



*Webworld9:
A Space Oddity*
Reed Andrews Williams

Preface

This story appeared out of nowhere one day. Huw was regarding his IT helpdesk colleagues with a quizzical eye, when a strange and comical idea took his fancy: what if everyone had a starring role in a science fiction story loosely based on popular culture, that involved the adventures of an orbiting spacestation.

He set to work, initially in a team guestbook, so that everyone could read it. Soon, a few particularly deranged people joined in with additional episodes, and a forum was found for its new location.

The story grew and grew, and three people - the authors of *this* version – took over the creative writing. As events on the Helpdesk unfolded, as popular culture continued to spew forth, as new techno-babble jargon revealed itself, so did this book.... and, like a phoenix, the Delia Flick, the Tuscany Raiders, and The Chosen One took flight

Oh, and Andrew? The metallurgy was done with fondness. Honest. Same goes for you too, Nick :o)

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PROLOGUE ONE

It was a lovely Monday morning. The sky was a brilliant blue, the birds were singing brightly, people were smiling gaily. And the middle-aged man strode purposefully down the street. There was a hint of grey amongst his unkempt thatch and a fair number of creases at the corners of his eyes. But his build was clearly fit and lithe, and if not *muscular* as such, it certainly carried a spring borne from experiences in far-off places.

As he walked past the terraced houses, he glimpsed from the corner of his eye movement at the curtained windows, a twitch here, a scrabble there, a gasp that accompanied eyes opened wide in shock and disbelief. The man simply grinned with pride and not a little devil-may-care mischief. He drew up before a blue painted front door, took a deep breath, and leaned a finger into the doorbell. It trilled to itself pleasantly, announcing his presence.

Within moments the door was opened by a plump red-haired lady, one who contrasted an air of cosey homeliness about her with a dark frown and an even sterner eye. The man simply returned the glare with a look of lovable rogue, and grinned lopsidedly.

"Mabel..." he began.

"Don't you Mabel me!" she snapped. "So Mister Fenstre Ohbeone Be-"

"Now, now, Mabel, dear..." placated Fenstre, his hands patting the air between them.

"Get in, man, don't stand there gawking and flapping!!" She ushered him inside, glanced up and down the street, glowered at the twitching curtains across the way, and slammed the frontdoor shut.

Fenstre made his way through to the living room, his hands already unconsciously wringing in nervous anxiety.

"Oh no you don't!" snapped Mabel. She filled the doorway, pointing an accusatory finger towards the back of the small house. "Into the kitchen with you! I'm not having *that* mud on *my* carpet!" She stared pointedly at the grime on her husband's shoes.

"Yes dear," he answered automatically, and sidled past her into the kitchen.

"Just in time to do the drying up, too..." continued Mabel emphatically, pushing a damp tea-cloth into his hands.

As Fenstre stood over the draining board and reached for the nearest plate, his wife ripped off a square of kitchen paper, bunched it up and spat on the corner. She bent down, and rubbed vigorously at the dirt on his shoe.

"Oh! What *is* this?!" She brought the offending grime to her nose, and sniffed loudly. "Lard?! *Lard?!?*" Mabel glowered up at her husband. "Fenstre, *why* do you have *lard* on your shoes??!"

"Ahhhhm ... don't ... really ... know ..." he replied carefully. "Dear".

"Don't you *dear* me!" She returned to her feet, the glower unwavering. "Now your son doesn't have *lard* on his shoes, so why should you??"

"Here we go..." he muttered under his breath.

"And, yes, here we *do* go! That good boy Stephen, he has nice black shoes that are shiny and *clean!*"

Fenstre nodded. "And how is Steph-?" he enquired politely, desperate to deflect his wife's ire. He immediately wished he hadn't.

“Stephen?! Oh, you’d *like* to know how your son is, would you?!” Mabel stepped back, threw the offending kitchen paper into the bin, and planted her hands on her hips. Neither of them noticed the wastebin shudder and convulse slightly.

This is it, thought Fenstre in resignation, *here it comes*.

“You’ve been away for *five* years and you have the *temerity* to ask how Stephen is?!” Mabel’s face was turning as red as her hair. “You just upped and left all those years ago, without a word...”

“I said I was going out for a pint with the lads...” he began.

“...and the next thing I knew was poor little Stephen asking where his dad was! The police couldn’t find you! You had simply disappeared! I was the *laughing stock* of the street!”

“I’m sorr-“

“*You’re* sorry??” spluttered his wife. “Tell that to Stephen! He’s got a *proper* job, in the post office, now, you know!” she crowed. “And no thanks to you! He’d had enough of your silly stories about teddy bears and pancakes, and made his mum proud by walking into the jobcentre and landing that job!”

Fenstre nodded to himself, Stephen was no match for Mabel.

Silence descended upon the scene. Unluckily for Fenstre it was short-lived.

“So give me your coat, then, I *presume* you’re stopping this time??”

He nodded slowly, uncertain, a conflict of emotion tearing across his face, the wild days of his youth beckoning him once more enticingly. He opened his mouth to make a suggestion, but Mabel was already clawing at his overcoat. As she pulled at the buttons, a blue spatula fell from an inside pocket and clattered to the floor. It was a little grubby but it was clearly an expensive make.

Mabel gasped and stared at it. “You...! You...!”

“Yes, dear...?”

“HOW DARE YOU ??!” she roared. “Of course! You have Another Woman!!”

“Mabel, no...”

“You can’t cook, and THAT’S too good a spatula for you!” She swept up the incriminating evidence and threw it at her husband. “Out! Get out of my house!” And in a flurry of arms and bellows she flailed him through the hallway and out of the front door. The neighbours who had crept out of their own homes to listen to the fracas stepped backward as Fenstre staggered from the doorstep, and surrounded him with a clucking of tongues and shaking heads.

He got himself to his feet, glanced back at Mabel, gave her a farewell wink, and, lifting his chin high, strode back the way he had come.

“What are you lot lookin’ at, eh?!” she screamed at the crowd of onlookers, and slammed shut the door.

Fenstre marched to the end of the street, and turned towards the pub at the end of the road. The sky was still a brilliant blue and the birds were singing just as brightly as before. As he drew near, he passed a red telephone box and he faltered. *I’m going to miss this place, really*, he thought quietly to himself. Just then, a three-wheeled *Robin Reliant* spluttered past, a large plume of black smoke trailing it in hopelessness. *No I’m not*, he realised, and flung open the door to the telephone box.

He glanced at the display of three letters per number on the dialling disk. He grabbed the black telephone receiver in one hand, and stuffed a finger into the

cavity for the number two. Determined, he drew the number in a near circle, revelling in the mechanical purring that came from the machine. Quickly, he dialled out the remaining numbers, eight, six, eight, nine, six, six, seven, eight, six, six, and seven, mouthing the corresponding letters *a,u,n,t,y,n,o,r,t,o,n,s*.

A cheerful voice greeted him. "Good morning, Aunty Norton's Truck Stop, how may I help you?"
"Take Away, please."

And at that, Fenstre disappeared in a zig-zag of lines that were sucked into the mouthpiece of the receiver. The phone fell to the end of its metal cable, and swung gently to and fro.

PROLOGUE TWO

It was a lovely Monday morning. The sky was a brilliant blue, the birds were singing brightly, people were smiling gaily. And Nick was walking into work. Which, of course, is the *way* of things because it *always* poured with rain during the weekend. Nick was a tall, lanky man, handsome in a floppy fringe and easy-grin sort of way, formerly from Croydon, who had joined the callcentre in Cardiff only recently, much to the disgust of his father who had a "*proper job*" in the postal service.

Nick's walk perceptibly slowed and faltered as he approached the great imposing entrance to his workplace. It was grey and bland, a design feature that Nick swore had been deliberate: to subjugate the workforce even before they had entered! He sighed, and strode forward.

A mangy black cat appeared out of nowhere, and barrelled into his feet. Nick went sprawling, his shoulder bag breaking his fall. He picked himself up, and peered inside the bag.

"Oh no. Squashed sandwiches for lunch," he moaned.

He relegated himself to the forthcoming horrors of a Monday morning, and entered the tall anonymous building.

He flashed his cheap photo ID card at the sour-faced guards who sat behind the welcoming desk and passed beyond the security fence to the building's set of four lifts. He depressed the call button, and then drummed his fingers impatiently against the wall panel. He knew he'd have to wait for the arrival of the only functioning lift that was available, as did his co-workers who were gathering around him.

Finally the lift appeared from another interminably long trip that had given it a wheeze similar to that of an asthmatic football player. Nick stepped aboard and pressed for his usual floor. He patently ignored the others entering the lift, and settled into the habitual stare that pierced the display of incrementing floor numbers.

A mechanical wheeze and cough later, Nick ambled his way into the office and veered over to the kitchenette. Within minutes he had brewed himself a fruit tea, which he carried to his seat at the Helpdesk. He could hear his colleague, Huw,

cackling over the latest additions to an ongoing *humorous* story that he had been writing involving all the Helpdesk operators. Jim replied with a polite smile, and gave Nick a friendly wave.

Nick sat down and threw his bag under the desk. Eight fifty-five. He sighed, and fired up his computer, clamping the headset about his ears. With seconds to go, he plugged himself in to the *FutureNet* telephony system.

The comm system beeped, and the first call of the day had arrived. Monday had begun, and it came in the form of a customer who had been “fiddling” with their website and the *cgi feedback form* in particular. Nick conjured up some remote enthusiasm and attempted to put a ‘smile’ into his telephone voice.

He stared at the screen, which was once again filled with confusing and contradictory information.

He calmly scratched his chin, leaned back and debated the validity of his life. How often had he wanted something really exciting to happen, even just the once!

He would never forget that thought, or live it down, for the rest of his life.

From his computer a faintly tinged blue light tantalisingly wormed its way out towards him while at the same time he could vaguely discern the crooning of a French-Canadian-Arabic voice. Nick wondered what was happening, and tried to sit up but found he was held fast! He panicked, his eyes swivelling around in a vain attempt to catch someone’s attention. But then he noticed that the blue hue had grown to encompass him, and was still attached to the monitor screen. Everyone else was hard at work and concentrating on their own screens, and failing to notice Nick’s slightly blue tinge develop to a *really serious* glow that meant *business*.

With horror, he realised he was slowly digitising *into* the screen. His last thought was the recognition - because, professionally, he couldn’t help it - that the file size was exceeding its safe quota, since his equivalent pixel size and colour sharpness were really detailed.

Then he was gone.

A moment later, Jim glanced over and noticed that Nick had suddenly disappeared. He put it down to a toilet visit and moved to put Nick on an ‘unscheduled break’ (which of course was very ironic given the circumstances), before returning to his own irate caller.

CHAPTER 1

The Universe is a big place. Take our word for it, it is. In fact, there's not only a lot of space, what with the pasta and the anti-pasta, and a certain amount of *fat*, but there's quite a bit of *time*, as well.

And the unfortunate thing about time is that it's a bit messy. You have things like the 'past' and the 'future' snapping at the heels of the 'present', the only sane one amongst them. You see, you know where you are with the present: it's right there beside you, pretty clear cut, and no nonsense. Yet even so, time *keeps moving*, anarchically keeping one on the hop, with the skill of a renegade military organisation.

And the past is made up of fragmented chunks of present that get stored in an unmarked warehouse, barely indexed, and for this reason is an eccentric historian's delight: the past gets shunted around, mixed up, and, the worst of the worse, *re-imagined*.

The future is no less a saint. It's full of *possibilities, endless and endless possibilities!* Do I walk to work today, or not? Do I take the bus, or the car, or the train? Should I be fit, and cycle in?! How messy is that?? And not only do all these options take up *space*, they're impatient, too! Always in a rush, never enough time to decide, forcing us down a path of kismetrified destiny, before we're ready.

Don't even get me *started on parallel universes*: eeeurgh!

So one bright spark thought he'd try and arrange some *order* into this god-forsaken mess. Einstein, along with his mum and dad and aunts and uncles and cousins, the whole damn family in fact, realised that the gods had indeed forsaken their responsibilities, and humbly set about configuring a set of practical *laws* that could be applied to the universe(s), thus ensuring everything ticked along just nicely. Good job for him that the universe(s) were all in one room, and the thirty-two fats flowed smoothly.

Einstein and his relatives were rightly pleased with themselves - and it must be said that the gods themselves were pretty grateful too – so much so, they were certain nothing could contradict their *physics* ...

Not that long ago, in a very very distant galaxy a great planet circled a bright yellow sun...

The Great Empires of Rome, Byzantium, and the Incas, all paled into insignificance when compared to the Semaf that was the vast Empire of RARS. A thousand planets, a trillion peoples, a zillion pampered pets. City spires that bisected the marbled clouds, information super highways that sprang between utopias, vast seas of azure that teemed with life, deep green forests that marched over rolling hills.

This was the RARS Empire. It had taken several millennia to reach such an advanced stage of civilisation, and was rightly proud of its fleet of starships that were unrivalled.

But it's Empress wanted more.

She wanted the strategic WebWorld9 spacestation out of action.

Sometime in the future, man - being very non-gender specific and referring to humanity as a whole (*...phew, that was close, 50% of the universe breathes a collective sigh of relief*) - will learn how to control spaceflight to the extent that going to Pluto will seem like a jog around the block, or at least a lesser drive to the local supermarket. It is in this future that we find a spacestation.

This station was rather like a spinning top, with a tubular ring about its equator, and an "Under Construction" sign permanently attached by thirty-two bars of scaffolding to the side of the station's lower extremities. The central sphere was crowned with a variety of interesting-looking towers and masts. The station was also one of the major tourist points in the galaxy, being almost on a par with the famous Statue of Liberty, the Giant Corn Fritter of Vega 4 and the Incredibly Large Toenail of Grimsby.

This was the *WebWorld9* spacestation and it orbited a small blue-green planet known as Jorbae. There was no doubt about this, having been on the Ordinary Survey StarCharts for almost two hundred years, or in other words, the point when the company actually reached that part of the galaxy. In fact *WebWorld9* had been one of a string of ten climatology stations circling the planet but only the Ninth one had survived the downsizing, the reasons for which had been lost in the mists of time.

The *WebWorld9*'s interior looked as if someone had taken a shopping mall and put it into a submarine. The various stores stretched from the famous promenades to the main bridge, where the dust covered controls for the once fierce weapons and defensive shields could be found. The population that now inhabited the station were generally humanoid in appearance but there were the occasional variations which made things rather interesting, especially when the architects had to redesign the toilets to accommodate tentacles, pseudopods, and other such important extremities.

And if the design and habitation of the space station was regarded as a little peculiar, then a closer scrutiny of the central processing computer would reveal a teeming and vibrant life of files in folders, all going about their own business, blissfully oblivious to the goings-on in the greater world at large.

Rhett Crisko leant back in his swivel leather armchair, and fumbled distractedly with his prize possession, a leather flying cap with goggles personally autographed by his hero, Captain Ace P. Lott. So the leather had had to be replaced over the years, and the signature had faded to a few grubby marks, but still, it was the thought that counted! His office was neat and tidy, and decorated with a minimal touch, usually a location for peace and quietude. But today,

something was in the air, and it polluted the serene ambience of his chambers. Crisko was the commander of the station and a Captain in the Terran Galactic Starforce, sandy-haired with a firm jaw. He had been a member of the elite military force for a number of years now and was considered the Old Man of the fleet even if he was one of the younger ones.

He longed to be a freighter pilot: the military life was not his idea of fun. In fact it always annoyed him that he kept getting promoted when all he was trying to do was avoid being sacked.

And this gnawing feeling of imminent trouble didn't help.

Rhett's anxious reverie was broken by a ping from his comm. He glanced at the CL-ID and his melancholy deepened. It was his second-in-command, Kia-Ora Dorris, who he knew had the hots for him.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Incoming message, sir," a dark-haired middle-aged lady with high cheekbones appeared on his monitor. She was of medium build, and had a perky personality that grew on you about the same way that mould grew on bread. Kia-ora loved all things technical and was enamoured with the whole idea that you could talk to someone in any location on the station. Even if they were adjacent to you.

"Okay, Dorris, patch it through, please," Rhett instructed.

"Sure, dear, will do" she purred.

Suddenly the screen changed and another face appeared on his monitor. The face was round, and lined with years of ozone abuse from various suns on a variety of worlds. This was a man who looked as if he had led a full and active life and his piping, which designated him Admiral, did nothing to dissuade anyone of that.

"Hello Rhett, how is life on the big space pizza?" the Admiral remarked jovially.

"Ah Admiral Jirk, what can I do for you?" Crisko replied, rolling his eyes at the pizza comment. He had heard *that* one a million times.

"*It's pronounced Yurk*, it has a silent J," instructed the Admiral irritably. "French ancestry, y'know. Anyway, as I am sure you are aware, since the last war with the Domino ended we have had overtures from them to sign some sort of trade pact, and we've decided we want your station to play host to this glorious event."

Rhett smiled back, "Ah, so another holiday for various TGA Senators again, then..." he mused. "Should I prepare the knives to spread pâté or to be made ready to implant into a vulnerable back or two?"

Jirk ignored the jibe. "Well as always, the free food alone will bring them flocking. But this time there is a special incentive. The Server Farm Fleet is sending one of its number to the ceremony," the Admiral shuffled some papers. "By the name of Slogs, I believe." Noting the cringe on Rhett's face Jirk smiled, "Ah you know him then!"

"Know him!" he retorted tartly, "I avoid him whenever I can!"

Jirk noted the lack of acceptance and stared at the Captain. "We are clear that this is not some personal vendetta between you and the Server Farm Fleet, are we not?!"

Rhett nodded as if to say he understood. The scientific and exploratory service did nothing for the TGA as far as Crisko was concerned.

The Admiral moved to a new topic. "Furthermore, you will be receiving a visit from the Ambassador of the RARS Empire, Javva the Hub, from Titfortat, so prepare well for this one, okay?"

"As always, I will have the red carpets beaten and give the Ambassador the true shag treatment," Crisko slyly responded. "Just call me *caterer to the stars*", he sighed.

The Terran Galactic Starforce, the *military* wing of the Terran Galactic Alliance of Peace (or TGA), now occupied the station. As the last outpost of law in the galaxy it was at the centre of many intriguing situations.

The HMS Server trawled through the inky void. Stars nova'd to the left. Wormholes slugged it out with blackholes to the right. "I'm stuck in the middle with you", mused Captain Hard-Grafft Slogs. He was bored. Ahhhh, this was the life, he thought. His impeccable servers were so stable they made a flat plane look wonky. The HMS Server was a blocky tower of a space ship, designed for function rather than style, its coloured running lights breaking up the stern browns and greys of the hull. If it came anywhere near gravity, the contest would be short-lived. Like a dog and its owner, the captain had a chubby build, and was not known for making impulsive rash actions. He wore the kind of vague smile on his round face that made one wonder if he was truly present in this reality. Still, he was more than happy with his lot, and that was all that mattered, after all.

Slogs turned to his second-in-command, Sandy DreamBerg, a tall slim lady with a no-nonsense cut to her short black bob. "Oh, just check the recycler-bin, and empty the latest cgi, will you, Sandy?" he instructed, waving his hand distractedly. "Yes SIR!" snapped Sandy, and turned to WWTwoOh, the prim and fussy golden-plated Human-Cyborg Protocol 'droid, "Proceed, TwoOh"

"Why, of course, ma'am, but would you like me to Efdisk the engines at the same time, they really have been sounding a little poorly, I noticed. Especially the aft booster."

"No, the cgi-bin will be enough, for now."

The droid minced his way to one of the four lifts on the Bridge. He waited five minutes in front of Lift Two, and then the fourth groaned into view. Lift Four, like Captain Slogs, was *definitely* not of this reality. The robot gulped, gingerly stepped inside, and the doors closed behind him.

Slogs turned back to regard the expansive view. Ahhhh, this was the life, he thought.

He glanced at the virtual sundial. Nearly 23:55:13.

"Sandy..." the Captain began.

"Yes SIR!" completed his colleague, who stepped across to the stand-alone PC that commanded a section all to itself just off the main bridge. She pulled at her officer's tunic, smoothing it down.

Sandy looked at her watch. *Any moment now*, she thought to herself.

23:56:00

And the PC went "PING!"

Sandy flicked a few switches, and confirmed that the RA files, which were really, really important, had once again done nothing.

"Correct and on schedule," she announced.

Slogs beamed at his First Officer. "Ah! All is right with the Universe, once more! Excellent job!" The Captain settled into his chair. "Things should tick along just so, don't you think, Sandy?"

Dreamberg nodded, and turned her attention once more to the Nav Charts. "We should be arriving at the WebWorld9 space station shortly, Captain," she noted. Slogs moaned. "Oh, thanks for reminding me Sandy. I really don't know why I've been assigned to this function at that infernal station! Diplomacy! The Home Server Farm Fleet is *above* that sort thing!! We're an exploratory and research service, after all. Our home site is one of special scientific interest. Besides, their's is permanently 'Under Construction', *and* a pile of junk to boot! What do you expect from that loser, Crisko, hmm?!"

"I understand the initial communiqué made reference to a buffet...?" pointed out the Comms Officer, Snazz Hashcake, an attractive lady well known for her dark sparkling eyes and warm smile. Her husky voice caused most men to go weak at the knees.

"Oooh, a buffet...?" Slogs answered, a thoughtful smile taking hold. "I wonder if there will be any TGA pâté available...?"

On the bridge of the WebWorld9, the second-in-command purred into her comm. "Dorris to Crisko."

Rhett clicked the channel open and his sigh was plainly audible. "Yes Dorris?"

"The Rarsian ambassador from Titfortat, Javva the Hub, has arrived with his entourage, dear, and would appreciate an immediate audience."

"Right, Number Two, tell the greeting party I will be down to meet them shortly."

Crisko pointedly ignored her familiarity, but knew she would never take the hint.

Kia-ora nodded, and flicked a second comm switch. "Dado, I'm sending the ambassador through. Captain Crisko will see you in ten. Dorris out," she barked in a clipped voice.

Javva boarded the station to the poops and whistles of the Titfortat National anthem that Kia-ora had thoughtfully arranged to be piped in. The ambassador made his way to the Ready Room. The main command crew of the WebWorld9, the soft-celled changeling Chief Security Officer Dado, the semi-wolvine Klick-On Hworff, and the human Dr Jordan Basser were already waiting when Rhett and Kia-ora entered some 15 para-secs later. Dado had been instructed to assume the form of a youngling of Javva's species, that, along with the anthem, they hoped would ingratiate the ambassador.

Ambassador Javva the Hub greeted the collective audience with a look that was normally reserved for small repugnant algae you might find on his home world. He was huge. So huge, in fact, that he had to be dragged around on a cart by his two attendants. Javva, a blue-coloured lizard-like thing resided in a green glop that looked like a liquid you would only find in the most stagnant of swamps. A breathing tank fed him a supply of Carbon Hydrochloride, which allowed him to

survive within the atmosphere of the station. He knew his role in the great plan of attack, but it did not make him feel any easier. Deep in thought, he sloshed in his tank.

The WebWorld9 crew were trying very hard not to look disgusted at the great mass that sat before them.

Kia-Ora nudged Rhett who reluctantly stepped forward to greet their guest. The station commander struggled not to gag at the foul odour rising from Javva's tank.

Meanwhile, the Domino war fleet was making its way through the void. They had travelled almost a hundred light years to this point, and soon their destination would be in visual range. The sleek, deadly stiletto shapes of the Gentlemen's fighters, their allies, maintained tight formation around the ponderous black and white battleships.

The spy was already in place, their cannon had been re-fitted, and they had just received confirmation that the RARS Fleet had been escalated. Within a matter of para-hours they would be at their target : the WebWorld9!

On board the main battleship, Wayone, the chief representative for the Domino, was speaking to one of the Master Deities over a comms link.

"May I ask just how this subterfuge will work, your deity?"

"Essentially Wayone it's a simple piece of coding called a Javva redirect," replied the deep voice of the god, Q-Rob. "It's intended to send all prospective traders directly to our quadrant and avoid the WebWorld9 because the station always gets more than their traffic quota!"

"And it works, this technology?"

"As long as we have the correct entry code and establish the suitable protocols the WebWorld9 will be redundant in days."

Wayone could hear the smugness in the voice, and shuddered at the pure evil. The comm channel clicked into silence.

In the farthest reaches of space, from the opposite flanking direction, a thousand warships of the RARS Empire escalated to I-Drive, their destination : the TGA WebWorld9 space station!

Within the great audience chamber, Javva began a long and flowing greeting to his counterparts in the TGA. The talk was very ponderous and in an environment where you were presenting to the military it had the exact effect that Javva was hoping for. The staff were on the verge of catatonia.

Hworff was especially irritated with the discussion of "pleasant planets" and "the rights of self-determination for all beings". By the end of it, he was frustratingly caught between a desire to hibernate or eat someone's heart. He bared his canines in a ferocious scowl. Dado could not help himself but auto-shapeshift as he dozed off. Luckily, he was at the rear of the crowd of delegates.

Javva inwardly grinned. He knew that he had lulled his audience enough that he felt capable of anything. If only his masters would let him. In the end he droned on for two hours to the officers concluding with a rather lacklustre, "Don't you agree?"

The crew collected themselves enough to give a half-hearted "here, here" and avoided trying to look too guilty.

"A wonderful speech by our guest," exclaimed Rhett diplomatically, blinking his sleepy eyes open.

"Captain Hard-Grafft Slogs of the Home Server Farm Fleet will be joining us shortly," interjected Norris, turning to the Rarsian Ambassador. "I'm sure the two of you will ... ahh ... have a great deal to talk about ..."

"Now Ambassador if you will just attach this to your tank," Crisko said handing Javva's attendants a metallic button, "We will escort you to your room."

The device clanged onto the hull of the tank, and Rhett turned to Dorris. "Okay Kia-ora, transmit."

"Yes sweetie," she whispered huskily.

The Energy transmitter burst to life around Javva's pallet which slowly pixellated. Within para-seconds, the room that had been specially prepared for the Ambassador was filled to the brim with overflowing Javva.

Soon afterwards, Admiral Jirk arrived in his Shuttle, the *Tidyroom*, which auto-locked into one of the remaining VIP Docking Ports.

Commander Hworff accompanied by the ever able Kia-ora Dorris met the Fleet Admiral in the reception area. Jirk was a portly gentleman who looked as if he was reaching the end of his career in the Military. A small droid trundled about at the feet of the Admiral.

"Ah Hworff, a pleasure meeting you again. And of course Lieutenant Dorris, it is *always* nice to see you".

"Umm...Sir," frowned Hworff, "What exactly is that *thing* you have there with you?"

The 'bot angrily chirped up at the seven foot Klick-On.

"Ah that my young friend is the new standard in the Server Farm Fleet, an MHFP Extensionlet droid. This one is a 2xx2 Model. It is slightly slower and a lot more bulky than the 2xx0 models which roam the Server Fleet," Jirk informed Hworff.

"It looks cute!" piped Dorris, clapping her hands.

"It looks disgusting!" the Klick-On remarked. His ridged forehead furrowed even more, and met his thick black eyebrows in a point of revulsion.

"That maybe, but they are functional and will serve our CLiENT Droids very well in the bowels of our Servers!" Jirk exclaimed closing the argument, and to ensure no further discussion told the warbling little thing to toddle back into the shuttle.

Ten para-minutes after going to I-Drive, 10% of the ticket class warships of the RARS Empire dropped back to C-drive. The battleships had the appearance of

broken mosaic tiles enthusiastically glued together. The underlying colour of the fleet was cream and ochre, but the tiles offered flashes of reds, blues, and greens, that belied their gaudy and stylistic origin.

Aboard the lead ship, the GE Problem, Captain Admirable Remedy rounded on his crew. He was very annoyed.

"What in rars is going on? That's the fifth time this week the server engine has failed. Get me engineering on the comm!" he roared. He was a thin, boney man of late middle-age, with a fairly rattish face, and quick jerky movements fuelled by a ceaseless energy. He paced the captain's deck impatiently.

"Right away, captain" affirmed a sub-lieutenant, patching him through.

Within moments, 'Scotty' Shorn was online.

"What's happened to the engines this time, Shorn?" demanded Remedy.

"Och, we don' quite know as yet, Sir. Weev parsed a queery up t' second level engineering team who've parsed it up t' third level team. Basically, the third level team has already fixed the wee problem, but they'll be keepin' it to the'selves for about two weeks before lettin' oos know. Engineering out, aye."

Remedy sat back and sighed. He turned to his Second Officer, a buxom lady with a thick mane of dark hair. "Winger, set a course for the WebWorld9," he instructed. "We'll just have to use the backup coffee-cup engine and go to CD-drive until the server core's back up and running. We've already lost 90% of the fleet and we're meant to be backing up the Domino with an attack on the station tomorrow morning. Rars only knows when we'll get there now!!"

"Course is set captain" came an anonymous voice from the helm.

"Engage!"

Meanwhile... deep in the complexities of the WebWorld9 File Application Server Protocol Sharing ... also known as the *computer mainframe* ...

It was a dark day in FolderLand. Well, inside FolderLand it's *always* dark.

Standback.cfee, the coffee vendor, was serving Doctor.Stavros.dctr a fresh early morning hit of Earl Black Tea, when in walked the lithe and sexy Wilma.exe, and her trusty sidekick, K9.prrr.

Computer files led their own unique lives, after all. It's not *just* a matter of passing binary hexadecimal values back and forth, a cosmopolitan world of customised executables were required to keep the proverbial cogs running smoothly. And as these inhabitants were ignorant of their relation to the space station that was the WebWorld9, so were the many species that lived and worked on the station unaware of just *how* the whole damn thing ticked along.

Wilma's eyes flashed a greeting at the coffee vendor, and Standback's tentacles flushed red in embarrassment. The good doctor, having just rushed from an early pre-natal delivery in the Folder called Eelee, chuckled to himself.

"What is thy bidding, My Master?", breathed K9 to her Mistress. Wilma looked down at her trusty cat, and smiled, "Oh, go and play with Tweeeky.bot, for a few para-secs, if you want".

As K9 wheeled about to head for the service door beside the counter, the people in the shop suddenly became aware of distant, muffled voices:

"... Where is ... does ... realise ... this affects his hold time ... Nick...?"

And:

"... wonderful ... guest ..."

And:

"... they intend to ... yargh ... been assass ... uhh."

The last one was followed by a muffled thud. Standback's patrons simply looked at each other in bewilderment.

The Shuttle A/MX detached from the HMS Server and telnetted across to one of the free docking arms protruding from the ring surrounding the WebWorld9 space station. Slogs had elected to arrive with the pomp and ceremony that came with a Home Server Farm Fleet shuttle, rather than use the Teleportation suite from the ground deck of his star ship. Being able to *walk* into a Trade Summit was far better than zig-zagging out of thin air, he had declared to Sandy, his Second-in-Command, when they were hurriedly trawling through the Fleet's tome of a manual on Diplomatic Etiquette.

The shuttle bumped to a stop, hissed with re-pressurisation, and on cue, the hatchway slid open. Slogs and Sandy were greeted with a feeble and off-key attempt at a naval whistle as they stepped onto the station, and then Rhett Crisko strode forward, a fixed smile politely holding his face together. He politely but briefly shook hands with the Server Farm Fleet captain.

"Welcome aboard, Captain, long time no sea... ha, ha, ha ..." giggled Rhett lamely at his own joke. Slogs returned the plastered smile, and followed it with a frown for good measure.

"Thank you, Crisko, it has indeed been too long since we last met, far too long..."

"Ummm... Shall we get on...?" offered Sandy.

"Yes, yes!" Crisko clapped his hands together. "Javva the Hub of Titfortat, Ambassador for the Rars Empire has already arrived, and given his opening speech... At least, I *hope* that was his opener, I'd hate to have to hear it all again..."

"What are they demanding, I mean, bringing to the table?" enquired Slogs, settling into his role of Representative of the Home Server Farm Fleet.

"Ummm ... We're not too sure yet..." answered Rhett truthfully. "Something to do with pleasant beings and self-determining planets...?"

"Don't you know?!" Sandy was incredulous that the small detail of *why* all this was taking place had eluded them.

"Oh, well we know the general abstract conceptual ... thingy ... of it all..." Rhett waved his hands expansively. "In fact, we think he's about to show us a new-fangled thingummyjig, a technical gizmo that the Rars Empire is offering to us."

"Hmmm," answered Slogs dubiously.

Trade Summit, Diplomatic Gathering, call it what you like, thought Dado, but if you didn't have at *least* one murder, they weren't worth diddley-squat.

The Head of Security prodded the body of the senator from Beatelgoose with a pencil, and made sure for the umpteenth time, that the body was technically a corpse. It was slumped over one of the space station's politically correct computer terminals in 'Kaff's Cyber Kaff' on the Lower Promenade, a popular stopover for species keen to network with their friends and loved ones. The workstation was thoroughly flooded with senatorial blood, which really annoyed Dado, since it was Station Property. Oh, and there was a pâté knife sticking out of the chap's broad back. Definately an assassination.

"We-ell, it looks to me as if the operating system has been well and truly wiped," Dado shook his head, as his Number Two moved about taking photos with his Kojak Instamake-it.

"Yes Sir!" Click, whirr, snap!

Dado sighed. "We'll shift the body down to the Medi-Bay for Dr Basser to look at. Can you get Engineering to spare a Fixer to come up and check this machine over?"

"Yes Sir!" Click, whirr, snap!

His colleague's keenness would go far, Dado noted to himself, but he really did need to brush up on his creative resourcefulness.

The station's mainframe rumbled internally, and all its portals shook violently. The epicentre was the Standback coffee shop.

Blinding white light, tinged with a hue of electric blue, flashed in through the coffee bar windows at Standback's, and momentarily blinded the occupants! Standback.cfee gasped, and inverted into his usual slimy ball of green goo. Stavros.dctr spluttered on his drink, and keeled over. But Wilma, level-headed and smart, whipped out her Trusty Sonic Screwdriver™, and hunkered down into a defensive poise. With her hand shading her eyes, she kept her senses sharp for anything around her.

And then vague mutterings could be heard, booming around the coffee shop, all about Wilma, and above and below and outside.

"Arrgggghhhh dad warned me file size hate Mondays"

What was going on??!

Somewhere in space...

At the command "engage" the appropriate switches were thrown and Captain Remedy heaved a sigh of relief, which landed in a far corner of the ship's bridge. The secondary coffee-cup engines flared into life and the ship headed off at a pleasant CD-drive speed, the rest of the fleet bringing up the rear.

That was until a panicked ping from chief engineer Scotty Shorn brought the fleet to a shuddering halt.

"Cap'n, the engines cannae take it. We were never loaded with the 844 isotopic reaction mass and the 845 isotope is generatin' harmful drains on the resources. We cannae go on until the resource drain has been cleared: *We're all doooooommed!!!*"

Jordan Basser sat at his medical table trying to decide what to do with himself. Dr. Basser was a tall heavy-set man who sported a goatee that was only seen on the likes of celebrity wrestlers and academics. The wire-rimmed spectacles confirmed him as the latter. Jordan was of course the station doctor but in all honesty he felt more like a mortician.

Although the Trade and Diplomatic meetings had only been going on for the first scheduled afternoon, there had already been *one* murder. And Dado's security resources were stretched to the limit investigating the assassination, while liasing with the station's doctor over the body. The senator from Beetlegoose was 14 feet tall and weighed a metric ton. This alone decreed a *lot* of resourcing.

"Still..." mused Dado, "what good is a Diplomatic gathering without at least *one* murder? It goes with the territory ... it's to be expected ... y'know, when my grand-daddy was serving on the..."

"Yes, yes, I *know* a good assassination introduces the 'spice' to any mediocre Trade meeting, but I ask you! I'm the doctor for Rars sake! Not the mortician!" snapped Jordan.

"Ahhh, yes, pity the mortician passed away only a few days ago..." remarked Dado.

"It's strange, don't you think, how the body of the senator was found slumped across one of the stations computer terminals?" wondered the doctor out loud.

"And with a pâté knife sticking out of him..."

"Is it?" questioned Dado. "All I was concerned about was the amount of blood everywhere! Pourin' all over the machine it was!" The Head of Security curled his lip in distaste. "Y'know, it's one thing on your *own* workstation ... But when you come visiting, and you bleed all over *someone else's*...!!"

"I just can't wait until they're gone! I've had enough of the lot of them," moaned Jordan.

"Well only a few more days and this political conference will be done, and we can return to our lovely, normal and above all, *quiet*, station," Dado answered, and he inverted with a *plop*.

CHAPTER 2

The schemes of Javva and the Dominion continued to grow as the Ambassador began to spread his thoughts to the various senators and diplomats from throughout the Galaxy. He was sure now that he was able to lull the fools to a point where the mighty Domino and Rars fleets could strike a fatal blow. It would only be a matter of time.

The WebWorld9 simply buzzed with interaction. The crew were slowly discovering that just finding a quiet corner to hide in was quite a challenge. And the station's security team continued to be hard-pressed, with Dado finding he had little time to draw breath, or *osmose* through whatever currently passed for gills.

In the guest rooms of Javva, the slimey Ambassador was staring at a secure monitor with something akin to drooling worship. The Empress of Rars glared back sternly; The Dominion deity, Q-Rob, hovered behind her shoulder.

"At your command, my masters," Javva oozed at the screen. "The famous Captain Slogs of the Home Server Farm fleet has now arrived."

"Excellent! You are to introduce the redirect, Javva. It is time to bring out the MH Fingertop computer," directed the Empress.

"By your command, O great ones!" Javva trumpeted. He brought out the small device that was to be the downfall of the WebWorld9 if his pudgy blue hands had anything to say about it.

"Well, Q-Rob, my friend, the WebWorld9 will soon be no more!" smiled Empress Loffux.

"Yes, Your Majesty," deferred the Lard of the Seive.

They regarded the view from the Rarsian Royal Citadel, perched high on the peaks of the tallest mountain range found on the capital planet, Ars.

"Javva's Re-Direct will re-route precious traffic to our own semaf systems!" exulted Loffux.

"Yes!" affirmed Q-Rob. "And if, for whatever reason, however unlikely, a weakness can be found, then we have the means to initiate our unsuspecting Ambassador into a Ripple Applet, that, combined with my Domino's new cannon..."

"...will wash away the WebWorld9 in one vast wave!"

"Off into the uncharted depths of community space!"

Laughter rang in peals throughout the Citadel halls.

The Empress stopped in her tracks. She laid a hand on Q-Rob's arm.

"And, my friend," she said conspiratorially. "We mustn't forget our Plan C."

"That's right," agreed Q-Rob. "If our exiled Gentleman succeeds in *his* mission, then we *might* allow him to reclaim his House and standing."

"If the double-agent fails ... why, the Lord Garridge will find himself in the Blackhole of Ars!"

Nick, dazed and confused, staggered into Standbacks'.

"Argh", he said.

Wilma.exe nodded in sympathy and understanding. Now that her eyes were adjusting to the light, she could see that a faint pink tinge was starting to seep through the White.

"Where am I ...??" muttered Nick. He slapped a hand to his forehead, and ran his fingers through his tousled hair, pushing his floppy fringe back into place. He felt as if he had been passed through a meat grinder, with extra foot-n-mouth on the side.

"Which Folder have you come from?" Wilma snapped at him. "What do you think's goin' on? Where's my K9??"

The pink, now turning into a darker shade of red, was coagulating out of the walls. There was a faint rust smell to it. And from above and all around, the muffled words, "... pâté ... sticking ... pourin' ... *own* workstation ... normal ..."

"Well basically..." began Nick.

"Hold it!" snapped Wilma. She had got up on to her three legs and waddled over to the wall. She was thinking furiously, "This reminds me of ... what was it? I tasted this when I was over in the Wildlife Folder ... ummmm ... BLOOD! That's it! This is *blood?!?*"

Nick's two eyes and Wilma's three eyes locked, "What *is* going on!?" she cried.

"Huh?" replied Nick, by now more than a little confused, "Surely someone can tell me what's happening?"

"Mmm, delicious pâté, don't you think, Mr Slogs?" remarked Javva expansively from his cart, Captain Slogs walking beside him. The two Titfortatian attendants were manufactured to the optimum muscle mass to haul the cart, but that didn't stop the glowering looks they gave their Ambassador.

"It's *Captain*," Slogs muttered to himself, already half-asleep from all the talk and hot-air he had had to endure.

The Great Banqueting Hall was crowded with dignitaries from all over the TGA, taking the well-fed opportunity to capitalise on the general *bonhomie* and engineer for themselves new trade routers and swap military bazaars. They were also ensuring a seat in the greedy Rars Empire before it was too late, by subtly calling the attention of the Ambassador, usually with the aid of a *hors d'oeuvres*.

Javva had been bored stiff by the toadies who had already come crawling for his favouritism, but had enjoyed placating each of them with a fictitious Ducal House and a dismissive wave of his hand. He had tried not to notice that Lord Garridge, who had been exiled from Ars many years ago, was also present. But Slogs ... Slogs on the other hand was a different percolator of fish. The Ambassador recognised that this captain of the Home Server Farm Fleet would be his main obstacle, for Commander Crisko had already been won over with a promise of a

flight in the very first Rars air vehicle. Javva had deigned to remove the fact that the historic model in question was underneath their greatest ocean, having crash-landed during its maiden voyage.

Javva decided it be best to come straight to the point and not beat around the cactus. He called out to Admiral Jirk and Commander Crisko to join them, announcing he had an extra special gift the Rars Empire would like to offer the TGA.

“Admiral, captains, we wish to present to you an example of the latest technology from the Rarsian deepspace research company, MacroHard,” he motioned to his attendants, who withdrew from a secret hatch in the side of the cart a small mahogany box. Javva snatched the item into his own stubby hands, and held it before him.

“This little gizmo not only tells you when the coffee is made, it also reduces hair loss!” he fiddled with the catch on the front of the box, and revealed a slightly smaller box. An attendant took the first box, and replaced it in the cart. Jirk and Crisko stood fascinated by the sales pitch ; Slogs, though intrigued, retained a stoney expression.

“This little gizmo not only calculates your tax returns, it also tells you how many miles you’ve travelled!” A third box, again smaller in size, was revealed, and held out lovingly before his enthralled audience, that now included Slogs. Javva was in his stride now.

“This little gizmo not only tells you when to prepare for the mating season of the Rarsian Duck – our national symbol – it also tells you

Jirk, Crisko, and Slogs nodded as one. Javva paused, exhilarating in the moment. His fingers delved inside the final box. The Great Hall was silent, expectant.

“*One MH to rule them all, One MH to buy them, One MH to bring them all, And from the station re-direct them,*” intoned Javva, waving his stubby blue arms about, the MH Fingertop clasped in one hand, for all to see.

Once the appreciative gasps had died down, Javva presented the MH Fingertop to Admiral Jirk, clicking a side button as he did so. A lid hinged up, and revealed a psychedelically patterned LSD screen, and an intricate miniature keyboard below.

“Admiral, behold, the MH Fingertop. A keyboard and screen, as you can see, with a wide variety of desktop games too!” the Ambassador beamed, as did the Admiral. A variety of really important looking paraphernalia had begun to scroll across the screen all at once in pretty directions.

“And ...” instructed Javva, “if you press this button here Yes, the one marked Eff-one-one”

Jirk did as requested, and a chubby finger flattened down on the small rubbery button labelled ‘F11’.

.... And the screen maximised to a deep shade of blue

.... Javva disappeared

.... And the legend ‘A Javva Re-Direct has now been enabled’ focused into view on the blue screen.

Wilma and Nick hurried from Standback's Coffee house hand-in-tentacle. The red-pink tinge was slowly being swallowed up by the natural and comforting dark

blacks of FolderLand.

"This way", urged Wilma. Their initial fright from the sudden white glare had left them, and now they were both experiencing a post-trauma rush of amphetamine. They found they were rather enjoying it.

"Ahhhhmmm to be honest, I'd be grateful if you'd tell me where we're going...??" Nick began.

One of Wilma's three eyes threw him a look.

"Just bear with me", she replied. Then she appeared to soften, and relented. "I'm taking you to my Folder, '25th Century'.... we'll be... erm... safer there!"

Nick opened his mouth to respond, and then thought better of it.

Nick found the 25th Century Folder to be comprised of soft furnishings, and clever gadgets that laid on tangy refreshments; it was quite pleasant. The habitual blackness was punctuated by soft dark mood lighting, and there was a hint of a fragrance in the air that reminded him of wet coats from Afghanistan... though if you asked him outright, he would be hard pressed to describe where exactly Afghanistan was.

What bothered him, though, was Wilma. From the distance her 3 legs had carried her from her portal she had somehow managed to divulge most of her over-garments, and was now draped languorously over some suggestively rounded soft curves in the living area. She was waving her Sonic Screwdriver languidly.

"Oh, Wilma..." Nick started.

"Please... join me...." her sultry voice made Nick go weak at the knees, a pleasurable feeling for which the Helpdesk training had not prepared him. "No, not there, over here, closer to me...."

Nick found himself taking a step closer.

"But what about your screwdriver.... ummmm... wouldn't it get in the way?"

"Ohhhhhh..... I don't think so, and besides I take my Trusty Sonic everywhere I go," Wilma beamed.

Nick smiled worriedly.

"And it has 3 settings!" she purred.

"Where's he gone?" Admiral Jirk wondered aloud lamely.

There was silence in the Great Hall, broken only by bewilderment, though urgent chattering soon followed.

"That's not very polite, is it?!" demanded Crisko, most put out that his duty as host appeared to be fast unraveling. "And what's a 'Javva Re-direct' anyway??"

"Something wicked this way comes, I fear," muttered Captain Slogs, whose years of experience in the Home Server Farm Fleet had enabled him to return to rational sanity far sooner than his esteemed colleagues. "This blue screen could be a horror beyond our imagination!" he warned, waving the other dignitaries back from the MH Fingertop, which had now been placed – gingerly – on the floor.

“How can that be?” argued one plump senator. “I’d have thought calculating tax returns would bring about greater peace and prosperity for us all!”

Before he could answer, Slogs was interrupted by a *PING* from Crisko’s wrist.

“Dorris here, Sir,” came Kia-Ora’s voice. “I don’t know what this means but....”

“What is it?!” snapped Crisko.

“A a ... a *huge* neon sign has ... appeared outside next to the WebWorld9?!”

“Neon sign?! Appeared?!”

“Th-that’s right, Sir ...”

“We-ell ... patch it through to the view screens as soon as you can!” he instructed.

Slogs beckoned Sandy Dreamberg over to him. “Sandy, hail Snazz, and see if she can verify this.”

Sandy nodded, and tapped into her wrist comm.

Aboard the HMS Server, that hung some distance from the station, Snazz was already running initial diagnostics on the new structure, when Sandy’s call came through.

“Yes Sandy, tell the Captain we’re already investigating it. Initial reports indicate that it is a ‘.obj file’,” answered the Comms Officer, as the RA Files PC went “Ping”.

Steff Proteous, the Engineering Officer, sat in Slogs’ chair and was Acting-Captain whilst Slogs was offline. He called over to Snazz. “Tell him we’ll update him when we know more! Cheers!”

Snazz relayed the message, and returned to her IDS monitors, running gamma and better scans of the Neon Sign.

Sandy turned to Slogs. “An ‘Obj File’, Sir, at the very least, but they will run some better scans and update us when they know more. Still, the RA Files PC went ‘Ping’ as normal,” she added.

Slogs breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh good show! Can’t have the RA Files PC getting out of step.

Captain Slogs turned to Admiral Jirk, ignoring Crisko completely. “Sir, if I may, I’d like to see if I can’t hack into this ... *thing?*” he indicated the MH Fingertop lying on the floor.

