve been making a fortune on the side.”

“I can appreciate that. So, what about Chuckles, there?”

She gazed at him, her eyes cold and steely, and didn’t say a word. Didn’t have to.

Yaka saw how it was. He sneered. “It is of no matter! I shall forge my own empire! And I shall possess dozens of queens!”

He turned to Garron and kicked him. “I count ‘ten’, bald one. Open your tesseract “

Garron nodded, snapped his fingers and the shimmer appeared.

Yaka leered in anticipation. “I shall regret killing you, Mongoose, false though you be. As for you two, I intend...”

Well, I guessed his intention and didn’t mind not hearing it.

The reason I didn’t hear it was because just then the registry, all solid memory plastic, burst out and smashed his face. It flew with such force it literally knocked him off his feet. His blaster skidded toward the princess and she grabbed it. “Don’t move a muscle, Dan Dravot.”

I appreciated her literary reference, but Yaka merely goggled.

“But... but how...”

She smiled brightly at me. “Talking counts as moving, wouldn’t you agree?”

I nodded and she shot him. “Still,” she said, “It’s not a bad question to ask.”

“Worse, I think, to furnish the answer,” said a familiar Draconian voice.

The chief, neatly bisected by the faint shimmer above Garron’s chest, looked a bit queasy. “That was quite a throw,” I said as we pulled him out.

“Did I kill him?”

“No.”

“Did she?”

“No, he’s still breathing. Anyone else in there?”

“Yes, the ones called ‘Spidrick’ and ‘Doctor’.”

“Good grief, Garron.”

With the chief's help we extricated Spidrick and the Doctor. Garron gestured and the shimmer shrunk to a point and vanished.

"Well, as devious plans go, that was a doozy," said the Doctor. "Still, though," he said, as I removed Garron's gag, "I'm still not sure why all three of us had to be in there."

Garron smiled innocently from the floor. "Always have a plan 'B', Doctor."

"Hmm. Maybe I should leave you tied up."

"Oh, very droll. Perhaps – "

Another echoing crash came from outside. The Doctor took a reading, frowned mightily at the result and said, "Oh, that's not good. That's so not good!"

He grabbed the ship's registry. "We can't wait until morning."

"What's the matter, Doctor?" I asked, dreading and suspecting the answer.

"The gravity cascade. It's starting now! If we warp again Rallax is finished!"

"What do we do?"

"Oh, I don't know! Die? No! I have to get the ship online!"

He dashed out, carrying the registry. Rooted to the spot, we watched him go.

Now what? I untied Garron in silence and hauled him to his feet.

"What do we do?" I asked.

The princess cleared her throat and said, "We *are* in a spaceship."

Garron grinned. "Oh, you are lovely."

"Are you both mad?" I cried, "We can't leave all those people to die!"

Oh, wait. What was I saying?

"I mean... can we?"

"I, for one, am willing to run the risk of subsequent, crippling guilt if I am alive to enjoy it," said Garron, "Who's with me? Chief?"

"Oh, friend, where is your honor? Did you not listen to my songs? I go to help the Doctor."

"I had no choice," said Garron as the chief mournfully turned and followed the Doctor.

Garron shook his head. "What about you, Spidrick? An honorable death?"

"I don't know..."

"I'll come back to you, then. What about you two?"

The princess was looking up at me, measuring me with her eyes. The deck shuddered as a minor shipquake rumbled below but her gaze didn't waver. With mild astonishment I

realized she would do whatever I decided. We could escape and live. That was a certainty. But could we be happy together, could we bear ourselves, wondering if staying here could have made a difference?

On the other hand, if we tried to help the Doctor we faced a path fraught with uncertainty. Maybe we could help, though I couldn't see how. The millions might be saved, but looking down at her, I didn't think it was worth the risk.

She might die, and she was worth more than all the others.

"Boy? We have to go." said Spidrick.

A weak voice drifted from the floor. Yaka. "Listen to the fat one. He alone of you speaks wisdom."

"Don't agree with me!" said Garron.

"But I do... one's own life is one's only true duty..."

Another quake, stronger this time, rattled the deck. Somewhere metal twisted and moaned.

"Princess," I said, "Hand me that blaster, please."

Wordlessly but with a glance at Yaka, she complied. I checked the setting, made an adjustment.

"You need to shut up," I told Yaka.

Then I shot the Princess. I caught her before she hit the deck.

"Garron," I said, "you and Spidrick get this ship moving. Get her away from here." I placed the princess on a lounge, kissed her forehead and moved to the hatch.

"Good-bye, Garron. Try not to miss me," I said as I clanked down the ramp.

I'd taken twenty laborious steps from the ship when I heard Garron call my name. He had Yaka by the scruff of his neck and was dragging the weakly struggling soldier down the ramp.

"Well, come on, then! Don't just stand there! I'm too old to carry him myself!"

"Garron!"

"There, that service cart. Hurry, now!"

"But Garron..."

"Don't worry. See, Spidrick's got the ship in the air already. She'll be fine."

"That's wonderful! But Garron..."

"Boy, if my plan works we will never, ever speak of it again. I have a reputation to think

of. Do you understand me? Never again!”

I looked at his crafty, dear old face and said the first thing that popped in my mind.

“I love you, Garron.”

“Shut up, son.”

The Doctor, surrounded by a small army of Bobs, wailed, “No!” as we entered the Auxiliary Control Room. Not because we’d arrived, mind. It was because he was sure he was about to die. That crash we’d heard earlier was was a girder blocking the tow beam controls; without the tow beam he couldn’t retrieve the Tardis, and without the Tardis he couldn’t break the Registry’s encryption, and without a working registry the ship was about to warp again, almost certainly tearing itself to pieces.

The chief saw us and shook the Doctor’s shoulder. He looked at us quizzically, frowning at Yaka on the cart. The Bobs parted as we joined them.

“Are you mad? Why are you here? This place is going to warp any second and she won’t survive the trip!” said the Doctor.

“Well then, Doctor,” said Garron, “you’d be advised to initialize the registry, wouldn’t you?”

“Don’t you think I’ve been trying? Without the Tardis I can’t communicate with it!”

“Well, you’d better ask the owner to do it, shouldn’t you?”

The Doctor stared at Yaka. “What do you mean?” he said to Garron.

“I mean Crewman Colepit, Doctor.”

Four deep, resounding knocks echoed through the room. The Doctor gibbered for a second but regained control.

“C’mon, Garron! This is no time to be cryptic!”

“Fine. Spidrick told me. This man isn’t who he thinks he is. Standard Levithian practice. Clone your offspring, then have a relative raise them as their own. If the original dies, transfer his memory.”

“Even if that’s true...”

“I studied the ship’s log on the *Indomitable Prince*, Doctor. She spent three weeks on Aye Aye before she traveled to Ribos. You know what they do on Aye Aye, don’t you?”

I yelled, “Do you Bobs have image alteration software?” Some of them did. I hauled Yaka to a sitting position. “Scan this man’s face! Remove his beard, trim his mustache and cut

his hair. Oh, and ignore the broken nose. Extrapolate!”

Within seconds the awed chorus arose.

“The Graff Vynda-K!”

The Doctor grinned at Garron. Yaka looked puzzled for a moment, then his jaw dropped.

Garron beamed. “I wasn’t sure what he’d been doing on Aye Aye until Spidrick – he was his secret minder, hired by the family – told me the story just minutes ago.”

I pulled Yaka to his feet and with the chief’s help got him to the registry plinth. “Put your hand right there, Graff, and say ‘initialize.’”

“And what if I refuse?”

The warp siren sounded. The Doctor looked around, his eyes wide.

“Well, we all die. But you... well, see the Bobs?”

The Bobs had massed tightly around us, every pair of eyes on Yaka. Suddenly there was nothing comic about their bland faces. They exuded menace, and I’m glad they weren’t looking at me that way.