The viewscreens in the Hall were now displaying the huge Neon Sign that declared “Traffic Diversion” in flashing red and green. Everyone could clearly see the incessant freighters and hauliers dutifully following the new instruction, and bypassing the WebWorld9 completely.

“We’ll be run out of business!!” wailed Crisko. “No-one will stop and trade with us, we’ll fold up and down size!!”

Admiral Jirk faced Slogs. “Yes, yes, go ahead, I don’t see that we have anything to lose!”

Slogs rolled up his sleeves, and knelt down beside the machine. He waggled his fingers, then slowly, carefully, placed them on the keyboard. The room held its

collective breath as he began. His tongue poked out from between his pursed lips in concentration.

The Captain quickly familiarized himself with the basic controls of the MH Fingertop, and in no time at all, had managed to conjure up a small animated wizard-looking fellow in the bottom-right hand corner of his screen. Slogs was pleased with his effort, and grinned. Jirk, however, looking over his shoulder, coughed pointedly, and Slogs continued with his hacking, ignoring the 'wizard's' offer of help.

A few moments had passed in utter silence, and then the Captain looked up, sweat beading his brow. "I've found a little picture in here that is labeled 'Re-Direct' Oh! and some more little piccies that look like scissors, brushes, torches, and pages Hmmm, there's one here that looks like a magnet ... I wonder what happens if I use that on the Re-Direct?"

"I don't care what you do, Slogs!!" interrupted Crisko, his hysteria now breaking through. He flung his arm up towards the IDS viewscreens. "We're already losing much needed traffic! Our quota allocation will plummet!!"

Jirk took Crisko by the shoulders and moved him to one side. But Slogs didn't need a show of dramatics to indicate time was of the essence. He activated the 'magnet' icon, and repointed the Re-Direct to what looked like a mini rubbish bin. 'Are you sure you want to Move these files? YES NO'.

Slogs affirmed the command.

"Well ... I don't know *where* that will end up exactly, but it's not here, at any rate!!" announced Slogs, getting to his feet and wiping his hands.

No sooner had he said that, than a great rumble shook the WebWorld9 spacestation. The silence in the Great Hall was immediately replaced by a frightened murmur.

"Okaaaaaay ... well it might take a *little* while to take effect" Slogs said placatingly.

Javva fumed. He would have stamped his foot, and punched the wall if he could. The 'Eff-one-one' should have teleported himself back to his waiting ship that orbited on the far side of the sanctuary planet. And in fact he *did* see its interior, if only briefly! And then the transporter room fuzzed out of sight, and he was stuck in this tingling limbo somewhere between the safety of his ship and the enemy station.

What had happened?! There was no way the device could have failed, and his Masters had assured him all was well.

And then, without warning, he felt himself ... 'move' ... and he was suddenly traveling at great speed ... into a multi-coloured darkness of pulsating pinpoints of light, where he was brought to a halt again.

Somewhere deeply embedded inside the WebWorld9 mainframe a little voice of frustration called out, "By Rars! Where in Tiffortat's name am I?!"

In the folder known as 'The Twenty-fifth Century', Wilma's tentacles were amorously entangled with Nick's fingers, the posi-screwdriver attachment having turned out to be really useful after all.

As they sighed and stared deeply into one another's eyes, a muffled voice intruded upon their privacy.

"... Rars ... where ... Tiffortat's ... am I?!"

Wilma sat up sharply, her senses twanging *danger*.

"Ahhhrm ..." Nick began.

Suddenly there was a brief flash of electric blue light.

Before the two could react, the blue was replaced by a grey mist that permeated the dark blacks of the Folder. In glaring shiny black was the legend : 'Are you sure you want to move these files? YES NO'.

As the two and a half pairs of eyes read this, and as their respective brains struggled to comprehend, the YES depressed and a highlight border appeared and a heartbeat later, the whole legend disappeared.

Instinctive intuition took over, they looked at each other, and thought, "Oh Rars!" The structure of Wilma's lodgings began to dissolve, and the lighter elements strewn around her space were suddenly sucked out through the walls towards a fiery grey Folder called Bin.

Nick wrapped his arms about Wilma, and hung on for dear life. Wilma's left and right eyes desperately glanced around looking for a handhold, her third eye looking deep into Nick's, looking for love, looking for trust. They felt their bodies rise and be carried along on this preternatural force, uncontrollably drawn towards Bin.

The great fiery death drew nearer. Nick had shut his eyes in resignation, but as Wilma stared into the grey flames, she thought she could discern a pale face: simple, plain, but still, inexplicably, very beautiful. The shadow-mouth opened, and crashing non-words flew out.

"I am Saleem Bin Dion. I am the Eater of the Bin Souls. I Empty the Discus. I obliterate all Machine Code. I don't like Binary," Saleem intoned.

"However. I sense an unusually vibrant and passionate emotion here. It is between you two executable files."

This might not feel good, but it is worth preserving. It ought to be archived, Saleem thought to herself.

"I see you have an ACME Trusty Sonic Screwdriver™. Actually they're quite good. Now, if you twist the lower half *that* way, and reply with the opposite motion on the upperhalf, *whilst* holding down *that* button there in the mid-section, while keeping *that* small adjustor lever *fully* advanced" she said instructively.

Wilma barely had time to look down to see the Screwdriver moving of its own accord, before there was another blinding flash of electric blue and SILENCE.

Nick opened his eyes. He was propped up against a black angular oblong, surrounded by comfortably soft white lighting. He glanced about, and saw the horizon filled with similarly shaped logs, floating on a misty white horizon plane. To his left, Wilma stood, tentacles drooped about her three feet, one hand on her hips, the other holding her Sonic Screwdriver, to which she was intently gazing. "Hmmmmmm. Well, it has never done that before!" "Arhhhhhm," began Nick. " Where are we??" "Well", she replied after having a brief look around, "I think we are in the fabled Log Files directory on the Server"

Rhett Crisko regarded the AandC hauliers through the viewport as they departed the freight dock, and audibly sighed with relief. Admiral Jirk clapped him across the shoulders. The neon lights on the diversion notice had flickered off, and traffic levels were slowly returning to normal. The WebWorld9's 'Under Construction' sign hummed brightly to itself.

"Now that's a *site* for sore eyes," chuckled the Admiral to the station commander, and turned to Captain Slogs. "Well done Slogs. I don't know what you did there, but you've managed to save the station from impending disaster. I'm sure the TGA officials will be very pleased when they hear about this. Allow me to get you a drink to celebrate."

Slogs nodded his head to the Admiral, trying to hide the big grin that had appeared on his face, whilst at the same time giving Crisko a demeaning sideways glance.

"Thank you Admiral." he replied. "However, as much I'd love to join you for a drink, I really should be getting back to my ship."

"Another day, then," the old skinflint answered, grateful not to be getting the rounds in this time.

CHAPTER 3

Fat is a funny thing. It's a necessary evil. We have all these low-fat diets, yet everyone's agreed that we need a minimum quantity of fat in our lives. Most people think that token amount refers to our food consumption. In actual fact, only a select few *truly* understand that Fat – all thirty-two varieties of it – has a greater, more intrinsic, importance.

Fat flows. Life flows. Put the two together and you get a smoothly flowing consistency of goo. Only the select few *know* that Fat binds the universe(s) together, that this paste allows for time and landscape to slip about each other in a well-lubricated motion.

Yet, as the doctors rightly indicate, too much of the wrong type of fat can be a bad thing. An accumulation of dark and burnt fat can produce *Lard*, and the thing about Lard is that it is enticing, seductive, gratifying: you immerse yourself in Lard, and you'll never look back.

Ah Retirement, Admiral Jirk mused, *it's very soon now and my little timeshare on Bendor will be my new home!* Jirk entered the docking tunnel with an air of satisfaction. He just wanted to get to his shuttle, get out of WebWorld9, and begin *enjoying* life. No nasty MH surprises for *him*, anymore, thank you very much! Besides, green women only went so far. Give him a drink, a comfy couch and a sporting event on a holo-projector.... now that was living!

The Admiral sat at the controls of his shuttle gazing out at the TGS AnyKey-E as it manoeuvred away, and quietly wondered if he could fly it better than Captain Picky.

His comlink suddenly blared. "Crisko to Jirk,"

"That's *Yurk!*" he snapped, annoyed that his reveree had been interrupted. "I'm on my way out of here, Rhett!"

"Sorry, Sir, but I was just wondering if you have any idea how to use one of those new MHFP Droids you supplied for our plumbing?" asked Crisko.

"Well you have a webbot there so you will need a new service droid to work with it." Jirk explained blankly. He was one of the few people ever to own one, and so had to expect this line of questioning every now and again. But not for much longer!

"But our Service droid has been working fine before this, why do we need to upgrade? Won't the patch that MacroHard tech provided us work with our existing service droid?"

"Well you know MH, they believe that if you want to use their droids you need to buy into their service plan and upgrade," Jirk replied testily, and closed the line.

Leaning on the *Tidyroom's* yoke, the Admiral gleefully flared the TGS AnyKey-E, as he sidled around the greater ship for a clear vector.

WWTwoOh busied himself in the depths of the HMS Server. He was in the sub-control-room, where the cgi was relayed off the Generator. The Recycler Bin was here, and whenever the cgi levels fluctuated to overload, it was at those moments when the very important job of deleting the cgi took place. It was done pretty much indiscriminately, but TwoOh preferred to think that his choice of cgi files determined the Karma of the HMS Server. Well, a droid could dream, couldn't he?

He quite liked it down here. Especially after that frightful ride in Lift Four.

The email relay on the RA Files virtual-PC – the counterpart to the Master on the bridge - went PING.

"Oh. Now that *is* unusual. It's only 01:23:07," commented the droid. "I wonder what could be happening??"

He stepped over to another console and flicked some switches. A display appeared on the OUC which showed two spacecraft playing tag. One had an elongated disc, supported by a lozenge shaped main body, with two T-shaped engine nacelles leading off ; the other was clearly a TGA Shuttle.

The droid shrugged his shoulders - no mean feat - and returned to his task. As he was searching through the cgi, a warning message appeared, 'ERROR: invalid file specification in dir LOG, unknown host in auth block conf file'.

"Oh!" remarked TwoOh.

He turned to another screen which brought up the Server Log Files. He tuned in a dial knob, bringing the screen into focus, and found two items amidst the log files that were labelled as viruses.

But these 'viruses' did not compute with his vast archived experience of KrAKworms.

TwoOh flicked the comms switch. "Chief Engineer Steff Proteus?"

"Proteus here," answered a cheerful voice.

"Ah, sir, it appears we have a non-virus in the Server Log Files for 01:23:07.

Would you be a dear, and possibly che ...?"

"Cheers! Proteus out."

In the command centre of the WebWorld9, Kia-Ora happily pressed the green button on her console, and a *PING* sounded in Crisko's office next door.

"Rhett here," answered her commander.

"Sir ..." began the lieutenant with a purr.

"Oh, it's you," sighed Rhett. "Is that Jirk back already?"

"No Sir, but I've got a report here from the Proprietors down on the Promenade. They've been hearing some... erm... strange noises coming from the infrastructure..."

"The architecture is solid and risk-free!" snapped Crisko proudly.

"Of course, Sir, but it's not *just* the Klick-Ons who have reported hearing this," she paused as she glanced down the log. "I've got comments here from pretty much every species on board."

"Well what have they been hearing, then??"

"An unusual increase in the clunks and gurgles of the piping... and..."

"And?" prompted Crisko.

"Ah... music, Sir?" Kia-Ora hesitated. "Well, some sort of strange melody, anyway."

In his office Rhett frowned. *What could be going on now?!* They had survived the traffic re-direct instigated by the Evil Rars Empire and that slimy Titfortat Ambassador, and all he wanted was the station to settle back down to its usual placid humdrum existence. He sighed.

"Instruct the Plumb-Bots to go and investigate, Kia-Ora. We'll see what Admiral Jirk's new MHFP Extensionlet droids can come up with..."

Chief Engineer Steff Proteus was busy diagnosing the Log File non-virus in his little cubby hole that was his office. He was a short, compact fellow, with a boyish grin on his youthful face. The Chief Engineer's office was on the 15th Deck, and very few people ever ventured up there, and the few that did would bypass the 9th deck for their own safety; the command 'bridge' of the HMS Server was in actual fact located on one of the lowest decks of the towering ship.

"Hmmm. Sure is a puzzler, TT," he remarked to his ASP droid in the corner. The Active Service Protocol Droid was tangled up in wires and cable-jacks in Steff's office, which was in its usual untidy state with cardboard boxes and Dedicated Handbags lying about. "I wonder if it's related to that MH Fingertop nonsense ...?"

"Oracle database error in the Affirmative, Steff", replied TT.

"Cheers!" he grinned.

Suddenly, the comm PINGed : "Steff, old boy, Slogs here,"

"Yes, Captain?" answered the Chief Engineer. All the crew were *Old Boys* as far as Slogs was concerned. Even the younger female officers.

"We seem to have a spot of bother here. There appears to be a TGA-class Shuttle playing keyboard-and-mouse with a Majestic E-Type Starship outside.

"I've asked Tactical Gunnery Officer 'Guns' Mademincemeat to keep tabs on them, while Snazz tries to hail the pilot a greeting for his Boat ID", Captain Slogs explained. "Can you make sure that the engines are ready to go into Novell Gear in case we need to make a dash for it into Super I-Drive?"

"Cheers!" confirmed Steff.

Wayone, the chief representative for the Domino, smiled. He had just read the SSL from the defunct RARS fleet Captain, Admirable Remedy, and knew for sure that all the glory would be his alone tomorrow morning, on the deadline for the attack. Although the earlier subtle Javva Re-Direct attack had failed, he knew that an all-out direct attack from the gentleman's fighters would surely bring them success.

With a flash of light, the main view-screen became active, and Wayone quickly made himself look more respectable as the Domino God, Q-Rob, came into view. "Your great one. We are honoured by your call." Wayone greeted him

"You have all the plans ready for the attack tomorrow morning, I assume?" the deity questioned.

"Oh, yes holy one. The gentleman fighter ships are primed and the pilots have donned their tuxedos ready for the attack, after which, we will all regroup for a cigar and some brandy."

"Very good, but, after the failure of our last attempt, I have implemented a backup plan," the deity informed Wayone, "You will find attached to your ship the new prototype SHIFT-REFRESH cannon, with added interactive Applet. The Applet has already been implanted into the WebWorld9's mainframe computer, via the 'Eff-One-One' code. The cannon can target it and move the space station from its current coordinates to a totally new location devoid of any sustainable traffic!" Wayone could see spittle form at the corner of his Master's agitated mouth.

"Brilliant plan, your magnificent one", Wayone replied, "But how do we use this new cannon?"

"I will give you the code needed to activate it. Listen carefully, for I shall say this only once, *tt875631*. Just input this code into your computers' feedback routine and the cannon will come online, fully automated and directly target the applet. I do not expect you to fail again." he instructed, waving a red glowing baton threateningly. The connection cut off.

The MHFP Extensionlet webbots burrowed through the conduits and piping behind the walls of the WebWorld9 spacestation. They slid down routes and swung on cables, electrical energy sparking wildly off everything they came in contact with, including an erstwhile Ambassador for Tiffortat. Doggedly, they followed the clunking that emanated from the waste network. They were in their element!

On the HMS Server, Snazz Hashcake fired up her comms terminal and sent a transmission to the unidentified shuttle.

"Shuttle Tidyyroom, we have you on our scanners. What is your destination and clearance code?"

Jirk, who had only minimal experience with the Home Server Farm Fleet and could barely remember his five minute 'refresher training' with the fleet, was stumped.

"My clearance code is..." he began, racking his memory of that dreary day a long time ago in a headquarters far far away. "... it's ... 'Blow up sheep now available'...".

Snazz looked absolutely dumbfounded. "Captain, it's an older code, Sir, but it checks out," she breathed. "Okay, which one of you geniuses thought that one up?" she queried the bridge crew testily.

"We'll need to ID the pilot," commented Sandy. She reached over and with a groan, hauled the Fleet's manual on Diplomatic Etiquette to her desk. The second in command flicked through the tome until she found the section on encrypted

ranking staff online identification. Turning to *B* she scanned through searching for 'Blow up sheep now available'.

"Ah ha !" she cried jubilantly And then her face fell.

"Guys ..." she called out to the Bridge. "You'll never guess who it is ?"

"Which bigwig is it now ?? " moaned Snazz.

"Admiral Jirk," replied Sandy rolling her eyes.

Snazz quickly turned back to her comms station, and flicked the return channel open.

"Admiral Jirk, what a pleashure to speak with you!" Snazz ensured that she had the sweetest of saccharine smiles in her voice.

"Ahhhh, Snazz, my dear," he replied, recognising the Home Server Farm Fleet's Favourite Friendly Female Communications Officer, and therefore ignoring the mis-pronunciation of his name. "I'm off to the Tourist Moon of Bendor and my little timeshare villa beside the sea! I've made use of Harrold's House of Razors store on Crisko's famous Promenade and have my brand new summer wardrobe with me !"

Snazz kept that smile firmly in place. "Oh, that's nice, Sir. Clear skies, Sir!"

As the Shuttle Tidyroom peeled away, the bridge crew fell about laughing.

"That *jerk* of an Admiral is so vain !!" laughed Captain Slogs.

The Domino Fleet executed a perfect hand-brake turn and came about to face WebWorld9. Tomorrow morning was *now*, a little late, but here nevertheless.

Wayone laughed maniacally. "Rrrriiiiiiggghhhht", he defined. "I'll be with you in a moment, Mister Rhett Crisko. All ships, on my mark."

The Gentlemen's fighters fired up their engines, charged their weaponry and at Wayone's command they set off to engage the station.

Crisko rushed into the command centre. The viewscreens were filled from corner to corner with Domino Warships and Gentlemen Fightercraft.

"Don't Panic, Captain Crisko!" cried the exiled Lord Garridge, in Big Friendly Letters, waving a full glass of port in the air. *Hmmmm, that sounds quite good as a name for that encyclopaedia I'm writing*, he thought to himself.

"What are you doing up here?!" Crisko shot the demoted Gentleman a dark look.

"Nevermind. Find a handrail and hold on to it."

He swung around to face Kia-ora. "Alert weapons command to repel enemy fire! Raise the Nuton Shields NOW!!!"

"Sorry, Sir," Kia-ora answered quickly. "The Shields are only at half power!"

"Site Wipe Weaponary system is being advanced through the Custom Security settings, and should be warmed up shortly!" reported Hworff.

"But we need shields ...!!!!!" Crisko was apoleptic.

"Mind those exclamation marks there, Sir, you *could* hurt someone ..." began Jordan, always concerned about Health and Safety.

"Sensors indicate a large incoming of Domino Warships!" cried Kia-ora. Hworff squinted at the long-range monitors. "... And what appears to be a squadron of Gentleman Fighters gathering in attack formation!" He shot Garridge a dark look.

Dado dripped through the ceiling vents, and mashed himself into shape. "Captain! What about utilising Security's SMS? We could augment that with the *Wibble-Wibble-Wibble* Setting and use it as a terra-pinning to the Nuton Shields" Captain Crisko's blank look was swiftly replaced by desperation : "Do it!" he ordered.

Dado, whose legs hadn't really fully reformed in all of the excitement, slithered across to the Comms, and called up Chief O'Brains.

There followed a rapid back and forth parse of technical instructions, worthy of the supra-sapient single-celled nano organisms, the M'Mammos, and the spacestation began to shudder with the power of the eDcSM augment.

The Gentleman fighters flew ahead of the large Domino Warships, and immediately settled into a bachelor formation.

The commander of the fighters opened a channel to the rest of his squadron, "Right men, listen up. I want a clean, swift battle, close *and two cigars!*"

"Yes, sir." came the unanimous reply.

The fighters accelerated towards the station, and opened fire, maneuvering in such a perfect synchronized formation they could put an Olympic swimming team to shame.

The commander broke formation and moved in closer, dotting the 'i' of the "Under Construction" sign in a staccato of laserfire, as a Gentlemanly display to any women that may be watching that he was eligible for marriage. He rejoined the rest of the fighters in a victory roll as they made a second run at the station, rupturing the lower bulkhead just before the stations shields came online, fizzling with the power of an eDcSM augment.

Wayone turned from his communiqué with the Great God, Q-Rob. It was time. His fleet had been pounding the Station for a while now, and the axe was about to drop. He signalled a nearby cadet, a work placement trainee, who beamed with the honour of responsibility. He would get top marks for enthusiasm, if nothing else.

The navy cadet saluted smartly, and stepped up beside his commander and lieutenant. The trainee, who was known as Conman Abdullah, flipped open the cover on the secure folder beside his command chair, and entered 8-7-5-6-1-3 into the keyboard.

Wayone opened the freely-serving Fleet broadcast channel I-SeeTwoFour, and announced, "Stand by. I'm activating the SHIFT-REFRESH!"

Conman looked thoughtful. He glanced at his commander and then back at the keyboard and the sequence of numbers he had just entered. He looked back over to Wayone, and then, oh-so-innocuously, he sidled off to one side. Walking the practiced walk of guilty nonchalance, he reached the lifts connecting the bridge tower with the rest of the ship. He selected the turbo-lift that would take him as far away from the bridge at the top-most speed, and pulled out an MH Fingertop from his breast pocket.

He regarded the boxy gadget that he had "come across". Conman was particularly intrigued by the Eff-numbers that ran across the top of the mini keyboard, and had been enthusiastically working his way through them, but to no apparent success : EffOhOne to EffOneOne hadn't done anything at all exciting. As the lift descended, he punched at the EffOneTwo button. He disappeared.

Somewhere in time, and very likely in a space as well, the Rars Fleet zipped past. By the time they continued on their zip, they were carrying one extra passenger and regarding their problem with the engine servers....

The cannon on the lead Domino ship aimed towards the WebWorld9 and the hornet swarm of Gentlemen Fighters.

A pinkish-purple beam emerged from the barrel of the cannon, firing into the space just ahead of the Fleet. A strange rippling distortion started to appear at the tip of the beam, which soon spread and formed into a large hyper-wave.

The beam emanating from the cannon stopped abruptly, and transmitted the command to the Applet to attract the huge wave towards its target.

...There was a brightly blinding flash of silence and.....

...The Gentlemen's Fighters disappeared as they were hit by the wave and sent, tumbling away into deep space....

Wayone stood dumbfounded. "WHAT IN RARS NAME HAPPENED??!" he screamed.

The commander ordered a yell.com to be opened on a 192 encrypted channel. The Great God appeared on the screen with a sizzle, and demanded to know why he had been disturbed.

Wayone quickly brought his Master up to speed. The agitated flourishes of the red baton told him that Q-Rob wasn't impressed.

"Listen carefully, for I shall say this only once.... *again*. The code needed to activate it is 'tt875631'. That's all there is to it!! Simple!"

"Yes, your Magnificence, of course, Sir, right away!"

The lieutenant who was standing at his commander's shoulder took a deep breath. "S-s-sir, I ... ah ... believe ..." he whispered.

"Yes? What is it??" Wayone snapped.

"I ... ahhhh ... noticed that the trainee ... ahhh ... inputted the tt number ... ahhhh Well, you see ... they were the correct digits ... ahhh ... but they ... ahhh ... they were not, *as such* ... ahhh ... *basically* ... they were not *exactly* in the *right* order, if you see where I'm coming from ...???" he ended in a rush.

"What are you blathering about?!"

The ensign took another deep breath. “The last two numbers of the tt code, Sir, were the wrong way around : it *should* have been tt875631!”

Wayone’s eyes opened wide. Then they opened some more. So did his mouth, but no sound came out.

He spun around, but the trainee was nowhere to be seen. Wayone jabbed 8-7-5-6-3-1 into the secure keyboard, frantically announcing to the Fleet a second activation of the Shift-Refresh cannon.

“Oh, one other thing,” added Q-Rob, “Don’t forget the Applet will need *re*-deploying ...”

Javva – or what *identity* of the Ambassador remained in the Applet – recognised he was on the move again, and with a zinging crickle-crackle and an animated Flash of electron light, that would have made his Neon sign envious, felt himself translocated to a mainframe that was strangely familiar.

Once Javva had settled himself down, and metaphorically patted himself all over to make sure he was all there, he looked about and regarded the R.I.S.K architecture that towered around him.

“HmMMM, there’s something strangely familiar about this place” He mused, reading the spiky, jagged heiroglyphs.

“By Rars! It’s in the numeric language of the Domino! I’m saved!” he exulted.

Out in space, the cannon fired once more and created another, much larger, hyper-wave.

Wayone watched in anticipation as the cannon beam stopped and the wave started to move towards its target the Domino fleet!!

.... There was another brightly blinding flash of silence and

.... the Fleet disappeared on the crest of the hyper-wave, and at a greater velocity than the fighters

"Thank you for calling your Helpdeity. If you need further assistance, please do not hesitate in contacting us again", and Q-Rob clicked off in ignorance.

Somewhere in deep space a small percentage of starships huddled together. Still waiting for a response from their 3rd level engineers the Rars fleet were stranded. They had managed to clear the resource drain caused by the incorrect isotope in the coffee-cup engines and were now just waiting for the news on a working I-Drive.

The SMS system pinged to life.

"Cap'n Remedy, this is Shorn. Ah just received wor' tha' the I-Drive is back online".

"Brilliant news, get her ready for the jump to I-Drive", answered Remedy.

"Och, aye, Cap'n".

Captain Remedy turned to his crew. "Set a course for the WebWorld9. Shift to I-Drive."

With a small shuddering motion, 10 percent of the Imperial Rars Fleet accelerated into I-Drive.

A question burned its way into the mind of Captain Admirable Remedy as Gee-Forces aided his digestion. "Do the other ninety percent of our fleet actually exist?" he wondered out loud.

Science officer Dr. Clock promptly stepped forward. "That would be a very illogical assumption Captain," he offered.

Winger turned to them. "But has anyone ever actually seen them??"

Captain Remedy looked around the bridge getting negative glances from everyone. He sighed. "Well that answers my query, I've always wondered why we seemed such a *small* fleet."

"Captain, the WebWorld9 is coming into sensor range, but ... there's no sign of the Domino fleet!"

"Put her on the OUC screen," instructed their Captain. "Drop to C-Drive on my mark ... Mark!"

The crew watched in anticipation as the WebWorld9 fast approached. As one they held their breath. The Rars fleet flew past the spacestation. As it did so, the GE Problem shuddered.

"Did Mark hear that last request?! Did anyone ???" Remedy demanded. "Drop to C-drive, I said!!"

"We're trying captain. We seem to be locked in I-Drive."

Captain Remedy hurriedly opened up an SMS viewport to his Chief of Engineering.

"Shorn, what's going on?"

"We have a wee problem, cap'n. The IDE cables have fused wi' the engine and we're stook in I-Drive," Shorn explained. "We've sent a message up to third level. I *hope* to get an ansser fro' the wee tykes within the next few weeks." He paused. "I ... ahh ... seem to I've ... ummm ... got my newest engineering recruit working on it for me He's grinning and waving a small box ... so *that's* a good sign ... isn't it ??"

"Oh Rars! Here we go again," moaned Captain Admirable Remedy.

CHAPTER 4

The Fat flows. It surrounds and permeates and binds. It's everywhere, it's all about us in places you'd hardly imagine could store fat. Plants and animals have a 'fat', rocks and oceans have a 'fat', celebrities, well, they have something they call "cellulite", but it's all the same.

There is a natural and constant striving for *balance* between the Fat and the Lard. The eco-system that is governed by thirty-two rules regulates the flow and the cleaning to ensure that the Fat remains fresh, and never pauses long enough to coagulate into Lard; similarly, the Lard must never be totally devoid of Fat, or else it could never *breathe*.

So the flow of the Fat is constantly *scrubbed* clean. As matter is discarded, it is recycled, and it is in this section of the universal pipeline that one of the most important duties is performed.

If that were ever to be disrupted ...

Since the Domino had disappeared the crew of the WebWorld9 had once again returned to their usual task of cleaning up the station and keeping the peace on the promenade.

Captain Crisko was now coming to grips with a new ship, his "baby", the TGS Defiled, an experimental craft originally created to take on the Klick-Ons when they were the enemy of the TGA. He was absolutely bursting with pride. It arrived soon after the senators had departed, with a note attached from Admiral Jirk, congratulating him for a "job well done". Now however, it was his own personal plaything to use against the Domino. And, besides, Slogs' bravura performance with Javva's MH Fingertop had tarnished his ego.

With Kia-ora and Hworff in attendance he announced his intention to travel to the secret location of the Domino known as PLEHKSED, a Morgan class planet located in the Grammer Quadrant.

"I ... we are without a doubt very lucky to have her!" Rhett announced with a giggle, like a boy with a new toy.

Hworff looked around the ship quizzically. "So what are we to do with this thing once we get it there, Captain?"

Crisko turned to face his officer. "Well that's the great thing! We will get our own back!" he quivered with excitement. "We'll give them a right going over, mash them up, wipe the floor with them and all that sort of stuff."

If the MHFP Extensionlets had aural receptors they would have heard a very odd melody. As it was, down in the depths of the spacestation, their built-in sine-wave synthesisers tracked the noise anomalies that had been reported by the denizens

of the station. Forgotten by the jubilant Crisko far above, they were descending towards the bottom of the station. A tracer on each webbot alerted the mainframe as to their location, which dutifully filed the report away in an important folder marked *bin*.

Once in a while things are perfect, just perfect. And that simply bugged Jirk. After years of serving in the TGS he knew that it just could not last. It worried him more than anything! The Tourist Moon of Bendor had that faintly comforting quality that could be found in all exotic locations: a landscape and cuisine that was familiar, yet with a colour palette that made the eyes water.

He had pulled out his swimming trunks out so that he could once again enjoy a dip in the nearby purple sea. He had even made up a picnic hamper of locally selected blue and lime striped fruit. As the Admiral moved down to the water's edge he hummed a happy tune that was at odds with his years of active service paging.

Ah, yes it truly was a great day! I should relax and enjoy it !

Just as Steff Proteus was thinking that his scottish cousin Shorn would have resolved this non-virus by now, the ASP droid TT chirped up : "Steff, why not use a guestbook.data to extract these two, since they are clearly *not* viruses??" "Cheers!" exclaimed the Engineer. "Of course! How simple! Thanks a lot, TT!!"

Within minutes, Steff had signed into the Server Guestbook, and accessed the .data through the DOZ command line. He could clearly see them there, and as he was implementing the Extractor Fan, they began to materialise on the screen of what was his copy of the RA Files virtual-PC.

Two little figures, clutching each other in fear, 5 legs, 5 eyes, a limp tentacle ... and an interesting looking cylindrical gadget

"HMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM," mused Steff.

In the bowels of the WebWorld9, the Extensionlets halted in the gloom. Beside them lay a sealed hatch. Printed upon it was a cheerfully helpful legend, "De-Pressurisation Point! Authorised Access Only!". The clanking and whooshing was louder, but other than the robots, the area was deserted. Their MHFP navi-systems affirmed to them that they were sat huddled against the station's hull, and deep space was on the other side. Their sensors clicked and whirred and reported that the source of the noises was coming from beyond the airlock hatchway.

Far above the webbots and the airlock, Doctor Jordan Bassier continued to research the incident with the Domino Fleet and the Gentlemen's Fighters. He

seemed to be the only one concerned with what had happened, and desperately wanted to understand their disappearance. The rest of the crew were fawning over the TGA Defiled with the captain.

So it was a surprise when the door to his Medi-Bay chimed, and Jordan saw Dado enter.

"What have you found out so far Doctor Basser?" the shape-shifting Security Chief asked without preamble.

"Well Dado I am still not completely sure what they were up to, they seem to have done *something* to themselves but I'm very confused by the whole thing. It seems as if they were intending to use some mystical *force* to surround us and bind us. But perhaps it backfired ...?"

"That wave thingy?" Dado said skeptically. "Do you think it was related to the mischief that the Tiffortat Ambassador caused?"

"Well, there could be a pattern Or it could just be that half gallon of synthale I had with Garridge last night," Jordan replied.

"Garridge!" exclaimed Dado.

"Huh?"

"He was one of ... *them*, wasn't he ? A Gentleman, before he came here. Perhaps *he* could shed some light on all this?" he pointed out, not without a hint of suspicion in his voice.

"That's right !" agreed Jordan, totally missing the subtle tone. "We've drunk each other under the table so often now that I only see him as one of us ! I'll go and check with him now!"

As Jordan headed out of his Medi-Bay in the direction of the Promenade, the MHFP webbots, far below him, twittered and chirped at one another, confirming their original provisioning order to investigate at all costs. They recognised the warning label on the hatch, and happily knew they were *above* that sort of thing. The lead-bot positioned itself over the controls to the airlock and its fellows clustered about. With an MH Over-Ride worthy of an award, the hatchway cycled open and the Extensionlets dropped through.

As the hatch above them closed shut, its counterpart below began to open. Activating their magneto-fasteners, the Extensionlets slipped out onto the outer hull of the spacestation ...

... and were faced with a sight that completely befuddled their tiny CPU chips! A vast chamber lay before them, while the hull of the WebWorld9 curved away beside them! As the webbots focused their photo-receptors on a singular object below them, a great *whoosh* of electric blue sprang up at them, disabling their magnetic hold.

The MHFP Extensionlets dropped to the floor of the chamber. The arc of electricity – curiously embedded with burnt bits of bacon – had rendered the 'bots all but useless, reducing them to their standby mode. This meant that they needed to recharge and to do that they had to urgently locate a power source. Their collective BIOS hummed to itself for a moment, then aligned on an open conduit across the way in the chamber wall. As one, the energy-starved webbots skittered madly to the hole, and dropped through.

On the Upper Promenade, the Gentleman Garridge, happily worked away in his little shop, BumsUp, the purveyors of fine wines and cigars, when there was a hoot at the door. With a whoosh it let Jordan enter the establishment.

"Hello Jordan, here to bother me again, my friend?" Garridge greeted him, with a warm smile. Of all the denizens of the WebWorld9, Doctor Bassar was the one he held with the greatest affection. His keen intelligence and worldly knowledge was in harmony with the Gentleman's Upbringing. Who knows? Another time, another place, and Jordan may well have been a Gent, himself!

"Well you know, Garridge, without our daily battle of ... wits ... I would be forced to find real work to do," grinned Jordan, as he looked longingly at the rows of wine racks.

"It's always a great wonder to me how you manage to survive without me and my fine wines?" Garridge sighed, "You look anxious, what's wrong this time?"

"Well, there's just the small matter of where that large wave came from that swept the Gentleman's fleet and the Domino warships away", Jordan began

"Yes that was rather bewildering, wasn't it?" Garridge answered "Well let's crack open a bottle and I'll get a pack of my finest snuff and we can talk all about it." He rummaged around behind the counter, selected a small matchbox-sized container, and brought it into view. "From where I was on the bridge I could hardly see a thing, y'know, old chap". He un-wrapped the box, dipped his fingers in, brought them to his nostrils, had a really good *sniff* ... and reeled, his eyes turning red and smarting.

"Ohhhh, that's a *good* one ...!" he said after a while.

Jordan had wandered over to the shelves to select a vintage bordello. "Yes, I still don't know how you managed to end up on the bridge ... but still ... Captain Crisko showed me the replay tapes afterwards."

"So ... ahhh ... what happened, exactly?" pressed Garridge, shaking his head vigorously to clear it ready for the next intake of snuff.

"Well the battleships of the Domino were arrayed to attack us, as you know," he replied, uncorking the bottle and sniffing it appreciatively.

Garridge nodded. Which was all he could do having taken another noseful of the white powder.

"But just before that a dastardly 'Who Dares Dines' death squadron of Gentlemen's Fighters swarmed over us with strafing runs." Jordan spotted Garridge's raised eyebrows. "Oh, sorry old chap, I tend to forget ... I look on you more as one of *us* than one of *them*, you see," he added lamely.

"That's alright, my friend, *do* go on ..." Garridge's interest was piqued now, but he tried not to show it.

"Yes, well, they were clearly very good at it, rars them to Ars! That maneuver of his, the one who dotted the 'i' on our sign out there, that was particularly cheeky if you ask me. But they didn't seem to have the *heart* for it, if you see what I mean? It was just diversionary, to keep us distracted whilst the Domino moved into position."

Garridge – former Lord and Heir to his House – recalled that admittedly cocky maneuver as one that all eligible bachelors would perform to display their *talents* to the womenfolk.

Yet it also reminded him of something else ... something that had been hypno-implanted in him just prior to his Exile from the great Semaf of Rars ... something associated with a pardon, that would allow him to return and reclaim his titles. Jordan was prattling on about this huge translucent 'ripple' that seemed to have blown through their ... enemy ... shortly after we ... *they* had opened fire.

But he ignored him. His thoughts were turning back in time ... to a moment of Imperial commandment....

He had stood there, facing her Majesterial Greatness. Well, if he had faced their Empress, he was likely to have had it scalped off him there and then. So, instead, he kept his eyes fixed to a rather curious and interesting smudge on the floor. He listened to their Majesty drone on ... ahem, *state a decree*.

“Lord Garridge, you have committed a most heinous crime”

Now his mind was replaying those dreadful moments of Exile-*tation*, he was puzzled by the odd word that he could recall, phrases that most definitely he wasn't aware of at the time.

“The Punishment would normally be Death by Embarrassment ... **Do Our Bidding** ... followed by a Life's imprisonment in the Dark Vaults of the Hammer Collection ... **Sleeper Agent** ... However, your House has personally begged mercy ... **WebWorld9 Spacestation** ... and in My Almighty Graciousness ... **Domino Attack** ... I will Be Lenient ... **Who Dares Dines** ... and I will Be Merciful ... **Dot The Eye** ... am I Not Merciful? ... **Signal For Action** ... and I decree that your Punishment ... **Unleash The Virus** ... will be a transfer of your domain from this Semaf ... **Wipe Them Out, All Of Them** ... to the hosting space of the Terran Galactic Alliance ... **Return Home In Glory** ... for the Rest of your Natural Life.”

And with that, gasping most un-gentleman-like he had to admit, he was marched from the Royal Chambers direct to an unmarked shuttle and a new home.

This home.

And his Purveyance of Fine Wines and Cigars. And his *friends*.

In the command centre of the WebWorld9 space station, Kia-Ora Dorris idly flicked through the latest edition of the *Captains and Lieutenants* magazine. What was affectionately known as “The Bridge” was all but empty, and she had studiously pored over enough brightly-coloured consoles to last a lifetime. The blue-green world of Jorbae was as terran as ever, and one could marvel at the inky starfields for only so long.

However, a gurgle and splutter interrupted her avid reading of the latest celebrity gossip column. It came from one of the monitoring machines in the far corner.

Sighing, she got to her feet and ambled over to it, throwing a disturbed frown at the machine for good measure.

As a stream of electronic tickertape displayed across its viewer, a needling, cranky computer voice informed her there was a confusing anomaly, and desired her human help.

“Disappeared?!” Kia-Ora peered at the info-display. “What do you mean *disappeared??*”

“No data in Bin equals no existence,” announced the computer logically.

Kia-Ora read through the last set of data logs. “So they had descended to the outer hull ... traversed the airlock ... and then ... disappeared??”

“Affirmative.”

“And you want *me* to do something about it?” she countered petulantly.

“You’re as good as any,” the machine agreed matter-of-factly.

Dorris sighed again. “I’ll be late for the Friendly Throwing Contest in Quirk’s later this evening,” she growled. “Alright, alright, leave it with me ...”

She returned to her desk – the computer smugly relaying its data over to her set of consoles – and she flicked open a comms channel.

“Kia-Ora to Third Line Engineers & Plumbers,” she called.

An indignant static was the only reply.

“Boys ...?” the lieutenant gave just the right amount of exasperation in her tone.

“Ah, Kia-Ora, hullo,” a voice hurriedly greeted her. “Cunningston here, what can I do you for?”

Dorris ignored the deliberate play of words. “I’m sending over some data that the mainframe has alerted me to. And I want *your* team to investigate it!”

“Can’t it wait? We’re ... ahh ... bit tied up ... got a really big job on ...”

“No, it can’t. Kia-Ora out.” She clicked shut the channel. She grinned happily to herself. *Now I’m free for Quirk’s tonight!*

In the engine room of the HMS Server, a cadre of MHFP webbots were slowly being inserted into the engines by a squadron of Climate Enterprise droids. These CliEnt droids knew little of the havoc they were about to cause. They had ordered the MHFP Extensionlets by MacroHard as a way of augmenting the ParentWebot, which sat in the Mailroom. The CliEnt ‘bots had been suitably impressed by the MH salesman named Mister C. Abdullah, who had won them over with his enthusiastic grin and endearing charm. This was before they had been unwittingly promoted to the engine room. The problem was that while they understood they had needed the Upgrade, they had no clue how it worked, nor that it was incompatible with the ship’s engines! When suddenly the Extensionlets had appeared in their midst it made perfectly logical sense to the CliEnt droids that their order had been successfully shipped! Unfortunately, the webbots could not fit in the engine receptacles, and were now spilling all over the engine chamber, since the ClieEnts were only focused on their dream of a fully functioning feedback form for the Mailroom, and were blind to the mess they were making.

The ancient and wheezing droid, WW-OneEh, trundled happily through the vast engine room, humming a tune of binary. Unbeknown to the squat barrel-shaped droid it had been certified for re-booting, since cgi was leaking out from his Home

Gateway, and the ETA Repair crew had been searching for the renegade droid for days. Now it sloshed over the floor behind him. Discarded, the MHFP Extensionlets muttered and chirruped to themselves as they recognised the smell of pearl cgi, the droid equivalent of sweet nectar.

Swooning with cgi-lust, the MHFP droids swarmed down to feed off the cgi, and soon the floor was a frenzied orgy of robot hedonism, as other 'bots followed the scent of fresh pearl.

As the cgi was wantonly guzzled in excess, the MHFP Extensionlets were reacting badly to the glutton. Soft, squidgy embryonic 'bots erupted from the droids' back-offices, and the new micro FPs were adding to the confusion. They were also fast adding to the remaining allocated space quota in the engine room.

Whilst Steff Proteous was running initial diagnostics on these tiny figures that had been generated, the Captain of the HMS Server was settling down to enjoy a nice, long, quiet, and above all, *boring* journey through deep space. After all, his mandate was to Baldly Venture Where No Excitement Could Be Found.

But the great vessel of the Home Server Farm Fleet continued to become overweight from the cgi overflow in the engine rooms. Suddenly, the towering ship wobbled unsteadily, and without warning, keeled over to one side, plummeting in a spiral towards the small purple-green moon of Bendor...

Captain Slogs was immediately brought out of his reverie with a crash as he fell headlong into the starboard wall of his command bridge with a thud. As odd as that was, he *should* have questioned why he suddenly found that he was *still* on the wall. He only knew that things were definitely not the way they should be.

Sandy, ever calm and collected however, was very clear what had gone wrong and she realised she needed to get to the emergency latitude over-ride controls before things *really* went wrong.

The Server's engines were slowly being swamped by the cumulative effects of thousands of little droids stealing resources and not bringing them back, then scuttling off to the right side of the ship to avoid the glowering gaze of the engine computer that was rapidly over-heating. The Central Computer had long since lost control and was coming to a conclusion about the whole affair that would have made TT blush.

Steff barely had a chance to think more on the conceptual physics of his two little non-viruses as the ship continued its murderous decent. Besides, the Chief Engineer was pummeled into the wall and his body was fast acclimatising to a world without gravity controls. He was ashamed to say he was very scared now : the Home Server Farm Fleet Sales Rep had assured them that their Server Ship would never have to endure such an unplanned manoeuvre! Steff feared that his two new guests had something to do with it. He stared at them clinging on to his

spanner and came to a final decision. He flicked them into a nearby bin and pressed 'Refresh' just as the ship railed against the burning atmosphere.

Sandy hauled herself hand over hand towards the Emergency *MIM* Controls, pulling herself by the HSFF Specification Hand Grips TM. *Ah!* she found herself thinking, **that's** *what these funny shaped nodules on the edges of the consoles are for!*

She made it to the Dedicated Console, and, with her feet literally flapping somewhere above and behind her head, she levered the power steering enough to at least dampen the ship's tumbling !

Captain Slogs screamed at Sandy to correct the ship. he briefly looked over at Snazz but she had been spending most of the time on the opposite wall implanted into an IDS Screen and was in no position to assist. Then the ship found that the ground had decided to put a stop to the whole kaboodle rather permanently and definitely dramatically.

The 'non-viruses' that were Nick and Wilma sailed through the bendorian sky, clutching each other and the Trusty Sonic in terror, passing close above a loud sonic boom that was formerly someone's seaside villa, and, as is the wont of small insect-sized creatures that can endure trauma ten times their own size, gently wafted down to a gentle cushioned landing.

BOOOOOM !

A thunderclap at what seemed to be a point just behind his left ear brought Admiral Jirk out of his purple reverie with a gasp and a scrabble. Frantically he looked about himself, and, realising there was a rapidly growing dark shadow all around him, he looked up in to the sky. He saw a great fiery pointed rectangle scream down towards the nearby forest.

Rooted to the spot, he heard a faint *plop* just as the burning spaceship levelled out of its dive. He watched with morbid fascination as the ship ploughed into the ground and dug a vast furrow of dust and dirt, and careened towards him.

With a great wrenching grind of metal versus rock, the spaceship was brought to a halt by Jirk's flimsy villa.

The HMS Server had crashed on the Tourist Moon of Bendor, and had completely flattened Admiral Jirk's wardrobe... as well as the rest of his house. To say that Jirk, sitting by the seaside when this happened, was a little upset was putting it mildly. He could barely fragment a sentence together he was so mad! Admiral Jirk was furious... all the work he had put into his retirement home gone to Rars in a matter of seconds. It was so unfair!

He sat on the edge of the crater and felt an uncomfortable *squelch* from the seat of his pants. He realised belatedly that all his *clean* trousers had been inside the villa.

Wilma, dazed by her fall but as ever ready to adapt to difficult circumstances, withdrew her tentacle, leaned back into some soft furnishings, and smiled dreamily. "Now that we have become a bit better acquainted, what did you say

your name was again?" she asked Nick. There was nothing like a bit of a fright to introduce two people together.

Nick had to blink a few times before answering. "Ahhrrrrm, I didn't. It's Nick Ben..."

"Ah, Nick", she cut in, always relieved to hear the sound of her own voice. She glanced down at her screwdriver. "So, where do you think we are? For once my Trusty Sonic has gone all quiet on me, and doesn't have a clue as to our location."

They both looked around, and then a faint tang in the air caught Nick's attention. He got to his feet, somewhat unsteadily, and glanced in the direction of a pale yellow stain. He looked to his right, and stumbled over to a light brown stain.

"Ahhrrrrmmm, I do believe we're in a pair of underpants", he nodded, while Wilma gathered her three legs under her, and stepped past him.

"There's what looks like a name tag over here" She squinted, making out the legend. "Marx ... Spencer. So we're in Marx Spencer's underwear, then, are we? Curious. I wonder what they are, or what they do". She glanced about. "And I wonder if Mr Spencer will be needing them sometime soon ...?"

Nick rolled his eyes and slapped his hand against his forehead. Being near some unwashed underwear was bad enough, but standing *inside* a pair?

"We've been reduced to miniature size." he moaned.

"What do you mean?" replied Wilma. "Everything looks normal to me. Nothing wrong with scale as far as I can see. Just how I'd expect it if we were back in Folderland."

"But this is all wrong for *me!*" he shouted. "I dunno. There I was working at the Helpdesk, commenting on Huw's writing creativity, when suddenly, WHOOOSH! And I felt myself sucked into some sort of *Huwlight Zone*," he shook his head sadly.