“If you don’t help us,” said the Doctor, “we give you to them first.”

Yaka gulped.

“Besides,” said Garron, “who was it who said, ‘one’s own life is one’s only true duty’?”

Another rumble passed below, the worst one yet. Sparks exploded from a nearby console. Just do it, I thought, sizing up the exit.

Yaka knew he was beaten. He nodded, placed his hand on the plinth and said, “Initialize” The control room lit up and systems hummed to life around us. The Doctor sprang to action. I couldn’t begin to tell you what he did; he was a dazzling blur as he raced from console to console. But the vibrations subsided, the alarm was silenced and finally he looked satisfied. He wiped his forehead and grinned weakly.

“Doctor?” I asked. “Is that it? Is Rallax safe now?”

He shook his head sadly. “I’m sorry, but no. We’re stable now; Rallax will never warp again. But she’s still dying. Every forest, every mountain, every living thing. The gravity is still increasing exponentially. Notice how heavy you feel?”

“What? I thought the automatic repair systems – ”

“Too late for that, I’m afraid.”

“Then what’s the point? What have we really done?”

“What we’ve done, Unstoffe, is give everyone some time to escape. You Bobs can

contact the other parts of Rallax now. Tell whoever will listen to climb up until they reach the parking bays. We're back in your own time and I'm sure a rescue fleet is on its way."

Garron, who'd been quietly accessing a small monitor, cleared his throat.

"What is it, Garron?"

"Actually, Doctor, all is not lost. Opportunities arise in unusual times, I always say. For example, have a look at this. A little bit of contemporary salvage law..."

The Doctor studied the screen and shook his head.

"Garron, I see what you mean but Rallax is dying within days. What do you intend to accomplish with this?"

I couldn't see what they were looking at and Garron winked when he saw my interest. He addressed the assembled Bobs. I studied the screen and felt hope.

"Are you aware, my plastic friends, that by the laws of this century you are all, part and parcel, now the property of the Graff Vynda-K? Oh, don't try to deny your identity, man, you didn't earlier and they all heard you. Bobs! This is the man responsible for exacerbating your already significant woes!

"Tell me, are you willing to serve him?"

The Bobs chorused, 'No!'

"You'd rather kill him, wouldn't you?"

The response was less than unanimous, but the majority carried the day.

"Well, then. If I told you I could free you all from his odious employ, would you be willing to let the Graff live?"

As the Bobs silently debated, Garron spoke to Yaka. "You are well and truly finished unless you agree to the proposal I am about to make."

Yaka watched the Bobs. "What do you want me to do?" he weakly asked.

"You need to put your hand right there and say 'transfer ownership'. Do that, and we'll save you from the Bobs. You can go back below and be Tsar. Best deal you're going to get all day."

"Make them swear an oath."

"Bobs," cried Garron, "do you swear to leave this man, the Graff Vynda-K, unmolested?"

They swore.

Sighing, diminished, Yaka did it.

Time stood still.

Garron stood at the plinth, dithering. He looked at me, a single drop of sweat running down his face. Slowly he raised his hand, held it before the registry..."

"And then he placed the hand of Bob What A Deal on the plinth! Yes, we know!"

The Chief Executive of the Parallax Corporation was livid. "Honestly, do you have any idea what you've done?"

Garron and Unstoffe grinned at each other. "Yes, we know," said Garron. "We passed the ownership of a legally salvaged vessel to a deserving entity."

"But you could have claimed it for yourself!"

"Oh, that would be far too much work. I'm content to collect a small consultation fee."

"Besides, those little Bobs kept your precious Rallax together as best they could for over seven hundred years," said Unstoffe, "No one deserves it more than they."

"But they aren't sentient! They're only Bobs! They can't own property! They *are* property!"

"That's where you're wrong. The report from Branbridge was released this afternoon. You haven't seen it? The Bots have been declared sentient. Long-term cosmic ray exposure, you know."

"Those damned sociologists," muttered the Chief Executive's counsel.