"Helpdesk? Huwlight Zone?" queried Wilma, bewildered. And then her mind picked up on something else. "Creativity? Huw? Did you say Huw?" she demanded.

"Arrrrhhmm, yes ..."

"The Great OverBeing Huw? The Creator himself" she intoned. "Do you see where I'm coming from?"

Huw as a God? thought Nick, incredulously. "Aarrhhhhmm, actually no, I don't".

Back on the HMS Server, the Captain was on his two feet again, and reasserting his command.

Hard-Grafft Slogs keyed for his Communications Officer who had returned to the Message Centre. "Snazz Hashcake, I need you to send out a distress signal on all encrypted bandwidths, and alert M'Mammos of our predicament," he instructed her. "I believe HMS Tea-Brake wasn't too far from our last location : I think she was stuck in Communities again. Can you see if you can hail them directly?"

"My pleashure, Captain," Snazz breathed. "I can always locate Tea-Brake, where ever they disappear to."

Slogs gave a deep sigh. Knowing that comms was in the best, and prettiest, of hands gave him peace of mind. Ahhh, that Snazz, she was certainly a

He shook his head. Back to the task in hand. 'Guns' Mademincemeat was waiting

for his orders, and the tall black-caped Captain knew the trigger-happy Security Officer was itching to begin. "Guns, you know what to do. Position a guard, I don't want anything to come through. Repel anyone by any means necessary."

"As you wish, my Master", Guns rumbled deferentially. "The facilities are crude, but should be sufficient to contain the enemy." His deep voice continued. "It would be unfortunate if we had to leave a garrison here".

"Precisely", agreed Slogs.

The Captain turned to Sandy DreamBerg. "Get me an update from Steff, will you Sandy? He's been too quiet since we... ah... crash landed. I don't like it when our Chief Engineer is silent...."

As the crew of the HMS Server began to reconstruct their ship something was stirring in the lower levels...

The beeps, pings and bleats of thousands of MHFP Extensionlets were raging. In a confined space, engorged on pearl, they saw red. They swarmed out of the engine room.

In the Recycler Room, WWTwoOh looked up in surprise, "MHFP Droids, here?! We're in danger! No don't get up, no no NO!!!"

Several hundred of the little droids crawled over WWTwoOh knocking him to the floor, and passed by him like some stomping ant army.

In Quirk's renowned Bar on the WebWorld9, Kia-ora busied herself with her fourteenth Klick-On Rum while limbering up for the next round of the Friendly Throwing contest with Hworff. The popular contest involved a fair amount of sadistic beating to the Friendlis, but since the small leathery chirruping creatures clearly enjoyed it, everyone was happy. To all appearances, Officer Dorris was a model crew member serving in the TGA. But offer her a pint of synthale, with an invitation to join a Friendly Throwing contest, and she was anybody's. Now she had lifted a small Friendly, and was eyeing the goal as best she could. She squinted. And swayed. Quirk ambled over to Hworff and enquired what had inspired this impromptu Friendly Throwing contest.

"A great honour, Sir. I am celebrating the activation of my brothers' Wheb-Syt, a turning point in any Klick-On's career. It takes a long struggle against hopeless odds to achieve this feat, and he has done so!" He paused. "Well, except for some small problem with the Mayl Tuform, but I'm sure that won't take long to fix. Therefore I am celebrating! This time tomorrow, He will be... Onlyne!"

Dorris heaved the grinning Friendly, who squealed happily through the air, and entirely missed the target, clattering across several tabletops instead. Hworff heaved a sigh of relief. He'd been torn for some time now between a desire to allow her to win and his Klick-On notions of honour.

Quirk returned to the bar, shaking his head. These Klick-Ons were crazy. He leaned across the counter and served Lord Garridge another shot of rum. As he did so, he heard a soft melodic crooning float by him. As barman, his hearing was attuned to anything that might be demanding to purchase a drink from him. Puzzled, he glanced around, but could not place the faint singing. He shrugged and wiped the counter reassuringly.

As the dust was settling on Bendor, Admiral Jirk could discern the outline of the smouldering spaceship, and a flash of annoyed recognition crossed his face as the name plate came into view. The ID proclaimed the *HMS Server*. Slogs may have saved everyone's bacon back on the WebWorld9, but *this* was taking things *a little too far!*

Movement amidst the smoke caught his attention. He could see the seven foot Security officer, 'Guns' MadeMincemeat, setting up a Nuton security shield in the area surrounding the ship. If Jirk wanted to exact revenge on the HMS server he would have to disable this first.

He sipped some local coffee from his hamper, pondering how to get beyond the Server's Shield. Without warning, a small furry being came up beside him and tapped him on the shoulder, scaring him half to death and causing him to spill the coffee!

"Oh RARS!" shouted Jirk, standing up quickly and seeing the dark brown stain spread down his front. "This is turning out to be *such* a classic day !! And seeing as the HMS Server destroyed my wardrobe, I cannot even change into fresh clothes, you little furball! I will get my revenge on that ship, you mark my words!" "You seem to be in a bit of a dilemma," remarked the small furry being. "Perhaps my people can help? We are the PHPWoks !" it added proudly. Years of military training took over in an instant. *With my new allies, I'll be able to take down that Nuton security shield and destroy the HMS Server ! That'll serve them right !*

As Steff directed the engineering crew to get the main drive up and running, he reflected he had seen too many strange things today that would *not* have been covered in his job description. As he sat in his office trying to figure out which blackbox went where, he heard a noise at his door.

The noise was growing louder.

Weet bleep **WEET BLEEP WEET BLEEP**. The noise was deafening. Steff moved to investigate but the door burst open. He was screaming at the top of his lungs when thousands of MHFP droids came pouring into the room howling and bleeping and pushing him slowly into the wall.

Typical Rarsing day! Steff thought before darkness swallowed him.

The doors to Lift Two opened with a professional swish, and Sandy stepped out. She had come up to the 15th deck to find out how Steff was progressing. She saw the massing MHFP droids chirruping and bleating away down the corridor like some great massive tidal wave. Fear took over as Sandy looked in vain for a commport to message the main crew.

Suddenly the chirping took on a panicked shrieking as something started to rally against the mass of droids.

"Rars I can't believe it!!" Sandy said anxiously staring as the massive ebb and flow of the swarm crumpled lifeless to the floor.

As soon as it had started it was finished and from among them came a bedraggled Steff Proteus. He grinned cheerily at Sandy holding aloft a large aerosol can.

"Arrayed : kills undocumented features DEAD!"

Then he added, for effect: "Cheers!!"

Several floors below, WWTwoOh pulled himself up off the deck and shivered fiercely. "Filthy Droidlets," he muttered to himself as he minced away.

Back on the 15th deck, Steff Proteus was busy discussing the ship's options with Sandy. He could tell the crash-landing had taken its toll on the vessel. "Well, we could apply a patch, but I'm always loathe to do that since the sticking plaster rarely has enough 'stick' to last us to the nearest engineering dry port."

"And we really don't have much time, Steff," she replied. "Guns has erected the Nuton and deployed the guards, but the Captain doesn't want to waste too much time down here, nor leave a garrison in charge."

"Cheers," agreed Steff. "Well, the only other diagnosis I can offer is to simply rename this grand vessel as HMS Server 4 ... that always used to work for my Great Great Great, etc, Grandfather Steve on the SS Stadium back in the good ol' days of the Millennium Hawker."

"Great!" Sandy beamed. "I'll recommend it to Slogs!"

"Cheers!"

Meanwhile, on Bendor, several PHPWoks had appeared from nowhere, and had bound Jirk to a branch before he had a chance to struggle. Now he was swinging upside down and being marched across branches that led high up into the tree-tops. Safari tourists prowled below in the lush souvenir forested undergrowth. He found they were taking him to their crude village, that was held together more with thick Frying Fat than with conventional building materials. As he swung back and forth below the branch, Jirk counted thirty-two strands of thick fat that bound the village to the trees. As he was brought into the elevated central plaza, many more of the furry teddy bears rushed to see what their brave hunters had captured for their supper.

The PHPWoks unceremoniously plonked the Admiral down beside the communal cooking fire, on top of which all their famous quality woks were arrayed about a singularly vast wok that currently held bean sprouts.

The admiral eyed the large wok.

"So ... ah ... what's going on?" he asked jovially.

A fanciful and, above all, multi-coloured head-dress moved into his view. The PHPWok bowed ceremoniously before him.

"I am Morga, Head Cook and Medicine Man," it declaimed intently. "It appears that you are the main course in a banquet in our honour!" Morga shuffled around Jirk to take his traditional place, closed his eyes and raised his short furry arms to declare:

"As the Fat is cooked in the Great Wok, as the Fat is tipped out into the Bin Network, as the Fat is assimilated in the Universal Flow, as the Fat seeks the Fatorian Way, as the Fat is Seived"

Morga paused, and bestowed a telling look upon the chubby Admiral.

"... so shall you be."

"I have a bad feeling about this", Jirk muttered. "Hey ... wait-a-minute ..." he began, but the PHPWoks, with a flick of their collective wrists that would have put Delia Smith to shame, tossed Jirk upon the garnished bean sprouts, Gas Mark 6, 180 degrees, for 32 minutes.

Jirk yelled in pain. He was now furious. And the PHPWoks were chanting to their collective selves. He could feel various spices being poured on him from all about. Suddenly the intense heat started to burn against his bottom ; yet his earlier soiling was crusting, and protecting his noble behind from the heat. Furthermore, it was giving off a foul stench leaving the PHPWoks repulsed and awed. One particular PHPWok glanced from it's cookbook to the wok, and came to a very dis-*stinked* conclusion.... It yelled out in its typical excitable, and above all, *furry* manner.

The Chief PHPWok, Sparerib, rushed forward jabbering wildly and gesticulating with his ceremonial wooden spoon. The lesser PHPWoks rushed to haul Jirk from the Great Wok, and, as ceremoniously as before, they dropped him to the floor of the hearth.

From now on they would treat him with respect. "Ping Pong ... Ping Pong ... Ping Pong" they chanted, bowing down towards the Admiral.

Jirk was quick on the uptake. He indicated himself. "Yurk! Admiral Yurk! Big, important man!" Although the PHPWoks nodded in understanding, their speech was unable to pronounce the "Y".

He pointed off towards the seaside and the remains of his wardrobe, with its fresh underwear. "Attack the Klick-Ons Enemy!" All enemy were Klick-Ons as far as he was concerned. "Seaside! Attack!!"

And enough shouting and gesticulating convinced the PHPWoks to rally an attack force.

"Jirk! Jirk! Klick Jirk On!" they cried.

The Admiral simply sighed.

Tucked in a corner of one of the many kitchens in the PHPWok village was a wastebin, full of rotting vegetables, rancid meat, and gelatinised Frying Fat. As the PHPWoks rushed around mobilising for War, a faint melody drifted out of its recesses.

".... Oh, My Heart Will Go On" crooned a French-Canadian-Arabic singing voice. Saleem Bin Dion, the Eater of Souls in All Bins, was manifesting in the

PHPWok village. She was intrigued about this new emotion called love, and wanted to have a further chat with Wilma and Nick, over a fine cup of Afternoon Sultan Grey Coffee.

The army of PHPWoks massed near the seaside. At the front of the crowd stood Jirk with the Chief PHPWok by his side. They gazed on the crumpled HMS Server and the crater in which it sat. With a wave of his ceremonial wooden spoon Chief Sparerib led the PHPWok army towards the great vessel.

Meanwhile, back in the PHPWok village, amidst the woks and pans in the largest of the many kitchens, the PHPWok women were all kneeling down praying. They were chanting some strange melodious tune, that could sink a cruise liner if it ever reached the right volume. In the corner of the room a strange glow had started to emanate from the waste bin.

From the hull of the HMS server 'Guns' Mademincemeat contacted the Captain. "Captain Slogs, Guns here. You'd better hurry up renaming the ship, 'cause there's an army of strange furry natives heading this way".

"Can you hold them off?!" demanded Slogs.

"Normally I'd say yes Captain," said Guns with a worrying tone in his voice.

"You sound worried Guns. It's not normally like you".

"I'll certainly try my best at holding them off Captain. But they've got Woks with them!!"

"Did you say Woks?!?"

Before Guns could answer him Slogs went into a frenzy. "Get me Steff on the comm... Steff rename this ship *NOW*. We have to get out of here fast!"

Admiral Jirk and Chief SpareRib led the PHPWok army right up to the edge of the Nuton Shield. Guns Mademincemeat stared down defiantly.

"You should not have come back, old man!"

As SpareRib vigorously brandished his ceremonial Wooden Spoon, Jirk spluttered, "I need my clean underwear!!! And my house!!!"

Guns shook his head. "You aren't on any mercy mission this time!"

"That's illogical!!" Jirk retorted. He turned to the assembled PHPWoks. "Attack!!!!!"

The PHPWok infantry readied its frying pans with the sticky globules of half cooked fat. As Jirk and the Chief scampered to one side, the First Line PHPWoks employed the Delia Flick : strings of sticky oily fat arced through the air and sizzled against the Nuton.

The HMS Server guard dived behind their weapons, and Guns heaved his favourite Gatling Blunderbu\$\$\$ into view. He fired off a few rounds, and declared "I'll be baaaaack!"

Steff and TT struggled with the ZF re-mapping, pointing the C-Name to the registration plate on the front of the great vessel. The laser was scoring a '4' behind the legend, 'HMS Server' ; in moments it would be complete, and, if Steve from the HMS Stadium was ever to be believed, it would free the HMS Server from its present major server failure.

On the bridge, Captain Slogs anxiously watched the PHPWok battle on the IDS screens. Steff had nearly completed the renaming of the ship ; Guns and his guard were bravely holding back the strange projectiles; and Snazz was awaiting an update from M'Mammos.

Sandy was looking nervously at the RA Files PC. It hadn't PINGed in a while, and Slogs hoped that it would hold out under all this stress.

Suddenly, the comm pinged. "Captain, Steff here, Cheers!"

Slogs leaned over and flicked the return Enee key. "Steff?"

"We are now riding aboard the 'HMS Server 4', Sir but, ideally, we ought to migrate the files across, and that could take precious time"

"We need to escalate NOW, Steff!!"

"Well, TT here can keep LineOne open with as wide a Bandwidth as possible while we take off but the migration may be intermittent"

"Give me two parsecs while I put you on Hold, Steff, I'll recall Guns and his crew, and then we'll blast out of here!"

"Cheers!!!" And the two clicked off, Steff to re-align TT, while the Captain was already re-routing Guns and his Securities.

Deep inside the grimy PHPWok kitchens, the PHPWok women continued to chant and pray towards the newly revered wastebin. The melodious tune suddenly screeched into the alto heights, and two connect2bapps, sesame seed encrusted and slightly toasted, ejected into the air above the bin, and slammed through the fragile roof. The fiery radioactive glow amongst the waste winked out, and the PHPWoks looked at each other in the startled silence.

Wilma and Nick had struggled out of the smelly Y-Fronts as quickly and gratefully as they could, and found themselves in sandy scrub undergrowth. Gazing up, they could see other garments tangled in the towering branches. They knew something devastating must have happened, but could only vaguely remember a strange succession of hazy images and sounds, something to do with eating, rubbish bins, a boyish-looking face leering down at them, and extracting guests. As they sashayed their way, hand in tentacle, through the soft sand, two bapp sandwiches whistled down from the bright blue sky, and landed, mayo side up, in front of them.

"Tea Time!" crooned a franco-canadian-arabic voice all about them, and the two lovers discovered they were of *normal* size, lounged upon a picnic rug, Sultan Grey Coffee steaming at their side, a pair of connect2bapps on plates, and the

most gorgeously ethereal lady, dressed in a flowing chiffon, was draped langourously opposite them. She was smoking a camel cigarette.
"Ahhh. Wilma. Nick. I am Saleem Bin Dion. I am the Eater of the Bin Souls. I Empty

"Anyway, enough of all that.

"I saved you from the deletion of Folderland inside the WebWorld9's mainframe.

"I perceived an unusual and passionate emotion between you two.

"I *would* like to know more"

Jirk raised his arms, and shielded his eyes from the brilliant glaring white noise of the HMS Server 4 escalating into the blue sky of Bendor. The PHPWoks, in turn, cowered behind their Frying Pans, as the stringy globules of razzled fat melted off the Server's carbo-casing and rained down upon the attacking force.

On the bridge of the newly re-named Server, Captain Slogs relaxed back into his chair, and breathed a sigh of relief. The vista out of the viewport was finally changing to inky purple as the blacks of deep space started to encroach on the Tourist Moon's atmosphere. They were free, and released from that awful sticky weblike substance that those infernal marauders had been slapping across his nice clean Server. He shuddered. He really couldn't abide spills and crumbs over his hardware!

"Captain!" interrupted Sandy. "The RA Files PC is coming backup online, and its output looks promising but I'm worried about what Steff was saying regarding the file migration into Server 4."

Slogs waved his hand. "Snazz has reset the PWD on the Exchanger to keep LineOne open. As long as Steff and TT can keep the files flowing, I think we ought to be able to ride any intermittenencies," forecast the Captain optimistically. He really did not want any further empirical entanglements for the day.

CHAPTER 5

"Well, That was a nice diversion, wasn't it." beamed Saleem Bin Dion. She rose gracefully to her feet, wiping C2Bapps crumbs from her gown. She prodded her tongue at a sesame seed that was caught between her teeth. "Right *mmmmm* ... excuse me *mmmm*," the seed was refusing to budge. "*mmmmm* I need to pop off somewhere, now. Duty calls, and all that!" She turned to go, but Nick and Wilma caught the muttered words, "That Rarsing Station will soon pay the price for its stubbornness!"

"Arrrrhhhhmm, luvrly picnic!" Nick smacked his lips. The spreadsheet had filled a hole that had been present since his fruit tea back on the Helpdesk, all those parasecs ago. But Wilma was more practical : "And what about us? What are we to do now?!" she demanded from their ethereal, and fast disappearing host.

"Your Acme Trusty Sonic," the Universal Eater of Souls replied. "She may not look like much, but she's got it where it counts. I made a few modifications you now have a Fourth Setting! Use it only for defence and knowledge, never for attack," Saleem instructed. A thought struck her. "In fact you might still be of some use" she mused to herself. "Fancy a drink or three at the Renowned Quirk's? And you'd be doing me a favour"

And with a flash of brilliant Dulux white and a loud silence, all three individuals disappeared, two to the WebWorld9, and one to a war cruiser en-route to the station.

Hworff was nursing his synthale in a corner of Quirk's Bar, thinking *hard* about Wheb-Syt rituals, the Mayl-tuform, and the attainment of the Onlyne stage. The ale was certainly aiding the free-flow of his thoughts, but they were flowing far too freely to be of any use to his brother. He knew that a h@t sigil was involved somewhere, and was really, really important for the Suh'Hub-Mizzin. He took another slurp from his stein, a souvenir he picked up on Bendor last year. Ahhh, that was better. Now. What was he saying again?

Hworff was celebrating, and the whole station was celebrating with him (it was a bad idea not joining in with a Klick-On's party). After many frustrating days, the problems with his brother's Wheb-Syt ritual were resolved, and the Mayl-tuform was now in full working order. The Klick-Ons commander was currently managing to defeat every ranking officer present in a drinking contest, with Crisko and Picky singing under the table and Dado constantly turning himself into Friendli ale and drinking himself. Only Kia-ora was keeping up with Hworff, and even she was having problems keeping the floor and the ceiling separate.

At the bar, Cunningston and his small team of Third Line engineers were questioning Quirk and comparing notes. Every now and again they threw dark glances in Kia-Ora's direction.

"So ... CLANGING in the PIPING ...?" the team leader shouted across the ale-stained counter.

Quirk nodded. "AND DON'T FORGET THE SINGING, EITHER!" he pointed a damp finger at the notepad.

"Y-yes ..." Cunningston's reply trailed off uncertainly.

"No rats?" enquired Grunge, a fellow officer.

"NO MORE THAN USUAL," Quirk replied cheerfully.

In another corner, Garridge sat quietly chatting with the WebWorld9's alcoholic Psycho-Counsellor, Dear Drew, whose elbow was already frequently slipping off the table top. The Gentleman sipped his Raktagino and watched the revellers with a smirk on his face. If only they knew what was coming : his portable sales display case sat shut at his feet. He glanced at his Gentlemans, solid 357.2 carot gold, Roley watch, and smiled. Only another hour before an unexpected arrival would ruin this party atmosphere...

And in space, approaching on his personal crown-shaped war cruiser, a huge and imposing five-headed creature watched the light-isms fall away as the WebWorld9 space station drew closer. Soon... Yes, soon.....

Admiral Jirk rolled on to his back with a snort, and looked up at the stars. "Stop shining so hard!!" he moaned, rubbing the throbbing ache in his head. He *really* shouldn't have had that eighteenth cochineal short. He tried turning over and almost crushed a small PHPWok that lay snuggled up beside him. It too was in a drunken blissful slumber.

Jirk was a little confused about all the things that had happened over the last few days. It had begun with him being the main course for a banquet in Chief SpareRib's honour ... and *then* they were taking on a starship of the Home Server Farm Fleet ... and *then* they were all celebrating him becoming a part of their tribe ... and something about a *Chosen One* ?!

This was all too much for a simple farm boy from Yohio to consider in the midnight hours and with that, he blacked out.

Q, Huw, Barney McGrew, FrontPage Guru, and Scrub, the five-part gargantuan commanding the War Cruiser, turned to regard its plans.

}} It's always the same ! {{ it moaned, and itself agreed.

}} If you want a job done well, you simply have to do it yourself ! {{

Although the Domino's attack had failed, Q, Huw, Barney McGrew, Frontpage Guru, and Scrub conceded that it had considerably weakened the space station. The WebWorld9 wouldn't stand a chance, and if Garridge did his job, and on time, then the Station would be laid wide open! Of course, it all depended on Garridge being able to deliver his end of the bargain

The fearsome Hydra was a psycho-projection, but all the more real for that. It could dissolve into its five individual parts, or *resolve* into one. It was a god-like entity, that spanned the known universe, and a few of the dark corners that had yet to be accurately mapped. This was, after all, to be expected, since these OverBeings gazed down upon their mortal players, and ... well ... *played* with them. Have you ever wondered where the ancient game of chess came from? It came from a pair of gods with too much time on their hands and *far* too much wit. They even removed the dice from the rules thinking that made the game too easy.

But these gods - two from the Great Rars semaf, two from the TGA, and one who just wandered about where the fancy took him – had become curious. For sure, they had set the greedy and ambitious Rars Empire upon the strategic WebWorld9, and they had tossed a coin, and had agreed the outcome amongst themselves. But what had *actually* happened had taken them by surprise. The station, for centuries a thorn in their side when a hexadecimal joke had got out of control, resulting in *ten* of these damn eco-stations in orbit, had refused to be destroyed, and the infuriating thing the mortals termed “*luck*” had shone through !

The Hydra had decided enough was enough. They personally would see to it that the WebWorld9 be no more. But with a flair, always a flair

Mad Huw the Creator cackled with a manic glee.

Though the celebrations at Quirk’s were technically winding down, there really was no indication of this by the level of rowdy festivities still going on. The barman saw that Kia-ora was now floating and bobbing against the ceiling - literally! She wore a sloppy grin on her face and still retained a tankard in her hand from which she slurped whenever her liver reminded her. *At least those annoying plumbers have moved on*, he thought to himself.

Quirk shuffled by behind the bar, and his foot knocked against a refuse bin : it toppled over, disgorging Wilma and Nick who rolled out into a rescaled full-size heap at the bartender's feet. Being used to similarly strange phenomena, Quirk paid them no heed, but simply belched loudly, and stepped over them. "Arrrrhhhhhhmmmmmm" began Nick, brushing bottle-tops and coleslaw off his shirt. He glanced around, and then back to where they had come rolling from. *How had he and Wilma appeared from such a small bin?! How had they appeared from the **bin** in the first place??!*

Wilma untangled her tentacle from a splattering of barfood leftovers, glanced at the shelves around her, and declared that although she had no clue as to what their location was, she *did* recognise the place as a *.bar* file extension, and a good one at that! She climbed to her three feet, whipped out her Trusty Sonic and dipped the end of it in an abandoned glass of velvety green liquid that stood on the counter. The Screwdriver displayed the *.htaccess* scale as Omega. "Nick, Luv," she declared, glancing down at her companion. "Our troubles are

over. We're home. Or as good a home as anywhere," and in one swift move, she downed the liquor.

Jirk woke the next afternoon lying across the snoring PHPWok. A puddle of drool and slobber stretched out from his open dry mouth to the furry creature's rump. With an effort, he climbed to his feet and gave himself a shake. He drew his hand across his stubbly face, and through his dank hair.

"Enough is enough!" he declared. "It's time for a change!"

He stumbled over to the remains of his house and dug through the debris that made up what remained of his precious wardrobe. He withdrew some fresh shirts and trousers – well, as fresh as they could be, given the circumstances – and returned to his shuttle *Tidyroom* that stood unscathed a little distance away.

Firing up the engines, he fled back to his *real* home, the stars.

Quirk recognised that this Klick-On Party wasn't winding down any time *soon*, and was seriously considering calling in the Night Shift. Not only would it be unwise to attempt to persuade Hworrff and his friends that they should leave, it would also be against his better, *profitable* nature to let willing patrons depart. That one or two of them were *floating* against the ceiling in an inebriated state just added to the *colour* of his infamous Bar. And the two strange newcomers seemed to be settling in quite well as they grabbed unattended drinks. Normally Quirk was against that sort of thing, but the party atmosphere was getting the better of him. And besides, he didn't recognise their faces, so they might as well look on it as an introductory freebie.

Suddenly, from the corner, Lord Garridge's Roley watch chimed a cheerful tune : it was time! The erstwhile Gentleman glanced at Dear Drew who was sprawled over the table top snoring loudly, and reached down. He retrieved his display case and nonchalantly placed it on the table in front of him. Clicking it open, he withdrew an illegal Tro-Gan Gun. Garridge stood up, set it to 'Catch All Wildcard' spray, and aimed the weapon at the crowded bar.

Nick panicked, a strange - okay, *stranger* - alien had pulled out what looked like a karaoke microphone. Now Nick knew he enjoyed a good sing-along at his local on a Friday night, but he doubted somehow that this was what it was for. He dived behind the bar, protectively wrapping his arms about Wilma. Everyone else in the bar were far too inebriated to notice.

Garridge pulled the trigger and sprayed a fine mist of dyalhup spores across the room. Everyone in the room fell comatose to the floor. The Gentleman Lard glanced about, and spotted Quirk. In one move, he swung his Tro-Gun and fired it at the barman. Quirk, in turn, whipped a metal serving plate in front of him, deflecting the deadly beam off towards the bar, where it ricocheted ...and hit Nick!

The blast sent Nick reeling back into a vent. Wilma screamed. Garridge turned to face her and let off another shot from his Tro-Gun that knocked her flat. He strode over to Wilma and opened up an industrial service-sized rubbish bin that stood nearby. He gathered her in his arms and heaved her into it. Garridge quickly exited the bar to continue his attack in the more crowded areas of the promenade.

On the War Cruiser the Hydra heard the relayed chime of the Roley and smiled : the insertion had begun ...

Scrub looked up in surprise.

}} We're attacking the station with *dyalhup*?! {{

}} And you have a problem with that? {{ the remaining four heads turned to coolly regard their companion.

}} Uhhh ... no, no Not at all ... {{ replied Scrub. }} I just didn't think we'd be using that particular disease ... {{

}} Well, we all agreed a default destruction was beneath us, and not worthy of such an adversary. {{ responded Huw, Q, Barney McGrew, and FrontPage Guru.

}} But of course {{ agreed Scrub meekly.

}} You've been away on your own adventures too long, m'dear Scrub ... {{ answered Q darkly.

Nick awoke.

He looked around and saw that he was in the crook of a ventilation shaft. He could see the broken section that he had fallen through high above him, out of reach. He was light-headed and queasy, and his body tingled all over. With a stab of pain he recalled what had just happened.

Where was Wilma?

And how the blazes do I get out of here?!

Shakily, he rose to his feet, and stretched in vain for the opening above him. The fact that he now had an extra appendage totally escaped him in his panic.

Wilma, however, had taken a pure hit and, unbeknown to her, the *dyalhup* was coursing through her lithe executable form, and reacting in horrendous decompiling ways. She lay at the bottom of Quirk's main bin, and waited for the darkness to come and take her away.

Meanwhile, down in the hold of the HMS Server 4 Steff was looking in on the Server's Data Engine. It was rattling something fierce. Steff feared that they may have a serious problem since the newly renamed ship was 'coughing and spluttering'. As soon as he entered the great engine room he clearly saw that the cgi was leaking into the LAN tubes and causing all kinds of java protection faults

across the board.

"She cannot take much more of this pressure," he muttered to himself. "If even one thing goes critical it could be disasterous." He pulled out his hydro spanner.

Thus after locking everything down with a "Rarsing thing" for good measure Steff was taken aback when his engines started to lag and then seemed to slowly collapse. There could only be one thing that could cause this, corrupt Fileunits in the Drive plate.

He pinged the bridge. "Captain, the re-naming and the rapid escalation has taken its toll on our server ship! I'll see what I can do, but it's not looking good..."

Slogs' face on the monitor was grim and that wasn't just the static. "Do your best, old chap, I'm sure she'll hold together for now. Slogs out."

Saleem desperately swam through the Bin Network. She had to reach the WebWorld9 station and her new friends before the Hydra arrived to complete their devastation. She had unknowingly put Wilma and Nick in mortal danger!

Soon, a blaze of noisy white light welcomed her, and she burst out of a Recycler.

"Wilma?? Nick?!" she cried, glancing around. "Where are you??"

She slowly took in her surroundings. They were unfamiliar. She was in a grimy nondescript corridor, a dull throb of engines sounding far below. This wasn't Quirk's! She was *not* at the WebWorld9 : where was she?!

She stepped across to a twinkling beeping health monitor, that colourfully displayed the specs of whatever vessel she was in. Saleem stabbed her hand at the screen, and her outstretched fingers dived through the display, dissolving into the electricity.

She smiled indulgently as a shiver of energy coursed through her ... and then recognised the hum and zing that made up the *HMS Server* Now renamed to the *HMS Server 4*.

Getting her bearings, she withdrew her hand, and turned back to the Recycling Unit, confused as to why she ended up here. Shrugging, she strode over to the Bin.

She paused, and her brow furrowed.

"Oh no... I sense a *great* disturbance in the bins ...!"

And she dived into the Recycler.

Saleem rushed back to Quirk's primary bin. She took Wilma's condition in one glance, and began crooning, "Ohhhhhhh, my heart *WILL* go on!"

Outside, in the bar, the temperature suddenly dropped, and icicles began to replace the spilt synthale. Saleem was not impressed, and Quirk's Bar would pay. The now soberly panicked patrons suddenly lost their footing as the decking of the club tilted sideways.

Inside the bin, The Eater of Bin Souls reversed a habit of a lifetime, passed a gracefully ethereal hand over Wilma's furrowed brow, and breathed life into her friend.

"Stay here for a while, you'll be safe", she whispered, and then disappeared.

"Oh RARS!!!", cursed Steff Proteus. The Hydro-Spanner had dried up, and TT had gone off to fetch another pail of water to refill it. This was not working.

He flicked on the communicator. "Captain, I have a really bad feeling about this..."

On the Bridge, Slogs' face fell. "Oh, Steff, you don't mean?"

"Aye Captain I think you will have to call on M'Mammos for their supra-sapient advice"

There was silence as Slogs considered his predicament.

"Okay, Steff. You're right. I'll call them."

"Cheers!" beamed Steff, mightily relieved.

Captain Hard-Grafft Slogs rose from his Chair, took a deep breath, and stepped to the Lifts. He ignored Lift Four's invitingly open doors, and waited for one of the other three to arrive. In a moment Lift Two arrived, and he jumped in, barking out the Ninth Deck as his destination.

In nano-parasecs the Lift reached the infamous Ninth Floor of the HMS Server 4. Slogs gulped and walked into a cloying mist that gagged him. Arms outstretched, he made his way to a drinks dispenser, and entered the '811' key code. There was a whooshing sound somewhere down at his waist, with a chocolatey smell wafting up, and just as The Dreaded Manageress' voice screeched out, "What you doin' 'ere?", a side door swung open, and Slogs dived through. The door closed behind him.

The Captain found himself in a brightly lit round chamber, in the centre of which was a cylindrical clear glass drinking-water fountain, with a tap on top. Slogs sidled up to it in reverence, crouched down, and peered through the glass : little floaters of muck - supra-sapient single-celled nano organisms - drifted in the distilled water. He reached up, and depressed the tap switch. As the water flowed out into its drain, the Captain spoke :

"O, mighty M'Mammos", he began. "The Server engines are failing. We think it's...."

But the omniscient organisms interrupted him. "WM-ess-12345. Done. It looks okay from here."

Slogs hurried out of the Chamber of M'Mammos, and held his breath as he dived through the fog of the Ninth. In the Lift, he demanded the Fifteenth : Steff's lair. Exiting the Lift, he strode a short way down a corridor, and pushed open the round green door.

Steff glanced up. "Cheers!!!" he greeted his Captain. Few people ever actually came up here to visit him, and Slogs' visit made it an auspicious occasion.

"What do M'Mammos say?"

"They say they've fixed it"

Steff raised his eyebrows inquisitively.

The Captain continued. "..... weeeeeellll I'm not too sure about that exactly, but they said it was 'Done', and it 'all looked okay' to them."

"Ah. A typical answer from them, then" replied the Engineering Officer dejectedly.

"Cheers."

He turned to TT, his Active Service Protocol Droid, and asked for an update. "The HMS Server 4 is still currently riding at basic QCR-Speed," the droid promptly reported. "We do have the emergency CD-Drive available, but even the 844 isotopic mass is starting to leak away into quart-life. The Java is now quite well embedded into the Drive Plates. We're DOOMED, Sirs!!!"

Slogs' face paled, but Steff rose to his feet and patted his Captain on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Captain. If you'll give me your security word, which might be a mother's maiden name, for the Ninth Deck, I can cross-examine M'Mammos - politely," he quickly added at Slogs's shocked look, "... and determine what their diagnosis and fix really is"

"Okay, Steff, whatever you think is best You'll need '811'. Ummm she was my favourite mother."

Steff didn't ask for an explanation.

On the Ninth, the Engineering Officer knelt beside the clear glass water fountain. He had never been in here before and was understandably trembling slightly. He depressed the tap, as instructed.

"O, mighty M'Mammos. WM-ess-12345 : can you explain, please?"

"Use the Fourth, Steff!"

"The Fourth??"

"Yes. The Fourth Setting. On the ACME Trusty Sonic ScrewDriver™. Done".

As M'Mammos fell silent, Steff settled back on his heels, reflecting on the words. *Hmmmm, those non-virus guestbook datas...*

The five-headed Hydra coolly regarded its battle plans. The War Cruiser was now just barely Light-Isms away from the WebWorld9 Space Station.

Q turned to its fellow head, Huw :

}} We are ready to nobley sacrifice one of our followers' lives. Lord Garridge will *clean* the WebWorld9 spacestation, and we will commandeer it {{

}} Ah, Q-Rob you have done well, my brother{{ congratulated Huw, The Creator. }} I

have modified the code, which will be revealed if anyone is foolish enough to 'View Source'{{

Barney McGrew chuckled a rumbling laugh. He appreciated the Mad Creator's *style*.

FrontPage Guru affirmed that its MicroHard Corp d'Etat had sown plenty of corrupt MHFP Extensionlets and now the Galaxy was at a brink. *That'll* teach

them a lesson they'll never forget! *How dare they use this "luck" thing?!*

Scrub blinked its eyes, and seemed to refocus, returning to their present situation. } } Oh, my heart *will* go on! { { it sang, in a vaguely familiar French-Canadian-Arabic voice.

The other Hydra heads glowered at it and frowned as one.

Unbeknown to their imminent danger, the WebWorld9 went about its business. Garridge, that Purveyor of Fine Wines and Cigars, had run through the station waving a microphone in the air, grinning and laughing like a madman. In fact, the general consensus was that he had finally flipped.

Doctor Jordan Basser sat at his desk staring at the reports compiled by Dado on his Gentleman friend. He had a pounding hangover and was feeling washed out. Everyone had joined in with Hworff's celebrations, realising that an acoholic stupor was more favourable than trying to explain their absence to a Klick-On. As he valiantly struggled to get to grips with a fifth reading of the Security Chief's report, he noticed a swelling start to appear about his torso. As his clothes were pushed outwards in what looked for all the world like an inflated tyre, he noticed his skin was turning a *very* unhealthy shade of blue.

Jordan was just starting to wonder what it all meant when he saw Captain Crisko walk in looking like a blue and white beach ball. His hair was merging together to form a white floppy hat, that matched the white 'trousers' he was now sporting.

"What's going on, Jordan??" he demanded.

"Erm... I just don't know Captain! I'm completely baffled by this one!" replied the Doctor, racking his brains hoping his medical experience would offer up a clue. As he did so, he could feel a very strange, very *care-free*, sensation welling up inside him. He had an overwhelming urge to burst out singing a gay little tune. *Of course!*

Rhett clutched his now abundantly blue middle, gave a strangled groan, and collapsed to the floor.

"Good heavens Captain, I know what this is!" He said breathlessly, "It's Sm... *argh!*" and with that he fell to the floor, twitching and writhing.

All over the WebWorld9 the disease spread in the same manner and soon the only sound that could now be heard in all of the station was "La la lala la lala la," soon joined by the equally fearsome and terrible "How much farther, Grandpa Smoof??"

The TGA Vacillate drifted in deep space deciding what to do. The orange star in the Infernal Dante Quadrant had got quite used to its long-term guest, and a familiarity had grown between its nebulae and the spaceship in the same manner one would find between a cat and its owner's cardigan: the two would not be easily parted.

In the Captain's chair sat Evadian Wasitmean, a short, fair-haired woman well

known for her indecision. The first officer was a large being known as Paradia Maximus, who, on the other hand, was very decisive about a lot of things, just not usually right. He tended to flap his arms about when he wanted to *impose* his opinion, and most people agreed that he often had the appearance of an over-eager puppy. It had often left Starforce Academy Instructors dumbfounded and frustrated. He gazed down on his captain, and realised with horror that she was trying to come to a decision over something. Her emotions raged across her face as she futilely sought a definitive answer to her options.

"Number One," Evadian began. "We are finally in a position... ummm... to return home to the Alphabet Quadrant ... after being lost for... ahhh... some years..." Long and pointless pauses were a Wasitmean trademark. After waiting for what seemed like ages, Paradia said, "Yes Captain," in a high trill voice.

"Well ... what do you think ... we should do, hmmm?" asked Evadian, eventually. "I think we should ask Chief Engineer Toth Hazel to get on with it then!" he answered testily.

"Hmm yes that is one idea.... but could there be any alternatives?"

"Oh, for Rars sakes, just ping him and ask him to make it so ... PLEASE!"

"Okay ... if you are sure," Evadian paused. Parey could see from her face that she had come to a decision, and inwardly he sighed with relief. "Okay ... let's ping him!"

In the Engineering department Toth Hazel was trying to conquer yet another feat of engineering mastery. "Yes!" he clapped his hands together gleefully. "I can make my Robot ready in time for RobotWars CXXVII".

The comm pinged, and Toth fumbled for the Return Key. "Hazel, here, what d'ya want now?!"

"Um hello, Toth ... this is your ... um ... Captain, speaking. Well I ... I mean, we ... were wondering, if you don't mind too terribly much..." the Captain was her usual tongue-tied self.

"Yes, what do you want?"

"Well could you maybe ... try to ... well, turn on our I-Drive for a little while?"

"Weeellll I'm not so sure, this would not require a callback later would it?"

"Oh no, completely Tel-Mail contact only if you want ... What is your opinion?"

"Well it's a nice stardate and I don't really have too much else to do so ... yeah, maybe I will," Toth replied, giving up the joy of working on his Robot. "But I'll be keeping an eye on our PCA Spectromitor so that we keep within perscribed limits!" he warned her.

"That is great, Toth, just great. Well ... engage then ... that is, if you are not too busy?" Evadian's attempt at a direct order trailed off.

"Fine, give me a few minutes then, I will 'Engage' as soon as I can, alright?"

"Oh, excellent! Evadian ... ah ... out," the Captain commed off.

About four para-hours later the TGA Vacillate burst into I-Drive heading for the Alphabet Quadrant.

..... And exactly 4.4 paraminutes later a worried Captain Evadian Wasitmean turned to Paradia Maximus, and asked, "Are we really, really, sure about this, Parey? What do you think?"

"Hmm could be....." answered Parey, equally dubious. Just as they were about to

enter into another round of vacillation, the comm pinged and Hazel came through in a huff : "Well, I'm bored with this, I've had enough. It's not exciting enough. Doesn't compare one iota with this robot I'm building and I've decided to go back and tinker with it a little more. And to do this, I need absolute - *absolute, d'you hear??* Not relative! - peace and quiet, no engine rumblings! So I'm turning the engines off, okay? If you behave yourselves and are good, I might, just *might*, flick them back on for a few more para-minutes". He clicked off.

And with that, the TGA Vacillate groaned to a halt, and hung in the depths of the Infernal Dante Quadrant, the orange glowing star burning brightly nearby.

The crew of the WebWorld9 who had succumbed to the strange blue-and-white padding disease were now up and about, speaking in highpitched voices and bumping each other with their large round noses ; the floppy headpieces kept slipping over their eyes and the fact that they all had appeared to have lost a finger - or whatever digit according to species - was causing them all sorts of coordination problems. Wherever possible, they were helping their comrades, those who were only now falling to the disease, down to the medical suites.

Crisko and Jordan passed some stretcher bearers in the corridor. The Captain turned to the doctor for the latest update, and bumped his huge round proboscis against Jordan's. "Oh! Um, sorry, Jordan, old chap," Crisko apologised. "What do you think is happening then? Tra-la-la?" He frowned at his little ditty. "We're nearly there, Granp *Captain*," replied Jordan, perplexed at what he just said. "I have heard of Smoofisms out beyond the Communities Sector, tra-la-la-lala-la". He gulped. "I think we have been afflicted. I think we're caught in *Smurftime!*"

Hworff growled non-menacingly at his reflection in the mirror. He wept openly now, for about three hours he had found that his total control was gone, slowly a white cap had found its way onto his head and a very cheery face now stared back at him.

He tried again... "Grrrala tralala," No he could not stop it from coming out. To think of the shame to his Klick-Ons ancestry. Now tears streaked down his round blue face in huge streams as he capered and jumped his way down the hall.

For Kia-ora it was a slightly different problem, one of trying to keep her now lustrous yellow hair out of her eyes as she "ooohed" and "ahhhed" every little thing Crisko did as he lifted various objects and tried acting tough. For Kia-ora she could barely contain her frustration at this stereotypical image she was creating.

On the Upper Promenade, Cunningston and his team of Third Line engineers were all but paralysed by their appearance and new-found outlook on life.

"I was asking ... hey-ho ... if you had heard any strange noises recently ... traala-la-la?!" growled Cunningston through gritted teeth. His white floppy hat slipped down over one eye. He heard a lieutenant behind him snigger. The proprietor of a sports shop shrugged his now-blue tinted tentacles. "Strange??" it snapped. "Anything *unusual*?? Are we *there* yet, Grandpa??" And it meaningfully tapped what passed for a forehead.

The horrible disease took hold of the WebWorld9 as the station slipped deeper and deeper into smurftime...

As the TGA Vacillate hung in space a gnawing feeling came over Captain Wasitmean. She felt she had completely forgotten something. Again. Why was she here? Where was she going?

Her Security Officer, stared at her with typical calm. Philpot Cain was the very model of a Vacillate officer. Logical to a fault, he could never think of much, except his appearance, and his bald pate in particular, which he polished to perfection. The Narcissistic qualities of the Oylkan mindmeld currently held his attention. Mostly though, he affected a knowledgeable stance for the benefit of his audience.

"Captain, how do you think I appear today?" he asked, pausing for effect.

"Handsome, profound or ravishing?"

"Well, I was, well.....Umm..... What were the choices again?" Evadian asked after a while.

Below deck, Engineering Officer Toth Hazel looked proudly upon his new robot. The hydraulic death-stabber had taken all week to tweak, and now it was working perfectly.

All of a sudden he heard a bleep and a hoot. He looked around, and wondered who dared to come into his domain. The bleeping intensified, and saw a growing mass approaching. The ship's Climate Enterprise droids were driving a huge stampede of MHFP droids toward his beloved Disk Core.

The CliEnt droids were quicky hustling the little 'bots in quick succession into the core of the Disk with no regard to the size or the shape of the various MHFP droids. It soon became apparent that their enthusiasm was getting the best of the ship and the Vacillate would be in serious trouble.

Hazel recognised that this was going to cause the vessel to lag, and in the worst case could crash the whole ship. He had to think of something and he had to do act quickly before it was too late. In fear he picked up his communicator and typed 0322 into it. He waited, and waited....and waited.

The comm pinged.

"Yes, Second deck Cindy here, what can I do for you," answered a voice at the other end.

"Yes, I have a problem here, I need support because there are CliEnt Droids reaching critical mass here," he said rapidly.

"Well did you ask for their ident number?"
"Umm, no."
"What battery system are they running?"
"Well I did not think to ask them that!"
"Well I can't help you then, can I, without the minimum details!"
"Umm ... well ... uh..."
Toth Hazel heard the comm cut out with a pang.

The CliEnts moved steadily and blindly forward, knocking the primary over-ride switch for the engines, activating them, and sending the TGA Vacillate into deep I-Drive. Hazel went for his KrAK gun instead.

Admiral Jirk's home was the stars. He knew that, and so did his shuttle. And he had to grudgingly admit that one of his more favourite haunts among the stars was the WebWorld9 space station that orbited Jorbae. Ahh, the famous promenades! The delicatessens! The green women! *And don't forget that idiot, Captain Rhett Crisko!* mused Jirk. And this is where the Tidyroom had brought him.

The admiral gazed upon the metallic floating pizza, and grinned. He reached forward, and flicked open a comms channel.
"Shuttle Tidyroom to WebWorld9, this is Admiral Jirk. Kia-Ora, luv, do you read me?"
A buzz of static replied. Jirk frowned, puzzled.
"Oi! WebWorld9! Anyone there?!" he demanded in his best Admiralty voice.

Lord Garridge was draped across the Captain's Chair on the command bridge of the space station. The area was empty, for the primary crew had joined the rest of the inhabitants running around, torn between being cheerily gay, and panicking with fear.

So. The station was his. The buttons were at his fingertips. His Semaf was within reach. *This* was command!

Yet ... yet, he had reconstructed his life, his world, here. People marvelled at his cigars, and swooned at his wines. Indeed, he had *friends*, too. Did he really want to go back to his Estate? Rejoin the Metropolia that was the Rars Empire? Humble himself before the Rars Empress?? He was his own boss here. And he had friends who could run the station ... *his* station ... for him!

The comm pinged, and snapped him out of his reverie.
"Shuttle Tidyroom to WebWorld9, this is Admiral Jirk. Kia-Ora, luv, do you read me?"
Garridge was startled, and glanced at the Messaging desk.
"Oi! WebWorld9! Anyone there?!"

The exiled Gentleman glanced up at the main IDS viewers, and sure enough, he could discern the Admiral's shuttle on its approach. But a sparkle of light further away behind the shuttle caught his attention. He flicked on the long-range OUC monitors, and gasped as he recognised the circular band crested with spires. The Royal Warship! Of course! They were here to take over the station!

He wouldn't have much time. They'll be arriving right after Jirk!
He paused, and his Years of Elite Education took hold. He smiled a particularly evil smile. His Tro-Gan Gun still had some dyalhup charge left within.

He stepped across to the Message desk, and opened a comm line.
"Admiral Jirk, what a pleasure," he announced smoothly.
"Naturally ..." answered the Admiral. "Wait a – who is this?"
"Garridge, Sir," he replied, and before Jirk could question him further, Garridge smoothly continued with what the Admiral wanted to hear. "You are requesting to land, Sir? Of course, we'll open Docking Bay 94 right away. He paused. "In the meantime, perhaps you could relay a hail to the freighter behind you? You're closer than me, and I need to parse this on to them as soon as possible. Ah, the Bay doors, are opening now ..." he added before Jirk could interrupt.
"Of ... of course, Garage..." he Admiral's voice sounded weak and not a little confused.

Working quickly, Garridge emptied the remaining smooofism charge from his gun, and compacted it into a Smooofette Peyo, all buttoned up so as to travel faster and with more impact.
"Admiral, Sir, if you could just relay this packet that I'm sending to you *now* ..." Garridge clicked a button and the reliably ultra-fast Cohn-Neckt wavelength did its reliably ultra-fast stuff. "And Docking Bay 94 should be to your right, Sir ..."

Jirk was a little puzzled, that was for certain, but that nice Garage chappie was directing him into Docking Bay 94. *Kia-Ora must be having a day off*, thought the Admiral. *Oh, and he wanted me to relay this Peyo hail thingie, too, didn't he?* A light on his console flashed green, and the Admiral leaned across to flick some switches that would relay the Smooofette Peyo back to that large circular freighter behind him. As he did so, a scoller readout displayed the ID of the larger ship : XML Botanical Bay. *Now why was that name so familiar?*
"Tidyroom to XML Botanical Bay, this is Admiral Jirk of the TGA. I am relaying this Peyo to you."
All Jirk heard was static at the other end and his level of annoyance picked up. Already peeved by the fact that he was wearing the same shirt for the third day in a row, he had had enough. He stabbed the release button.

The dyalhup smooofism continued on its way... and the shuttle Tidyroom nudged closer to its dock, its pilot thinking only of one thing: a new wardrobe of clothes!

Q, Huw, Barney McGrew, Frontpage Guru and Scrub turned their serpentine heads to face the main viewer as the Royal Warcruiser dropped out of I-Drive in the Jorbaean system. They had received the go-ahead from Garridge, who indicated that the station was open to attack, the occupants crippled by their drastically changed forms.

}}Soon we shall possess the station my young apprentice, and utilise it for *our* means!{{ they rumbled. From their point of view, *everyone* was their apprentice. And the crew of the Warcruiser were no exception.

}}How long before we can board?{{

The pilot checked the instruments fearfully. "A-a-about five para-minutes my Lards" he replied, a quiver in his voice. "B-b-but we are picking up a relay from a small craft just ahead. S-s-scanned headers indicate it originated from the WebWorld9 ..."

}}Excellent! It must be from our desperately helpful Gentleman Lord Garridge! {{ announced the Hyrda in stereo sensurround multi-bass. }} Retrieve it, and bring the packet before us! {{

Lord Garridge smiled. He regarded the view from the station's command centre sipping from a Raktagino, heavily dosed with anti-smoofism drugs. As a Gentleman he knew that the best antidote was always served cold.

His convoluted plan was bearing fruit, the War Cruiser under its five-headed captain was approaching the station, aware of the helplessness of its crew thanks to his reports - and the observations of other spies that Lord Garridge was sure they had on the station. They knew the station was open to invasion, and so had approached to within striking distance. Any moment now, that idiot Jirk would unleash Garridge's secret weapon upon them.

After spending so much time with his plethora of fine wines he was a true *financial* Lord in this sector and he hardly needed his old life and titles. He could now get all of the reward but do none of the work.

Within the depths of the Dante Quadrant, the TGA Vacillate slowly drifted past an unusually familiar orange glowing star.

On the engineering deck, Toth Hazel knew there was only one company that created CliEnt droids. Typing their comm number into his communicator, he waited. And waited. The CliEnts were buzzing and mumbling about his feet. Toth was more annoyed than worried, for his beloved robot was only *just* out of their reach.

A cheery female voice piped up on the other end of his communicator.

"Good afternoon, MacroHard tech support. No you haven't found a bug, it's only an undocumented feature and there is absolutely nothing wrong with any of our products. Goodbye"

The communicator cut off, and Toth was left seething with utter exasperation.

On the bridge, Evadian Wasitmean grinned triumphantly, as she realised the ship was going into I-Drive again. "There you go, Paradia!" she announced. "Who says I'm incapable of ...errr ... ummm ... what's that term again ... executive thingy ... command! Well... just remind me to.. ummmm... thank Toth, later."
"Will do, Captain", boomed Paradia, and Evadian ducked, cowering behind her chair. She finally crawled back onto her chair just as the ship shot past an orange glowing star.

Meanwhile, on the HMS Server 4, Steff hurriedly returned to his Office, slamming the round green door shut behind him. He stooped to pick up a Dedicated Handbag off the floor, and retrieved some Boots from a nearby shelf. TT, who had been patched through on Steff's personal Bandwidth when the Engineering Officer was conferring with M'Mammos, and thus knew what the situation required, gingerly passed across to Steff a WateryStone. They both then meticulously set up a Retention Queue, implementing a micro-WirePlay on the HoxFarm. They glanced into each other's eyes for a moment before settling the items into the Re-Booted Handbag : this was dangerous. Sweat beaded on Steff's brow, and ran down his nose. They carried the fixture across to the Virtual-RA Files PC, which PINGed happily to itself, and slotted it into the open receptacle. Steff flicked a few switches, and commenced a short apocalyptic countdown for a guestbook.data extraction. Since this wasn't a true Log Access, he had to implement this method to enable him to oscillate to the ACME Trusty Sonic Screwdriver TM.

They stepped back expectantly and on the concave bowl-shape atop the Virtual-PC, a figure began to shimmer into view. It had two arms and two legs and was definately female and was definately clutching the Screwdriver! Steff breathed a sigh of relief he wasn't expecting a person, but if the Screwdriver was here, then it didn't really matter what attachments came with it! He stepped forward to lift away the Screwdriver, but the female suddenly spoke:

"Wha'? Where am I? Oh no you DON'T!" she snapped as Steff made to take her Trusty. She clutched it to her breast. "This is mine. Where it goes, I go too." Wilma looked down. "Hey. Where's my tentacle! I've only got two legs? And why does this room look so odd so stereoscopic?!"
Steff knew when to be expedient. "Madam. We need your help"

Hworff was SO angry now that he went to the locked chambers where the Klick-Ons' Aggressor Ornaments were held. He ripped open the doors, but found he skipped inside: striding purposefully was not an option anymore, he realised miserably. He went straight to the traditional golden curved Pee that was feared for its deadly Backslashes and Forwardslashes. Admittedly, it *did* make a splattering mess if not aimed accurately, but that was one of Hworff's least concerns. His favourite killing blow was a Stylised Targeted-Main Forwardslash Pee, though in tight corners he could administer a crippling Curly Brace that

would simply Span his opponent. He was so aggrieved his floppy white hat slipped over his furrowed brow.
He danced out of the Chamber, swinging his Pee gaily, determined to find the culprit that had made him so embarrassed, and make him *PAY AS HE WENT* with his blood.

Aboard the XML Botanical Bay, Q, Huw, Barney McGrew, FrontPage Guru, and Scrub were laughing at the infamous Admiral Jirk who had had the *temerity* to signal them. }} Foolish Human!! {{ They chortled to themselves. }} Only *we* give permission for a dual communi- {{

Suddenly a huge roar of blue noise spread throughout the warcruiser, affecting both crew and vessel.

The pilot looked up at Q, Huw, Barney McGrew, FrontPage Guru, and Scrub and started to report. "That packet! It's just been opened, and it appears to be a virus of some sort! The ship and her crew are turning bl-... Tra-la-la-la, argh, yarg..." The pilot felt his own grip on reality begin to slip as his torso blossomed into a blue-white balloon.

Q, Huw, Barney McGrew, FrontPage Guru, and Scrub knew there was only one thing for it : an emergency MI dissemination!

}} That Exiled Gentleman will definitely be Hex'd!! He'll *pay* for this ... {{
And with that, the gargantuan five-headed Hydra dissolved, separating into their five distinct counterparts, before disappearing

Jirk watched the ship expand before his eyes in an amazing eruption of blue and white. "Holy Rars," he whispered, awed beyond belief.

Using the ventilation conduits, Lord Garridge swiftly administered the antidote to the space station. The inhabitants found themselves in a quandry of not knowing whether to laugh, cry, or get drunk. Most chose the latter of course, and Quirk's was once again a place of laughter, gaiety, and purple vomit.

Nick stumbled about for hours stuck in the air vents of the WebWorld9, coughing and hacking in the thick fog of antidote. Although he quite liked liquorice, he didn't particularly enjoy being caught in a smog of the stuff! He finally found a service hatch, which he kicked open, and he staggered out onto the Lower Promenade. He breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of people going about their business again – even if half of them were aliens – though he was embarrassingly aware how active his extra appendage was suddenly becoming.

Working at the Helpdesk had prepared him to be flexible, and he soon adjusted to his exotic surroundings. He had only two questions : where was the nearest

doctor, and, more importantly, where was Wilma??

Wilma stood before the panicked Steff and quickly decided to help this strange person. *And it might solve what had happened to Nick, too*, she hoped.

The ASP droid, TT, briefly wondered who she was, before pointing to the Drive and talking rapidly about the M'Mammos and the fourth setting. Completely confused, Wilma turned on her FolderLand charm, and nodded and said yes a lot before stepping forward to the Remote Virtual RA Files PC.

She screwed up her courage and said a quick prayer before aligning the Trusty Sonic to setting four and began to work on the Drive. "Well, if I ain't an Executable..." muttered Wilma.exe.

Much later, smoking a cigarette, she looked at Steff and said, "Was it good for you?"

He blinked back in confusion. "Uh ... cheers??"

On the TGA Vacillate, Chief Engineering Officer Toth Hazel did the only thing anyone in his manic and bitter situation would do. He pulled out his KRAK gun to destroy the CliEnt Droids.

One by one the droids were taken down and so too were the MHFP droids who found that in the vacuum left by the CliEnts they had little reason for operating, and quickly went bust.

"There, let's see you reboot from that!" Toth exclaimed with a crazed gleam in his eye as the last of the CliEnt droids ceased to function.

The ship shuddered to a halt, and gently settled back into its circuitous route about a familiar orange star.

CHAPTER 6

If time and space were ever to fall out of kilter, though the effects may not be readily apparent, you would know about it soon enough. Breakfast at tea-time; your grandparents chatting to your grandchildren; the ocean overflowing the continent; that planet crossing the path of that sun.

All really rather messy and untidy, and not at all abiding to the rules laid down by Einstein's Relatives. The Fat would still flow... but would it know where it was flowing to, and when?

There were contingency plans, of course, but the alarm bells that would sound were so loud that no-one had ever tested them. And since a Major Incident had never been war-gamed, no-one could rightly remember where the manual was. That was the trouble with getting your family to help you out: the instructions may be in the Einstein household... *but who had them last??*

Still, one thing *could* be recalled. If there was any trouble whatsoever, the manual was in agreement that a briefcase was necessary.

Somewhere in the deep recesses of space, 10% of a rather small fleet of ships abruptly stopped, their collective handbrake yanking them out of I-Drive. On the bridge of the lead ship, a warning flashed up on the IDS screen:
Failure with a temporary file - lost communication with the AR system.

"Thank Rars for that," Captain Admirable Remedy breathed a sigh of relief. "We've finally dropped out of I-Drive." He turned to his Second-in-Command. "Winger, get me astrometrics on the comm".
"Yes captain," and Winger set the SMS system tingling into life, sending an SSL initiation signal to their astrometrics department.
"Stardotstar here captain, how can I help?"
"It may have escaped your notice, but we've dropped out of I-Drive," he explained sweetly. "So ... I want to know *where the Rars are we?!*" he roared.
"I'll get the team on to it right-away, Captain. Stardotstar out."

Down in engineering, Scotty Shorn was startled by the SMS system flaring into life.

"Shorn, Remedy here. What happened??"
"It looks like we loost coontact wi' the internal AR system, causin' the I-Drive to coot ooff. The I-Drive wi' probably be oot o' operation for a few wee days, but I should be able t'unfoose the IDS cables noo."
"How long is that going to take Shorn?"
Hoo the Rars should I knooow ya ferret-faced stick insect?! "Should take me aboot two hours t'unfuse the cables," he answered, "but as foor the I-Drive I don't knooow whin that'll be oop and runnin".
"That's okay, Shorn, I think we'll stick to CD-Drive for a while. Remedy out."

Ping, PING, **PING**

Remedy answered the SMS sytem.

"I think I've discovered our ... location, Captain," announced Stardotstar uneasily.

"Go ahead, Star."

"Well..." she took a deep breath. "Being in I-Drive for so long, we've actually merged with space-time and have switched from outer-space to inner-space. As such we've now been inverted and appear to have reached 90% mass, while losing another 10%"

"90%? How is that possible? If 90% of the fleet don't actually exist, but yet are still there somewhere, how can we possibly now be the 90%, and if so where the Rars is the other 10%??"

The IP coordinates warbled their warning, and Q-Rob leaned on the Novell gears of his personal one-man starship, the *Q-Level*. As the ship decelerated to the secret rendezvous, he knew his fellow gods were also in one piece and would soon be joining him. Whereas some, like Scrub and Huw, would simply dissolve into the very fabric of time and space, and go with the interstellar flow as it were, he himself preferred a more substantial method of translocation: so he had *bent* time, and called up his personal starship. This petulant favoritism wasn't really becoming of a deity, but it was one of the perks of the job : who was going to argue, anyway??

The *Q-Level* dropped out of Super I-Drive and the XML Executable hove into view. The new ship was huge, making the TGA Anykey-E look like a child's toy by comparison.

Q-Rob grinned evilly.

"Welcome, oh Lard Q-Rob, to the greatest ship in the Galactic Rars Empire," fawned Admiral Premium.

"Yes, yes. You have prepared for the journey to the Mim system?" he queried his underling.

"But of course. We have a Version 5 engine which means we are superior to those who used the Version 4 engine which failed so spectacularly for us during the Domino War."

"Good, I expect us to arrive before the Empress then!"

The Admiral gave an audible gulp. "Y-y-you m-m-mean the E-E-Empress will be coming as well??"

"Yes and she is not as forgiving of mistakes as I am!" Q-Rob answered flatly.

"Then we shall redouble our efforts!" the Admiral quickly responded, and he fled to the bridge.

" I hope so, for your sake..." Q-Rob chuckled to himself.

Upon the Tourist Moon of Bendor, the village medicine man Morga sensed a great disturbance in the Fat. The grey-tipped PHPWok went to his Chief to discuss the matter. There was a great evil about to be turned upon them all and it needed to be stopped now!

The shaman was really afraid. After his people had helped "the Jirk" drive off the invaders, he thought that their involvement was finished. Only now he could sense something really bad was developing and it wasn't just the refried beans they had had last night.

He stood before Chief SpareRib and waved the mighty spoon of courage. "Oh great one we must act soon or as sure as the gods are made of flour we will be in *real* trouble."

SpareRib was a cunning and well educated PHPWok. He had read all the great Javascriptures prior to becoming a Pan Fryer and felt sure he truly grasped the nature of the Universal Flow.

SpareRib licked his lips nervously. "So ... what shall we do then, Morga?"

"We must find The Jirk before the new moon appears, or else it will be swallowed by the darkness in the black box!" He waved his spoon encouragingly. "That is the way the batter pointed."

"*Flour and sugar*, 'wok, how do you propose we do this?? All the batter in the world would not bring the man before us, could it?!"

"The great and living Fat has pointed the way, we must go to something called the WebWorld9 before the third teatime or we will all die!"

"How?" the Chief prompted.

"I see a way..." he replied, and then pointed to the left over pile of MHFP Droids that were victory tokens from the war with the HMS Server.

After four days of being in Super I-Drive and over heating the Data Engines, the XML Executable arrived in the Mim system. The third planet hosted the mighty Rars Empire's primary construction servers. As the ship closed in, the Admiral noticed something new.

"What is that? It looks like a small moon..." he asked Q-Rob.

"That is no moon, Admiral, that is a battle station!" announced the deity gleefully. The DottOrg ball was now complete. "Ready my shuttle!"

Within para-moments, Q-Rob arrived in the main docking bay of the battlestation. He was intercepted by the commander.

"Ah Governor Kablue-e, only you would be so bold," he said, genuinely surprised by the other's intrusion.

"I apologise, oh Lard Q-Rob, but the Empress' shuttle approaches," his several pointed tentacles flailed about pathetically.

"We must go greet her, then, mustn't we?" replied Q-Rob agreeably.

The DottOrg Battle Station opened its main Nutonshield and allowed the sleek, stiletto-shoe looking shuttle to land to a perfect point with a small breath of CD-

Drive. Hundreds of Central FileTroops stood at rigid attention as the shuttle boarding ramp lowered.

Q-Rob stood briefly at attention as the Empirical Guards clothed in business dress, descended from the shuttle's boarding ramp holding their staff by the throat.

"What is thy bidding my mistress?" breathed Q-Rob.

"It is time to bring the full power of this battle station to bear, Lard Q-Rob," she said, her voice chilling.

Q-Rob deferentially followed the robed Empress to her throneroom that lay deep inside the spherical DottOrg.

"Guards, advisors, toadies, leave us," the Empress commanded from under her dark hood. The others in the chamber nodded a salute, and silently filed out. As soon as the doors had swished shut with a flourishing animation that incorporated a lot of flying text, the Empress threw back her hood and turned to face Q-Rob.

}}Ah! Q, my friend. That was indeed a narrow escape, was it not?{{ beamed Frontpage Guru to its fellow Hydra-part. }}Kept us all on our toes!{{

}}Yes, indeed, Guru{{ agreed Q, dropping the pretense of inferiority now that they were alone.

}}Cheers!{{ grinned Guru, and then paused, somewhat puzzled by it's own comment, and wondering where, on its travels, it had heard it. }}Have you heard from the others?{{

}}It's been a little difficult to keep track of everyone after we had to Uninstall and Remove ourselves from the XML Botanical Bay's unfortunate fate. When I get my hands on that Garridge{{

}}Agreed. But now is not the time for *petty* vengeance. Soon we shall have *full* revenge!{{

}}Scrub I believe is back in the Bins, re-booting herself. Some recent incidents had apparently left her drained and almost unable to cope with the Hydra's Separation. Barney McGrew has called on his old friend McVities Hobbs, to prepare for Plan D. Alas, I have not heard from Huw, the Creator, as yet{{

}}No matter, he will soon join us, and the WebWorld9 will be crushed! Everything is going as we have foreseen!{{

The entity known as Scrub swam in the tide of information and wasted space within the Bins, gathering its power and replenishing its strength. It hummed to itself an annoyingly catchy tune as it pondered the incredible luck of the WebWorld9. Not that it minded. In fact, the Eater of the Bin Souls quite liked the place. The exception was whoever had shot the two fascinating folder denizens it had transferred there, and it had gone along with the Hydra's plan as long as it did partly to get revenge on the culprit - whoever that was.

However, now it had to divert the rest of the Hydra somehow, or at least save Wilma and Nick. This wouldn't be too difficult, but the brush with smooftism and the dissolving of the Hydra had weakened it, and until it regained it's strength it didn't have a chance against one of the other Hydra heads, never mind all four. It would have to rely on cunning, guile and misdirection.

Or, at a pinch, a c2bapp in the face and a hefty headstart.

Thanks to Lord Garridge's timely antidote, the WebWorld9 spacestation orbited peacefully about the Jorbaean world.

Although Crisko and Dado had managed to bring order to the chaos on the station, the Security Officer was painfully aware that the Sacred Klick-Ons Aggressor Ornaments Chamber had been broken into, and that the Golden Curved Pee was missing. He and the Captain were now looking for Hworff, who they felt could aid them in their investigations. The fact that he had last been seen swigging vast amounts of Synthale had made them decide to go in tandem. It may be a speciest thought, but the only thing worse than a Klick-On was a drunk Klick-On, especially one who until recently had been wearing a floppy hat and over-sized trousers, and bore a blue tinge. But they knew such a loyal and dedicated crew member would help them.

The Klick-On in question had been quizzing various station inhabitants as to the sequence of events when Smooftism had taken over: he had discovered that Garridge had started a commotion in Quirk's Bar and then fled and had later been Everyone's Favourite Hero administering the antidote. *Far too suspicious*, thought Hworff. So he had come down to the Tailor's Shop to have a 'friendly chat'; and Hworff felt that swinging his Golden Pee would help Garridge shed light on the events.

90% of the Rars Fleet sidled through inner space, looking sheepish. It didn't really know what to do with the new fleet mass, since it could only ever compute 10% of its interface at any one time.

Deep within the GE Problem warship, the placement trainee, Conman Abdullah, was carrying out his work experience in the engine rooms. Inspired, he had cleaned out the dot-not-arf files... and had found that the small fleet had returned to normal speed, but then had inverted to its present 90% mass ... whatever that meant, but it sounded good. Regardless, he had a feeling that either the Chief Engineering Officer, Scotty Shorn, or StardotStar of Astrometrics would be hounding for his blood if they ever discovered he was involved in this. Perhaps it was time to hop ship again

In the far out-reaches of Communities, found right at the far end of the Galaxy's astrometrics starcharts, the HMS Tea-Brake lazed its way though sparkling webs of star dust. It provided a really important and reliable corner-stone service, and was proud of that fact. What that service was, no-one fully knew but it served the Galaxy's populace with blindly focused conviction.

Captain McVities Hobbs stared out of the wide viewscreen portals. He was a short stocky man, young for a captain, with a crop of sandy hair, who quivered with a nervous energy. He knew that his colleague, Hard Grafft Slogs on the HMS

Server, enjoyed these deep space panoramas, but they left him cold : he longed for action, even though he had been told that the HMS Tea-Brake was running an extraordinarily important communications Two-Peas-One-Pea medium. Snazz Hashcake used to be assigned to this great vessel, and in fact had played a key role in splicing together this new Bandwidth, but she was now with Slogs' crew : still, she had often told him that she felt a nostalgic affinity for the HMS Tea-Brake.

But now, his old friend Barney, from Special Forces, had dropped by on a flying visit, "all hush-hush, y'know", with "orders from the 16th Penthouse Suite, with its Retinal Scans", for immediate action in the Jorbaean System: they were to make an imminent jump into Super-I-Drive, for a rendezvous with the famous WebWorld9 spacestation. He wasn't clear on what they were to do once they arrived, but Barney had assured him that all would be revealed in good time. Interestingly, Barney, normally so clear and precise, had stumbled on his words, and Hobbs had distinctly heard him briefly say "... in god time"?! Barney was currently in a Closed User Examination Group, apparently communicating with his superiors, and didn't want to be disturbed until they were on their way.

On the bridge of HMS Server 4, all was tranquil. The crew were grateful for Wilma's earlier intervention. Slogs lounged in his Captain's Chair and Sandy, the Second-in-Command, busied herself with a datapad. The great vessel drifted peacefully in deep space.

Suddenly, the doors to Lift Four, the infamous rattling turbo lift that existed at right angles to 5 dimensional reality, opened, and WWTwoOh stumbled out, flustered and jittery. The doors snapped shut, while the mincing HMS Server 4 Command droid flailed his arms about. Sandy rushed to help him, and the Captain sat up in his seat.

"Oh Captain!", wailed the droid. "Help! I found myself in Lift Four ..."

"You know better than to do that, Two-Oh," muttered Sandy.

"... and suddenly this person just 'appeared!'"

"*Appeared?*" questioned the Captain. "Who?"

"Well, he was short, had a scary grin with a broken tooth, and he said, '*Hello, I'm Huw, the Creator, do you see where I'm coming from?*' and then he disappeared! He seemed quite ... mad."

Just then, the doors to Lift Four swooshed open, and Huw peeked out : "Do ya see where I'm coming from?!" As the others whirled about to face The Creator, the doors closed again, and the Lift clanged away into the depths of the ship.

Steff was a little lost for words. He wasn't even sure if "Cheers" was *appropriate* in the vicinity of a lady. But since they had used the Fourth, and regained Super-I-Drive, he had enjoyed Wilma's company as he led her on a tour around the intricacies of the HMS Server 4. TT, however, was not impressed, and was

sulking in their Office : he had serious misgivings about this particular guestbook.data non-virus.

"Yes, yes, I can clearly see how interesting the cgi Recycler Generator is," said Wilma sarcastically down in the Lower Control Room, "but what I want to know is where's my tentacle?? And where's my Nick?! I need adventure and excitement!" "Adventure? Excitement? Huh, an Engineering Officer craves not these things," scoffed Steff. But when Wilma's mouth turned down

"We-ell," he suggested, "There *is* the Manageress on the Ninth Deck, Dr Faustus Tina ..."

"Right! Take me to her!"

"Cheers...?"

Saleem Bin Dion was pretty much *hole* again, now. Her immersion in the proverbial carrots and smelly brown lumps found in the Universal Bins had invigorated her powers, and she was ready to rejoin her fellow deities. She knew they were about to follow-up their initial attack on WebWorld9 and retaliate with Plan D, but she also wanted to have a 'friendly chat' with Garridge about certain recent events.

As she swam through the flotsam and jetsam of Life, wondering exactly where she was, she became aware of a nearby faint chanting through her olfactory network "Ping, Pong Ping, Pong Ping, Pong"
"Ah," she thought, "I know where I am."

Morga, the PHPWok Village Shaman, with a Doctorate in Medicinal Carl-Herbs, was overseeing the almost completed construction of the rickety starship made from the MHFP Extensionlet Droids. He was on his way to Chief Sparerib for the ceremonial Waving of the Wooden Spoon Over the Great Wok, which would send them on their way in their *Caravan of Courage*. As he neared the village centre, with its babbling brook (affectionately called 'Kelly'), its public postal house, and orthadontic church, he could hear the PHPWoks chanting their "Ping, Pong" merrily away before their Chief and the Wok. Morga beamed, their starship would soon be ready, and they would return their Jirk to them. He thought he might name the new ship 'The Naked Jirk'.

Aboard the GE Problem of the Rars Fleet, Scotty Shorn was making his way through the back end of engineering. He just couldn't work out what could have caused the AR system failure, the consequent shutdown of the I-Drive engines, and inversion.

Surprisingly this part of engineering looked a lot cleaner than usual. The last couple of days he had chucked the work placement trainee down here and by the look of it he had done a good job. Which made him wonder just where he was. A little further down the corridor, Scotty Shorn froze in horror. On a nearby

console, the large, red, release button had been depressed.

"Whee the hell are yous?!" he shouted down the corridor.

Shorn charged down the corridor where he caught whiff of a strange pungent flowery odour.

He flew around the corner, just in time to see one of the escape pods being jettisoned and a large cheesy grin staring at him through the window.

Shorn returned to the main part of Engineering where he opened a comm to the captain.

"Cap'n, Shorn here. I've found the wee problem. That damn placement trainee had pressed the Large Red Release bootton."

"The Large Red Release Button! No wonder the AR system failed. Can you fix it?"

"Och, it's a difficult procedure, cap'n, but I should be able to manage it. First I'll have to clear the temp'ry dot-not-arv cache, makin' shoor to avoid the 'Exact Search' switch, which could, if depressed, cause a ship-weed failure. I'll then have to re-initialise the main engine corr and log oos back into the main fleet 'afore recreating the dot-not-arf files which shood re-pop oot the release button." There was a momentary silence of cluelessness from the Bridge. "Get on to it Shorn. But remember one thing. Leave the I-Drive switched off, we'll stick to CD-drive from now on."

"Aye then. I'll let yoo know when it's doon."

"One more thing Shorn. Will this un-invert us back to outer-space? Because I quite like the extra mass," he added cheerily.

"Ah really could'n say cap'n. With the paradoxical nature o' the fleet, I wouldn't like to assume anythin', och, noo."

The Ainsley Lift was fried perfectly, and 'The Naked Jirk' escalated into Bendor's orbit, shuddering as it fought free of the planet's greasy gravity. Morga was the Duty Manager supervising on behalf of Chief Sparerib. The MHFPs were holding together surprisingly well, and their transfer rate was very high.

They were in the thick of processing Wap updates in the I-Drive, when suddenly error 553 Valid-In flashed through the interior of the ship. "Oh Batter!" muttered Morga. "What the flour does this mean?"

A PHPWok ran up waving a Lesser Wooden Spoon. "We are being hailed by a deep space pea-pod," he updated.

"Well, we can't have the Great Wok fore-go on any ingredients, now can we? Not to mention what the caring and hospitable Jirk would say!" declared Morga. "Bring the Pod in!"

In the Rars Escape Pod, Conman Abdullah breathed a sigh of relief. His work placement fun would continue.

The DottOrg battlestation orbited Mim, the Rars Empire's mighty construction servers. Q-Rob, Guru and Barney McGrew, via Closed User Examination, were

discussing the nastiest way of inducing the closed queue loop : they agreed it had to be done with flair.

}}Guru, we know that the Domino had failed with tt875631. Using a SHIFT-REFRESHED Javva Applet was just too uncouth{{ bemoaned McGrew.
}}Agreed. They acted on their initiative{{ Frontpage Guru criticised.
Q silently glowered at Guru.
They fell silent for a while, ambitious to make the WebWorld9 suffer horribly.
McGrew raised its head. }}What about a horrible ORA timeout retrieval?{{
}}Nah. That's far too nice{{ countered Guru.
}}Yep, we'd be too easy on 'em{{ agreed Q.
}}That's it!{{ snapped McGrew. }}The TGA Vacillate! We'll borrow the services of Captain Wasitmean and Parey Maximus!{{
The 3 Hydra-parts all shared a rumbling bass chuckle.

Meanwhile on the WebWorld9, a freshly changed Admiral Jirk sat at Rhett Crisko's desk playing with various video games on his personal holo computer. With a Swish and a Flash in walked Captain Crisko.
"Well, congratulations on destroying the enemy ship, Sir," Rhett said, annoyed that he had to placate the Admiral.
Jirk beamed, and lapped up the attention like any good Admiral should. "Oh, it was nothing ..."
Rhett squirmed, but knew he had to seek advice from Jirk. "So ... uh ... what do you think we should do with our Rarsy friends now?"
"Well, I got the Home Server Farm Fleet to run a trace-route on its last known coordinates and we have tracked two of the hops to this absolute location in the Rars Empire. So we are going to make a foray into their space!"
Crisko was thoughtful. "You're considering using the TGA Defiled, then?"
"Yes, her masking device and massive KrAK weaponry make her a great choice."
Jirk expected Rhett's crest-fallen face. He stood up. "But you can fly her!" he announced magnaminously.
Rhett grinned from ear to ear like a child in a sweet shop.

Deep in the Infernal Dante Quadrant, a circuitous voice conference was taking place between Captain Wasitmean and Paradia Maximus on the bridge, Toth Hazel in Engineering, and Signal Folley in Navigation. The TGA Vacillate mimicked its crew, and continued on its looping way.

"So we are on our way now ... yes?" enquired the Captain hopefully.
"We're ... uhh ... perambulating, yes," affirmed her Engineering Officer, testliy.
"But are we agreed on the destination?" interjected Parey.
"Hold on. Don't anyone start giving me *destinations*, now. If anyone is going to decide where we're going, and, I might add, *which* way, then it really ought to be me!" Signal Folley was a stickler for procedures.
"Ah, yes ... good question ... good question ..." The Captain was suddenly anxious.

"Huh? What bit of *Alphabet Quadrant* don't you understand?!" Toth demanded, incredulously.

"Oh, yes," came Parey eagerly, "For we ought to determine exactly *which* alphabet we're intending to use ..."

"Which ... ahh ... alphabet, Parey?"

"Yes, Ma'am, the Othodox Basic, or the Cryllic Serif, for one thing. And then, of course, one ought to consider the Urdu or even the Weft. Oh, and there's the case sensi-"

"Waitaminute! My navi-manuals don't mention anything about the Weft Quadrant, or the Cryllic Serif one, either!"

"And if that Kwidditch Serve one is over 13.7 lightisms away, then I'm sorry, but we'll have to re-fuel along the way."

There was a faint crackle of static that sounded as if the conference call had expanded by one extra person. Sadly, though, the crew were too engrossed with their letters to notice. "The WebWorld9 is closer, y'know," the voice said agreeably.

"Oh ... is it indeed? Then we really ought to ... you know ... consider it ..."

"Yep, it's a good destination, all star-routers lead to the WebWorld9, first thing we learnt at Nav School!"

"First-rate dry docks, too, as well as some of the finest drinking establishments."

"Oh yes, Quirks' Bar is there, not to mention Garridge's Purveyors of Fine Wines and Cigars."

"So ... this WebWorld9 place ... what do we all think? Are we agreed?"

"Sounds good to me!"

"And I know where it is! And how best to get there!"

"It's Famous Promenades are ... well ... galaxy famous, really."

"Right then. That sounds like a good choice all round ... then ... yes?"

"I'll arrange for a course to be set for the WebWorld9, Ma'am ..."

Q-Rob fell back laughing, and Guru slapped his friend on the back.

}}The TGA Vacillate are *so* easy to manipulate!!{{

}}And it's time we put their confused dawdling to its *intended* use, and apply their discursive ramblings to a killing effect! {{

They were aware that the *rules of the game* dictated the Vacillate belonged to the Terran Galactic Alliance ... but since the crew themselves were so confused now, the gods knew that *loyalty* didn't count and so they could be put to anyone's use!

The doors to Lift Four opened, and Steff and Wilma stepped gingerly out onto the Ninth Floor.

Wilma had to get her breath back before speaking. "Well, I have to admit, I've never had one of those before!"

"Cheers!" grinned Steff. "We don't normally *choose* Lift Four, but you did say you wanted Adventure and Excitement!"

"And who was that short guy with the mad grin and broken tooth?"

"Good question."

Steff gently pushed her deeper into the fog-encrusted deck. "And now somewhere in here is Dr Faustus Tina, the Manageress of the Ninth. But I ought

to get back to my work," and with that Steff leapt back inside the Lift as the doors sizzled shut, muttering, "... and I'm not going to stand up to the Manageress. Cheers!"

Wilma turned to face the cloying, gagging fog and heard the clanking of chains and the crack of a whip. "Fee Fi Fo S and M, I can smell the blood of a Fifth Floor One." A great and scantily-clad figure emerged from the mists. "What you doin' 'ere?"

Wilma took hold of her Trusty Sonic, and thought of her beloved Nick.

A little later on the bridge of the HMS Server 4, Slogs was back in his Captain's Chair, enjoying the view, and Sandy had finally calmed down WW-TwoOh. With a loud whoosh that broke the tranquility, the doors to Lift Four opened, and Wilma staggered out.

"Well!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "She won't be doing that again in a hurry!"

"Who, madam?" enquired Slogs, turning to face her.

"That Doctor woman," she replied. "Up on the Ninth."

"The ... the Manageress!" Slogs exclaimed, standing up in amazement. "What have you done with the Guardian of M'Mammos?"

"Oh, not much," answered Wilma, dismissively. "But she won't be such a nuisance for a long while."

And with that, the Server 4 command crew settled back into their comfy enjoyment of deep space.

The HMS Tea-Brake made ready to jump into Super-I-Drive. Barney of the 16th Penthouse Suite Special Forces entered the Bridge and greeted Captain McVities Hobbs.

"Hobbs! Are we ready? We'll need to keep the Two-Peas-One-Pea medium running smoothly, so prior to our departure, I suggest we lay some MSF... some local exchange boxes behind to carry on the good work."

"Whatever you advise, Barney," replied Hobbs in a smooth caramel voice. He was eager for action now, and was crumbling with excitement.

Barney was pleased for he was going to take the opportunity to lay some MHFP deep probe droids, and fully corrupted at that.

The Universal Eater of Bin Souls materialised in the PHPWok kitchens on the Tourist Moon of Bendor.

"Ah!" exclaimed Saleem Bin Dion, "I can get my bearings now! "

She glanced about and frowned, puzzled as to why the normally bustling village only had a skeleton crew.

She dived back inside the swing bin.

Hworff stepped through the Gentlemen's shop door. "Garridge? Where are you??" he growled, fingering his Golden Pee.

Garridge pulled aside a curtain. "Hworff? What can I do for you?" He'd heard that the Klick-On had been asking questions, so he had come prepared : he was holding a KrAK gun behind his back, fully loaded with Smoofism.

"Today is a good day for you to die!" and heaved the Golden Pee into a stylised forward slash.

Garridge ducked, brought the KrAK gun to bear, and fired. Hworff spanned the sticky goblet of blue balled smoofism and charged.

"Hworff!" called a voice from behind him. Captain Crisko and Dr Jordan Basser rushed in, relieved and alarmed that they had found the Klick-Ons weapon *and* the Klick-On Lieutenant. Jordan took a syringe from his handbag, and stabbed it into Hworff's thigh. Within seconds the Klick-On had slumped to the deck. "We'll get him out of your way, Lord Garridge. Sorry to bother you," apologised Crisko. He and the doctor took hold of Hworff, and manhandled him out of the shop.

Not too far away, Cunningston and his Third Line Engineering & Plumbing team were quizzing the staff at a branch of the MuckRonalds faster-food enterprise. The staff were understandably nervous. After all, even they didn't know what exactly went into the ingredients, and the most popular meal, the MuckSurprise™, was ... well ... a *surprise* each and every time you took a bite.

"Only the very best bovine, Sir, I can assure you," the diminutive and balding manager wrung his hands anxiously.

"Yes, yes, that's all well and good, but have you actually *heard* anything out of the ordinary??" demanded Cunningston testily.

"Apart from the Klick-Ons, you mean?"

"Of course apart from the Klick-Ons!" He took a deep breath to calm himself.

"Anything 'flowery' or 'musical'? Anything above or below the normal threshold of hearing?"

The lieutenant, Prevara Cate, stepped up. "Actually Sir, if it's beyond hearing ... how could they ... ah ... hear it?"

Cunningston glowered at his subordinate, and turned his stare on to the manager, who raised his eyebrows and smiled weakly.

At BumsUp, Garridge retrieved the KrAK gun from its hiding place, and turned for the back room. Suddenly, a tall ethereal lady barred his way. "Lord Garridge. I would have a *friendly chat* with you," came the melodious French-Canadian-Arabic voice. But Garridge knew when he was at a disadvantage and fired a quick round of smoofism at her. Saleem struck a diva's pose, opened her mouth, and scaled both the known and *unknown* bars of music : the blue globules simply bounced off her shimmering image, and reverted back into him. He stared in disbelief and horror as he felt his complexion turn blue, his trousers turn white

and increase in size, and a floppy hat slip over his eyes.
"Tra-la-la-la-laaa!" he sang, and gaily skipped about the shop.
Saleem, with a triumphant grin, marched out through the front door.

"... would ... *friendly* ... you ... ahhhhHHHHHHhhhhhhHHHHHHhhhhhhh ..."
The Promenade followed MuckRonalds' example and fell silent in shock and disbelief at what could only loosely be described as a melody.
"Oh! Something like that?" asked the manager of the faster-food chain helpfully.
"Was that what you were after?"
Cunningston whirled in the direction of the noise. "That way, lads!" he pointed.
"Get a decibel tracker on that thing!" And they all rushed out of the shop.

Raging through I-Drive the DottOrg battlestation raced to the WebWorld9 on a course that would see their greatest victory. The HMS Tea-Brake and the TGA Vacillate were to rendezvous with them close to the Jor-Baeen sector.

KKKRRRRRRRAAAAASSH !!!

The station had collided with something, certainly not large enough to obliterate the Rars Empire's setpiece, but nonetheless significant enough to make a dent in the bodywork.

Scotty Shorn of the Rars fleet had finally re-located them out of inner space... but in doing so, had well and truly crashed the armada! They now littered the surface of the DottOrg station!

As Crisko and Jordan gently laid the comatose Hworff onto a secure couch in the WebWorld9 Medical Centre, Nick glanced up from the tests that were being conducted on him. Although Jordan had made sure he had been checked over following the station's troubled period of *smurftime*, he had discovered that whenever he became excited a small plug-in would start to grow out from him. Thankfully, it wouldn't get too large and embarrassing, and would deflate back down.

Still, he wanted it checked out, and thought it wise to make use of the Station's top-notch facilities. Unfortunately, he had also discovered that if he thought about his favourite past-time - naked twister - it affected the plug-in *badly* and the current on-shift Medi-Bay attendants were particularly alluring too.

"Well, Mr Nick, dear," breathed one femme fatale huskily, "your CHT stats are all normal. Your Wrap is boringly average, and your Walkaway Ability is totally unaffected. As far as we are concerned you're fine".

"Arrrrhhhhmmmm errrrmm okay," Nick replied, disbelievingly. He put his shirt back on, and made his way out of the Medi-Centre. Now that *they* all thought he was normal, it was high time he found his Wilma.

The Third Line Engineering & Plumbing crew ran through the Promenade, following the ping-ping-ping of their decibel tracker.

"The noise itself is fading fast, Sir, but the location echo still holds!" confirmed lieutenant Null Loomoo at Cunningston's elbow.

They rounded a corner, and nearly barrelled into a tall Lady of ethereal beauty dressed in a flowing shimmering chiffon dress.

"Oh! *Please* excuse us, ma'am!" Cunningston nodded at her, and motioned the others to get out of her way.

Saleem smiled politely, eyes sparkling amusement, and continued on her way.

The crew, momentarily halted in their pursuit of the noise, gazed longingly at the departing vision of beauty.

"Now *she* could fill a *whole* issue of Pandora's Weekly!" muttered Null, who held the tracker.

Cunningston nodded. "She could even *sink* it!" He pulled himself together.

"C'mon, lads, we've got a job to do..."

With one last heartfelt glance down the corridor they turned and followed the echo recorded by the tracker.

Upon the caravan of courage that was the good ship 'Naked Jirk' the PHPWoks were slowly realising how difficult it was to get along with apprentices. The recent addition of the work placement employee Conman Abdullah was ejected from the ship after yet another disastrous stay.

The warped MHFP remnant ship known as the 'Naked Jirk' arrived at the WebWorld9. Morga led the 'woks off the vehicle, and took a good whiff of replicated air.

The PHPWoks were the greatest of many great oddities that had ever arrived at the station. They introduced a new element to the *colour* of the station's inhabitants as the PHPWoks wandered in awe through the famous promenades. But for the Head Chef and Shaman the search for the one strong in the Fat was all consuming, it had become a great and powerful force that bound him to the task. If they were to succeed they needed to move fast.

So it was with great surprise that he came across Nick standing outside the medilab. The small fact that Nick had not even a passing resemblance to Admiral Jirk escaped him entirely! Besides, they were both humanoid, and that was enough for Morga.

"By the Flour I have found you! O Great One you have been Chosen as the Last Hope, you must come with me to Bendor and learn the ways of the Fat!" Morga said by way of introduction.

"Wha... who... umm, you want to run this all by me again??" Nick demanded, worried that he needed to find Wilma.

"You are the one who will bring balance to the Fat and clear the bacon bits from the hearts of beings. You have the Fat within you and I know you are the Chosen One," Morga answered gravely.

"Well I do need to track down Wilma, maybe having your aid will help me to find and rescue her..."

After a short stop at Quirks to pick up the remaining PHPWoks, Morga and Nick boarded the Naked Jirk and headed for Bendor....

“BumsUp Sir!”

“What?!” demanded Cunningston.

“The noise came from BumsUp, over there!” explained the Third Line lieutenant, Null Loomoo.

“Ohhhh, really?” hissed Cunningston nastily. “The exiled Gentleman, eh??”

They charged into the wine shop, and fanned out. Garridge stood behind the bar, grinning nervously. He was also a shade of blue, and wore a floppy white hat that slipped down over his brow.

“So! Tell me Lord Garridge, what have you been up to lately, hmm?” began Cunningston without any preamble. Some of his lieutenants took up menacing stations in the store, whilst others swaggered about, pulling down wine bottles and snuff boxes and regarding the labels.

“Ohh ... th-this and ... th-that...” Garridge stammered. *Rars them! How have they found me so soon after the smooftism?!*

“Really? How interesting ...” Cunningston leaned across the counter until his nose almost touched Garridge’s swollen and blue-hued proboscis. “Well we know differently, don’t we Number Two?” Both lieutenants either side of him nodded grimly. “What do you know about what’s been going on in this ‘ere station?!” A *plunk* sounded from across the way, and Garridge saw that one of the team had popped a cork and was sniffing at the wine inside the bottle. He brought his attention back to the leader of Third Line and licked his blue lips nervously.

“E-Everyone turned blue and ... and white for a while ... but it wasn’t for long ... and they’re all much better now ... honest ... Tra-la-la...”

Cunningston waved his hand dismissively. “We know all about *that*, Garridge. Tell us something we *don’t* know...”

The Gentleman allowed himself a smile. “There’s a *very* good offer on the Chateau Jorbae ’71, truly out-of-this-world ...” he suggested nervously.

“Is there? Is there really?” Cunningston was wearing his poker’s face. She didn’t like it when he poked her, but at least the look forewarned her. “I don’t *care* about your proxy wines,” he hissed, “I want to know all about the strange noises we’ve been hearing lately!”

“N-Noises?” he gulped. “The *Tra-la-la* doesn’t last *that* long ... Tra-la-la ...”

Cunningston turned to the officer on his right. “Make a note of that will you? The *Tra-la-la* doesn’t last *that* long.” He turned back to regard Garridge sourly. “And the gurgling and clanking...?” he prompted.

“Ohh, very very little of that, I can promise you!” Garridge said helpfully. A sneeze sounded from the snuff display and another *plunk* came from the far side of the shop. “A small amount of high-pitched squeaking, perhaps...?” he offered.

Cunningston nodded, satisfied. He stepped back.

“Lads, tear this place apart,” he sneered.

Not too far away, in one of the premium hangars segregated for the command crew and any Very Important Server Personages, or VISPs, Admiral Jirk stepped aboard the TGA Defiled, and made his way to the bridge. In the Captain's Chair he recognised Crisko acting like a schoolboy, as he gleefully barked orders and issued command lines. *He's truly in his element*, smiled Jirk to himself. *Ah, but then so was I, at his age.*

To his left at weapons control sat a recently rehabilitated Hworff. The Klick-On was better now that he had something he could *sink his teeth* into, though Jirk could see the volatile ancestry simmering just underneath. Kia-ora, on the other hand, was artfully delegating much of the work load that could weigh down the ships navigation officer. She had set the spreadsheet repulser to maximum in a bid to quantify all the various data files.

Admiral Jirk walked over to the Science Fiction Officers chair where a yellowed and battered copy of an Arthur C. Clarke novel sat in its pride of place on the lectern. He picked it up and absently thumbed through it, wondering if he even remotely understood what it was trying to describe.

A puff of CD-Drive manouevred the Defiled out of the WebWorld9 and it smoothly escalated into I-Drive. However, before they had got very far, the ship's sensors tootled a cheery tune, and the IDS Viewers displayed the latest SMS : a battlestation had been reported, and was fast approaching!