"I wouldn't be too hard on them," said Unstoffe, "besides, it's like the Doctor said; the sociologists can't wait to get their teams into Rallax. If you agree to buy, you'll make a fortune from them alone, not to mention the millions you'll make from scavenging that dwarf alloy."

"About that alloy," said the chief engineer, "it's all still there in the center, correct? Inside that tesseract device?"

"And safely enclosed in the void space, yes. It's far too dense and heavy to transmat directly, so at my suggestion," said Garron, "the Doctor rigged the transmat and built a remote control. It was tricky work, but he managed it. We transmitted the tesseract, opened it at the center and now the dangerous alloy is safely cut off from the rest of Rallax."

"Inside the tesseract, where its gravitational pull can do no further harm?" asked the chief engineer.

"Of course," said Garron, "and it's yours for the taking, though I wouldn't want to wait too long before you extract it. You can keep the tesseract, by the way. My loss is part of the

settlement. Those olives with the tiny transmitters were irreplaceable.”

“Transmitters! That’s how you knew…”

“Yes. We heard the princess and Yaka hatch their plan.”

“But she was terribly conflicted,” added Unstoffe.

“But that’s not important, gentlemen. Yes, it will be costly, but this is your only sensible move,” said Garron.

“Face it, despite the repair bills, the class-action lawsuits, the disavowal from the Historian’s Guild and the fines from Empire Standards and Practices, you’re still going to come out ahead. All you have to do is accept Bob’s price, agree to an equal partnership and you’ll all be set for life,” said Unstoffe.

“Refuse,” added Garron, “and instead of magnanimous heroes you will be abhorred as base villains. By my projections, you will be bankrupt in a year. I repeat – accepting Bob’s offer is your only sensible alternative.”

The chief executive frowned. “You will excuse us while we discuss your offer.”

“Of course,” said Garron.

As the most powerful executives on Earth conferred in private, Garron & Unstoffe shared a smile. The Chief executive and his cronies returned to the table.

“Let me ask you something. That Doctor, where is he?”

“No idea. As soon as he’d retrieved his ship he transferred the tesseract to the center of the planet. He visited the shop, muttered something about chickens and then he and the Tardis just faded away.”

“And you? What do you get out of this? Will you have a role in Bob What A Day’s organisation?”

“No, sir,” said Unstoffe, “we’re just his realtors.”

Garron & Unstoffe walked back to their ship. It was too nice a day for a taxi. Great towers reached the sky around them but they were not awed in the least.

“How did it go?” asked the Princess, “Did they agree to it?”

“Well, my dear, they said we’ll know tomorrow, but they’re just stalling. They’re trapped and they know it. If they relinquish their responsibility for the disaster of the century their stock will plummet. It will be the end for them. But if they are seen helping the poor, simple Bobs, they will be able to spin public opinion their way. Not to mention the profit

from selling off that alloy. Yes, they're going to pay." Garron looked well pleased.

"Sir," said Spidrick, who was painting 'Connie 2' on their cruiser, "the port authority was around again."

"Fear not, though," said the chief, "I saw them off."

"Oh, I hope you didn't hurt anyone too badly. Was it the licensing again? Those confounded bureaucrats! Is it our fault that we haven't renewed for 200,000 years?"

"Actually, according to my research we don't even exist," said Connie.

"Yes," said Garron thoughtfully, "And by this time tomorrow we'll be reasonably well-off." He gazed at the towers across the water and the stars emerging overhead. They had a lot to learn, but not as much as he'd feared. Empires, fortunes, technologies and cultures had risen and fallen many times but seemed to always settle on nearly the same level. These people weren't all that advanced from those of his time.

"About that," he said. "Has anyone considered what an advantage nonexistence could be to a small band of enterprising businessmen?"

Then Garron turned and raised a speculative eyebrow at the apprentice, the princess, the soldier and the noble savage.

Unstoffe chuckled softly.

"Is it safe to assume, sir, that we haven't retired?"