The TGA Defiled moved to intercept the DottOrg Ball, and the remnants of the Rars fleet. They had just re-aligned their vector when a great shadow fell across them! On the prow of a ship that was rapidly downloading from Super-I-Drive was the legend : *HMS Server 4.*

CHAPTER 7

Although Captain Slogs was dumbfounded as to who this Wilma.exe was, and how she had appeared on his ship, he was enough of a grateful pragmatist to not kick up a fuss. According to Steff, she had been instrumental in putting the HMS Server 4 back together again, to facilitate their speedy departure from Bendor. However, he recognised his ship needed a thorough maintenance check-over, and the WebWorld9 was the closest appropriate station at which they could moor. Wilma's Trusty Sonic Screwdriver™ thingy had safely propelled them into Super I-Drive, and they were now approaching their destination.

With the sensation of a rollercoaster car *just* descending from the highest track, the HMS Server4 dropped smoothly through the Novell Gears, and decelerated to CD-Drive. Slogs smiled to himself happily. *Ahh, this was the life ...*

"Captain, I think you had better take a look at the IDS viewer!" announced Sandy from her station. "I think it's the TGA Defiled from the WebWorld9!"

"Well what in Rars could they be wanting?!"

"Captain, they are hailing us!" called Snazz.

"Right, put them on the main viewer," instructed Captain Slogs calmly.

"Sir!" announced Sandy. "Another ship is vectoring in fast!!"

"Put the Defiled on *Hold*, Snazz," Slogs ordered his Communications Officer.

"Sandy ...?" he turned enquiringly to his Second-in-Command.

"Oh Rars!" breathed Snazz, as she waited for the slow scanners to return data.

"It's my old friend McVities Hobbs for sure!"

"But how ...??" enquired Sandy

"I have a a 'unique' connection with HMS Tea-Brake," smiled Snazz and sure enough, the HMS Tea-Brake blazed into view.

Morga basked in exuberant triumph. His primary mission had gone smoothly, and he was soon to return home with his Chief and the Chosen One. His Chief? *Hmmmmmmm*, he thought, *perhaps, now, that ought to redressed, especially with the power to bring Balance to the Fat in my paw*. But, he had to admit, the fact that the Chosen One kept on babbling on about a Wilma and, more disturbingly, a Trusty Sonic, did indeed worry him.

Suddenly, a Lesser PHPWok ran up excitedly waving his arms about.

"What is it?" snapped Morga, annoyed that his reverie had been broken.

"O Great One!" he cried. "That Work Placement Trainee! Just before we ejected him, it appears he had managed to reset the syntax of our cook book engines to gas mark nine!"

Morga's eyes widened in alarm.

The TGA Vacillate's engines whined like a wolf's howl in reverse, and the starship settled to a placid CD-Drive speed.

Captain Evadian Wasitmean turned from the executive over-ride control and regarded her Second-on Command.

"Are we sure that this is the ... *best* course of action, Parey?"

Paradia sighed. "I'll re-open the conference call, shall I, Ma'am?"

"Yes, yes, that would be a good idea ... wouldn't it?" She looked up at him. "What do *you* think, hmmm?"

Not too far away, the orange star glowed brightly.

'The Naked Jirk' dropped out of I-Drive with a shudder. They were now only para-secs away from Bendor, but with the engines set on gas mark nine a flamboyant flambé effect had started to occur, which had begun to melt the lard that held the ship together. Huge hot methanous convection currents with vast yellow sulphuric splodges enveloped the ship as the flambé took effect. Electrical flashes sparked from the many MHFP extensionlets that formed the hull of the ship, and belches of hydrogen gas erupted from the lard that was now degrading into a messy goo.

"Oh batter", Morga gulped, and looked at Nick.

Nick licked his lips, and thought of Wilma.

"Arrrrhhhhmmm" he said, and his plug-in quivered.

As the remains of the 90% Rars Fleet arrayed itself menacingly about the spherical DottOrg battlestation, the TGA Defiled squared itself up beside the HMS Server 4, quickly identifying its friendly foes from its evil enemies. However, the HMS Tea-Brake still hung ambiguously in the space between the two adversaries.

Snazz was desperately trying to hail Captain Hobbs, aware that something was not quite right here.

"Captain Hobbs, please respond! McVities, boy, answer dammit!" she pleaded.

On the Exchanger, Slogs was quickly discussing the situation with Crisko. There was very little love between them, but they knew when to pull together. "That's right, Snazz is trying to contact them now. I've got 'Guns' Mademincemeat prepping the weaponry, and Steff Proteus has the Gateways closed to block any unwanted hacks".

"Jirk advises that he recognises the Fleet as being from the Rars Empire but no-one can identify that battlestation!"

"Captain!!" cried Snazz. "I don't believe it : the HMS Tea-Brake is about to reverse *my* Two-Peas-One-Pea medium?! That'll be catastrophic! All the KrAKs in the universe won't be able to stop that!"

"The traitors!" cursed Slogs, always one for the old school sticking together.

"Don't worry, Sir!" said Snazz optimistically. "..... if I can hook up our Primary RA Files PC to the Defiled's Trip-pex Masker" she trailed off, lost in thought.

Aboard the DottOrg Ball, Plans were being put into action.

"The HMS Tea-Brake is now here," affirmed Q-Rob to Empress Loffux. "I'm sure the TGA Vacillate will be bringing up the *terminally-boring* hypothetical and postulating vanguard shortly. Barney will be warming up the anti-Two-Peas-One-Pea medium which will, reversed, have a great and costly effect. Their billing will go though the roof and they'll go out of this world!!" He turned to face the viewscreens. "We'll finally be free of this meddlesome WebWorld9 station," he muttered.

Governor Kablue-e brought word to his Empress.

"Your Majesty, the HMS Tea-Brake has just started the reverse procedure on the Two-Peas-One-Pea medium."

"Ahh, *Excellent!* Everything is going to plan. Prepare to charge up the main weapon. It's time we put this battlestation into action."

On the bridge of the HMS Server 4, the tension was running high. Captain Hard-Grafft Slogs couldn't believe his old friend would betray them.

Suddenly a *ping* broke the tense silence.

All eyes turned to face Lift Four. The doors opened, and out jumped an energetic teenager.

"Hello, I'm your local work placement trainee!" Conman grinned. "Can I help ...?" Slogs rolled his eyes. *Oh no! It couldn't get much worse, could it??*

The 'Naked Jirk' crash-landed on the tourist moon, breaking it in half, and spilling its passengers and crew all over the place. Morga looked up, dazed, and found he was staring out from the limb of a tree. Beside him, Nick groaned.

Chief Sparerib, who had landed in a nearby bush, stood up and looked around puzzled as to where they had crashed. He knew they were on Bendor, but didn't recognise any of the surroundings. Using his chiefly knowledge, passed down to him from father to son, Sparerib held his ceremonial spoon high lining up the bowl with the outline of the sun. He pondered for a moment, and then exclaimed, "Oh, Batter... we're on the southern continent!"

Panic-stricken. he looked up towards Nick. "O Great Chosen One, the Great Jirk, please help deliver us from this great tragedy that has befallen us!!" he cried.

"Wha... huh? Who is Jirk and what are you oversized teddy bears on about?"

Nick asked, bewildered.

"You, you... aren't the Jirk who helped us defeat the Monster known as the HMS Server?" asked Morga, coming fully awake.

"No, of course not! Who is this Jirk, anyway?! My name is Nick. I work on the Helpdesk ... or at least I did," he finished miserably.

"Morga! You told me this was our Chosen One! The Jirk! Not some N-lck from Halpdeesk," Chief Sparerib said struggling over Nick's name and place of work.

"Umm... well, you see... they all look alike to me," Morga explained, shamefaced.

"We are all in very deep batter now!" the Chief remarked.

On board the TGA Defiled the real Admiral Jirk looked up. With a glance, he took in the situation, but remained mystified. "Well this is Rarsing peculiar, what do you make of this Captain Crisko?"

"I think we could be in a bit of trouble, Sir. Do you see the glow coming from their I-Drive Nacelles?" Crisko said.

"Yes, of course I can see that glow they are creating."

"Well I think they are trying to Dual Bond them, thus creating a Two-Peas-One-Pea back-flow of incredible strength! Not even our KrAK guns can stop it now! It will destroy us all in a matter of seconds!"

Jirk was stunned, but quickly announced he was going down to Engineering.

"What is the status of the I-Drive Captain?"

"We can be back in to I-Drive within a minute at your command, Admiral," Crisko deferred, worried now that it would not be soon enough to get clear.

Jirk quickly headed back to the engineering department, where he found the Chief Engineer, O'Brains.

"Do you have some email-shot Torpedos available?" Jirk asked quickly.

"Yes, Admiral, we do. Why?"

"No time for that now, man," snapped Jirk in reply, "I need to be able to reach its access port."

The officer led him to the weapons array with the rack of Torpedos laid out before him. Jirk grabbed an MI Tracker wrench and unbolted the hatch of one of the destructive devices. He fiddled about with the wiring in ways that the engineer never knew existed.

"Right, that's done it. Okay, load this puppy!" Jirk announced.

"Torpedo is loaded, we are ready for launch!"

On the bridge, Crisko's communicator pinged. "Crisko here."

"We're ready. Make this shot good Captain, fire the torpedo!" Jirk commanded.

As Hworrf fired the torpedo with a gleeful bark, Crisko's eyes followed it's path, but realistically doubted even an email-shot could touch the Two-Peas-One-Pea power on the HMS Tea-Brake.

Then he saw the enemy's Nuton Shield fail! Suddenly the torpedo exploded with great fury into the left nacelle sending debris everywhere!

On board the HMS Server 4 Captain Slogs watched flabbergasted as his old friend's ship exploded when the torpedo struck. He was flabbergasted. Sandy Dreamberg, however, knew they had to move with speed and set I-Drive to spin cycle and manoeuvred them out of the way quickly.

"My Rars, what was that?" said the stunned Slogs.

"That, Captain, is an amendment made to Terran Galactic Alliance of Peace email-shot torpedoes known as the SPAM Modification. It blows unstable connections like the Two-Peas-One-Pea to pieces." Dreamberg said quietly.

"And don't forget my little contribution," put in Snazz. "By associating the RA Files to the Trip-Pex Masker, it allowed the Email Spammer to zero in unnoticed."

"And Captain McVities?" enquired Slogs.

"Alas. That combination is horrifically unstable we had no way of knowing the outcome. And it was a matter of Life or Death, Sir," pointed out Snazz.

"Indeed. McVities had simply run into a Bad Crowd," affirmed the Captain. "Can't have that sort of thing in the Server Farm Fleet."

As the HMS Server 4 accelerated to I-Drive, its destination the Home Server Farm for much needed repairs, the crew of the TGA Defiled watched the aftermath of the Masked SPAM attack in silent amazement. Captain Crisko was greatly relieved. Rhett had feared that having Jirk along was like asking your dad to drive while you went on your first date. But in the end the old fossil had turned out useful when it counted.

The conflagration suffered by the HMS Tea-Brake had caused the DottOrg and the 90% Rars Fleet to magnetise and clump together. Now, their combined mass was so heavy that they just plummeted straight down, totally defying gravity and Einstein's Family of Relatives.

Crisko watched the conglomerate drop from view with an excited gleam in his eye, and moved to the control helm. Jirk spotted this, and took a step towards him.

"Crisko, old friend ... I wouldn't do that if I were you ..." warned Jirk.

But Crisko, like a child with a new toy and without a care in the galaxy, let out a cowboys-n-indians whoop, and stabbed the rudder controls down.

The TGA Defiled nose-dived, screaming in the void as it pursued its quarry. The crew members' faces all stretched horribly as inertia decided to come along for the ride, and the ship's anti-grav elected to go on a holiday. Jirk was holding onto a Bridge railing, his feet bouncing off the deck. "Crisko! You ... Rarsing ... idiot!" It wasn't just his face that was being elongated. "Slow ... down ... or pull ... up!"

But Crisko wasn't listening. He was slowly gaining on the leadweight before him and then the rushing starfield went sideways, and the TGA Defiled was yanked to the left.

The DottRarsOrg conglomerate receded from view.

"Rars," muttered Crisko. "I had forgotten about the local Worm Hole."

And with that, the Pride of the WebWorld9 disappeared from the Jorbaean Sector.

The DottRarsOrg battlestation dropped like a lead balloon. Mr and Mrs Einstein were not impressed. Little Jimmy Einstein gnawed anxiously at his nails.

Chief Sparerib was worried. After their recent disappointment at finding this N-Ick fellow was not the Jirk, there was a sense of panic and urgency among the PHPWoks. There were several old legends surrounding the southern continent and only the bravest of PHPWoks ever ventured there. Therefore after much debate the remaining crew struck out in what they hoped would be the correct direction home. They decided, however, that Nick was not welcome so they left

him to fend for himself.

Crisko wrenched on the Defiled's control stick, and the WebWorld9's pride and joy lumbered around searching for the DottRarsOrg.

"They must be here somewhere!" he cried, his eyes darting around the starfield seeking the enemy. "I reversed our trajectory as soon as we slipped into that worm-hole : I'm sure we got back to Jorbae?!"

Kia-ora was double-checking the figures in the ship's starcharts. "I'm sorry Captain but it looks like we are most definitely not in the Jorbae system". Jirk peered at the constellations. "Yep, don't recognise those," he agreed.

The TGA Defiled circled to a halt.

Voices could be heard drifting out from the hull, steadily rising in panic :

"So where the rars are we?!"

"Or more likely *WHEN* are we??"

"Oh rars... Where's the synthale??!"

The HMS Server 4 dropped out of I-Drive and limped towards the top secret Home Server Farm, the central clearing house for their Fleet. The farm, like the risky architecture of their ship, was quite blocky and clunky in appearance, with various pipes and spires protruding outwards, and many openings leading into dry docks and other such handling pens. A plan view would show something not unlike a cow pat, riddled with grass stems. Slogs breathed a sigh of relief, Steff gave a heartfelt "Cheers!!", and Guns stood down his array.

The great servership sidled up to the out-reaching RJ45 co-axial triple-twisted pipe that allowed it to dock with the Farm. Once the uniform resource was located the crew would be able to go on the intranet relay chat and undergo some serious R+R.

A number of quaranteened hours later, Steff and his Work Placement Trainee were walking down the Pipe.

"You see this marks the end of the second line here, and the third line of the OSI begins on just the other side of this wall," he explained patting the hull plating.

Conman nodded, totally dumbfounded.

"Cheers!!", grinned Steff. "We can't go any further unless we are teleported from the ship directly into the Farm."

They had come to a hatchway, emblazoned with a black-n-yellow warning sign : 'Authorized Personnel ONLY - Don't Panic'. And just below hung a sign that said, 'except for Work Experience Placement Trainees'.

"Hmmm," frowned Steff, "I've never seen that before ...". But Conman just grinned and pushed past the Chief Engineering Officer. "Thanks for everything! He he he." he giggled, and, unhooking the sign off the recently embedded nail, swung open the hatch.

As the portal slammed shut, Steff frowned to himself. "Well I'm sure he knows what he's doing"

The DottRarsOrg battlestation plummeted.

This time, however, it had been steadily increasing velocity, and now the magnetised clump of ship and battlestation were charging the inner space, the dark anti-pasta particles of the universe that had been discovered only with copious amounts of Swiss Grouyere Cheese, and causing the space-time continuum to invert at right-angles to the proposed 5 dimensional reality.

The same reality that HMS Server 4's Fourth Lift existed in

The same reality that the Five Gods called home

"Good to have you onboard, Roger Signal Wilco!", welcomed Captain Hard-Grafft Slogs in the HMS Server's teleportation suite. This was the main egress station, with its glass revolving doors and containment turnstiles.

The Transmografiar, a seven foot tall, broad-shouldered chap with slack mouth and prominent teeth, frowned at the visitor, not used to letting people walk through his turnstiles.

"Call me Wilco," offered Roger, who carried his swagger with a well-built frame from which hung a loud purple silk shirt.

"Management have memo'd that we need an additional Arty Pee-Cee Operator to check we are having the correct breaks and at their scheduled times, make sure the queues are busy, that sort of thing," explained the Captain. "You have an artistic flair, I understand ...?"

"That's right. Down the pub every night, pie-n-pint, pi\$\$-artist under the table by the end of the night!!" Wilco grinned.

"Ah ... that's good, that's good ..." Slogs patted Roger Signal Wilco on the shoulder, and steered him up away from the Grounding Deck. "We only have a few more hours' repairs here at the Farm, and then we'll be moving on"

Conman Abdullah was in his element. All these switches and flags and cinematic multiplexes and grunts and upsells and Circus-Co's, they were a joy to play with. His learning curve was far from flattening out now, and to be in the middle of a top secret Server Farm as well! He had re-penned the DairyLeia bovine vache with the chicken batteries, and had let the pigs out into the paddock.

As he moved deeper into the farmyard, clambering over cables, ducking through gateways, venturing past leafy dells, sampling the facepowder in the compaqs, a ferociously virulent enemy followed him. The lethally contagious Foot-In-Mouth Disease prodded its leprous fingers into all open gateways and PCI slots, and corrupted the routing of the Home Server Farm and any of its docked Fleet ... including the HMS Server 4!

Nick blundered through the fast-encroaching darkness.

"On Monday morning I began my shift on the Helpdesk", he thought to himself.

"For that matter, when **was** Monday morning?! And then I was falling ... falling falling And then there was Wilma, Oh Wilma, where are you now?! And then there was that Bin Woman. And her picnic with those tasty c2bapps, sesame-seeded, and lightly toasted. Then that strange bar with that even stranger karaoke singer. And this ... plug-in". He shuddered at the thought. "And **now** these crazy teddy bears !!!"

He had to find safety soon, dry cover in which to pass the night on this infernal jungle of a planet! He had no idea what those furry teddy bears were on about.

Suddenly, howling out from the liana vines, crashed terrifying Tuscany Raiders, swinging bottles of chianti and munching chunks of lamb liver. Nick took one look at the emaculated gentlemen, his plug-in frantically inflated and deflated... and he fainted. The Tuscany Raiders circled around him. The leader, Hannibal, stepped forward and prodded Nick with his magnum corkscrew, but no response came from the lifeless body. "What ho chaps!" exclaimed Hannibal in his plummed voice. "I do believe we have got ourselves a super supper!" "Oh jolly good show, eh what?" agreed a cannibalistic Raider enthusiastically. "If only old Garridge was with us to share a cigar or three?" noted another. "OooGA-Chukka! Oooga-ChukKA!" a maniacal bellow suddenly rolled through the trees, rooting the frightened Raiders to the spot. They glanced around, looked at each other, and scarpered.

And out from the trees shuffled a cloaked old man. He knelt beside Nick, placed a hand over the man's excited plug-in, and a few moments later leaned back on his heels. Nick's eyes fluttered open.

"Rest easy, son, you've had a busy day," rumbled the old man's voice.

Nick blinked groggily. "G-G-Grandfather Ohbeone? Boy am I glad to see you!"

"Ohbeone?" the old man chuckled, and added mysteriously, "Why, I haven't gone by that name for years." He paused, lost in the thoughts of a long time ago, in a place far, far away. He sighed, and straightened up. "Now I'm simply known as Old Fen by the Sea. But the Tuscany Raiders are easily startled, and they will soon be back in greater numbers. We must be on our way!"

Now that he was alert, Nick was confused more than ever: this old man wasn't his *Grandfather* ... surely?? That fright just now had confused him. That's why he had mistaken the old man, of course. But then *why* had this old codger agreed with Nick's woozy recognition?? He shook his head in bewilderment.

Old Fen helped Nick to his feet, and the two of them headed off under darkness towards Fen's mud hutt .

The command crew for the HMS Server 4 filed out of Lift Two, and settled at their stations on the bridge. The great and fully operational servership began to unbuckle itself from the online RJ45 pipe, Steff and TT busied themselves in the Lower Engine Rooms, and Wilma and Dr Faustus enjoyed a quiet cuppa in the No Smoking Room on the Ninth.

"Ahhh, this is more like it," smiled Slogs, patting his chair's armrest. "Time to get

on with some seriously lazy boredom deep in the web nebulae."
He turned to Comms. "Snazz, inform the Home Server Farm of our imminent departure." Snazz nodded and smiled into the mic.
"Sandy," he instructed his Second who stood at the Netstar Navigator helm, "see that cluster of stars out there ...?" he pointed vaguely at the viewscreens.
"The green ones next to the smudge on the viewer, Sir?", replied Sandy.
"No, no, just below and to the left ... yep let's head over there, shall we?"
"Aye, aye, Cap'n!"

And the HMS Server 4 leapt into Super-I-Drive riddled with Foot-in-Mouth Disease.

Chief Sparerib and his crew stumbled into the outskirts of a village, that was strikingly familiar to the PHPWoks yet eerily different. Although it was spread out upon the ground amongst the tree trunks, a recognisable weave of fatty webs were strung like interconnecting cables. It took a lot to scare a PHPWok but this blatant careless copying was frightening!
As Chief Sparerib stared he heard a slight hum begin, which inexorably increased in pitch and volume! He cringed in fear: what could this mean?
From out of one of the nearest buildings a short creature wearing a great hooded cloak covering all but it's face and hands appeared and came towards them; it seemed to be ... *floating*. From within the cloak the creature began to speak in some tongue that completely confounded the Chief.
"Morga, what is that? Do you have any idea?" The Chief asked his loyal friend. Morga was just starting to come to grips with the issue when suddenly it hit him right between the eyes. "My flour, it cannot be, not after all these years not them... not now!"
"What you fool, what is it?" demanded the Chief.
"I think this village belongs to the E-Waps, a race that began on the northern continent, much as we did, but gained some higher form of conciousness and moved away from our side of the batter in a quest for the Living Fat!"
"But I thought that was just an old legend, a tale told to little Woks...?"
"Yes and I fear we are much too close for my liking. We should get out of here *now*," Morga suggested anxiously.
The PHPWoks began to move away from the village when a great roar went up from the village. As they turned around to look they saw great numbers of E-Waps floating in their direction. Fear grabbed the PHPWok party and they lost all sense of cohesion as they scrambled to get clear from the oncoming forces. The E-Wap pulled out a small rectangular shaped object and fired a large WML stun blast. The PHPWoks were caught and frozen instantly.

The TGA Defiled ploughed through the stars, its crew panicking and desperate to get home.
"Well what do your rarsing charts suggest, then, Kia-ora?" screamed Crisko, the captain quite hysterical now. Kia-Ora vainly stifled a sob.
"Don't take it out on her, Rhett," interrupted Jordan, "we know where we are now

.... I think we're just not sure when exactly" he trailed off.
"That's right," affirmed Hworff. "We're almost certain it's the Infernal Dante Quadrant ... it's just that the constellations don't line up for our timeframe"
"Yep, that orange glowing star is really unusual," Kia-ora pointed out. "I've never seen it before in the entire universe."
"But you've ONLY EVER BEEN ON THE WEBWORLD9!!!" wailed Crisko. "The furthest you've ever been is with the help of a Jorbaeean Brandy in Quirk's!"

Not too far away, and in an undetermined number of para-years, the TGA Vacillate circled the orange star contentedly.

Roger Signal Wilco was incredulous. Sandy had been describing the ... 'wonders' ... of the HMS Server Four's lift array.
"I just don't believe it, Captain, that's illogical," he pointed out.
"That may be, Wilco, but Lift Four is ... ah ... unique"
"That's right," interjected WW-TwoOh with a flutter, "It has a personality all of its own, and we believe it to to exist at right-angles to reality!"
Roger was aghast. If he was going to be serving on board this Server, he felt he had to put his foot down. He stood up, and strode purposefully to the Lift array.
"Let's end this nonsense once and for all!"
"Oh no, Signal!" Sandy leapt after him. "Please don't do that!" But she wasn't quick enough, and Wilco slapped the call-minder controls, summoning the Fourth Lift. As she reached his side, the doors slid open, more sluggish than usual.
"Oh rars," they said in unison, and took a step back. Slogs and Snazz hurried up behind them, while WW-TwoOh cowered in the corner.

They looked into the space normally reserved for the Lift Car
..... and saw an exact scaled replica of their Universe, the WebWorld9 Space Station over there, Communites out at the back, the Domino's secret PLEKSHED down there, "... and that pinpoint of light is our HMS Server 4!!" finished Sandy bewildered.
"Oh dear," said the Captain faintly. Wilco passed out.
But Snazz kept her cool, and rushed over to comms.
"Steff! Priority One!"
"Erm cheers?"
"Almost. We've got our Universe in Lift Four."
"Oh."
"Can you find Wilma? I think we might need her Screwdriver thingy"

The Universe wasn't feeling too well.
For one thing it had been *rudely* inverted.
For another, it was now all bunched up, elbow-to-elbow, in a *lift* of all places.
And if that wasn't enough, it was having a vexing time keeping all those stars and planets and nebulae separated and in some sort of coherent order.

Under the title of 'Parent Directory', everything was listed haphazardly, with no sense of direction nor purpose.

And the five gods were feeling the strain too. They hated to admit it, but the health and general well-being of the Universe bore a direct relation on their own well-being.

As a single Hydra unit they could *refresh* in a *control* environment, re-charge their batteries, as it were, for when they were separate identities. But without their godly environment they were in danger of becoming *individuals* to too far an extent

The PHPWoks groaned into collective consciousness. They were in a spherical dark brown chamber, that was effused with a warm glow, and smelt of tangy orange. The PHPWoks, intuitive chefs that they were, immediately thought of cockroach á l'orange, and felt better for it.

As they roused themselves, a segment rolled to one side, and a cloaked E-Wap, known as Sson of Eric, floated into view. They noticed that he was holding one of those rectangular weapons, a *Nockia*, in his hand, the kind that had earlier disabled them into intermittent paralysis. They also noticed that if they could see under the dark hood was a pair of glowing pin points of light.

A crackley voice issued from the shadowy hood :

+++ U R 2 go w/me +++

The PHPWoks looked at each other, amazed that they could just about understand him, but also realising that if they did *not* accompany him, he would shoot them again. They shuffled to their feet, and followed him outside.

A great cell of E-Waps were clustered in a semi circle, mobiley agitated. They were facing a tiny E-Wap, Master Voda, the CEO shareholder, who was so technologically advanced in his years, he was almost miniaturised ; in fact, on his back was branded 'Made in Taiwan'. On the other side of Master Voda a great glass saucer lay on the ground. The PHPWoks were herded onto the saucer, which began to slowly rotate. Master Voda turned to face the newcomers, and spoke in a crackley and snowy voice, that held a slight welsh twang :

+++ U av hackd N 2 S +++ The pen L T 4 hacking S deth +++ U
will B my cro wavd 4 S +++

And Master Voda passed his claw-like hand before him, from left to right. The arrayed E-Waps raised their Nockias at the saucer, and depressed their green SEND buttons. The saucer's rotation began to increase its velocity, and as it warmed up, the PHPWoks clung together for dear life.

In Fen's hutt , Nick sat nursing a severe poking in his back from some Tuscany Raider. He was very unsure of how he knew Fen or the fact that he had claimed

he was his Grandfather, but he did feel for the first time since he had lost Wilma a sense of belonging.

Fen sat across from Nick, studying him intently. Nick shuffled awkwardly under the old man's piercing gaze.

Finally, Fen leaned back and smiled. "So young man, why are you here? I wonder what possessed you to travel half way across the galaxy searching for some old man?"

"Well you see, I'm sorry, sir, but I'm not looking for you or any old man, for that matter! I need to get back to Wilma," he looked a little sheepish as a blush stole across his cheeks. "And I need to finally get home."

"Well ... I think you might be looking for training in the ways of the Fat," Fen replied simply.

"Fat? *Fat*?! Why on earth would I need to be looking for ways to get fat?!" Nick was suddenly appalled.

"No, son, the Fat is not *merely* the great power that binds food, it surrounds us, and combines us! It flows in all of us, it binds the galaxy together! Yes, it even flows between us and the forest outside! Only the Spatula Warriors know this to be true!" Fen proclaimed with great conviction and pride.

"Look, I'm not here on any mercy mission for some old lunatic, I'm looking for a passage off this rock and away from this madness!" announced Nick, who felt he was having one conversation, while Fen was clearly having another. He jumped to his feet, and banged his head on the low ceiling. "Oww!!"

Fen peered at him quizzically. "You must learn the ways of the Fat, Nick, if you are to join with me as we fight the Rars Empire." The old man smiled, and Nick's blood ran cold at the sight of it. "It is your destiny."

"What?!" he rubbed his sore head. "Why does everyone in this place have a strange fascination with me ?! And with cooking lard?!"

"Control! Control! You must learn control!" Fen pointed a gnarled finger at the young man. "It will lead you, spatula in hand, to a brave new world, my young apprentice."

Nick sighed and sat back down, finally beaten. "Alright, alright. I'll play along... what do I have to do?" It was useless to resist. Truly, it was.

On the utterly confused and bewildered bridge of the HMS Server 4, the doors to Lift One swished open with a Flash, and Steff and Wilma stepped out.

"Wilma, ma'am, we require the services of your Screwdriver thingy," explained Captain Slogs, gesturing towards the open doors of Lift Four.

Wilma, having got used to the vagaries of the ship and its crew, nodded, and unhooked her ACME Trusty Sonic Screwdriver™ from her belt. It was a Registered Trademark, now, thanks to Saleem Bin Dion's modifications.

"Ohhhh, I can't watch," moaned the golden plated WW-TwoOh from the corner, and attempted to further hide his eyes from the parallax monstrosity.

The command crew stepped back, Sandy having dragged the now woozy Signal Wilco to the opposite side. Steff hurried over to check the Master RA Files PC, glanced at the Digital Sundial, and nodded with relief when he heard a faint ping.

"And the RA doesn't sound too healthy, Captain," he motioned towards the PC. "It's retaining it's scheduling, but it's very faint."

"HmMMM, Snazz has tried to raise an MSF with the Home Server Farm, but she can't get through," added Slogs.

"And I've noticed my gunblister emplacements have magentarised on the spectrum, and tripled in number," offered 'Guns', who had joined them. "The blisters are appearing all over the hull." He held his Blunderbu\$\$\$ at the ready.

"Right. Silence please," commanded Wilma, who stood, feet squarely planted, before the Lift Array.

She pointed the clever end of the Screwdriver at Lift Four and pressed a few buttons. She then turned to her left, and did likewise towards a nearby bright light. She pressed a few more buttons. "Okay, so at a sixtieth of a para-sec, f16, slow shutter....", she muttered, peering at a small VDU.

She aimed the Sonic at the Universe, closed her eyes, and pressed the red RLS button.

A blinding and silent flash of white noise strobed throughout the bridge. Everyone blinked a few times. The Universe remained inside Lift Four.

Wilco, the Newbie, was the first to spot the difference. "There's a Fifth Lift!" he pointed to the right of Lift Four.

"Rars! My word, you're right ..." began Slogs, but the doors swung ponderously open, and out stumbled - well, they were still floating, but they were taken somewhat by surprise - came the cell of E-Waps, Master Voda at their head.

+++ Where R we?? +++ Wots w/the Pen L T?? +++ Voda txt mssgd, losing his signal with reality.

"At the end of my Gatling!" barked the imposing figure of Guns, who, as Chief Security Officer, could always be relied upon to contain a viral flame. "You're under arrest!"

Chief Sparerib was in utter shock, for he had expected to be a few para-seconds away from being at the wrong end of a banquet meal. Now he was not too sure : the glass disk had continued to spin but was now decelerating. As he was beginning to feel his fur melt, he felt the pressure and heat evaporate in a great PING. He glanced around the saucer but saw only the other PHPWoks all looking very relieved. The PHPWoks quickly abandoned their worst fate and fled the fearsome E-Wap village which had gone eerily quiet.

"Concentra-a-a-a-ate," warbled Fen, sitting cross-legged on a bench above a deep wooden tub.

"How can I, with all this... goo?!" Nick moaned, lifting his hands to display the strands of semi-liquid-like substance that oozed around him. He stood chin deep in the tub. His skin crawled, though, thankfully, the contents had been pre-heated. He hated to think what it would have been like if it had been stone cold. With a *plop* the thick fat dropped from his fingers back into the soup.

"You must feel the fat *flow* around you!" urged the old man.

"Oh don't worry, I can, I can!!" snapped Nick. "I'm more concerned that I'll soon be feeling it flow *IN* me you daft old git!"

"Look here, my young apprentice, how can I teach you if you refuse to learn?"

"I'm not refusing, I'm up to my eyes in cooking lard for goodness sakes! How do you expect me to *learn* when I'm drowning in fat?!"

"But how are you to learn the ways of the fat without immersing yourself in it?"

"Oh come on, this is crazy, I just don't believe you!!"

"And that is why you fail!" answered Fen with a triumphant grin on his face.

"But surely you don't expect me to spend the rest of my life in a tub full of fat?!" his apprentice reasoned.

"Don't be silly, of course not," replied the old man. He leaned forward. "But you were too old to start the training, and so I have had to resort to drastic measures, fast-track you, as it were." Fen settled back and continued, "This way, we will acclimatise your body and mind and soul to the Ways of the Fat, a harmony and balance, that will forever be in your subconscious. When needed, you will *draw* from the Fat, and act ..."

"But how will I know ...?"

"You will *know*. When you are at calm, at peace, mmm, yes, a Spatula Warrior's strength flows from the Fat... he uses it for knowledge and defence..."

Nick sighed. It worried him that old Fen expected so much from him. He was absolutely sure he would never measure up to his expectations.

Fen leaned across to a nearby thermostat dial, and turned it up.

Around Nick the Fat began to bubble.

The TGA Defiled was now one very confused ship. After travelling for days in the Infernal Dante Quadrant it was readily apparent that they were in deep trouble. They were many Light years off course and who knew how far back in time they were. It was all very frustrating.

Jirk, attempting to regain some on-ship sensibility, tried to scan for habitable planets that might offer them refuge and restock of their very badly depleted supplies : they found a blue-green planet they hoped would suit their needs. The Admiral decided to go down to the planet with the formidable Hworff to search for any resources, and see what help may be on offer. Privately, Jirk was relieved when Crisko, a mad gleam developing in his left eye, agreed to remain with the ship. They boarded the small pilot shuttle, and were soon on their way.

When the shuttle landed in the midst of the planet's main city, it became very apparent that it was abandoned. All was quiet, or so they thought.

"ALL RIGHT SIR, NO, you are not listening TO ME!!" The voice was deafening, it was so overpowering that even through the shuttle the two were weeping with pain.

Jirk and Hworff donned ear protectors and headed in the direction of the noise. The noise grew in intensity.

"Right, well, you know that it IS THE RIGHT PUSH NOT YOUR LEFT."

The decibel level was almost unbearable when they reached a plaza and found, sitting on a chair, a short dumpy robot. It was obvious that the robot was frazzled: it had black wires sprouting haphazardly from the top of its head.

Hworff immediately noticed a switch to the left nipple of the robot and pushed.

"I SAID THE right not the lef...." The robot stopped.

Hworff quickly removed his ear protectors. The silence was deafening. He started to fiddle with the top of the robot. He quickly found the volume control and turned it all the way down in an attempt to actually talk to the robot.

"Okay turn him back on," Jirk said, somewhat anxious even then.

The droid blinked awake immediately and the robotic stare was very intense.

"Who ARE YOU?" It demanded. It looked as if the volume control had made very little change.

"I am Admiral Jirk and this is Officer Hworff," Jirk said.

"Ah, I am Androi Joyrider. I was once a member of the crew of the HMS Census MANY YEARS AGO BUT I AM NOW banished."

"Where are we, Androi?" Jirk said.

"You are on the planet Yucmri AND IN THE CITY of Bridgeclarity," indicated the robot.

Androi, they noticed, was clutching a battered black executable briefcase. This worried them, though they couldn't really explain why if pressed.

There was a moment's silence, in which the robot looked quizzically at them.

"DO YOU KNOW WHICH IS THE LEFT AND WHICH IS THE RIGHT??" it exploded.

Jirk and Hworff jumped. "Ssshhhh, no need to be so loud!" waved Jirk frantically.

"OH SORRY, sorry, Sirs," replied Androi, apologetically. "I guess I don't know when I'M TOO LOUD. You see this place can be deafening," he explained waving his arm towards the deserted city.

Jirk and Hworff exchanged puzzled looks, though Hworff's face on Jirk's handsome and cherubic features, they agreed, did not go too well.

"So this place is 'Bridgeclarity', you say?" enquired Jirk, invitingly.

"That's right," nodded the robot. "I was serving with Infer-Man on the 'Bridge cities, AND THIS WAS MY FINAL CITY where I was stationed. I was the only specialist who could decode and re-encrypt the ISEs."

"And?" asked Hworff, leaning closer.

"WELL SOMETHING catastrophic happened, AND EVERYONE SUDDENLY WENT AWAY", he shouted back.

Once Jirk and Hworff had regained their footing, Jirk asked the obvious.

"I DON'T RIGHTLY KNOW, SIRs, but they started leaving whenever I spoke a little above the HSE decibel levels."

Jirk and Hworff nodded in complete understanding.

The TGA Vacillate slowly crept up behind the TGA Defiled, which was in a holding position in orbit over the planet Yucmri near the brightly glowing orange star.

The bridge crew exploded into action.

"Ma'am!" exclaimed Parey. "We have an incoming vessel. Very likely to be unknown and hostile!"

"Oh!" returned Captain Wasitmean. "... Are you sure?!"

"We-ell, that's what they say in the movies" her second-in-command trailed off.

Signal Folley, the Navigator was with them. "They erm don't seem to be taking any hostile action, do they?" she suggested.

"But they *are* getting closer," reasoned the Captain.

The TGA Vacillate continued to advance towards the TGA Defiled.

"So those strange hooded sprites are in the secure block, then, Guns?" asked Captain Slogs on the bridge of the MHS Server 4.

"That's right, their conf has now been authorised. They won't be going very far very soon," the Security Officer grinned evilly.

"Hokay!" Slogs rubbed his hands together, and turned to the open doors of Lift Four. "Wilma, ma'am, what do you advise?"

"We-ell, to be honest, Captain, I'm not too sure," answered Wilma, who stood fiddling with her knobs and switches. "I'm pretty certain that the Universe is okay in there - we are okay, so surely that means the Universe is still running smoothly... doesn't it?" she asked, hopefully.

Steff chuckled with experience. The RA Files had started to PING again, louder and more frequently, so he was feeling more at ease: if the really really important RA Files PC that did absolutely nothing ever failed to PING, *then* he would worry. Sandy steered him away from the others; she didn't want him to cause any undue worry.

"Well we obviously don't want to extract the whole universe nebulae by nebulae, that would be... messy," said Wilco testily.

"And what could we do with the planets and stars? Where would we put them?? We haven't got enough space in the lower holds!!" argued Sandy.

"Okay, okay," declared Slogs, waving his arms in a calming gesture. "What we'll do is this : I'll discuss it with M'Mammos, well, I mean, I'll *listen*, but for the time being I think we ought to close the Lift's doors," Slogs nodded. "After all, it *does* look rather untidy, doesn't it, and there's no need to be reminded of it all the time," he explained, gesturing to the universe floating in the Lift car.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief, and agreed that this was indeed the best course of action. They ushered WW-TwoOh to the Lift array, and persuaded him, against his will, to hit the CLOSED button on the controls. The doors Swuushed closed with a Flickering whimper.

"Right! I'm off to M'Mammos," announced Slogs. He paused, and turned to Wilma. "Ma'am, would you mind erm ... accompanying me? You seem to ah ... get on so well with the Manageress!"

"Sure ... I was going to mull this over in fact I'm wondering if a certain ethereal chiffon-wearing Lady could help us" mused Wilma thoughtfully.

The Lift Two doors opened at the Ninth Deck, and Captain Hard-Grafft Slogs and Wilma stepped out into the fog.

"C-c-careful, now, ma'am," stuttered Slogs nervously.

"Oh, don't be such a baby!!" criticised Wilma. "Ya-hoo! Tinaaaaaa??!" she called

out.

A snap of a whip and some chains clanked in response, and Dr Faustus Tina stepped out of the mists. "WILMA!!!" she beamed happily. "What you doin' 'ere?!!" "Oh, we've got the universe inside Lift Four," she answered dismissively with a wave of her hand. "So we thought we'd quiz ..."

".... M'Mammos?" finished the Guardian of M'Mammos. "Step this way," she said, indicating a portal to the left. "This is my own personal gateway".

The three of them stepped inside the white chamber, and Slogs hurried over to the water fountain, depressing the switch that allowed the water to flow through the tap.

"O, mighty M'Mammos", he explained. "The ... ahmmmm ... universe appears to be inside, well, when I say inside, what I mean is"

But the omniscient organisms interrupted him. "WM-ess-12345. Done. It looks okay from here."

"Pardon?" blinked Slogs. "Can you explain??" He had learnt that trick from Steff.

"Ah. Yes. We see the problem, now. The pearl bookstore was stocked with version 3 pizzas. Cheers?" They had learnt *that* trick from Steff.

Wilma stepped up. "Come on, now. What can we tell our customers??" She glared at the floaters in the distilled water.

There was silence as the supra-intelligent micro-organisms pondered this from the safety of their glass cylinder.

"A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, there is an executable briefcase. It is black, and was new." M'Mammos looked smug. "Done."

The bridge doors to Lift One swished shut behind Slogs, Wilma and Tina, who had come along for the view, and they updated their colleagues with M'Mammos' riddle.

"So we need to find a black battered executable briefcase. Easy," announced Signal Wilco.

"But it's in the past?!" argued Sandy.

"And we have the whole universe to search in!! It's like looking for an '&' in an initialisation string!!" moaned TwoOh, the pessimistic droid.

"Or a space character in a TUNIX file," agreed Steff.

Slogs and Wilma were deep in thought, mulling over their predicament. She looked up. "Of course, we do have the universe in one place," she reasoned. "It's all in Lift Four."

"And as you peer deeper inside you see further back in time," continued Slogs, vaguely recalling his Home Server Farm Fleet classroom lessons.

"Hullo Wilma," came a non-voice that could sink starship cruise liners. Everyone turned and saw the ethereal and chiffon-clad Saleem Bin Dion step from Lift Five. Everyones' mouths dropped open. "I understand you have a slight problem in one of your lifts?" Everyone nodded, speechless. "And that you are looking for a very old and fairly battered black executable briefcase"

The PHPWoks hastily beat their eggs as they scrambled over the uneven turf surrounding the E-Waps' Fully-Licensed G3 village. They were desperate to

make it to the comparative safety of the jungle, but without a starship, they weren't too sure what menu options were left open to them. They picked their way through the liannas and creepers.

"Oh! I say! Elevenes!" came a posh voice from somewhere off to their right.

"Nah. Brunch, I'd propose!!" decided the left hand jungle.

Having had their Courageous Flippers and Wooden Spoons confiscated by the E-Waps, the PHPWoks were mortally defenceless. With nowhere to run, they huddled together in a quivering soufflé, and waited for the worst. A well-chewed piece of lamb's liver hurtled across the clearing and landed in the dust before the PHPWoks. There came a rustling in the undergrowth as several things slowly advanced.

"OooGA-Chukka! Oooga-ChukKA! OooGA-Chukka! Oooga-ChukKA! Time for some onsite experience, my Apprentice!" invited an old man's voice from somewhere in front of the PHPWoks.

The Tuscany Raiders looked at each other, collectively gulped, adjusted their tuxedos, and scampered back into the forest. The little PHPWoks huddled together, shaking with fear: out of the frying pan and into the electrostat oven, to say the least!

Fen and Nick, who was covered all over in a pale veneer of lard, appeared from the undergrowth, and without further ado, escorted the PHPWoks back to the Old General's mud hut beside the Sea.

Once there, Fen quickly whisked together a Quiche Lesley, and served it to the little furry Woks, who, after all the excitement, had low fat-sugar levels. As they huddled in the far corner munching their way through the biscuit filling, Fen and Nick discussed the day's events.

"You see, my young Apprentice," Fen was pointing out, agreeably. "You didn't need to resort to *Naked Twister* to save our little friends. By immersing yourself in the fat, you had the lung capacity to scare away those Tuscany Raiders! You *felt* the Fat flow around you and through you"

"Arhhmmmm, yeah I guess so" answered Nick doubtfully. "I'm just glad that this plastering of goo all over me meant they didn't recognise me!" he whispered. "I can't abide being called 'N-ick', nor being bullied because I wasn't the Chosen One."

Fen chuckled. "Now we have to see where they've come from, and what they want"

"And how to get rid of them. Unfortunately, their ship splintered into pieces when we crashed here," explained Nick.

"Awwwww, cannot get your ship out?" teased the Old General.

"But it's in PIECES!" moaned Nick, who wasn't sure if he preferred to stay with Fen and send the PHPWoks packing, or try and sneak away from the mad old man, and depart with them in what remained of their starship.

"Judge me by my singular oneness?" enquired Fen cryptically. "Use the Fat, Nick! You *are* the Chosen One!! We have the power to rebuild ... you must glue the ship back together with the *fat*!"

Nick rolled his eyes, and sighed.

Jirk and Hworff, ears fully plugged, walked Androi Joyrider between them by the arms. They were heading back to the shuttle, having decided it was safer back on the Defiled than in the oppressively deserted Yucmri city of Bridgeclarity. Androi had refused to leave behind his black case, and was clutching it to his chest.

They clambered into the shuttle and soon blasted off, escalating into the planet's orbit. As they cleared the curve of the northern hemisphere, they spotted the TGA Defiled and another vessel closing fast from behind!

"Jirk to Crisko!" pinged the Admiral to the Defiled. "Enemy ship in range!!"
But only snowy static was returned.

Meanwhile, on board the HMS Server 4, Saleem had stepped up to the edge of Lift Four's opening. She teetered on the brink of the universe.

"Oh, do be careful, ma'am!" urged Captain Slogs, gallantly. He had no idea who this lady was or where she came from, and in fact thought she was a little short for a Starship Trooper vocalist, but he was the Captain of the Ship, after all, and had to keep up appearances.

Gripping the edge of the doorframe, Saleem leaned in and stretched out with her other hand, fingers probing deep into the space between the nebulae and the galaxies. She felt something under her finger tip, and tapped gently

Great booms ricocheted about the HMS Server 4, and the crew were flung to the deck.

"Oooops, sorry," she apologised over her shoulder, and, twisting a little, angled her arm to the left and deeper into the lift car.

"Oh Rars!" she exclaimed in a lilting french-canadian-arabic accent. "I've just bumped something"

..... And in the Dante Quadrant, high over Yucmri, many millennia past, the TGA Vacillate found itself suddenly pin-balled great lightisms across the sector!

Crisko and his shuttle crew gaped in amazement as they saw the intruder bowling away, end over end. Quickly, Hworff steered the shuttle towards the Defiled's hanger bay.

"..... Ahh, got it I think," announced Saleem, triumphantly. And ever so slowly and carefully she withdrew her arm from the lift car, her index finger and thumb pinched together, delicately holding a scaled spaceship - the TGA Defiled!

Saleem looked triumphant. "See? This was the problem all along," she beamed.

"Within this ship is the Battered Black Executable Briefcase we search for!"

"Hey, that looks like a mini version of the TGA Defiled!" Snazz said. "How did that get there?"

"It *is* the TGA Defiled," Saleem pointed out patiently. "All we need to do is enlarge the ship and use the great Executable Briefcase to solve the problem!"

Fen watched as Nick tried to help the disgruntled PHPWoks sort out the remains of the 'Naked Jirk'. The old man found it amusing to watch these furry teddy bear creatures hit Nick repeatedly with their wooden spoons as they cursed him in frustration. The fact that Chief Sparerib sat mutely upon the ground and very pointedly ignored Fen or Nick was his way of expressing his anger. But Fen could tell that behind their terse façade, they really were grateful to the human for helping them with their repairs.

Under the Chosen One's guidance and liberal applications of gooey lard, the PHPWoks were slowly re-building their 'Naked Jirk' from all the MHFP Extensionlet debris that was scattered about the great tree. They weren't sure if the E-Waps would be back to make their life a misery again, so they hurried as fast as their little paws could go.

"O N-ick!" cried Morga gratefully. "You truly belong with us in the tree-tops!"

Nick just scowled at him, still undecided as to whether he should escape with them, or remain with Fen. He knew he wanted to find Wilma, and was resigning himself to the fact that he would probably have to join them, or lie : lying to Fen about his 'powers' just to humour the old man did not sit well with Nick's morals, even when he felt the answer to most of Life's problems was a *hearty round of Naked Twister*.

Great tremors shook the TGA Defiled, and the fabric of the starship creaked under the strain. Inside, Hworff made his slow way to the Bridge, while Jirk escorted the increasingly anxious Androi Joyrider down to the holding slots. The shuttle had been thrown onto its side, but its crew had managed to vacate it just in time.

Crisko was staggering about the Command Bridge, and, hand over hand, made his way back to the Captain's Chair, just as Hworff collapsed into his own seat at the side station.

"Captain. It's just illogical!" exclaimed O'Brains, the Chief Engineer, totally bewildered. "It's as if we're stuck in an earthquake zone!"

"And the IDS viewer's only display glaring Dulux Brilliant White! We can't see a thing!!" cried Kia-ora, hysterically.

"Okay, okay, don't panic, in big friendly letters," assured Crisko.

Another lurch threw them all to the right ; they crawled back into their seats.

"Ummmm shields? Weapons? Are we ready to take evasive action?" enquired Crisko nervously. "Why can't we outfly this thing??"

O'Brains answered. "It's as if the engines at full power just have no effect!"

The bowling velocity of the TGA Vacillate was diminishing, and the crew were thanking their lucky Rars that the anti-grav had taken hold, and they weren't being thrown around like ragdolls.

"What hit us??" yelled Second Officer Parey.

"I don't know what do you think?" replied Captain Evadian, true to form.

"So how do we enlarge it?" demanded Sandy on the bridge of the HMS Server 4. "And it will have to be done during an allotted scheduling," reminded Signal Wilco, who felt that it was high time he returned to his station's duties now that everything appeared to be returning to normal.

Slogs waved him into silence, though, as he helped Saleem and her precious cargo to Lift One. "So, ma'am, do you have any suggestions ...?"

"We-ell everything in a bin is reduced to a common denominator, a level pegging if you like. Nothing grand and nothing inferior, once in the bin, you are the same status as the next piece of crap beside you," she explained knowingly.

"What I propose is to ahm throw this in the bin, as it were, and then re-extract it to its full 1:2:1 size."

"I'd suggest using the recycling bin down in the small service hangar bay where the remote shell Web-Bot is stored", suggested Steff, helpfully. "That way if you are successful in reverting the Defiled back to size, you have a TEMP holding space large enough to store it.

"Cheers?" he added, for good measure.

CHAPTER 8

In Space no one can hear you scream. Honestly you can't do anything in space as you would die the minute you left your oxygen environment, but you get the idea.

Right now McVities Hobbs was screaming: he was petrified. The crumbley caramelly voice was shrieking a plea of desperation worthy of a nougat-filled chew bar.

"I don't care who I am talking to!! I just want to get off this rock and go back to the Server Farm! I was left alone on some planet in the middle of nowhere by that low class Barney McGrew and I want to get out of here!"

Hobbs had indeed been tricked by the conniving McGrew into transporting down to investigate some rare lichen on the ice planet of Brrrrr'Aa on the way to WebWorld9 and had been left for dead. He was far from impressed. He had struggled across the blue white surface of the planet until he had found a small and abandoned outpost where he had discovered the latest Pandora's Monthly eee-magazines and the communications device that he was currently screaming into.

He was *communicating* with someone from the Server fleet headquarters on Alphabravo in the Fonetec System. It was not going very well.

"Look, I am not asking you, I am telling you!! If you don't send someone out to the fourth planet in the GWN System there will be Rars to pay!" he roared with finality.

"Alright Captain Hobbs, I will send the HMS Dedicated to your location, Captain Catchador will be your contact," came the patronising reply.

"Ah right, I think my old friend Rich T Biskit has joined their crew. All good people. Yes that will be ... satisfactory," he grudgingly admitted.

Captain Hobbs finally settled down and nibbled on some of the emergency stores of Marsh Munchers, while leafing his way through one of the Pandora magazines. "Fine art at its finest...." he said, much happier now.

The HMS Dedicated routed through space at a zinging pace. Captain Odyssey Catchador lived up to his namesake and always aimed to meet whatever deadlines were thrown at him. He was proud in an arrogant sort of way, strutting around the Server Farm behind his shades and his toothpaste advert smile. He enjoyed showing off, more so when there was an appreciative audience.

"Well, you do ingdeed have a fasht one 'ere," applauded Rich T Biskit in a thick nasally voice. His head cold had suddenly got worse, and the 2-channel AV streaming was making his handkerchief thick with goo. He sneezed loudly. "Oh, exguse me," he apologised.

"That's all right, deep space is certainly a cold place," remarked Catchador. "Of course, if you were like me, fit as a fiddle and wooing the ladies with my 6-pack, you wouldn't have the time to be ill!"

Rich T smiled politely. "I hope we gan reach MagVities in time, he hates beink idle and bored. I don't know what I'd do if I were stuck on an ice gube," he said.

Captain McVities Hobbs was happily flicking through Pandora's Monthly, digressing briefly as he wondered which way up the centrefold image should be viewed.

In the HMS Server Four's service bay, Steff taxied the Shell 'Bot to one side, to allow room for the rollback of the TGA Defiled. Slogs led Saleem to the nearest bin, where she rummaged around inside the container.

"I just want to make sure we have some *quality* waste in here, first," she explained to Slogs' puzzled look. "When I revert the Defiled's size, it helps to be able to draw on the surrounding flotsam and jetsom. Consequently, what is currently in the Bin affects whatever is put in there and whatever comes out," she added warningly.

Slogs peered over her shoulder. "Ummmm a MuckRonalds wrapper - I don't know, those things get everywhere!" he moaned. "A greasy rag, some nuts and bolts, a mouldy C2Bapps hmmm, with extra sesame seeds, I notice!" he added with relish. "And yesterday's copy of 'The Stellar Sun' STEFF!!" he barked, "WHAT'S THIS FILTHY NEWSPAPER DOING IN HERE??!"

Steff poked his head out from the Web-Bot's cockpit. "Nothing to do with me, Boss! Cheers!"

"Ohhh, this lot will have to do but I can't guarantee the quality of the Defiled....." advised Saleem. "Can you stand back, please, Captain?"

Slogs hurried to the far side of the Hangar Bay, where Steff soon joined him. Saleem Bin Dion tossed the miniaturised TGA Defiled into the Bin, and passed her hand over the Receiving Slot.

There was a tall, dark, silent flash and a puff of smoke.

Saleem had disappeared, and the bin was squashed underneath the hull of a true-type sized TGA Defiled!

"Rars," whispered Slogs.

"Cheers," agreed Steff heartily.

"Rars, Rars, RARS!!!" shouted Slogs boisterously, as he marched up to the entrance hatch, and slapped the external manual over-ride controls with a 515 Server Farm code. As the ramp slowly lowered, Slogs called up into the darkened interior. "Crisko? Yahoooooooooooo? Dot Com? Anyone there?!"

"Smells a bit mouldy, Captain" began Steff, worriedly. "And it has that cardboardy salt-n-vinegar smell you get at a MuckRonalds"

"Mmmmm, from what I can see everything's black and shiny with oil," Slogs indicated the gloomy corridor that led away from the boarding ramp. "Oh my Rars.....!!!"

"What is it???" demanded Steff, squinting into the gloom.

"I-It's ... it's ..." stuttered the Captain.

Hworff appeared from the murk, totally naked except for a pair of tassles. Crisko, also naked, peeped over the Klick-On's shoulder. Jirk followed from behind, his hand covering his modesty.

"Ah. Captain Slogs," began Crisko. "... Ummmm good to see you again..."

The crew of the TGA Defiled, directed by Slogs, quickly made their way to the Green Rooms of the HMS Server 4, where they found a fresh wardrobe of clothes. As they were shrugging on some Christmas party frocks - which Captain Crisko was *not* happy about - Slogs was casually debriefing them, trying to make sense of what had happened to them since the attack by the Rars War Fleet and that Battlestation.

"So it just 'dropped', you say?" commented an amazed Slogs. "But that's just an insult to Einstein's family?!"

"I know!!!" Crisko shot back. "And then we ... arhmmmm ... got pulled to one side by that Rarsing wormhole"

Slogs burst out laughing. "The Jorbaean wormhole that every space cadet knows the exact z-index for??"

"Yeah, alright, alright," he muttered. "And then we found that we had actually gone back in time and ended up in the city of Bridgeclarity on the planet of Yucmri where we met this chap," he said, indicating the robot Androi Joyrider, who still clutched his black executable briefcase to his chest.

"PLEASED TO MEET you Sir, my name IS ANDROI JOYRIDER," beamed Androi.

Slogs picked himself up off the floor, and eyed the black executable briefcase.

Nick sat down, finished at last. The ship positively glistened with the sheen of fat around it. He had to admit to a glowing feeling of pride at the result.

The 'Naked Jirk' now resembled a gigantic handwhisk. The fact that it had taken this form had amazed Nick as he was sure that it would've been much more like a boxy kind of shuttle without all its add-ons. Old Fen had just nodded knowingly.

"Well the time has come young Nick to escape this place and seek your destiny," Old Fen said.

"Yes and it is time for us to go back to find the great moon that will be arriving in the space of Bendor soon!" added a beaming Chief Sparerib. "And I think we have arrived at a name for this new ship!"

"Oh, really and what might that be?" asked Nick carefully, not without some trepidation.

"Well, you see N-lick, it was your own position that decided the fate of this ship ... so we have decided to name it after you!"

"I am very pleased to hear that Chief," Nick replied carefully. "It does my heart good to know that you think so highly of me."

"Yes, we have named it ... the 'HTM Ready-Steady-N-ick'!"

"I am ... speechless," said a shocked and somewhat dismayed Nick: he had always hated those TV programmes!

After celebrating with the PHPWoks, Nick realised Old Fen had wandered off. Concerned, he made his way over to the old man's hutt . Nick found Old Fen packing his meagre belongings into a rucksack.

Nick asked the old man what he was doing.

Fen stood up and turned to face his young Apprentice. He wore an expression of utmost seriousness and dedication. "The time has come, I must go with you to the WebWorld9 for you must become a Spatula Warrior like your father before you!" Nick looked at him. "Arrhmm ... but my father was a postal worker from Croydon?" he answered, puzzled. "Wasn't he??"

"That was what he wanted you to think," Fen answered. He licked his lips, and shuffled from one foot to the other. When he continued, he did so hesitantly.

"Your father was ... strong with the Fat ..." revealed Old Fen, "until he was beaten by Lard Q-Rob, the Dark Lard of the Sieve. Along with so many other Spatula Warriors like him," he added wistfully.

"Sp-Spatula Warrior?!" stuttered Nick, incredulously.

Fen nodded. "Guardians of Justice and Order and Peas. He was once a Spatula Warrior ... like his father before him ..."

"No, I don't believe you, that's ridiculous." He backed away, shaking his head.

Fen sighed. "Nick, this won't be easy for you to hear, but you must. There may not be much time left, and besides, I'm getting too old for this sort of thing."

Nick moved to the nearby bench that ran along one side of the mud hutt. The mad old man had all his attention now.

"Your father was my son. I *am* your Grandfather Fenstre Ohbeone. You see, Nick, only the greatest, most powerful Spatula Warriors are able to pass through the time and space of the mainframe. The Fat is strong in my family, my father had it ... my son had it ... and *his* son has it ... yes, it's you, Nick, you are my grandson ..."

Nick slowly nodded to himself, subconsciously accepting the truth of the words. "I always wondered how I was able to eat so many burgers and not put on any weight ..." he mused.

Fen smiled. "But that's not all! You will have had ... special moments ... where you've done something out of the ordinary ... yet you've been unable to explain it."

Nick frowned. He couldn't exactly recall any times like *that* as such, unless you counted ... no, no, surely not. He shook his head.

An introspective silence settled on the hutt.

The younger man looked up and regarded Fen directly. "H-How did .. my father ... die?"

Fen swallowed. "There was a great battle. Q-Rob had personally slaughtered many Warriors, and the fields were red with their blood. Only a very few escaped alive, and I was lucky enough to be among them." He sighed. "Unfortunately, though, I do not know where they are now. For all I know, they are dead too, and I am the Last of the Spatula Warriors."

"And you've been hiding out here like a coward?!" The anger was swelling in Nick, now.

"Pretty much," admitted Fen. "I'm not strong enough to defeat the Dark Lard of the Seive. So it was a choice of self-imposed exile, or going back to your grandma ... but even I couldn't take her incessant nagging for long."

Nick nodded in sympathy.

Then Nick's mind backtracked. "Wait-a-minute. Y-you said ... *mainframe*? Travelling through the time and space of the mainframe?! W-what do you mean??"

Fen sighed, and lowered his eyes. "Nick, you're going to find that many of the hometruths we cling to depend greatly on our own blessed ignorance."

“What do you mean?” replied Nick carefully.

Fen raised his eyes, and stared into those of his grandson. “What you know as home ... is actually a set of computer programs. They’re stored away in folders in another mainframe. What you know as ‘the Universe’ ... is actually a collection of Server mainframes.”

Nick opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came out.

“Travellin’ through the mainframes ain’t like dustin’ crops, kid!” grinned Fen. “As I said earlier, only the most powerful of the Spatula Warriors can accomplish this feat. And you can do this. Or at least, you will, one day.” The old man patted Nick on the shoulder. “But the Dark Lard of the Seive will never let you escape,” he added soberly.

“So the universe is doomed then, at the mercy of this Q-Rob?”

“We-ell, no, not exactly,” and he grinned. “The prophecy says the Chosen One will appear to purge the Universe from it’s resident evil ... And, well, we’ve heard what the PHPWoks think about that, haven’t we now?”

“Those furry teddy bears?!” barked Nick. “Why should we listen to what those failed chefs have to say??”

“Ah ... your eyes can deceive you : the PHPWoks were often used as MSN Couriers. The Master Spatula Network was forever in their debt. You wonder how they can build *starships*?? Wonder no more. They are an unusual species, to say the least ...”

The PHPWoks lined themselves up inside the newly-built starship. They raised their right arms high above their heads, their left hands cupped, palms down, and presented before them.

The Chief held his Ceremonial Wooden Spoon high, and then dropped it : the PHPWoks all began pumping their hands up and down in a vertical direction.

The 'Ready, Steady, N-Ick' slowly began to rise, in a jerky, 'stuttering' fashion, its destination the Tourist Moon of Bendor, via the WebWorld9 for Fen and Nick!

“You have five para-minutes to beat these eggs, rustle up a cheese, mushroom, and ham omelette, *and* present it on a plate beside a sliced tomato and two pieces of buttered bread,” instructed Fen.

“Wha-?” Nick looked at the old man in surprise. “But that’s impossible to do in five minutes!”

“No, it’s not impossible. I used to bullseye them back home when I was your age.”

They were in the small section of the ship that was put aside for the galley, roughly located in the shaft of a hand blender just before the blades. Nick was standing before a worktop holding a two foot long spatula, that glowed a faint blue. In front of him were arrayed a cooking wok and various plates and bowls. Nick sighed. “Okay, okay, I’ll try ...”

“No !” snapped Fen. “There is no *try*, only do ... or do *not!*”

Again Nick sighed, but he raised his spatula and, on Fen’s count, dived into his work.

Twelve para-minutes later, Nick stood back exhausted.

"I can't, it's too much... too little time..."

"Control, control, you must learn control!" Fen said, exasperated. "This *snack* would be completed in five para-minutes were you a Spatula Warrior!"

Nick just shook his head.

Fen gestured to him to move to one side. "Here, boy, watch me... if you can, that is."

Fen drew his own spatula which glowed proudly. In the blue light, he took two new eggs and held them together high above the rim of the wok.

Two and a half para-minutes later, a slightly panting Fen presented Nick with a plate, beautifully adorned with succulent omelette, neatly sliced tomato, and mouth-watering buttered bread.

Nick just gaped.

Fen grinned, put the plate down, and stepped over to a cupboard. He withdrew an extra-large sized chef's hat.

"I suggest you try it again... but this time wearing this hat." And with that he plopped the baggy white adornment upon Nick's head; it slipped down over his eyes.

"But with the hat on I can't see... how am I expected to cook?" he moaned.

"Stretch out with your feelings and you will see..." Fen answered cryptically.

He provided his young apprentice with two fresh eggs, helped him up to the workspace, and once again gave a count down. Nick took a deep breath and aimed the eggs at the wok.

Seven para-minutes later, Nick pulled off the large hat, and gazed in surprise at the result of his feast: although the items were spread across the plate and the work top, they *were* all there!

"You see, you can do it!" announced Fen.

"Wow! It was almost like I could see the omelette!" Nick breathed.

"Well, Nick, you have just taken your first step into a larger world, congratulations! You are indeed a Spatula Warrior!"

Nick sat down. *Imagine me, a warrior*, he marvelled, *that takes some doing doesn't it?!*

Q-Rob watched as Governor Kablue-e's engineers tried to bring the DottOrg battlestation back into some sort of reality. One where natural laws applied might be nice. For the Empress, it was a simple do or die, one that got results everytime. In this case, the engineers worked their *rarsest* so as not to die.

So it was that they changed the laws of Physics, braking the fall of the sphere and returning them to the den of Einstein's relations and the good old familiar Universe. To say that the whole thing left a sour taste in the godly mouths was an

understatement.

The slightly charred battlestation had been brought to a halt near a planet whose advanced civilisation screamed its electronic presence out into the aether. Its non-spacefaring inhabitants were only just recovering from their global panic at the sight of this vast metal moon high in their skies, and were weighing up the possibilities of a peaceful communication, or, more reliably, a military one. The latter was currently the favoured option.

The Empress looked on in triumph as the DottOrg ball climbed from the planet's gravity well, shedding the magnetised remnants of the RARS fleet as it did so. "That planet! It had the affrontery to try and trap my DottOrg Ball! I will not have it! I will now demonstrate the power of this fully armed and operational Battle Station!"

She flicked her com-link on.

"You may fire when ready, commander!" she barked. "No! Rars that! *Fire now!*"

Across the station, lights dimmed as power was shunted into the DottOrg ball's main weapon. With a rumbling roar, it opened fire, and a huge extended blast of KrAK energy speared out from the Ball and impacted on the planet, ripping a huge hole through its crust. For an instant, the land masses glowed with suppressed fire, and the seas coagulated into dark, burnt fat before vaporising.

Then the planet exploded.

The Empress watched in glee as the planet shattered, deliberately ignoring the fact that about a third of the RARS fleet was caught in the explosion and destroyed or severely damaged since she hadn't bothered to warn them of what was about to occur. "Yessss!" She hissed. "Now *that's* how to kick rars!"

Q-Rob just looked at her and sighed.

Across space, old Fen suddenly clutched his stomach and gasped. Nick abandoned his newly-successful culinary feats and wandered over.

"What's happened?" he asked, concerned.

"I sense ... a great disturbance ... in the fat," the old man could barely whisper. Nick looked at the old man's stomach. "Oh I don't know, you could do with losing a few pounds, nothing that serious, though... "

"Ooooooo, pass me an anagram," Captain Wasitmean urged Paradia Maximus. The rotund First Officer handed her a packet of the headache tablets, and she gulped down five in a row.

In seconds, she was feeling light-hearted, and her spirits were bouyant.

"Ahh, I feel much better" she took a deep breath. "Now ... What THE RARS HAPPENED?"

The TGA Vacillate's Navigations Officer, Signal Folley, stepped forward. "After the initial pin-ball motion, as I was checking the constellations, I spotted this HUGE battlestation dropping down on top of us!!!" she paled, and fell to her knees with the shock of recoil.

Engineer Toth Hazel resumed the account. "Well, this battlestation hit us - thankfully our Andrex shields were strong enough to only suffer *'arf-a-dent* - and went off at right-angles, towards a nearby planetoid. Then my scanners lost it." Evadian slumped down in her Captain's chair. "Okay. So we got hit. Then we stopped rolling. Then we got hit again. By a *battlestation*? But this battlestation isn't attacking us again, now. So we're ummmm ... safe now?" she asked fearfully.

"So far." grinned Toth, optimistically.

"So what do you think we should do now, hmmm?" Since the excitement had calmed down, her mind was reverting to its usual woolly self.

Slogs was unable to prise the briefcase from Androi's vice-like grasp, so he propelled the robot down the corridor to the lift array.

"DO YOU WISH ME TO ENCRYPT THE ISEs, SIR?" the robot offered.

"No, no, that won't be necessary," replied Slogs, patting Androi on the shoulder with one hand, and stuffing as many fingers as he could into his ear.

"Oh, well I can EASILY DE-CRYPT THE ISEs, IF you prefer," Androi continued earnestly, bouncing around in the decibel ranges.

The Captain steered the robot into the waiting doors of Lift Three.

Within moments, the Bridge doors to Lift *Two* slid open with a shocking wave releasing the captain and the robot. Slogs shuddered, and glanced over his shoulder at the ID display above the lift. *How does it do it?!* he thought to himself.

"Right, Androi," Slogs began carefully, "we require you to ahhhhh use that smart briefcase of yours to *encrypt* the contents of this Lift Four here."

Slogs operated the call-minder controls, and the Universe was beheld in all its glory.

Wilma stepped up to the brink, and pointed her Trusty Sonic into the vast well, holding it from the side. Androi lined up behind her, and with a flick of his wrist, flashed open the tattered black executable briefcase. Wilma depressed the indigo button, and with a pink flash, the Universe was sucked into her Sonic's pointy end, and was channelled in one precise line out of the stubby end across into the open black briefcase. Within para-secs, the Universe was collated inside the briefcase, and Androi graciously snapped it shut with a CLICK.

Although the crew felt a slight tremor in the decking whilst the universe - and itself - was sucked out of Lift Four and into the case, they all kept their footing, and in fact cheered when they heard the click *connect* !

"Right," announced Slogs, rubbing his hands together. "We've sorted that out quite well, if I don't say so myself." The captain turned to his Security Officer, and raised an eyebrow in the direction of the briefcase.

Androi beamed LOUDLY, proud that he had been of use to these nice people. He didn't resist when Guns professionally sidled up to him and gently prised the battered black executable briefcase from his grasp. As Guns purposefully strode for Lift One, Sandy took Androi by the arm as the robot began to glance around inquisitively.

"My word, does that LOOK LIKE AN RA-FILES PC, version 3.007???" he pointed.

"Oh, and, surely, that CANNOT BE A –"

"Androi, why don't I give you a brief tour...?" interrupted Sandy smoothly, and she guided him to Lift Three. "We can call on your ... ahh ... *friends* whilst we're about it..."

Once the doors to the Lift had flashed shut, Slogs clapped his hands together. "Excellent work there by the crew, I think!" He faced those who remained. "All we have to resolve *now* are these blisters and pimples that are starting to appear around this place"

Empress Loffux, if you could see under her hood, and if you *dared* be close enough to peer under her hood, grinned from ear to ear, and rubbed her hands together ecstatically. There's nothing like vaporising a planet to cheer your spirits.

Q-Rob looked at his friend, and frowned. Even when separated, the five gods could communicate and understand one another. Well, if you didn't count Huw and Scrub, that is : he was *slightly* mad, and she seemed to be always off on her adventures when she wasn't ensuring the Universe *flowed*. But nevertheless, something was definitely wrong. He could *feel* it. A sensation of nagging forgetfulness, combined with cramp on the scale of irritable bowel syndrome, really could not be ignored, and it had begun as soon as their battlestation had plummeted from the WebWorld9... But added to that was a distinct *fuzziness* when it came to *linking* with his fellow Hydra-parts.

He had to get away, and now! It seemed to him that with the other gods absent, and Guru clearly too engrossed in anger, he was the only one with a stable perspective. He needed peace and quiet to mull this over, and then recall his four friends back to him.

Q-Rob nonchalantly backed up to a side door. Loffux whirled about to face him.

"And where do you think you're going?!!" she hissed with superiority.

"Oh? Me? Ah," Q's mind raced. Now that the Hydra had been wiped into its sub-particles, he wasn't too sure what dastardly malevolent plans were being serving-side applied in her mind. But that meant his own anxious behaviour could be masked from her. "I thought I'd better run some diagnostics, now, and evaluate what damage we may have suffered. And then we can get on with deleting the WebWorld9!" he added brightly.

Neither realised just where, nor, of course, *when*, they were now. The teenage spotty-faced navigations cadet knew which side his C2Bapp, sesame-seeded, was larded, and kept his initial observations to himself.

Sandy steered Androi back to the Green Rooms, where they found the crew of the TGA Defiled. Still dressed in their party frocks, their mood had lifted as the *jolly* atmosphere of all things christmasy had slowly and insidiously permeated them. Balloons had been inflated, and the tangy smell of cordite hung in the air from several pulled crackers. All in all they were relieved to be back to normal size and in a time frame that included their friends and colleagues. Oh, and that noisy robot had left them in peace, too! Recognising their opportunity, Jirk and Crisko were about to shepherd the crew back to the ship and depart for the WebWorld9 spacestation.

So, unsurprisingly, when the door opened, they greeted Sandy and Androi with barely concealed glowers and politely fixed smiles. It was indeed the mother-in-law of all Christmases.

“Admiral! Captain!” smiled Sandy. “So glad to see you’re having fun ... Oh ! And preparing to leave too!” She breathed a sigh of relief, and propelled the robot in their direction. “Don’t forget *this* fine crew member!” She knew her Home Server Farm Fleet etiquette when she had to.

“Oh ... yes ... of course ...” stuttered Admiral Jirk. “Hallo Androi ...”

“MY FRIENDS!!!” announced the robot, and everyone ducked, except Hworff, who growled.

Before they could protest, Sandy added, “And you’ll be pleased to hear the Defiled has clearance to leave whenever you’re ready!”

“Oh ... good ... well, I suppose we’d better be going ... then ...” agreed Rhett lamely.

Sandy nodded vigorously, and held the door open for them. The crew of the Defiled, which included Androi and who were now definitely recalling the depression of a Boxing Day, trooped out in their gaily coloured finery.

As they disappeared down the corridor towards the hangar bay, Sandy breathed a sigh of relief, and made her way back to the Bridge. After all, no Home Server Farm Fleet Officer liked having another’s crew on their ship.

Fen was feeling really achey all over now, and although his stomach pains had calmed down, he was ashamed to say that he was gusting great roils of sulphuric wind. Thankfully, traces of Lard were still plugged up Nick’s nose, so the Apprentice Warrior wasn’t too aware of the foul stench: what he *could* smell he just attributed it to the PHPWoks, naturally.

The space-faring handwhisk-shaped starship was battering out of I-Drive and folding into Jorbae’s orbit, lining up in preparation for docking with WebWorld9. The PHPWoks weren’t too happy about returning to the spacestation following their last eventful visit, but were so grateful to Fen and N-ick for their assistance that the least they could do was a Delia Flick for them.

The ‘Ready, Steady, N-ick’ engaged its pipes, and settled into the WebWorld9’s infrastructure. The PHPWoks just made it onto the station as the fat holding the ‘Ready, Steady, N-ick’ together finally gave way. It looked as though they wouldn’t be going home just yet. Though saddened, they knew they had to present a good send-off to their new friends, to whom they were indebted.

The 'Woks lined themselves up, and raised their Wooden Spoons high, waving them in the sigil of the Order of the Spatula. Fen and Nick grandly walked across the threshold, and entered the station.

"Where do you suggest?" asked Fen.

"Well, I last saw Wilma in this strange bar somewhere here. A hive of scum and villainy. We ought to be cautious. We could start there..."

"A bar, did you say? A drinking bar?!" Old Fen's eyes almost popped out of his head. Nick nodded, and his plug-in quivered.

"Take me to it, my young Apprentice! Only the best synthales are to be found in such hives!"

"But what about my training, and saving the Galaxy, and all that?" Nick hated to admit it, but he was rather enjoying the attention.

"Oh, a few quick shorts won't harm you! In fact, they'll get you on your way!"

As the TGA Defiled blasted away from the HMS Server 4, TT, Steff's personal droid, was steering the small service Shell 'Bot over the HMS Server Four's hull, examining the virulent outbreak of angry-looking red blisters and pimples ; they leaked creamy cgi alarmingly.

"That is correct, Steff", affirmed TT into the comms. "They are increasing in number in fact I can see an eruption swelling now on the far side of this hull."

"Cheers," muttered Steff, dismayed. He was back in his office and had the relay open so the Bridge could key in and conference.

"But has it affected the engines, Steff?" demanded Slogs. "We might be able to ride it out if it's only superficial, perhaps?" he asked hopefully.

Steff leaned across to some monitor screens. "We-ell, the data on site-grope looks ahhm ... green, so that's okay! Cheers!" He punched some buttons and changed the resolution. "But the site-scrape text is sort of turquoisey coloured. *That* isn't too good"

On the Bridge, Captain Slogs glanced at Sandy pensively. She shrugged, and shook her head perplexed. She started to walk over to the RA Files PC.

"I don't know, Sir, I'll che- " and her right foot shot up off the floor and buried itself into her open mouth! She fell over, dislodging her boot from her mouth. "What the RARS?! Wha-??" and her left boot slammed into her mouth.

Roger hurried over to help, but he too went sprawling as his foot landed in his mouth. Arm muscles straining, he pushed his leg away. "Sir! I know what this is!! It can only be the contagious Foot-in-Oomfph!" and his boot bound up his mouth again.

"Steff! Priority One!" Slogs called into the comms. "Major Accide- " and he too fell to the floor with his foot in his mouth.

The HMS Dedicated swung around low in the cool blue skies of Brrrrr'Aa, and showing off a flashy manoeuvre, descended just outside the comms outpost.

A patch of space next to the huts shimmered and Rich T Biskit zig-zagged into view.

"Oh-oh-oh!" he muttered as he materialised. "I do hayt theez new telly-porder things! They mayg me feel really gueer all over!"

He stepped throught the hut's portal. "Yahoooo! MagVities? It's Wich T, are you in here?!" he called into the gloom.

From the darkness there came a quick rustling, something being slammed shut, a scrape and something else being knocked over, followed by a "Rars!!"

"Rich T? Rich T Biskit? It *is* you! It *is* you!" and McVities Hobbs appeared from the gloom, tucking his clothes in.

"I'm 'ere with Odyssey Gatchador. We're going to get you out of here! Gum on!" cried Rich T excitedly.

"Great. Oh, hold on!" Hobbs paused, and dived back into the gloom. "Mustn't forget myer things," he explained as he returned with a small travel bag, the corner of a magazine sticking out of the top.

Odyssey Catchador lifted the HMS Dedicated with a flourish and trumpet fanfare in case anyone was left on the ice planet to watch the flashy ship's departure.

Rich T and McVities Hobbs hung on to a railing on the observation deck, as the ship banked away from the planet's terminator. They gazed down on the band of twilight.

"Thanks for the rescue, Rich!" said Hobbs in a caramel-smooth voice.

"Don' menshun it!" his friend remarked nasally. " I garn't imajin how you survived down there! No stimulation wotsoever"

"Oh well one could always find something to keep one's hands occupied, as it were" his foot nudged his travel bag further under the railing. He knew his friend was a little prurious when it came to literature of the calibre of Pandora's Monthly. High calibre, he agreeably noted to himself.

The Dedicated Server accelerated through its Novell Gears into Super I-Drive. Unbeknown to the Bridge crew, a keenly dedicated work experience trainee was also aboard.....

The TGA Defiled accelerated to Super I-Drive, and Rhett Crisko sighed. He really couldn't abide that Captain Hard-Grafft Slogs, more so whenever he was in his debt. Which seemed to be occuring far too frequently for his liking!

"I know what you mean," growled Admiral Jirk, as if reading the captain's mind. "If it wasn't for his ship I'd be enjoying my retirement with a *full* wardrobe!"

Rhett nodded in sympathy. "And to foist that rarsing robot back on to us! The cheek of the man!"

The admiral jumped, and glanced around fearfully. "Where is he?! Where is he?!" Kia-Ora stepped forward. "We've put him in airlock number seven when he kept going on about his black executable briefcase."

"Oh good show! That ought to keep him quiet..."

"We-ell ... not exactly as it turns out. We were going to jettison him into space ... but the Local Control Switch has overloaded with the robot's incessant and loud ramblings. He's stuck in there."

"Perhaps it's for the better," added Crisko. "At least we know where he is..."

Nick and Fen walked into Quirk's Bar. It was reasonably quiet, yet there was that sense that you got just before happy hour begins, namely the nervous energy as the staff braced themselves for a night of non-stop alcoholic debauchery! So, grabbing the opportunity with both tankards, they strode up to the bar and began an attempt to drink Quirk out of business.

Some time later.....

After several efforts Fen was failing rather miserably to down his twenty-fifth synthale. There was something *just not right* with the ol' hand-eye-tankard-mouth coordination. Across from him sat the station's Irish Agony Aunt, Dear Drew, and quietly and steadily she had consumed thirty of the hard drinks, and knew the old man was done. She grinned: bar crowds would part for her and Kia-Ora, who were lauded with respect in every drinking establishment on the station. Whilst the command crew were *Absent With Leave* - and hadn't thought to take her with them - she would have to make do with these new drinking buddies. The old man's control had impressed her, and so she was relieved to see him flagging. The fact that she could barely see straight was a bonus!

Nick, however, had only survived to the tenth round before he found himself firmly pinned against the apparently vertical floor. In his booze-addled brain he had blearily wondered what Wilma was doing with herself these days. But then the ground had come up to meet him and, with a sloppy grin, he had stopped worrying about anything anymore.

TT piloted the service web-bot over the hull of the HMS Server 4 to the great plated Bridge windows. The shell extended an arm, and polished the space grime off the pane. The ASP droid peered inside the newly quarantined bridge. The command line crew were up and about sort of : as they went about their stations, a boot would whip up into their mouths, and the crew member would topple to the floor, briefly incapacitated.

"Yes, Steff, just as you feared," affirmed the droid to the Chief Engineering Officer. "A highly contagious case of Foot-in-Mouth Disease."

"Cheers," replied Steff, disheartened. "We must have picked it up from the Universe being in Lift Four, since it started outgassing before we picked up the Defiled."

"Could we have sub-contracted it from the Server Farm?" enquired TT.

"What?!!" Steff was incredulous. "There is no way the Home Server Farm could have routed an attachment of that magnitude! Cheers!" he added emphatically. Steff shook his head. "No, it'll be something in that Black Executable Briefcase,

you mark my words. Thank *rars* Guns has it under lock-n-blunderbu\$\$\$."

The comms went quiet.

"... Unless it's those rarsing floating txt-mssngrs we've got in the holds. They looked far too suspicious for my liking, under those hoods, and all," he remarked with just a *hint* of speciesism.

Down in the Lower Holds of the HMS Server 4, the said E-Waps were chattering in high FM.

```
+++ |000||00000|0000|||0||0000| +++
+++ 0000000|||0|0|0|0|0|||00000000||? +++
+++ 00|||00|0|0|0!! +++
+++ |||000|0|00|0|000|||00|||00000 +++
+++ Cheers! +++
```

The last comment was given by a young E-Wap who had a particularly attuned ear for exotic languages, and certain Engineering Officer phrase-isms.

Master Voda turned to his most Heroic cellbrethren, SsonOfEric, and awarded him the honour of being the first to attempt their daring escape.

As Sson floated up to the holding bars, the wizened Voda took one of their Nockias, and pointed it at him. The Made-in-Taiwan CEO depressed a specific pattern of buttons all in one go and a transparent beam shot out and engulfed SsonOfEric.

The pioneering E-Wap disappeared and shimmered into view on the other side of the bars. He patted himself all over, making sure he was in one piece.

```
+++ |||000|||0!!! +++ he cried out jubilantly.
```

Immediately, the remaining E-Waps whipped out their Nockias, divided themselves up into pairs, and carefully shot each other into oblivion.

Beside Sson, on the other side of the Holding bars, the group of E-Waps shimmered into view.

```
+++ Rt. We R Back. Ths S WAR +++ pronounced Master Voda, eager to
be moving on. +++ N a B gar war thn the 1st 1, the Fon Warz +++
he muttered from under his hood.
```

The diminutive CEO led his troops out of the Lower Holds in search of the Bridge, and someone to whom they could give a collective kick up the charging socket.

The DottOrg Ball was riding on the crest of Loffux's elation, as well as the planetary jamma wave that had been created when she had ordered the destruction of the small planet. At this great velocity, they could see an unusually bright orange star, the only one of its kind in the universe, advancing closer and closer.

Q-Rob and Governor Kablue-e had examined the battlestation, and, due to its amazing Nort-Afee shields, confirmed that it had only suffered minimal damage,

which was even now being repaired by thousands of tiny MHFP Extensionlets.

Q-Rob left a satisfied Kablue-e to report to the Empress, and headed for the lower levels. *I really have no idea what has happened, but this headache and these cramps are killing me! I'll have to have a word with Einstein and we'll discuss this over a cuppa.* The Dark Lard of the Sieve paused. *And there's something else ... a feeling I haven't felt since ...*

In short order Q-Rob made his way to the immense hangar bays that held squadzillions of Rars Fleet fighter schemas. These were small snub-nosed fighter craft that packed a crippling punch with their ARRER-ORA guns. However, Q-Rob passed these by and made directly for an authorised portal. Once through these doors, he found himself in the Hydra's dedicated parking host, which held the sub-particles' own starships.

He ran up the boarding ramp, slapping quiet the CLI door controls. He strapped himself into the cockpit, and within moments the *Q-Level* escalated from the battlestation, jamming the station's perimeter sensors and allowing him to slip through unnoticed.

As he pulled away from the DottOrg Ball, his craft's sonar pinged excitedly : there was another ship nearby! Q-Rob vectored into the approaching ship, already drafting a welcoming script in his mind. Furthermore, the telnet radar had confirmed that it was the TGA Vacillate. That information would be the key to his success! He was looking forward to taking over the Vacillate and it's crew. He was sure they could help him with resources, even if he had to commandeer them with a META re-direct!

The crew of the TGA Vacillate were happy. They had found their bearings : an unusually brightly glowing orange star, the only one of its kind in the universe - at least in *this* timeframe!

Captain Wasitmean and her crew had settled back into their circuitously and perambulatory routine, and didn't want to be disturbed by anyone or anything, especially great big battlestations that dropped out of nowhere, totally defying Einstein's Family.

"Ma'am," Parey interrupted his Captain's reverie. "We have an incoming ship ... well, I think it's incoming, we *are* moving towards it, so I'm not exactly sure who's moving here" he trailed off thoughtfully.

The general broadcast Line One pinged. "Good afternoon, Helpdiety, Q-Rob speaking, how may I...?" crackled a voice.

And at that the crew had fallen under the Hydra trance, for Q-Rob's opening words were an ancient mantra to induce drowzy submission.

Chief Sparerib held the ceremonial wooden spoon high so everyone could see, and walked down the corridor, everyone following like a tourist excursion. They eventually reached the promenade, where, on spotting Fen in a nearby bar, they quickly ran into the nearest storefront to avoid him. They were peering around the door, when a growling voice could be heard behind them, "G'thca Ki'at vghT?!".

Startled, they turned around. Standing behind them was a tall fellow clad in armour with what appeared to be a folded pancake stuck on its head. They had found their way into the local Klick-On restaurant. Their jaws dropped as they noticed the giant cooking woks at the far end of the room. As one, they fell to their knees and started chanting, Chief Sparerib waving his spoon high. They were in PHPWok Heaven.

After the destruction of the planet by the DottOrg ball, the RARS fleet had come unstuck from the spherical station. However, due to a third of them being destroyed by the blast, and only 90% of them existing on the DottOrg, due to the 10% inversion, only 57.3% of them now existed. This was still a vast improvement from the original 10%, but perplexing nonetheless.

Captain Admirable Remedy sprawled concussed in his chair upon the bridge of the GE Problem. For the last ten minutes he had been discussing the finer points of Perpetual fleet mass with the comms officer Winger. When the realisation of the extra .3% arose in his mind he passed out from the overload in his brain.

Scotty Shorn was down in engineering playing a round of golf. The .3% of the 57% fleet had added itself onto engineering, giving Shorn the room to create a mini golf course.

Apart from the slight loss of mass from the inverted 90% down to the new 57.3%, everything seemed to be going fine for once in the fleet.....

.....that was until Shorn got a bit excited with his golf club and whacked the ball into the engine core, piercing the coolant tank. With coolant flowing around the engineering deck and not the core, the engine was going critical with an imminent server overload about to happen.....

Scotty Shorn ran around waving his arms in a panic. He had managed to miss the acid pools of coolant, but it had already eaten the astromech turf of his golf course. He went to some service lockers, and pulled open a secure drawer. After rummaging around, he pulled out a ball of initialisation string, and returned to his golf cart. Adding the string to the basket, he proceeded to check out the driver's disks. Just as the coolant was reaching his feet, he yanked a huge safenet from the cart and brought order to the outflow, channelling it into an empty storefront stall.

Buying himself some nett time, Shorn was then able to filter the loose coolant back into the warp core, administering a quick fix to patch the hole in the tank caused by the golf ball ; needless to say, the golf ball was now a decomposed mush of pseudo-coolant.

The Rars Fleet, headed by the GE Problem, and totally unaware of the Hot Coolant usage, continued on its way, mapped by Stardotstar towards an unusually bright orange star, truly the only one of its kind in the universe.

"But don't you see, I JUST SIMPLY HAVE to find my black executable BRIEFCASE," reasoned Androi Joyrider to the facia of the airlock controls. The controls remained silent. And burned red.

This section of the TGA Defiled's mainframe had given up long ago. It had tried to argue with the robot, countering that the fact he was inside its airlock must have had a significance. But it found it just couldn't cope with the repetition, not to mention the robot's fluctuating volume, and so it simply burnt out.

Androi sat in the airlock arguing his cause.

"IF I CAN FIND THE BRIEFCASE AGAIN, then all will be right with the universe. DON'T YOU SEE??"

The TGA Defiled gee-zipped through Super I-Drive, rushing home to the WebWorld9 spacestation.

Strolling near the holo-suites of the Promenade, the WebWorld9's local rep for Pandora's Monthly, wrapped thickly in his long furry duffle coat, was finding that the latest copy of the high calibre eee-magazine was selling like hot transponders, with extra silicon wiring.

"Big issue!" called out Tubby Honest. "Pandora's Monthly, once a month! Big ones found inside!" He stepped past the entrance to the Klick-On Restaurant, and almost dropped his periodicals in shock at the sight that greeted him, a collection of mini chefs all tossing to the fascination of the Klick-Ons inside.

"What is the Galaxy coming to??" he muttered to himself.

Far below the cheerful Tubby Honest, the Third Line Engineering & Plumbing crew were nearing the base levels of the space station. They had found nothing overly incriminating in Garridge's BumsUp shop, though they had enjoyed turning the place over and confiscating some of the more exquisite goods. Frustrated, they had stumbled upon the bright idea of trace-routing the last known path of the MHFP Extensionlets that had disappeared. Although it had taken them a while to persuade the station's mainframe to give up the binned logs, they had soon made their way down to these dark and gloomy depths, devoid of life except for a passing 'bot.

The report had confirmed that the Extensionlets had clustered about airlock number four, and it was to this hatchway that Cunningham led his small team.

Pandora's newest admirer was currently gazing at the swirling starfields of Super

I-Drive, the 'Download in progress' flashing on and off across the heavens, stationary in a parallax sort of way. Captain McVities Hobbs knew that this Novell Banner always appeared from whatever view as one sped through the Drives, but you never ever reached it.

Down in the Dedicated's canteen, Conman Abdullah was trying to decide whether to have a coffee, black, white, extra sugar, espresso, cappuccino, au lait, nescaff, mocha or tea, black, white, extra sugar, PG, Sultan Grey, Tootley, Yarkshar, Jasmine, Chinese, Friendli and was pressing a variety of selector buttons for inspiration.

Unfortunately, this optional activity was far too much for the HMS Dedicated's Load Bearers, and with a spine-jarring **kru**-unch, and a ragdoll lurch, the great ship, Odyssey's pride and joy, was thrown from the Drives, and back into normal space.

As Captain Catchador firmly applied the brakes, and yanked hard on the yoke, they immediately recognised their location : the WebWorld9 space station hung meekly before them.

On the Canteen deck, a certain work placement trainee stood at a window, looking in fondness at the huge spacestation before the ship.

It was late.

In fact it was so late it had reached the stage of being early.

Drew had stumbled along the corridors of the station trying desperately to remember where her room was and why some rarsing idiot had moved it.

She finally made her way down what she thought was the last corridor and found what blearily looked to the very drunk Station Councillor to be her door.

"Okay, okay.... well, I mush find the rarshin door handle round 'ere somewhere?"

Drew muttered out loud. She reached over and fumbled around pressing buttons on the wall beside the room.

With a *swish* the doors opened and she vectored towards the bathroom off to the side. Gulping down an acidy retch, she crashed her way through the door, flung open the toilet seat, collapsed to her knees, and thrust her head into the bowl. A colourful rainbow of carroty synthale gushed out of Dear Drew's open mouth, and splashed down into the negative-grav toilet that cleanly and cheerfully sucked the mess away.

"Ahhh, bejesus, ah needed tha'," the station's councillor gasped. "Uh ... uh ... *eurgh!*" And she heaved again. And again.

"Argh, tha's the ... evil *id* ..." she panted, "... colourin' tha' bowl ... o' life ... that *is* tha' ... *ego* ... o' th'tortured self ... t'b'sure, 'tis ... *eurgh!*" Another rainbow cascaded down into the chute.

The toilet was getting confused. Not only was it one of the latest modems to roll off the Rent-O-Suck™ conveyor belts, the intelli-let was mistakenly recognising the on/off nature of the heaving as *Binary*. The psycho-therapeutic jargon babble wasn't helping either. Instinctively, the Bin Network understood that It Did Not Like Binary, and resolved to obliterate it. With a loud WHOOSH that brook no argument, it sucked the station Councillor, head over heels, down into the plumbing of the WebWorld9 and the Universe as a whole. Dear Drew passed out.

At the end of every rainbow, it is said, you will find a pot of gold. It is also said that you will find a cute pixie from the Land of the Leprechauns, but since most cute pixies were raving alcoholics with multi-coloured projectile vomit, people tended to gloss over this particular aspect of the idyllic story.

Aboard the TGA Vacillate Captain Wasitmean was looking at the incoming ship with great confusion. She had been surprised far too much in recent days and she was very cross with the whole thing.

"Right.... Let's see Here, Paradia give me a ... vector thingy on the incoming ship," she said decisively.

"Well Captain, I must say I have been very confused by the situation as there are many factors that are influencing it," Paradia said in his usual unhelpfully convoluted way.

"Right well... lets not be too hasty then... can't have that at all. Right, well ... what do you think?" she enquired of Paradia.

Signal, who by this point had gone completely mad with rage, said, "If you two idiots are going to do nothing all day, can I at least warm up our KrAK weapons?"

"Well ... now that is the real question isn't it? Should you be able to do that? hmmm.... Well what do you think?" said Captain Wasitmean falling back to her old pattern.

To say the scream was loud was an understatement, only a certain android could have topped the volume of the shriek Signal blasted into the bridge.

But the effects were immediate: the ship shattered by the piercing sound, neatly broke in two, and reformed into two smaller clones of the first.

On the bridge of one clone, the TGA Vacillate, the crew were in shock.

"Well that WAS a surprise!" exclaimed Captain Wasitmean. "I wonder what it means ... hmm ...?"

On the AGT etallicaV the crew were equally stunned!

Toth Hazel was walking out of engineering when a high pitched sound wave shot past buffeting him. Two seconds later he seemed to be in engineering again, but something was not quite right. It felt like engineering but everything had been emayl-mirrored and turned front to back.

He immediately made his way to the bridge, almost getting lost a few times as he had to remember that everything had mirroring applied, meaning he needed to travel in the opposite direction.

The bridge was full of disorientated crew members and on the viewscreen the HMS Vacillate could be seen, except for the fact that it was slightly smaller than usual. With his engineering expertise he knew exactly what had happened. The high-pitched sound wave he had heard must have reached a high enough velocity to cause a theoretical J-Script splitting : their parent web had had children ... and their ships were the brats!

Being the only one with knowledge of their situation, he immediately took

advantage, proclaiming himself Captain in the time-honoured tradition of ascendancy found everywhere in the universe.

Q-Rob was stunned. On his viewscreen, there now sat two ships. The vacillate appeared to have split in half. Adjusting his zoom displays for a closer look, he could make out the names of the two, albeit slightly smaller, ships. The TGA Vacillate and the AGT etallicaV. Obviously he had mis-judged the Vacillate's capabilities. He would proceed cautiously for now, for he had to find out more about the splitting weapon that they had just revealed.

He could not keep his sense of forboding out of his head as he watched the DottOrg Ball float along in the distance making for his location. He had to be free of those Rarsian imbeciles for the time being, and Guru in particular!

Toth Hazel was very pleased with himself. He had renamed the ship and had decided that he was ready to go into the lucrative field of space piracy: *they got all the chicks, just look at that guy from Corel-leia or somewhere like that, it would suit him just fine!*

His gloating was interrupted by a quiet but insistent comm beeping.

"What is that?" he asked the ensign sitting at navigation.

"Umm, well it looks as if it is a ship hailing us!" announced the ensign who did not look like he had a clue how to use the equipment.

"Oh, okay, onscreen then..." Toth replied, in his best captain's impression.

"Ah Toth Hazel, so you are in *temporary* command then," said the figure, emphasising the word *temporary*.

"And who are you then?" Toth replied angrily. This was his ship, he had stolen it fair and square, after all.

"I am your new Captain, my name is Magniffiscent Loading and I will be leading this ship which is now named the XML Closedplanet." A new name was always a good start felt Q-Rob, and it put any old troubles behind one. Other than that, there really was no logic to it. "Open the docking port so I may board!"

Besides, this half of the cloned ship thankfully didn't appear to host either Evadian Wasitmean or Paradia Maximus.

Sson glanced around, and spotted a side door with a conventional lock file.

+++ Lk! +++ he twittered with a shriek, and pointed out the unobtrusive door.

+++ Flw me +++ commanded Master Voda, and, en masse, the cell of E-Waps flowed to the other side of the room. They made short order of the lock file, and the next two similarly lock portals. They found themselves in a darkened chamber in the heart of the HMS Server Four's Holding Cells.

They gathered around a central pedestal, upon which rested a battered black executable briefcase, held securely by padlocks, links, and chains.

+++ I C 24 +++ Master Voda counted the padlocks +++ Bt ths S the N
Sir! +++

The E-Waps nodded and hummed in agreement.

The RARS Fleet, all 57.3% of it, slipped into a holding orbit about a bland nondescript planet, that sat at a useful distance from the unusual bright orange star.

"We don't detect any civilisations or high bandwidth comms ..." announced Winger "... massive lifeform readings though: *something's* alive down there!" Captain Admirable Remedy struck a thoughtful pose. Said pose went off to the medi-lab with a broken nose.

"So a fairly backward planet, then?" remarked the Captain. "Primeval, even? Ripe for some conquerous picking, hmmm?" After the recent disasterous attempts at warmongering and territorial gain, he was itching to have something he could proudly call a 'Success-Response!' However, he had also learnt when it was wise to tread carefully, especially where angles feared to be right.

".... But I think we need some manpower here, and employ some good ol' fashioned face2face parley!" Admirable turned to face his Comms Officer.

"Winger! You're coming with me! And so are you, Clocky!" he added to his Science Officer.

The Rarsian assault shuttle slipped smoothly between the satin clouds, broadcasting its white "we-come-in-pieces (57 to be exact)" banner. Winger piloted the envoys above some forest, and landed in a grassy clearing. They donned atmo-suits and the three of them stepped outside.

"Nice grass!" complimented Dr Clock, to whose comment Remedy raised inquisitive eyebrows.

"Sir! Something's coming!" Winger pointed to a break in the trees, where small serpentine creatures with short stubby legs were waddling and slithering their way to the newcomers.

"Ah. Our ... erm ... hosts?" suggested the Captain. "Now, remember, everyone on their best behaviour Winger, ready with the babeling, if you please."

The grey-brown scaly creatures came up to their feet, and raised their long snouts, a sniffing sound emanating whenever their tongues flicked out.

"Greetings!" the Captain announced, as Winger dopplered his voice through the babeler. "I am Captain Admirable Remedy of the Rars Fleet's GE Problem. We come in peace well, we do for the moment!" Warmongering, after all, did come naturally to him.

The creatures glanced down and looked and hissed at each other. They glanced back up at the three envoys.

"Jor-baaaae! Jor-baaaae!" they welcomed sibilantly. "Jor-baaaaeeee!"

Yes, the Rars crew had unknowingly landed on Jorbae when it was but an embryonic cradle of civilisation!

Tubby Honest had sold nearly all of his copies of Pandora's Monthly, and was down to the last few. He glanced out of the ops window, and saw the HMS Dedicated line up to one of the WebWorld9's RJ45 Pipes. He recognised the great vessel, and his heart sank : he didn't expect much custom from that crew! He shuffled into the amusement arcade, where many a space cadet were revising for their exams on the jetbikes.

Captain Odyssey Catchador engaged a perfect lock, and configured his ship to the spacestation.

"Right!" he announced on the internal comms. "Remain a lert, and patched into our comms. You've all got some unscheduled 600s now, but I expect you on standby for when we leave!"

McVities Hobbs had never been to the WebWorld9 before, but Rich T was a regular patron.

"Gome wiv me, MagVities, I'll show you awound!" he offered his friend thickly. Hobbs shrugged in a crumbly sort of way, and noded his agreement.

They found themselves in the Promenade, and were heading towards the rather interesting flavours that were emanating from a nearby Klick-Ons Restaurant. Rich T, forever thinking with his stomach, rushed on ahead, but McVities experienced eye spotted a certain magazine cover sticking out of a scruffy bloke's holdall. He rerouted into the amusement arcade and went up to local Pandora Rep.

"Ah, my good friend, I see you have some top notch literature there?"

Tubby was a large man. But an imminent SALE brought about reflexes that would put a carl-herbist to shame. "Yes, indeed, an issue with big ones!" he beamed.

"May I possibly?" McVities was finding his hand was shaking from withdrawal, and his fingers were grappling at thin air, desperate to take the material under his domain.

"Naturally. Five dollars please," announced Tubby.

"WHAT?! Five dollars?? That's midnight theft!!"

"Well there's no need to get uppity about it," Tubby was affronted, but was keen to ship the last issue. "Four dollars, fifty groats to you my friend."

McVities was sharp on the uptake. "Two dollars, 75 groats," he haggled.

"Three pounds, 50 cents."

"Three euro, 25 lira."

"W-M-Ess, Done!"

"You have been!!"

And they clapped their hands together, and McVities Hobbs walked away the contented owner of the latest issue of Pandora's Monthly, with extra Big Ones.

Chapter 9

Q-Rob had examined his new ship and had come to some rather startling conclusions.

He noticed that while this ship was always lost it was not a bad ship and had some potential. Also, his second in command was not exactly exuberant in full support. That might become a problem soon.

"Umm... Captain Loading, is there some *destination* you want us to aim for?" asked Hazel somewhat sarcastically.

"Well it is my intention to take over the WebWorld9: we will make for the station!"

"Yes sir!" again less than enthusiastic. As he walked away Hazel muttered to himself about the gall of some people.

Q-Rob chuckled to himself... *he did not have to like it but if he does it, who cares?*

"Now we are getting somewhere!" Q-Rob said with joy.

The XML ClosedPlanet's engines roared into life, destination the WebWorld9. The HMS Vacillate could be seen receding into the distance, along with a particularly bright orange star.

What Q-Rob didn't realise was that the ship was actually heading further away from the WebWorld9. He hadn't taken into consideration the fact that the ship was a mirrored version of the Vacillate and therefore everything worked in the opposite way. To get to the space station they would need to employ a reverse engine lookup and head in the other direction

Q-Rob grinned an evil grin: he finally had a good chance to rid himself of the WebWorld9. It had now become his own personal crusade to rid the multi-verse of the station. He was vexed over the way the rarsing thing continued to survive beyond all logic, and besides, taking his cue from Guru, it would make him feel better.

He was comfortably settled in the captain's chair watching the stars go by on the viewscreen, when he suddenly sat up. *Haven't I seen that star somewhere before*, he thought to himself.

The ship slowly circled the bright orange star.

At Q-Rob's orders, the XML ClosedPlanet accelerated, and the Navi-IDS moaned its insistence that they were NOT getting closer to the WebWorld9 station.

"I don't care!" Q-Rob snarled back at the monitoring screens. He paused. "Still, there is that unusually bright orange star out there"

He turned to Captain Toth. "We are still moving, aren't we?"

"That is correct, Sir," hedged Toth.

".... in a circular direction, perchance??"

"Ah! *That's* why!" Toth beamed, but Q-Rob felt sure the insight was a sham.

"Okay, okay," he placated, not wanting to be drawn into an astrophysical argument just now. "Let's just reset the vector, and aim for the WebWorld9 *properly*, this time?" he advised coolly.

"Yes SAH!" snapped Toth, suddenly eager to please.

A few para-hours later, Q-Rob stormed up to the Navi-IDS and quizzed the computer.

"But we've set a course for the WebWorld9!!!" he wailed back at the Navi's insistence that they were now even further from the station than before. "The ship's engines are going flat out!!!"

"Sir," Toth called gingerly from the other side of the bridge ; he wasn't going to get too close to his new Master. "Might I suggest that since we are an exact mirrored clone of the HMS Vacillate, what we do is in reverse and might even be slaved to that ship's actions?!"

"So you're *advising* that we are accelerating at top speed AWAY from the WebWorld9?!" Q-Rob needed. "THAT'S PREPOSTEROUS!!!"

Meanwhile, on what remained of the original HMS Vacillate, a comms ping startled Captain Evadian Whasitmean out of her perpetual state of de-motion.

"This is the Governor Kablue-e of the DottOrg BattleStation of the mighty Rars Empire! I command you to put to, and allow us to board! Any failure to do so will result in instant vaporisation of your vessel! I instruct you to reply forthwith!"

Captain Whasitmean duly leant forward and flicked the Return key.

"This is Captain Evadian Whasitmean ... captain of the ... ahhhh ... one moment, please," she called to her second-in-command from the corner of her mouth.

"Who exactly are ... we, Parey?"

"Now that's a very good question, ma'am," replied Paradia Maximus. "A body of stellar atoms, or a transient vessel for the soul ...?"

"Oh. I didn't realise it was ... so complicated ..." she flicked the Return key again.

"Mister Kevlar ... who do *you* think we are ... hmmm?"

The tiny Master Voda in the lower holds of the HMS Server 4 stepped up to the briefcase ready to permanently borrow it. He raised his hands and rubbed his fingers and thumbs together.

Just as his cohort was about to Nockiarise the 24 padlocks, his own Nokia pinged loudly, and the cell of E-Waps jumped.

+++ Ys? Wot S it??! +++ he answered angrily.

+++ |||||00000|||000000000|||000|0|0|0|0! +++

+++ U R N the WW9?? How?? +++

And Master Voda glanced around and hurriedly counted hoods.

+++ R. Bug R. Pls Brr w/ S +++

Voda switched off his Nokia. It looked as if some of his Waps had microwaved themselves onto the WebWorld9 when they first escaped Guns' holding cell

Captain Admirable Remedy was beaming. *At last, an easy conquest*, he thought. He had returned to the GE Problem and was reviewing their recent conquest of the world below them, a victory that had closely followed the *Rars Handbook of Easy Conquests*, until one of the lizard creatures urinated on his boots.

"Why must they always pick on me??", he mumbled to himself.

The former primitives were now growing into a fairly cosmopolitan bunch as their evolution began to accelerate shortly after the assault shuttle had returned to the main command ship.

However, the Rars fleet had lost most of its data engine control and SQL errors of major proportion had hit about half the starfleet sending a small proportion of ships crashing to the surface at about 9 pm. Remedy looked at his fleet, of which only 35.3% remained, and wondered if he wasn't quite cut out for this Galactic domination stuff after all.

For the society known as Jorbeans they now had new gods that rained down technology with great success. In fact they worshiped one god above all others and his name was Adme Ramedse who sat as captain of the stars. Thus it was that Captain Admirable Remedy became the chief god on Jorbae for over 3,600 years.

Dear Drew, the WebWorld9's much-needed Agony Aunt, yawned, stretched, and sat up.

"Rars! Why that certainly was a good sleep, it was t'be sure!" she announced. Groggy, she glanced around, and frowned. Her quarters seemed more spartan than usual, and she didn't recall her bed being *this* hard before. Her eyes re-focused, and she saw a mop and bucket next to her on the right, a broom ahead of her, and a 'Cleaning in Progress' sign to her left. A trickle of water traced a path between her and the bucket.

"RARS!" she screamed, "Where the RARS am !?!"

She leapt from the floor, and over to the door. She immediately recognised what she was in - a good Agony Aunt can only come from personal experience, after all - but had no clue as to where she was. It certainly wasn't the WebWorld9!

"HELP! Get me OUTA here!!" she screamed at the top of her considerable lungs.

'Guns' Mademincemeat dozed in his Security Office in the central hub, surrounded by the holding cells. He was *'en Guard'*.

Suddenly, he was jolted from his slumber. Had he heard something??

"... help OUTA"

Yes! He stood up, grabbed his beloved Blunderbu\$\$\$ that hung from its hook on the wall, and followed the strange sound. "Shouting," he muttered to himself. "In MY cells! I don't know, what is the Galaxy coming to??" Admittedly, having residents down here was a new concept.

He came up to the offending room, and hefted his Blunderbu\$\$\$: he wasn't going to take any chances. He opened the door.

Dear Drew glared at him. Guns frowned back.

"What are you doing here??" he demanded.

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT YA MEAN, YA *EEE-JIT!* GET ME OUTA HERE!!!" she screamed at him.

Guns had read the manual, and felt sure this direct plea was one of the oldest tricks in the book.

"Certainly, ma'am but if you'll just bear with me, I'll put you *on Hold*, and check something" he said vaguely, and slapped the door lock shut.

Steff and Wilma hurried down to the Server's Teleportation Suite.

"So you want me to go through these ... these turnstile thingies, and be beamed into the Bridge?" asked Wilma.

"Cheers!" confirmed Steff. "That's right, and when you are inside, use your Sonic Screwdriver. I know it's the answer!"

Wilma back-pedalled. "Inside the *quarantined* Bridge. Yes?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes, don't worry, I think you'll be quite safe, you are after all not one of us ..." Steff's true colours were coming to the fore now.

"Well, you might be right," agreed Wilma uncertainly. "I am from FolderLand".

"That's right! And you did ummm survive the Manageress!!" Steff ushered her to the tele-gate. "Now if you'll just step through here Jon, you have the coordinates set, don't you ...?"

The Transmogriker nodded.

And Wilma was beamed onto the HMS Server Four's infected Bridge.

Wilma zig-zagged into view near the Lifts on the Bridge of HMS Server 4.

"Oooooh! That tingled!!" she shuddered.

Immediately, the command crew's antics caught her attention : as best they could, they were getting on with the very involved task of running the HMS Server 4, but at frequently regular intervals were finding their feet flying up into their mouths. Snazz Hashcake, the Comms Officer, was currently the most able to engage a conversation. Wilma stepped across to her.

"Snazz, this is crazy! What's going on?"

"Foot-in-Mouth! It's crippling!" she answered.

"Don't worry, I have an idea," Wilma replied. "Everyone! Gather together over there, beside the Lifts," she called out. "Oh, and I'll bring WWTwoOh", she added, hurrying over to the poor golden plated protocol droid who was sat slumped in a corner, both his legs wrapped about his head. She picked him up - one of FolderLand's non-gravitational merits - and carried the bundle of robot to the Lift Array.

Wilma arranged everyone into a huddle, and raised her pre-prepared Trusty Sonic. As one or two of her friends collapsed to the floor from the virulent illness, she flicked a lever and thumbed some colourful buttons : a wide spray beam flashed out like a star-spangled net, and gently settled down over the crew.

The doors to Lift Five *swished* open with an impressive 3D aliased wave effect, and the netted group were sucked back inside the Lift car; the doors snapped shut.

"Rars," said Wilma.

Master Voda had done his archaeologist's impression, and SsonOfEric now sat on the pedestal, enchained by 24 padlocks. The brave E-Wap had heroically volunteered this caretaking position, and was confident his CEO would be back to free him.

The E-Waps now had the black battered executable briefcase, and, although they were unaware of its contents, could tell from the neutronic vibes emanating from inside that it was their answer.

Now they had to rescue their cell brethren from a space-station!

They utilised Sson's Nockia to make an ___*private* connection to one of their brethren's Nockias on the spacestation. With this open, they buched together, and faced Sson.

From under his chainlinks, Sson fired his boosted Nockia at the group, assimilating them into a pseudo-Klick-Ons E'Mayl Attachment, and sending them directly to the Nockia on the WebWorld9 or at least somewhere on the station that recognised E'Mayls....

Quirk was sitting in his quarters on the WebWorld9. He was enjoying a Klick-On takeaway and perusing the artistic photos in the latest Pandora's monthly, when the eee-magazine started to vibrate. He immediately dropped it, spilling his Klick-On takeaway all over the floor, and hurried to the opposite side of the room. The eee-magazine continued to vibrate more and more violently. Suddenly, it flew across the room, leaving an array of slightly disillusioned E-Waps in it's wake.

Far, far below Quirk and his eee-magazines, Cunningston adjusted the EVA spacesuit, and activated the hatch cycling. Though he was the team leader for the Third Line Engineering & Plumbing and knew he had to set the example, he allowed himself a nervous gulp : if there was one thing he really couldn't abide, it was floating around in a zero-gee environment. He glanced at one of his colleagues, and was surprised to see the man's eyes open wide in shock, and his faceplate glint from an unexpected light source!

His head snapped round to regard the opening hatch, and was dumbfounded to see a bright artificial light washing into the airlock. As he made out a floor far below him, he also realised that the dreaded zero-gee of deep space was conspicuous by its absence!

He slapped the over-ride button that halted the hatch cycle, and braced his arms and legs against the cavity of the airlock; his team did likewise, muscles straining as they held each other above the gaping hole below them. A confused silence, tinged with embarrassment, fell upon the intrepid explorers.

"Uhh ... so ... ahh ... what now, boss?" One of Cunningston's men hesitantly broke the awkward moment.

Their leader looked at the faces before him, then glanced down between their feet.

"Well we need a rope ladder, *obviously*."

Since Lift five had appeared, there was a strange red-lit display hovering above it. Wilma watched in fascination as a small arrow and a set of numbers appeared on the display. The numbers started incrementing, flickered at 15 for a brief moment, before arriving at the destination of deck 16.

The comm pinged and Steff's voice soon followed, "Have you managed to cure them?"

Wilma replied sounding a little nervous, "Not quite, Steff. I still haven't got the hang of this Sonic Screwdriver™ since Saleem fiddled with it. They got sucked into Lift Five and sent to floor sixteen."

"Deck 16?" Steff questioned her, "We don't have a 16th deck."

"Well you do now. I'll cleanse the room of the Foot-in-Mouth virus so you can beam across".

Wilma set the screwdriver to setting 3 allowing a beam to emanate and sweep across the room, killing off the remnants of the virus.

A few moments later, Steff beamed in.

He headed over to Lift 5 and could see the display set as Deck 16. "I don't know what could be on that deck, but we'll have to venture up there to save the crew."

He pressed the button for lift 5 and waited in anticipation.....

....nothing.

The lift was stuck on the new deck.

"Hmmm, this could be a bit of a problem. None of the other lifts have the ability to reach a 16th deck."

"What about your Lift Four?" Wilma asked. "That might have the possibility to get us there."

"Cheers," Steff answered sombrely. "That's a great idea, but it could be dangerous. If we link your screwdriver into the internal lift matrix we may just be able to do it."

"Well what are we waiting for, let's go save the crew!"

Steff slowly reached out his hand and pressed the button for Lift 4. A look of terror came over his face as the lift arrived. He grabbed Wilma's hand as the doors opened and they entered the void

The TGA Defiled downloaded through its Novell Gears and dropped out of Super I-Drive. Before them hung the blue-green world of Jorbae, with its bright speck of a companion, the WebWorld9 spacestation.

Aboard the ship there came an audible sigh of relief. The crew were home. *No more adventures!* they silently agreed.

Kia-Ora piloted them towards the command hangar bay, and under CD power landed to a gentle stop.

As soon as the boarding ramp was lowered, everyone stumbled out, gratefully breathing in the recycled and, above all, *familiar* mechanical air.

"May I suggest a vintage from Garridge's *Finest Fine Wines* to celebrate?" announced Admiral Jirk, and the crew cheered.

"Why not?" agreed Rhett cheerfully. "After all, surely we've deserved it??"

"And I can log it under the reward vouchers scheme!" piped in Kia-Ora helpfully. They trooped out happily ... completely forgetting Androi the robot still trapped in the number seven airlock.

A handful of FP Extensionlet drones busied themselves about the starship, cleaning it down and running Really Useful Post-Flight diagnostics. One droid found the number seven airlock to be welded shut with melted cgi, and dutifully slapped some Lo-Cal explosive against the stringy silicon. Unfortunately, in its eagerness, it hadn't accurately calibrated the amount required, and had totally forgotten to convert to metric.

A blackened and soot-encrusted Androi stumbled out of the wreckage that was all that remained of the TGA Defiled. He looked around at the bits of FP Extensionlet that littered the hangar bay floor, and nodded in understanding. "Thank the gods for my CERAMIC-STEEL HULL," he announced cheerfully. "Now ... I wonder WHERE I AM ?? AND WHERE MY black executable briefcase may be?"

The XML Closedplanet was speeding along in Super I-Drive away from the Jorbae System and their *destination*, the notorious WebWorld9. Q-Rob sat triumphant in the Captain's Chair. It was amazing what a little godly anger could do to *motivate* the mortals!

He seethed. The WebWorld9 station! These mortals and their '*chance*'! The nausea in his gut! *What was going on?! It was becoming increasingly apparent that his individuality was being developed along a completely different path from FrontPage Guru and the other gods. But what was causing this?! Q-Rob was realising more and more that he did not need the remaining members of the Hydra-deity. In fact, to be perfectly honest, he actually loathed the other members, and their infuriating self-righteous prattling had just done more to get in his way than anything. Well that was all over now! He sat up sharply. That was almost blasphemy?! he gasped. I really must speak to Einstein and his mum and dad about this*

Suddenly the very fabric of the Space-Time Conundrum was tearing a new hole in itself, fuelled by the angry wrath of a deity. *Hell hath no fury like a scorned woman*, it is said; generally by the husbands. But when you have an angry god, even geologically upset mountains shuffle out of the way; time just rolls over and plays dead.

From out of the relatives of Einstein came the burning XML Closedplanet, downloading at a very rapid rate into the Jorbaean sector! It was the present day, tea-time to be exact.

Amazing to think someone deemed a rope ladder was a necessary item in our plumbing gear, mused Cunningston, grateful for the foresight.

The Third Line team had scrambled down the ladder, and were now regarding the impossible view about them.

They were standing in a vast hangar-like chamber. Above their heads, what suspiciously looked like the underside of the WebWorld9 spacestation curved away to the upper horizon. Not too far from them was an old-fashioned cream and blue toilet, with overhead cistern and brass pull-chain.

"Now *that's* unusual," commented the team leader. "Fatorian, if I'm not mistaken..."

"Yes, Sir," agreed Roth Plume in her silky voice, the one female officer on the team. She stepped closer to the contraption, and squinted at the floral design that covered the ceramic. "Early to Middle Fatorian, I'd say," purred Roth. "Pretty robust, little or no leakage, and," she eyed the pull-chain, "a good yanker."

Not wanting to let his eyes mist over with nostalgia, Cunningston returned to the present with an order. "Plume! Get me an omega reading from the water in the bowl!" he barked. "And you there, determine the swing-to-leverage ratio of the ballcock inside the cistern!"

As his crew hurried to carry out their experiments, he tilted his head and regarded the station that confoundedly floated above them.

Nick woke up in a cell...

Very cell-like. At least that was Nick's first impression. And second. In fact it was completely cell-like in all its glory. Grey walls, two rather flat and hard benches and one rather conspicuous toilet that looked rather ... well, let's just say, clearly open in nature.

Nick moaned. *I'm now **definitely** at the low end of this whole ordeal, for certain. I'm **never** drinking again ...*

Fen groaned and woke up with a snort. He pulled himself into a sitting position, his hand automatically going to his thumping head. He leaned forward, and a techni-colour vomit spewed forth.

Nick could take no more. He screamed to be released from their prison, and decried the injustice of a little light drinking.

The ruckus made an impression : a clutter of tiny cleaning 'bots appeared, and wiped away the mess. That it was only a cleaning of their cell and a freshening of their water was joy enough for they at least had received *some* attention : they were making progress and by this time that was all that mattered ...

Androi wandered around the Promenade looking with amazement at everything when he saw one of his former shipmates in Quirks Bar!

"RICH T, I CAN'T believe it, it IS REALLY YOU!!"

McVites was still trying to get his hearing back when Rich T responded, "Oh, hello Angdwoi, how're you doink?"

The robot had worked with Rich T Biskit when the lieutenant had until recently served on Yucmri.

"Well, things COULD BE BETTER, I have to say. WHERE ARE you headed?"

"We are returnink to the Ship, zo I guess we will zee you later, Angdwoi."

Androi, not taking the hint, continued to follow the fleeing HMS Dedicated officers across the Promenade. "WELL MAYBE YOU know where I might find my BLACK EXECUTABLE BRIEFCASE?"

Captain Odyssey Catchador was less than happy to be told that he had an extra *and rather loud* passenger, and that worse than that he had to take him *now*, because according to the WebWorld9 Immigration Control he had a Trustful Server Farm Certificate printed on his back.

But GOOD SIRSI!" Androi was protesting. "Where is my Black Briefcase??! I really do NEED MY BRIEFCASE, IT SIMPLY must be found!!" he wailed.

Odyssey Catchador slapped his hand to his forehead, and sighed. This rescue mission was turning into something far worse.

"Well, where did you last have it, and when?" enquired McVities Hobbs kindly. "It was held under 24 padlocks ON THE HMS SERVER FOUR," Androi explained. " 'Guns' Mademincemeat MADE SURE of that"

"I see" began Odyssey.

"BUT IN THE PANDEMONIUM I REJOINED CRISKO AND his crew on the TGA Defiled, and ENDED UP ON THE WEBWORLD9!!" continued the robot. "I saw Rich T Biskit, and thought I'd ask him about my briefcase and HERE I AM NOW, IF YOU SEE WHERE I'M COMING FROM?"

"Ah, I don't exactly," muttered Odyssey, digging his fingers deeper into his ears.

The E-Waps stood on the promenade of the WebWorld9 and muttered quietly to themselves.

Chief Sparerib had been gorging himself on his 3,590th Pancake when he looked up from his syrup induced haze and noticed something really frightening: the E-Waps were right outside the restaurant!

Beside him, Morga also looked up and paled as he spotted the E-Waps!

The youngest of the E-Waps looked over, noticed them sitting there and said in his best basic :

+++ Cheers! +++

The PHPWoks lost it.

The E-Waps entered the Klick-On Restaurant. Master Voda had not expected to see their former dinner again but now that they did he remembered that the last time he had had a good meal was quite some time ago.

+++ rt I thnk we r prprd 2 mk an e.g. of U +++ Voda said.

They pulled out their Nockias and prepared to fire!

Before they could, however, Morga grabbed a Golden Pee and used one of the moves he had learnt over the last day or so from the overly aggressive cook. It was a perfect backslash which knocked one of the Nockia out of an E-Wap's hand!

From that point on all was chaos of fur and hoods as the combatants fought in a great battle. The E-Waps who rather enjoyed their technology found that their technical advantages were rather limiting in a brawl which was going on before shouting Klick-On patrons who were encouraging and betting heavily on both sides.

At one point in the battle Voda and Chief Sparerib came face to hood, and they were scratching and biting each other with great vigour when station Security Chief Dado came bursting through the doors with about half a dozen security officers. He was livid! "If you Klick-Ons cannot control your clientel I will be forced

to close you down!" The owner looked at Dado with a look that said, *Well this IS a Klick-On Restaurant!*

Dado and his force busily rounded up the little PHPWoks and E-Waps. The first battle was a draw as all of the assorted beings were once again incarcerated by the WebWorld9 Security forces ...

Dado was frantically scribbling in his notebook : the brig these days was ridiculously busy!

"Let's see, now, we have 3x Klick-Ons - as you'd expect - one who's criminally greasy, if you ask me, 1x old man babbling about the Fat, 1x youngish man with a pale veneer of Lard, both of them whingers, several furry bears, several hooded imps," Dado ticked off his list.

Crisko pursed his lips in thought. "I agree, it *is* odd that we can't pin down their numbers for that last group. They seem to be mingling about each other whenever we try to count them!" He sighed. "Certainly is a busy day for you, Dado, poor chap."

"If only the Station's Counsellor, Dear Drew, was around," moaned Dado, "She would sort this lot out in no time at all!"

"Yes, I've pinged her, but got no response, even a hopping trace-route can't locate her. I'm concerned," Crisko admitted ruefully.

The Third Line Engineering & Plumbing crew suddenly paused. A low whine had intruded upon the silence of the vast chamber. As one, they glanced around to a lift entrance on a far wall and the now-increasing sound of an anti-grav vehicle rapidly approaching! Like rabbits before the glare of headlights, they were held fast!

Cunningston, the team leader, was the first to shake himself into action. "Quick! Back up the ladder!" and he cajoled the others to move.

His crew clustered about the end of the rope ladder, and began to clamber back up it, one on each side.

The lieutenant Pravara Cate turned to Cunningston.

"But, sir ...?" Cate began carefully.

"What?" his commanding officer snapped.

"Could it be ... worth our while ... to ... ahh ... wait here ... and ... erm ... see if they might be able to ... ahh ... help us?" He nodded at the lift door, the ID light of which was now furiously blinking on and off. "They might ... ahh ... be in a position to ... erm ... explain what's ... going on??"

Cunningston looked at his subordinate as if the eager man had just farted a silent but very smelly fart.

"You're new to the team, aren't you?"

"Yes sir."

Cunningston nodded. "You've got a *lot* to learn, boy! Initiative only gets you demoted! Now, get up that ladder double-quick!" he snarled.

The Third Line officer followed him up and into the airlock above, snapping shut the hatch. *What they couldn't see wouldn't worry them*, he reasoned.

The XML ClosedPlanet vectored into the WebWorld9 from Jorbae's bright sun, relying on its brilliance to occlude its presence on all the scanning spectrums. Q-Rob rubbed his hands, as Toth Hazel stood nervously nearby.

"Right! We'll IGNITE this infernal station once and for all!!" the erstwhile Hydra-part exclaimed. "...but we'll do it from the *inside!*" he grinned. "Toth, I believe there is a service hatch at the back of the round station, near all that scaffolding just there," he pointed, "which should allow us a masked forward entrance!"

"Very good, Sir," Toth replied automatically. He was furiously thinking up plans that would wrestle control of *his* ship back to him, and allow him to get on with building his beloved robots for 'RobotWars CXXX'. Mad captain or no mad captain, he simply couldn't miss the application deadline for this year's tournament!

The XML ClosedPlanet slipped in amongst the scaffolding and lined up beside the hatch.

Wilma and Steff were suffering the effects of Lift Four : something that travelled at right-angles to Fifth Dimensional Reality, and which had until recently held the Universe, understandably affected organic sentient beings. They felt slightly queer, and definately nauseous.

"Now I know why WWTwoOh fears this Lift urrggghh!!" Steff shuddered. He and Wilma had made it to the 16th, and gingerly stepped out onto this new Deck.

They couldn't believe their eyes...

The E-Waps huddled together, the central hub sitting down on the floor, hidden by their cell brethren. Masked from view, Master Voda and his most senior colleagues rt-click opened the battered Black Executable Briefcase.

The Universe contentedly swirled inside.

Voda slowly reached a gloved finger forth, and dipped the digit into the lazy maelstrom.

Stars nova'd with a multi-coloured display, and a spiral galaxy unwound itself ; ripples gently dispersed outwards, and they all felt the subtle microwaves rock the WebWorld9 almost imperceptibly.

Voda looked up. From under his hood, he grinned.

With a soft gurgle in the rippling waters, Saleem Bin Dion poked her head out from the open toilet, and grinned up at Nick.

"Hallo! How are you doing?" she hailed him with a Franco-Canadian-Arabic lilt. She hauled herself from the open cesspit, her sparkling white dress amazingly

clean and dry.

Once Fen and Nick had regained their composure, and stilled their beating hearts - an attractive woman appearing from the depths of a foul toilet was not something they were used to - Fen's Apprentice undertook a round of introductions. Fen was instantly smitten.

"But how come you live inside this ... toilet, my dear?" the old man asked as gallantly as he could.

"No, no, I don't live in *here*. I live in the Universal Bin, and a toilet is a bin of sorts, after all," she explained. "Tell him, Nick," she added at Fen's polite, but definitely blank, look.

Nick waved his hand at Fen. "Later, later..." He turned back to Saleem. "Have you heard from Wilma? We're ... ummm looking for her, amongst other things," Nick asked.

"*In here?*" Saleem laughed. "No, I haven't seen her in a while. I left her on the HMS Server Four, trying to extract the Universe from one of their Lifts. I believe it's currently in undesirable hands at the moment" she finished cryptically.

"What is? The Lift?" Fen enquired politely, desperate to keep the conversation going.

"No, no, you silly man!!" Fen's face fell. "The Universe *of course!*"

Nick looked at his Master, and the Fat flowed between them : Holy Starships! They had their mission!

"So what exactly are you two boys up to?" she asked.

"We're trying to get out of this place by something other than a public commode!" replied Nick pointedly.

Saleem rolled her eyes. *Why was it her lot in life to be rescuing this Nick and his companions?!*

"Stand back," she smiled, waving them to the far corner.

Saleem planted her feet squarely, jiggled her shoulders, and pushed out her considerable chest. She took a deep breath and opened her mouth.

"My heart - - -"

The voice *sprang* from the audible and melodic scales, and the room went *silent* in that really noisy way that complete absence of noise brings. Somewhere on the station a dog howled, and Hworrff winced in agony. Fen glanced at Nick, a puzzled frown across his face. Nick, however, was looking intently at the bars on the cell door, and Fen followed his gaze.

The metal bars were also puzzled. The atoms that glued the supra-strength alloys together were vibrating wildly, bouncing against their neighbours, and generally not wanting to still be hanging around. Saleem, the waves of modulation emanating from her open mouth, cocked her head on one side. The metal bars sighed in resignation, and, as one, *snapped* in their middle, and fanned out into the corridor, bending far enough away from the cell to allow the occupants to pass through.

"Shall we adjourn, gentlemen?" Saleem asked, as she stepped most lady-like between the open bars. Nick and Fen clambered out through the gap.

"Wonderful girl," muttered Fen under his breath. "Either I'm going to recruit her, or I'm beginning to like her..."

Guns Mademincemeat had been unable to raise his Captain to discuss the proper authorisation for situations like this - which worried him - so he took ownership of the Trouble and steered Dear Drew through to another chamber which he assured her she would find more comfortable, and which he promised would only be a temporary measure.

Guns feared she would go off on one again, but as it happened the red-headed lady was subdued. He locked the door behind her.

Drew immediately ran up to a pedestal, upon which sat a forlorn hooded midget, securely fastened by 24 padlocks and heavy chainlinks.

"Oh my poor boy!" she cried. "What's happened to you, now? Tell your Aunty Dear Drew all about it"

Wilma and Steff googled.

They were in a vast hangar-like chamber, in the middle of which sat the WebWorld9 SpaceStation; actually, it floated 12 foot above the deck, and directly underneath the station they could make out a collection of cream bowls and boxes.

The two glanced at each other, Wilma gripping her Trusty Sonic, and they walked towards the vast station.

An hour later, they had crossed one of the Radiuses of the Server's chamber, and were able to discern that the collection of shapes they had seen made up an old-fashioned toilet, with overhead cistern and brass pull-chain. It was cream coloured, with a pretty blue floral design, common at the time of Queen Fatoria, a proponent of the FatWay.

As they circled the Toilet, a voice timidly called out from the cistern above.

"Yahooo? Wilma? Steff??"

"I know that voice" muttered Steff, and glanced up.

WWTwoOh was poking his head from out of the cistern lid.

"What happened??!" demanded Wilma.

"Oh-oh-oh Wilma, ma'am, we found ourselves in here, totally cured. When we wandered over to this toilet under the WebWorld9, Captain Slogs sat down on the ... ah ... throne to think I think he used the chain to pull himself back up, and he disappeared!!!" he wailed.

"Okay, okay," calmed Steff. "So I guess all the others did that, too. But how did you get up in there??"

"I umm tried to investigate and thought I'd look in here to see if they were inside"

"But they're up in there" finished Wilma, to herself.

Steff helped WWTwoOh down, dripping wet, and the three of them glanced down at the lowered seat of the Toilet.

"Right. Here goes nothing!" And Wilma plopped herself on the seat, yanking hard

on the brass chain. The cistern gurgled to itself.
"Wilma, dear!!" cried Steff, but Wilma disappeared.
Steff immediately jumped on, and he too pulled down on the chain. The cistern gurgled, and he disappeared.
"Oh dear," warbled WW-TwoOh.

In the promenade toilets, in an out-of-order cubicle, the toilet started to flush itself and a few seconds later, Wilma appeared feeling slightly dizzy. After getting herself together, she noticed the *WW9* stamped toilet paper, attached to the wall next to her. As she got up, the toilet flushed again and Steff appeared.

She waited for his dizziness to pass before cautiously opening the cubicle door, and stepping into the central toilet area. Steff was just following behind her, when they both froze.
A flushing noise arose from one of the other toilets, and the cubicle door began to open. A rather drunk Klick-Ons wandered out, paying them no attention. Wilma sighed with relief.
"Right, we have to find the crew," Steff instructed.

WW-TwoOH nervously sat down upon the toilet seat, and reached for the chain. He closed his eyes as he pulled on the chain and disappeared.

Saleem, Nick and Fen were heading out of the security office when Saleem stopped dead in her tracks. "What's wrong?" Nick asked of her.
"If you'll please excuse me, I have to go."
Saleem dashed back into the security office, heading for the toilet.
"Damn", she thought to herself, "Someone's breached the plumbing network!"
She dived into the bowl.

Saleem flowed through her infinite network, homing in on the breached area. As she neared the area, an air of unfamiliarity came over her. "I've never seen this node before", she thought as she came flowing out of an old Victorian toilet. She glanced about. And then up. A look of awe came over her as she realised where she was.
"How can this be?!" she asked herself. "That's the WebWorld9?!"

"I jus don't believe it! I I amb so tired of himb tryink to be so frienly it is irratink, I amb so annoyed!" Rich T Biskit finally announced, voicing his opinion rather nasally.
"Hmm... you said something?" said Hobbs distracted by his recently purchased Pandora's Monthly. It had some great articles, he *rightly* justified.
"I sed that I amb really tired of that wobot," Rich T was peeved now as his

lamentations were being studiously ignored.

Suddenly the door opened and their newest bunk mate joined them..."WHAT HO, so how are YOU CHAPS, THEN?" Androi said happily. He was always cheered to see Rich T with whom he got along with so well.

"*Pleez jusht shud up would you?!!*" Rich T was very annoyed at the whole injustice in the world. The fact that they were banned from the WebWorld9 and were now searching for the HMS Server 4 did not help alleviate his mood.

Q-Rob had instructed the crew of the XML ClosedPlanet to board the WebWorld9 space station with extended shore-leave. The fact that he intended to destroy the station once and for all worried him not one iota. He was a Dark Lard of the Seive and a godly Hydra-Part : he was *above* that sort of thing.

He now sat in silence upon the bridge, gazing out at the station's scaffolding that hid the ship, and was mulling over his plans. The scaffolding marked where the WebWorld9 seemed to be eternally being extended, a building site heaven for labourers who never wanted to finish the job they were on. But the spidery myriad of joints and buttresses seemed to calm Q-Rob's mind, and was helping him to form a battleplan.

He examined these darker areas much closer : was that a thick smudge of ... grease?! Was that which covered the construct ... *lard?!!*

Q-Rob was incredulous. *Could it be?! Could this cursed station be The Sieve of Dark Lard??* Quickly, he counted the primary bars of scaffolding ... and found they numbered thirty-two! He gasped. *Fat32!*

As his eyes focused and unfocused amongst the tubing, something further caught his attention! At every connection there seemed to be a build-up of 'rubble'. His interest piqued despite himself, he squinted closely at the thirty-two primary bars. Yes! It was a scrap of burnt bacon! And ... another!

He could see that those crunchy bitter-tasting little devils that *always* end up in the corners of frying pans, were, here, piled up in the intersections of the scaffolding.

And that could only mean one thing.

Soberly, Q-Rob, the Helpdesk Deity, Hydra-part, and Dark Lard of the Sieve, realised grimly that *his* powers were said to be borne by the Great Sieve, and the burnt bacon bits in particular.

If this was *the Sieve* – and he *knew* it to be true – then he'd have to re-think his intentions.

And then he felt a 'movement' from inside the station, a *sensation* that was both archaic and familiar all at the same time.

"Hmmm," he mused, "I feel a presence ... I haven't ... felt ... since ..."

On the bridge of the HMS Server 4, the doors to Lift Four *Three-Dimensionally Maxxed* open, and a voice quavered out.

"Do you see where I'm coming from?"

Huw, the Mad Creator, popped his head round the doorframe, and peered out.

"Oh there's no one at home!" He rubbed his hands together, grinning his broken-toothed grin, and stepped down onto the Bridge.
"Right! This Hydra-Part is *now in command!*" announced Huw, and he plumped his middle-aged frame into the Captain's Chair.
He glanced over at the navi-screens, and waved nonchalantly.

The HMS Server Four's attitude thrusters fired, and the great vessel turned on its heel, and drifted off in a south-westerly direction towards a cluster of bright lime green stars.

The criminally greasy Klick-On was moaning at his fellows, blaming them for their predicament. The light from Jorbae's sun shone in through one of the Brig's windows.

"You shouldn't've added the to'mahto k'chup to theyer pancay'akes!!" he argued.
"Your mo'ther has a smooth for'hayd!!" one of the other Klick-Ons spat back.
"Ha! Your fa'ther died of old age!" cursed the third Klick-On, and shoved the greasy Klick-Ons.

Unfortunately, due to the grease and fat that covered the Klick-On, the third one slipped off the other's chest, and went sprawling onto the group of E-Waps that huddled nearby.

+++ Lk out U fool!!! +++ twittered one of the hooded imps, but the Klick-On collapsed and fell into the open executable briefcase. He disappeared and there was silence, save for the occassional High FM tweet from a young and nervous E-Wap.

There came a muffled bump from across the Brig Office, in the Cell Row, and everyone glanced over to the window : the Klick-Ons's lifeless body hung in Space bumping against the Vision Express Reactolite UV window pane. The E-Waps glanced at each other.

Inside their own Data Cell, the hooded imps quickly reset their Nockias to a 1-2-1 setting, and dived into the briefcase, depressing their microwave gadgets as they went.

Out in the Row, the E-Waps suddenly reappeared, and Master Voda, all 18 inches in height, imperiously strode to the Data Cell lock, opened the door, and retrieved the Briefcase. The remaining two Klick-Ons stood dumb-founded.

The cell of E-Waps floated out.

The PHPWoks trapped in the other Data Cell of the Brig tensed themselves as their fearsome rivals exited. Jirk, the Chosen One, who they were *originally* looking for, would know exactly what to do with this menace!!

Wilma and Steff stepped out of the WebWorld9's Unisex toilets, and found themselves on the central Promenade.

"Look!" pointed out Steff. "There's a Tesko store over there! We can check with them to see if they've spotted Captain Slogs and the command crew! Cheers!!"

They hurried across the thoroughfare, nearly bumping into a dazed and confused group of station plumbers, and up to the open foyer of the store where the checkouts were situated. A pungent flowery fragrance drifted over to meet them, along with a high-pitched giggle. They stepped up to an unusually quiet till, and a wide cheesy grin met them.

"Good afternoon, how may I help you? And do you have a Points Card with that?" the tiller asked.

"Ummm, no," answered Wilma, "but have you seen a plump and jolly Home Server Farm Captain and his command crew?"

"Of course!" answered the tiller helpfully. "They went thataway!" he made up.

"Cheers!" And Wilma and Steff ran off in the direction that Conman Abdullah had indicated.

Conman shrugged and returned to counting the brightly coloured credit bills.

Nick and Fen left the security complex and wondered what they should do. How do they find an Executable Briefcase - not that Nick had ANY clue what that was! - and the E-Waps?! He was finding that he was so confused these days, he really was beginning to miss the easy life on the old Helpdesk.

Fen on the other hand was having the time of his ancient life! Wine, women, now all they had to do was find the song and his life would be complete. And thinking about that Saleem lady sent his heart all a-flutter.

They crossed into the doughnut ring section of the station and found themselves standing in the Promenade and looking at the Tesko's that Steff and Wilma had so recently left. Nick was looking at Conman with a sense of recognition that comes only when you really are sure that you *might* recognise the person but yet are too afraid to really pursue it in the worry that you might be embarrassingly wrong. Conman of course just grinned foolishly.

Before Saleem had time to explore her new surroundings, she sensed a new presence. Someone was still in the plumbing network. She dived down into the ancient Fatorian toilet bowl and headed for the intruder.

WW-TwoOh was getting very dizzy. He felt like he'd been whizzing around in this piping for hours. Somehow he had been diverted at the U-bend and sent down a side drain, and now he was lost. Amidst all the floating debris he could discern a small shadow coming toward him. As it came closer, he could make out some kind of material. The strange ethereal flowingness of the material prompted some recollection in his mind. He was sure he'd seen it somewhere before.

Saleem had located the intruder and *flowed* towards him. It appeared to be a service droid. With her calm, yet very distinct, French-Canadian-Arabic voice she bellowed towards it, "How dare you intrude on my network. I am Saleem Bin Dion, eater of the bin souls. I Empty the Discus. I obliterate all Machine Code. I don't like Binary."

Saleem noted that the droid ahead began to nervously shake with fear. And with

that she started to sing a strange melodious tune.
As the notes emerged, the flotsam around her began to swirl. It was in her domain and would feel her power.
The swirling debris started to create a small growing current within the network. Saleem in complete control of this current used it to direct the flow of WW-TwoOh.

WW-TwoOh was terrified. The ethereal flowing material belonged to a very glorious lady with an overpowering voice. She was singing and he felt his directional movement changing. A strong current was building up in the pipe creating a great pressure that pushed WW-TwoOh through a small adjoining tube attached to the pipe. It was a tight squeeze, but a couple of minutes later he emerged into the light, and fell into a pool of bubbly liquid.

Nick and Fen left Tesko's trying to now decide what to do in order to find the E-Waps.

"So where to now?" asked Nick.

"Well I was thinking we could nip on down to Quirk's for a bit of a..... well maybe not," Fen adjusted, as he saw Nick look at him darkly. "Do you have your Spatula still??"

"Ah. I ... arhm ... think I may have lost it..." Nick looked sheepish. "Back at the bar actually."

"Right then back we go!" Fen said pleased. Maybe he would get to have that song to go with the drink, after all! And if Saleem was there it would make things just perfect!

It was readily apparent that this was not Fen's day as they saw that Quirk's was quiet. The staff were replacing broken tables and chairs after yet another Klick-On ceremony had just finished and most of the guests had staggered out. The price of success was indeed great, it is always said.

A lone Klick-On sat at the bar nursing a synthale, when suddenly he became angered and started to shout. "QUIRK! What the rars is this piece of metal in my drink?!"

The Klick-On held aloft a miniaturised WW-TwoOh between his fingers, and flicked it down the counter.

Before WW-TwoOh knew what was going on, the robot had skidded across the bartop, caught the edge of the counter, and then he was cartwheeling through midair. WW-TwoOh fell into darkness just as Nick bent down to retrieve his Spatula from under the salad bar.

As Fen's Apprentice reached under to pull it out he noticed that the fat and old pancake batter had coalesced into something quite strange. The entire spatula was now a shade of green.

"This can't be normal!" Nick said, disgusted.

"Well, truth to tell, it actually is quite common, we are Spatula Warriors, after all, not dishwashers, my young apprentice!" Fen explained in a voice that just oozed

tradition. "Especially when Mabel isn't around trying to clean the damn thing!" he muttered darkly.

So with that the two men moved on and began their search.

From the XML ClosedPlanet Q-Rob regarded his remote spycam with concern. He had hacked into the WebWorld9 security surveillance, allowing his Seived Sense to direct him intuitively, until he had recognised the old man.

The years have been kind, Ohbeone. But the circle is now complete, and that silver hair and frail frame will soon be stardust...!

He watched Fen and a younger man leave the Promenade. He thought he had destroyed all the Spatula Warriors many decades ago but they were indeed like a bad curry ... they kept repeating. The Dark Lard of the Sieve pulled out his own Spatula, which glowed red, and held it aloft.

"Soon we will reveal ourselves, soon we will have revenge!" he growled.

WW-TwoOh rocked back and forth. His trans-locatory servo-motors would normally have inspired him to be lulled into a deep shut down, but something was definitely wrong here: his embedded anxiety programming was overheating with the effort of panicking!

The robot could tell that he was in a fairly deep and dark place, softly padded, with an opening overhead that blinded him with pulsing artificial lighting in time with the rocking motion. All about him were bits of fluff and lint, and *Eurgh ! ...* underneath him was a sticky brown mass of sweetly pungent oblong!

It dawned on him: *he was in a POCKET!!!*

Saleem, feeling very pleased with herself, decided to go and rejoin Nick. She flitted in and out of the debris making her way through the network. She emerged from a waste paper basket and almost gave herself a heart attack. Standing before her was a young individual with a large cheesy grin and a thick flowery odour that overpowered even her own ethereal self.

Not wanting to remain in his presence, she left the Tesko store and caught up with Nick as he was leaving Quirks'. A look of disgust came over her face as she realised Fen was behind him.

"Hello my pretty, I see you've come to join me again", piped in Fen.

Saleem ignored Fen and spoke to Nick. "Let's go find Wilma. Where did you see her last?"

"Don't be shy now," Fen answered, "I'll take you home later and let you cover me in lard. You may be a bit on the thin side, but I'll fatten you up, Don't you worry about that."

"I'd be obliged if you could keep your fantasies to yourself please Mr Ben."

"That's *Fen*."

"Whatever."

And the three strode off in search of Wilma.

Several stairwells later, Steff and Wilma found themselves on a lower deck of the station. This area was filled with large parts of scaffolding filling the corridors and a large neon sign that read 'UNDER CONSTRUCTION'.

"This part of the station must still be under construction", Steff concluded.

"Well, the sign gives it away really," Wilma replied.

"We'll have to be careful down here," Steff commented as they rounded the corner and bumped into a horde of floating hooded figures carrying a tattered black executable briefcase.

The figures quickly got up and carried on down the hallway, the youngest shouting +++|00|0|Cheers!00||0|+++ as they disappeared around a corner. Steff turned to Wilma. "Where have I heard that before?"

Upon the bridge of the HMS server 4, classical music blared over the comm system, and Huw, the creator, sat relaxing in the Captains chair, waving his hand every now and then to control the ship.

His stomach grumbled.

"Ooooh, I haven't eaten all day ..." he muttered to himself. "I fancy a floury burrito from Aunty."

From the corner of his eye, Huw noticed a whale gently swim by not too far away, which was trailed shortly afterwards by a school of clicking dolphins.

"Hmmm, that's a little odd" murmured Huw.

Tubby Honest was striding quickly for his favourite corner of the Promenade, down between Quirk's and the new Tesko's which meant that he could catch the drunks coming out and the various people doing their morning grocery shopping all at the same time.

Now Tubby was a thin man who lived like a dung beetle that had really let itself go. It wasn't that he was just not very aromatic, he frankly stunk. Thus he was not exactly hard to miss as the crowd tried to part whenever they saw him coming. So it was a great surprise to Tubby that he smacked straight into someone, spilling his freshly minted Pandora's Monthly all over the floor.

"Oi you! Look wot you done 'ere!" growled Tubby.

"Sorry son," Fen began, but suddenly the stench of the man caught up with him.

"Fwaaa...!!"

Tubby looked up and saw Saleem. He goggled at her briefly before trying very hard to look as if had done no such thing.

As Fen gathered up the eee-magazines that were strewn around the deck, he finally got a view of the front of the magazines, and blushed. Intrigued, and thus converted, he quietly slipped one into his pocket. However, the old Spatula

Warrior's stomach gently grumbled a fatty warning, and although puzzled, Fen allowed an old mantra to quietly pass his lips. As he handed over the last of the eee-mags, he wondered what had inspired him to pronounce the emergency power-up command

CHAPTER 10

After his near death experience on the HMS Tea-Brake Barney McGrew had decided that the Hydra was too focused on the *comings and goings* of the WebWorld9 station and not on the reason *why* they were destroying it. He had travelled through, around, and across the universe several times over during these last few para-lightyears, but still the *raison d'être* eluded him. He felt that journeying to the station would shift-refresh his mind about why they were meant to be destroying it, but unfortunately when he got there the seductive qualities of Tubby Honest cooed to him and he found he simply could not escape the alter-ego. He felt himself falling into the comfortable routine of the Pandora's Monthly seller and was clearly enjoying it far too much to really continue with his old ways. In fact, he had a sneaking suspicion that Scrub shared his view as well. Like the Eater of Bins, he was grudgingly acknowledging the merits of the WebWorld9 station and its inhabitants.

Sitting in his quarters aboard the station, he was not only getting worried about the Hydra again, but now two of them had turned up on the station and would undoubtedly cause trouble. He knew he had to stop them, before his perfectly good selling spot was nothing more than a flicker of space dust.

The gears and cogs inside his brain began to grind and turn as he tried to formulate an action plan, when his eye fell upon his collection of Pandora's Monthly. The eee-mags were glowing ; only ever so faintly, but they were definitely glowing. He picked one up, and noticed that the monthly with extra big ones had gained a green tinge to the overall shining aura. He tried to open the pages, but it refused to reveal its secrets: he could however, roll it into a tube. Instinctively, he picked up two more of the vibrant magazines, and, laying the three together so they overlapped, rolled them all into one long tube about 3 feet long. *Now why did he want to do that?*

He waved the green tube before him, in the manner of a sword swing and parry, curling it around into a thrust. "*What on rars was happening?*", he thought to himself. Shrugging, he gathered the Tubby dufflecoat about him and stepped out into the corridor.

Walking through the bowels of the station, Fen sighed and rubbed at his belly. "Are you alright?" enquired Nick. "Not another grumbling appendix?" "Kind of ... I think I've bought ourselves a little time though ..." he replied cryptically.

Saleem raised her eyebrows curiously. "Good. We need to find those E-Waps soon, and if we can find Wilma too, then all well and good!"

Nick waved his green glowing Spatula above his head. "Hurrah!" he cried out excitedly.

The others looked at him.

Nick dropped his arm to his waist, and hung his head sheepishly.

Fen glowered at him. "Adventure, excitement! Hmph! A Spatula Warrior craves not these things! Wine, women, and song, now that's another matter. Anyway, put that thing away. You're going to get us all grilled. Use your Spatula for Nutmeg and Fennel..."

"Knowledge and Defence..." Nick nodded to himself, taking mental notes.

"...never for showing off. We are still a rare lot, and taken none too kindly by ordinary folk ..." Fen continued.

"Come on. This way." interrupted Saleem, taking charge, and keen not to let the old fool drone on. "I can feel a conjunction."

"Huh, nothing to do with *me*," retorted Fen, his voice full of hurt and hope all in one go.

Saleem ignored him. "Our two goals came very close just then, but now they are going off at a tangent again... We don't have much time!" She led the other two towards a nearby lift array, calling for the downward and slightly to the right option.

Chief Sparerib stared at the grey walls of the brig and seethed with anger. Only moments ago, he had seen the E-Waps use their technological wizardry and some sort of briefcase to escape the jail cell next to their own. He knew he had to get his people out of here and hunt down those horrible little hooded creatures. To think they were *cousins* only made the Chief shudder even more.

Morga was just preparing a masterful exposé on how to escape when a strange gurgling noise started to rise from the toilet. As he crept over to take a closer look, Captain Slogs emerged from the bowl and landed on the floor with a slosh. The PHPWoks were dumbfounded. Slogs was still fully dressed but his clothes were completely soaked. He really could not have looked – or felt – much worse. And to top it all off, he had lost his watch in the U-bend. The only highlight to his rather brutal adventure in that tight passage was that he did not have Foot-in-Mouth any more. The only question now was, where was everyone and what were all these furry creatures doing here? He feared he was about to be the main course at some pagan feast. He hoped he looked stringy and gristly.

"Umm ... hallo ... do any of you ... ummmm ... speak basic?" Slogs asked, fearing the answer.

"Well, yes of course we do," Morga said testily.

"Right, good, well, now ... where am I?" It seemed a reasonable question.

"You are on the WebWorld9, and in the brig," one of the younger woks piped up.

"Ah, right then, so how did you all get here?"

The PHPWoks were too embarrassed to actually answer that one.

After a long and drawn out silence, the little furry creatures went on to explain the gist of their problems and perils. Slogs was impressed that they were so well travelled considering their diminutive size and appearance, and felt they ought to be eligible for an honorary Home Server Farm Fleet title.

With a little pacing, which actually equated to only six feet cell wall to cell wall, he considered his situation. Within moments he announced he would have to write a novel on the mechanics of pacing inside a jail cell. Unfortunately that idea didn't last long when one of the PHPWoks produced a small book from within it's fur titled, 'The Mechanics of pacing inside a Jail Cell, by Little Jimmy Einstein'.

"Okay you lot," he sighed, "Come with me, we're getting out of here."

The PHPWoks let out a mighty "Hi-ho!" and then looked sheepishly at each other. After nearly an hour of trying unsuccessfully to lure one of the guards with the "one of us is really sick" routine they went for the obvious and had Slogs demand to see His Lawyer. This terrified the guards as they had only been trained to understand words shorter than five characters, and would never be able to

withstand the convoluted speech of a Lawyer. At once, they released the captain and the PHPWoks, who hurriedly left the brig before any of the gaolers thought an evening class in Legal Semantics sounded like a fun thing to do.

Q-Rob slipped silently through the lower corridors of the WebWorld9. He could feel a presence in the fat. The flows were curdling and lard was forming. He knew it was somewhere near and heading in his direction. He revelled in the fear-attack tingle that ran through him. Soon, soon he would face down his Spatula enemy!

Barney McGrew hurried deeper into the bowels of the Space Station. Down here, the lighting was poor and unserviced; only web-bots prowled these corridors, and they fled before the glow of his green tubing that he held ahead of him. Intuitively he moved forward, a little puzzled by his growing indigestion. Indigestion was always a sign of the Fat curdling, which could only mean one of two things; either his lunch hadn't been cooked properly or part of the Hydra was nearby. A worried look spread over his face at the thought of what he would have to endure if his lunch hadn't been cooked properly. "I *really* hope it's the Hydra my stomach's sensing..." he muttered.

Saleem, Fen, and Nick staggered out from the station's *sideways and a little to the right* lift, and paused to catch their breath. None of them were used to that moderm of travel and it took a while to readjust one's internal organs back into a state of normalised reality. Once the floor and ceiling had separated themselves, they stepped quickly into the service areas that held various conduits, pipes, and routes.

They had passed through a few corridors when Saleem suddenly paused at an interchange.

"Ah. We have a choice. We can either go that way for Wilma, or this way for the Universe." She turned to face them. "Which way? It's your choice"

Fen looked at Nick. Nick looked at Fen. The Spatula Warriors returned Saleem's gaze.

"I'll go this way for Wilma," instructed Nick, taking charge as only the Chosen One can do. "You two head after the Universe!"

Fen looked at Saleem and grinned. Saleem rolled her eyes, but took his hand - her *only* concession - and headed for the stars.

Nick took a deep breath, held his green Spatula aloft, and descended into the dark murk

.....After a few para-minutes of staggering around, Nick really wished he'd looked for the light switch before heading down the dark corridor.

Q-Rob stationed himself at the connector portal, his eyes penetrating the

darkness of the various S-bend and U-bend corridors that conjoined at his location. He waited contentedly, grinning to himself. He was ready. He also happened to be masked with a superficial disguise, just in case. "I *am* an evil tactician after all," he had reasoned to himself, "and besides you can never be too careful".

After a short while, and a why that spanned the whole of eternity, he heard the running patter of footsteps ahead, and a green glow was warming one of the darkened corridors.

As a vague figure approached, Q-Rob stepped forward to intercept him.

"The Fat may be with you..." hissed Q-Rob, "...but you are not a Spatula Warrior yet!!!" And he leapt at his adversary, his red spatula high above his head.

Hard-Grafft Slogs drifted through the crowd, contentedly serving refreshments. He and his command crew were in the WebWorld9's great Sports Arena, and the crowd were settling down to watch the annual tournament of Klick-Ons Ten-'Nys, that had been delayed due to unusually good weather, a typical game involving buxom Klick-Ons dressed in short white skirts wrestling each other in mud.

Truth be told, he was glad to be free of those teddy bears. They had been greatly impressed by his 'Lawyer' trick, but babbled on about it incessantly. So, at the earliest possible opportunity he had given them the slip, and followed his nose to an information point.

The erstwhile Server 4 command crew had appeared, a little dazed and somewhat worse for wear, from various toilet cubicles around the station, but all had displayed worthy ingenuity and had found their way to the local employment office. Once here, however, they had discovered they couldn't supply any useful information : it wasn't amnesia, as such, rather it was that annoying and frustrating feeling when that elusive word is on the tip of your tongue, but for the life of you, you can't figure out what it is. They *had* been able to report that they had something to do working with servers so the careers advisor had put them all in here, serving refreshments.

It was a job, shrugged the captain, as good as any other.

Barney McGrew ducked under the sizzling red blade, and stabbed with his own green eee-mag weapon. Q-Rob's spatula parried, and Barney's masked foe danced out of reach of a counter attack.

"Rars! This Fatty is good, too good!" cursed Q to himself. "If only he'd push back that silly fur-lined duffle hood, and let me see the whites of his eyes, then I'd have him!"

The Dark Lard could not believe how difficult it was to deal with his adversary. He was shocked at how strong this warrior was and how he could feel the fat flowing through his enemy. It appeared they were evenly matched.

Barney gasped. "I don't know where I'm getting these fencing moves from it's as if the rolled eee-mags are moving of their own accord" he grinned from under his duffle coat, "... but rars I'm good!"

However, his reverie was cut short as his opponent spun and swung a hidden uppercut. McGrew batted the spatula away ... but only barely, and had to give ground. Q-Rob advanced, determined to strike down this Fat Knight! After preparing himself for this moment – one that was supposed to be of bliss and pleasure – he was very concerned that he would be stuck without a way to easily finish off his opponent. Q-Rob launched his great *Griddle cakes* move and then turned it into a *Flying flapjack with maple syrup* which was considered a very deadly move. However at every turn his spatula was being blocked. He began to sweat, and almost stumbled with exhaustion. Suddenly, Barney McGrew sensed that he was pushing back his enemy: he was actually winning! But then Q-Rob made a sneaky *corkscrew whisk* with his Spatula against his opponent's blade. The green eee-mags inexplicably collapsed with a sizzling splutter, and Pandora's Big Issue With Extra Big Ones flopped to the floor. Q-Rob, pleased with the turn of events, saw the opportunity to finish his enemy. With a brutal strike he swung at the chest of Barney, who skipped backwards. With his 'Big Ones' coalesced into a smoldering heap on the floor, Barney realised that he was now in over his head and decided to run for his life. Q-Rob yelled in frustration and tore after his foe.

Nick meanwhile was trying to look for Wilma in the depths of the ship. It was a most desperate affair. His small plug-in warbled with excitement at the thought of seeing the lovely lady once more. He was really struggling to keep it down. He returned his Spatula to his pocket and tried to calm himself. He felt more than saw something coming towards him from the gloom ahead. Fear welled up inside as the figure approached, so he hid himself behind a drinks dispenser that had been conveniently placed in the corridor. He saw it was a man in some sort of hooded cloak running like a madman away from another chap who was holding a red glowing object. A very familiar glowing object in fact. Nick gulped in trepidation as the two figures ran towards him.

Adjacent to the dispenser, Barney stopped, completely out of breath and fully worn out. His bout of indigestion and heavy parka had done him in. He leaned over, resting his hands on his knees, and gasped for air. Q-Rob was also huffing and hissing in his attempt to catch his adversary. In his rush he only just noticed someone standing behind the vending machine. He stopped immediately, looked up at the man and his hesitant grin, and knew he was in trouble.

Q-Rob looked across at his original opponent and then back to this new towering menace ... he weighted up his odds of success, and cursed his apparent cowardice. Using the crippling *Blueberry Pancake Thrust*, he leapt at Barney, sliced through the thick parka and sent him tumbling to the floor severely wounded. It was only then as the body crumpled to the floor that the hood muffler fell back and Barney was revealed to his former Hydra companion.

"No, this can't be! It's impossible!" Q-Rob hissed. The full weight of what had happened hit him : he was betrayed, the horror of it all was that he was not the

one doing it!

Nick, stared blankly at the two combatants, he came to his senses and fled the scene trying to get away from the murderer. He failed to realise that he had just met his most feared opponent.

Barney, gasping for air looked up at Q-Rob, "New issue sir? With really Big---" Whatever he would have said next was lost as he collapsed leaving Q-Rob alone in the corridor with his thoughts.

"I have got to get out of here!" Q-Rob fled the scene as well.

After about ten minutes Barney opened one eye, then another. He ripped off his coat and saw that the slice had indeed gone through the thick coat and his shirt but a great layer of fat had surrounded him during the battle and it had saved him. He chuckled, *remarkable stuff, absolutely remarkable stuff!*

The E-Waps scurried - well, floated - at a fast pace along the higher corridors that led into the WebWorld9's command centre. The fact that they had entered an unauthorised area was of no concern to them. They Nockia'd the door locks, which swished open before them with a begrudging flash.

Master Voda honed in towards the Station's Bridge. From here they would unleash the power that emanated from the battered black executable briefcase. Already one of his top scientifically-minded E-Waps was running along behind, studying how best to affect the Universe with a pre-meditated poke. If they could subtly influence at will the var.locate of their sworn enemies, destiny quite literally would be in their hands! This E-Wap, called Tureen, had outstanding abilities in decyphering and encrypting all sorts of puzzles and enigmas, and Voda knew he had his best Wap on the job.

The final set of doors wavered animatedly before their combined Nockias, and, like a dream, they gained entrance to the central control centre.

Crisko whirled around to face the midget intruders.

"Who are you?!" he demanded. "Access forbidden! Permission denied! Get out this instant!"

+++ U shll sbmit. We R N cmmnd now +++ declared the diminutive Master Voda. The E-Waps, fanned out, circling the command crew of the station, and pointing their Nockias threateningly. From across the way, another Auth Conf door slid open, and the remaining separated group of E-Waps appeared, having been summoned to rendezvous here by Voda. They too raised their weapons, and covered the crew.

Kia-ora stepped forward, raising her arms. "Come along, now, let's all be reasonable, and act like mature sentient beings. I'm sure we can discuss this and come to an underst..."

+++ ||000|0|0|0|0|000000!!! +++ screeched Master Voda in High FM, and calmly shot her with his Nockia. Kia-ora crumpled to the deck, unconscious.

+++ N tht ws me be N nice +++ he sneered from beneath his hood. +++
The nxt 1 2 mv will B ded +++
He motioned with his Nockia towards a store room. +++ Evry 1 N there +++
Now +++
Crisko and a colleague took Kia-ora under the arms, and the command crew sullenly allowed themselves to be locked in storage.

Nick ran at full pelt down the dark corridors, his own green spatula held aloft illuminating his way.

After their close and mercifully brief encounter with the floating imps, Wilma and Steff crept gingerly through the darkness of the scaffolded lower corridors. Neither wanted to admit it, but they were quite on edge now.

Frantic steps came running towards them from the gloom.
"Argh! Whassat?!" gasped Steff, freezing to the spot.
Wilma careened into him and jumped out of her skin. "DON'T DO THAT!" she hissed back. "I don't know? How the rars would I know?" she demanded.
"Cheers," agreed Steff, and at once felt a *little* calmer now that he had heard his familiar idiom.

However, a green glow began to colour the murk

Nick galloped around the bend and crashed into Wilma and Steff. The three of them went sprawling, and ended up in a scared and trembling huddle. The minaturised WW-TwoOh was catapulted from Nick's pocket, his shiny gold plating reflecting what little light was down here like a nuclear sunburst in Schroedinger's box.

"Nick!" cried Wilma.

"Wilma!" cried Nick.

"WW-TwoOh!" cried Steff, whose eye caught the golden gleam on the floor beside them.

"Am I pleased to see you." they all cried.

Wilma and Nick hugged each other madly, and Steff crawled over to the doll-like robot, and sat him on his open palm.

The 3 inch high droid craned his neck up to regard Steff's beaming face. "Oh thank the Maker." he wailed. "It's sooo good to see a familiar face again even *if* it is enormous!"

Morga and SpareRib were standing on the deck of the WebWorld9's Promenade wondering what was really their best option, when they noticed a slightly familiar being sitting beside a comely alien woman in Quirk's Bar.

Jirk was trying to chat up a Banditalorian woman of questionable virtue when he felt a tug on his trouser leg. He swatted at it briefly and continued to relate his magnificent manouevre at the battle of DottOrg when he again felt a tug. He looked down at some very familiar furry faces. He gave an audible gulp.

"O Great Jirk, it is you, it is you!" Morga said.

"Yes, yes," he snapped. "It's *Yurk*, by the way. What are you guys doing here?" he was now a little uncomfortable as he remembered why it was that they considered him a god-like figure. Flatulence and underwear is not a subject to win the ladies. And the mis-pronunciation of his name really didn't help either!

"Well Great One we have come here for you... We need you, it is a time of great danger, there has been a great disturbance in the fat you see."

"Oh, right. Well what can I do?" He was trying desperately to look daring and heroic for his feminine companion who had become quite interested in something else entirely.

"You must come with us to vanquish the nasty E-Waps and their fearsome weapons," Chief Sparerib said.

"E-Waps? They sound very... umm... fearsome?" he replied, twisting their ridiculous sounding name in his head. He felt that the terror of the PHPWoks would be rather harmless to him.

"So, you will join us?" One of the lesser Woks, Flip, asked.

"Yes, yes I think I must..." answered Jirk, then he paused for effect, "For the good of the galaxy!" He glanced around, but noticed that his lady friend had wandered off with a Klick-On.

With Crisko and his command crew in deep storage, the E-Waps quickly attached the battered black executable briefcase to the WebWorld9's mainframe. As Master Voda paced - well, floated - back and forth, muttering in High FM, Tureen plugged tri-axial cables to all the metal outports on the case, the hinges, the slide snaplocks, and the roller password lock on the front. These in turn were connected back to the ports and jacks on the station's primary computer. Satisfied, the enigmatic E-Wap stepped back and instructed one of the cell brethren at the power generator over-ride to 'Flick the Switch'.

A great rumbling rattled through the Space Station, and it began to break free of its Jorbaean freshmint orbit on its rusty underused thrusters.

+++ |00|0||0|0000||| +++ commanded Voda, and the Space Station's armoury was brought to bear on a distant star, aimed via the briefcase. Voda barked the command to *Ignite*, and everyone peered into the briefcase.

In the swirl inside the briefcase a star went a multi-coloured nova, and winked out.

Voda looked up at his cell of E-Waps, and grinned malevolently.

"Rars, those midgets float fast." muttered old Fen, as he and Saleem pursued the

E-Waps back up into the command centre of the WebWorld9. They came to a halt at an 'UnAuthorised Entry' door, which refused to budge for either of them. A set of running footsteps sounded from the other end of this intersection, and the old Fat Warrior and the Eater of Bin Souls glanced up to see several teddy bear like creatures and a podgy admiral rolling into view ; the small bears were armed with rolling pins and wooden spoons, and, even more threateningly, starched white aprons.

"You here for the Universe?" Saleem asked, coming straight to the point.

"That's right," confirmed Jirk expansively. "Only a job for a Home Server Farm Fleet Admiral, y'know!"

"HmMMM," she remarked.

"Yes, well, anyways we have to get through this door." interrupted Fen.

"That's right." agreed Chief Sparerib. "Those pesky E-Waps are on the other side, I can FEEL it!!!"

Morga stepped up and waved his ceremonial wooden spoon. Flip, the lesser PHPWok, volunteered, and Stir joined him. They rummaged about in their belt pouches, and were soon kneading some shoe pastry on the floor in front of the solid door. Once ground to the proper consistency, they rolled it into spaghetti strings, pushing the dough into the crack around the doorway.

They turned to face the others with a downcast expression.

"We need something to heat up the dough!" explained Flip.

"But our flints were confiscated by the Station's Security," pointed out Stir.

"By the Fat!" snapped SpareRib. "Rars to them!!" he cursed. "We need to fast-cook the spaghetti so that it triples in size," he explained to the two humans and one gorgeous and ethereal goddess. "We need some exorbitant heat or something highly inflammable" he added, turning a thoughtful look in the direction of Jirk.

Jirk quickly glanced at Saleem with a flush of embarrassment. "Oh er yes, I see what you are suggesting" and sidled up to the doorway, facing the others.

"And I can provide the heat!" offered Fen, whipping out his blue Spatula, which began to glow fiercely.

Fen stepped between the plump admiral and the door, and waved his Spatula up and down. Jirk leaned forward, and took a deep breath, puckering up his face and screwing his eyes shut.

A great fart erupted from the rear-admiral, and Fen directed its combustible energy along the Spatula, fanning the blue flame over the spaghetti, like a homemade aerosol can blowtorch.

They had about three seconds to dart out of the way while the spaghetti cooked and expanded and EXPLODED : the remains of the door hung off strings of dough.

Once the smoke cleared, everyone peered inside.

The E-Waps peered back out. As did an array of Nockias.

+++ Tk 1 stp N we blw up the uni-vrs +++ Master Voda threatened.

Silence gathered about the protagonists.

++++ mmmmm I thnk ths s wrng +++ cheers! +++

One of the E-Waps was looking very hard at Master Voda.

++++ Now Lk here Orng I thnk ths s not the tm R pls 4 ths+++
Voda said very carefully ; he was on a Nockia's edge at the moment.

It was apparent to the various beings that things were getting out of control. Fen watched waiting for his chance to interrupt in a way that would make an heroic difference.

Little Orng meanwhile was debating the wisdom of expressing his opinion to the almighty Voda. He felt his paws sweating and his little Nokia was slipping back and forth in his hand. The E-Waps were all looking at their little ally with a sense of concern and for the moment were not looking in the direction of the interlopers.

Fen snapped. He had to do *something*... not that he really knew what it would be but there was a lady present and he needed to impress. However, said lady was already taking matters into her own hands, delicate and sublime though they were. The Eater of Binned Souls stepped up to the cracked doorway, and opened her mouth.

"Ohhhh-ohhhh-ohhhh..." she began, her Franco-Canadian-Arabic crooning slicing through the Control Centre. This time around, though, she was modulating her singing voice through the airwave transistors, scaling up and down the FMs, LWs, and the dog whistles.

"..... my heart WILL go on" she sang.

The E-Waps collectively jumped. Recovering, they withdrew to a concentrated huddle in the middle of the room, surrounding the executable briefcase, and the cables that trailed up to the WebWorld9's controls.

Fen waved his blue Spatula high, and heroically - and pompously - leapt past Saleem, his rheumy eyes fixed on Master Voda.

Unfortunately, his arthritic legs gave out on landing, and he collapsed to the deck. This dynamic intervention snapped the E-Waps from their frozen stance, and as Saleem muttered, "You crazy ol' fool!", they pulled themselves together, and fanned out, directing their Nockias back at the intruders.

Jirk and Saleem darted forward, grabbed Fen, and dragged him back, another great sulphurous cloud erupting from the rear-admiral that once again stalled the E-Waps in their aggression. Voda and his cells fired a set of purple rays, which congealed with the fruity fart cloud, slamming a solid substance back against the open doorway, blocking it once more.

Saleem sniffed. "Good thing you had those refried beans last night," she congratulated him.

Jirk flushed red, but snapped his fingers as a thought struck him. "Y'know, we need someone to augment that amazingly melodic voice you have, m'dear. And I know just the chap" "

The HMS Dedicated had done a handbrake turn, and re-vectored for the WebWorld9 space station. "Anything to pacify that rarsing robot, and the poor crew," thought Captain Odyssey Catchador.

Androi Joyrider had sent the crew to distraction with his modulating decibels, not to mention his desire to retrieve his beloved battered black executable briefcase.

He was now in deep storage, chatting with the broken web-bots that awaited repairs.

"We'll zoon be bak, we-unight the andwoid with 'is bag, and be wid of him," Rich T consoled his Captain.

"And I might be able to get an update from ummm Pandora," agreed McVities Hobbs eagerly.

The RARS fleet, all 35% of them plus the extra .3% of a golf course, were still stuck in the past, hovering above the old version of Jorbae. In fact the planet was so primitive it was still only version 1.1.

Captain Admirable Remedy sat in his quarters cleaning the Jorbaean urine off his boots, unaware that some of it had dripped into his cup of tea.

Adding the last shine to his footwear, he put them away in their locker and settled down to finish his tea. He took one sip and fell sideways off his chair.

The stuff was extremely potent and Remedy was starting to feel very dizzy. He fell into an immediate hypno-trance. Strange visions started fleeting through his mind.....A large ship with a cheeky grin.....a strange new deck.....a toilet and accompanying floating space station....darkness.

And then he saw his grandfather, captain of the ill-fated SS Titanium, turning to an ensign, and demanding, "Asteroid? What asteroi...?!"

The visions faded and Remedy came around.

He didn't know what to make of it all. The tea had given him some kind of strange prescience....

He grabbed the cup of tea and headed for the science labs.

"Dr Clock!" he shouted as he arrived.

"Yes captain?" came the reply.

"I want this tea analyzed. It seems to be some kind of strange awareness drug," Remedy explained and he recounted his experiences after drinking the liquid. Clock immediately took a sample of the tea and put it through the computer for analysis.

"It should only take a moment captain."

A few para-minutes passed.

The computer bleeped. "Ahhhh, here come the results," announced the science officer. "Hmmm, very interesting".

"What is it?" Admirable asked quizzically.

"What exactly were you doing just before you drank the tea?"

"Cleaning my boots".

"Were those the boots that met with the unfortunate accident?"

"Umm, Yes, why?", the Captain answered his cheeks taking on a shade of pink.

"The tea seems to contain traces of urine. The urine appears to have melded with the tea creating a super-awareness compound. Anyone who drinks this stuff will gain a unique prescience and be able to see through all time and space. I think we've found ourselves a very powerful resource in these beings, Captain."

"Ahhh, how nice. I want public toilets installed on this planet immediately! We have to gather their urine!"

The HMS Dedicated manoeuvred into a docking with the WebWorld9, and Androi Joyrider was re-assigned from the repair queue.

"Oh, thankyou, good SIRs!" the android beamed. "THOSE FELLOWS HAVE A VERY INTERESTING TOPIC OF conversation," he said, describing the broken web-bots, "but between you and me, I don't think they are quite all there, IF YOU SEE WHERE I'M COMING FROM?" He twirled his index finger beside his forehead, and winked conspiratorially.

Captain Odyssey Catchador wasn't too impressed with an android, imbalanced and a stowaway to boot, criticising his web-bots, even if they *were* broken. But with the prospect of finally releasing this latest version of a nightmare from his ship, he wasn't going to complain. In fact he wasn't going to willingly engage in a conversation with the android, so he just patted him on the shoulder.

Instead, the Captain turned to Rich T Biskit and McVities Hobbs. "We'll release him onto the Station as soon as we've completed docking. And then we're going straight back to the Home Server Farm," he whispered.

However, McVities was looking forward to seeking out that Pandora's Monthly vendor, especially if he had any of those big issues left.

"Tell you what, Captain, I'll go with him," he offered. "I'm not really assigned to your crew, and I'd be uhhh happier, knowing that this android wasn't going to do anyone any harm if I was with him" he explained.

"An' I only game along for the wide," added Rich T, thick with cattarrh. "I good do wid sum time on the dubble-ya dubble-ya nine."

"Fine by me!" replied Odyssey, who was eager to get his pride and joy back to the way it was.

"Well that was CERTAINLY a good start!" exploded Chief Sparerib at the others.

"Why, you ...!!!" retorted Fen, who made a lunge for the furry diminutive teddy bear chef. Instantly, Rib's 'woks came to the chief's defence.

"It's okay, it's okay," interjected Jirk, "he's an old friend of mine," and he placed himself between the two aggressors.

"Look, the Chief is right," reasoned Saleem. "We're back on *this* side, with this great brown pancake between us, and the E-Waps with their weapon of mass destruction are *still* on *that* side!"

"And Crisko and Kia-ora and the others are their hostages!" reminded Jirk.

"So we need to get back in there!!" demanded Morga furiously, alive now with the adrenaline rush of batter in his fat. "Any suggestions??"

"We-ellll if I remember rightly, there is another entrance, on the far side of the control room, near the stores" began Jirk thoughtfully.

"A back door, huh?" realised Fen.

"Well, let's go!" Saleem demanded, taking charge.

Captain Odyssey Catchador waved from the portal hatch and beamed a thankful grin so wide it would have swallowed all the cats in Cheshire. If he knew where

Cheshire was, that is.

"So long, and thanks for all the stories!" he called out to them. "Good luck you two ... you're gonna NEED it!!"

Rich T and Hobbs waved back, and quickly steered Androi out into the WebWorld9's corridors before the android had chance to say anything. The intersection doors slammed shut, and they heard the roar of engines as the Dedicated powered up to depart.

"Zo, what do you suggest, Angdwoy?" enquired Rich T.

"Well, I was thinking of asking Captain Crisko , since I WAS WITH HIM LAST," Androi suggested. "HE'LL BE UP IN THE CONTROL centre, probably."

"Wite! Gontrol centre it is, then!" agreed Rich T.

"Ahhh ummm tell you what, I'll pop over to the Promenade, and see if ahhh he's taking any time off, shall I? Then, if I see him, I'll ping you over?" suggested McVities.

"Oh that's a GOOD IDEA, SIR, THAT'LL BE REALLY helpful!"

McVities Hobbs quickly left the other two, who headed for the express co-lifts.

The rescuers crept up to a window, through which they could see Crisko and his crew holed up. Jirk tapped on the glass, and caught their attention. Beside the pane was an unlocked door, and they quietly slipped inside.

Crisko slapped his head in frustration. "Oh rars! I automatically assumed that door would be locked since we *are* in an unauthorised area!!"

"Never mind," said Saleem. "We need to get back in the control room, and disable those E-Waps!"

Fen moved over to the secured door that led in to the control room, and peered at the lock mechanism. The PHPWoks clustered around him, quickly offering tiny kitchen utensils that might prove useful in picking the lock.

Since Rich T was a serving member of the Home Server Farm Fleet and so had full Call ID access into the WebWorld9's nerve centre, he and Androi quickly slipped through the authorisation doors, and found themselves before the congealed brown pancake. Even Rich T could faintly smell a sulphuric tang.

"What good this be??" he wondered aloud.

"My photo-receptors register it as a fart that has been congealed by nockiarisation," described the android helpfully. "However, it really is only a type of web, and shouldn't pose too much of a problem"

Androi stepped up, and flung his mechanically-pistoned arm through the brown smudge. With a loud rip it came apart in two.

At that instant, on the far side of the central control room, Fen successfully released the door's lock, and he and the PHPWoks tumbled through. Jirk and Saleem stepped in behind them.

The E-Waps were caught by surprise, and fearfully glanced all about them. Voda scooted over to the open briefcase to grab it.

"Captain Crisko !" exclaimed Androi.

"Androi Joyrider!" answered Jirk jubilantly and Crisko fearfully.

"Am I GLAD TO SEE YOU! I'm looking for my OH IT'S MY BLACK EXECUTABLE BRIEFCASE!! THERE IT IS!! BUT WHAT'S it doing on the floor??! And who are these FLOATING IMPS??!!!"

The E-Waps were rooted to the spot by the thunderous noise. Saleem instantly realised what Jirk had had in mind, and took centre stage.

"Ohhhh-OHHHH-ohhhh my heart WILL go on!!" she sang, modulating her voice through all the colours of the spectrum.

"Give me back MY BLACK EXECUTABLE briefcase, this INSTANT!" demanded Androi with a bellow.

And the E-Waps were overcome by the modulating microwaves of the decibels from both Saleem and Androi

"....my heart WILL go on.." carried on Saleem. The modulating frequencies going between Saleem's powerful voice and Androi's very LOUD voice were causing the E-waps to start to vibrate. The strange new frequencies flowing throughout the room were interfering with the E-wap carrier signal. They were never designed to cope with such modulations.

Back in the past, Remedy had drunk some more of the new awareness-tea and was going through another vision-illustrated trance. He saw a strange muddy barrier before him which seemed to slowly tear down the middle and a robot emerged, which, when it spoke, almost deafened him.....a black briefcase..... and small floatingimps. They appeared to be frozen to the spot and vibrating slightly.....a black briefcase.....strange furry creatures and a chubby man from which emanated a strange odour.....a black briefcase. Remedy was intrigued by the constant vision of the briefcase. He reached his hand forward as if to reach out to it and get a better look.

The E-waps vibrating increased when suddenly Saleem stopped singing and stared at the briefcase. The briefcase had started rocking back and fore as if some dormant power had been awoken.

The E-waps recovering from their frozen state raised their nockias in anticipation, not noticing what was happening with the briefcase.

Everyone else had their eyes transfixed on the briefcase as the rocking became more pronounced, when suddenly, a large hand emerged from the briefcase.....

Captain Remedy fumbled around in his vision. He briefly felt the briefcase and then nothingness. His hand appeared to be in open space. He moved his hand to the right and knocked something that felt like it had been floating.

The large hand started to move. The E-waps were completely unaware of this until

the hand hit Flip and flipped him up into the air and across the room. The E-waps turned and Master Voda let out a string of syllables, none of which we can repeat here.

The E-waps steadily moved back away from the hand.

Hmmmmm, Saleem thought to herself. *Something large stirs within the Universe, but my bin network has alerted me to no strange presences. What can this thing be?*

Q-Rob was still wandering through the darkness of the lower decks searching for his Fat enemies. The Sieve aggression had fought back the cowardice of mortal humanity, re-aligning this Hydra-part's perspective : *it was his DUTY to hunt down all Spatulas who existed in the opposite corner to the Sieve !*

Darkness was his ally, but it was rarsing inconvenient some days. He really could not see four feet in front of him. Worse still he had thought he had *seen* that conduit at least twice before as he passed it yet again. He was realising that *something* was happening on the station but he could not figure out what it was. That he felt Scrub's presence did not help in the slightest.

Then from out of the gloom he heard voices!

In another corridor, Nick, Wilma, Steff and a miniaturised WW-TwoOh were shuffling around after their respective tearful reunions when a strange hissing noise began behind them.

They turned and saw Q-Rob cloaked in the darkness bring forward his red Spatula! Nick, realising he was the only thing standing in the way of this mad man, brought his own Spatula to bear.

"The Fat may be with you..." hissed Q-Rob triumphantly, "...but you are not a Spatula Warrior yet!!!" Recognising this was truly his enemy made this impressive entrance speech all the more sweeter. He glowed fire-red with excitement.

Nick literally quivered, he was most insulted as he felt he had tried very hard over the last few months to bring his weight down. But then he realised with a start what the fool was referring to and just shook his head. He then turned to Wilma and quickly said, "You need to take Steff and leave now, while I hold back this madman!"

Wilma gave him the pitying, loving look that said, *I will do it for you, you big fool, but do NOT get yourself killed.* She then grabbed Steff and fled down the corridor looking for the Promenade. WW-TwoOh warbled, "We're doomed!!!"

Q-Rob stood at the ready in the basic flip pose and waited for Nick to make the first move. Nick on the other hand had no clue what he was going to do.

"Ah ... umm..... you don't want to talk about this would you?" Nick said hopefully.

Q-Rob looked up, evil in his eyes, "Shall we begin?"

"Umm...er... maybe?" Nick said as Q-Rob leapt into his first move.

Nick just managed to duck to the side, dodging Q-Rob's twirling blow. Turning, Q-Rob headed into a reverse, double whammy up-in-the air round thing type move. Nick lifted his green spatula in the air and as he moved forward, stumbled and fell under Q-Rob's guard.

Rars, he is good! Q-Rob thought to himself.

What the hell am I doing?! Nick wondered.

Both men turned to face each other. Nick's attachment was quivering nervously and a bead of sweat lingered on Q-Rob's brow.

Suddenly Nick heard a voice. "Use the fat, Nick". It was an echoey, ghostly faint noise, but Nick did not have the time to stop and wonder.

Trying very hard to remember his training, Nick opened his mouth to belch, spewing forth a torrent of lard from the cooked breakfast he'd had that morning. The lard hit Q-Rob, freezing up his joints, and slowing him down considerably.

"Damn you, Old Man", Q-Rob retorted.

"Old? Who're you calling old", Nick called back. He was now getting a little rarsed off. How dare someone call him old. With a great lurch of momentum he flung himself into the air going into an Ainsley spin, Spatula at the ready. He didn't have a clue where these moves were coming from but he decided to go with the flow. He soared gracefully through the air, heading towards the immobile Q-Rob.....

The two warriors were going tooth and nail. Q-Rob having been beaten down tried desperately to regain his footing but the fat he had been doused in was making his grasp rather useless. Worse yet the enemy was coming towards him. The Dark Lard of the Sieve was used to seeing others in this position, but this time his natural god-like qualities were failing him and he was getting most frustrated. Nick who at this point was doing a perfect golden griddle cake almost sliced his nose off in the first attempt.

Q-Rob was desperate now, he had to get away, escape was his only option. He slid along the floor in a pathetic attempt to hide his fear and get away. He needed an opportunity and saw one. As Nick began his final assault with crepe suezette in Raspberry sauce he lunged aside and sent a burst of fat from his own belch to collide with the scaffolding.

The pipes burst with a huge crash which stunned both combatants almost immediately. Then using the fat as a weapon Q-Rob reached down deep and let out a very gristly belch which sent Nick colliding into the scaffolding. Nick went down with an "OOF!" and folded like an accordion onto the floor.

With that Q-Rob, Lard of the Sieve, tormenter of WebWorld9 and member of the Hydra, ran for his life. He needed to find a place to digest all this new information and he needed to get away before Nick did something more than "OOF! "

Nick regained consciousness a few moments later and really wondered, not for the last time, why he ever went to work on that Monday morning so long ago!

CHAPTER 11

Blindly groping with his hand stretched out into his prescient vision, Captain Admirable Remedy's fingers felt the lip of an edge.

"Ah ha! Finally! Something tangible!" he muttered to himself, getting quite rarsed off that he was seeing all these cinematic widescreen presentations with Dolby Stereo Sensurround. His fingers and thumb took a firmer grasp on the leather edge, and he pulled back hard towards himself

As Saleem helped up Flip, the poor PHPWok who had had quite a busy day, she noticed the fingers on the hand curl around the edge of the black executable briefcase. Intuitively, she guessed what was about to happen.

"Nooooooooooooooooo!" she cried out. "Stop that hand!!!"

Androi leapt at his briefcase, just as the knuckles on the mysterious hand went white. The robot fell on the briefcase, wrapping his arms about it, and clutching it to his chest in his old familiar way.

Then he, and the case, disappeared, sucked down into a point of white light much like water going down a plug hole, or blips on a radar screen when the cleaner has accidentally kicked out the plug.

Remedy pulled hard, and from out of midair a battered black executable briefcase appeared, all closed up and dangling by the handle from his hand.

He had about 3 para-secs to ponder this when a loud scream literally tore through the fabric of time and space, coming from somewhere in front of him. Then a bulky figure also appeared in midair, sprawling towards him, a pair of eyes, a wide mouth, and a string of flashing lights over the chest.

"By the great Oracle Error!" whispered Remedy in awe. "It's Lucy in the sky with diamonds!"

And Androi, fully materialised in the air now, fell to the floor with a great crash.

"Oh-oh-oh-ohhhhh" the robot moaned. "MY HEAD"

McVities Hobbs scoured the Promenade for Tubby Honest but failed to locate him. However, what he and all the other patrons had instead discovered was a huge flowering Direc tree, growing tall in the middle of the Promenade decks. He joined the others staring up at this golden marvel

The E-Waps remained paralysed as Saleem quickly emulated Androi's patchy modulating decibels. She had no idea where the robot had disappeared to, but

had a strong feeling in her pipes that he had gone to the same place that the black executable briefcase went.

Dado slithered into the WebWorld9 control centre, and arrested the floating midgets for drunk and disorderly behaviour, loitering with intent to be unruly. As the PHPWoks started up their electric hand whisks, the buzzing augmenting the E-Waps static, they joined Dado in serving a secure sentence on their rivals.

"Thank Rars we've seen the last of those flying imps!" sighed Jirk.

"And that confounded briefcase!" agreed Fen.

"Ohhhh, I don't know," muttered Saleem with time honoured wisdom. "I think we ought to find out where it went at the very least. It's clearly a powerful weapon in the wrong hands"

"At least we can keep an eye on those nasty midgets!" Captain Crisko promised.

"They won't get the better of us, I can promise you that!"

Saleem, Fen, and Jirk all rolled their eyes.

The HMS Server 4 continued it's random wanderings through the deep recesses of the universe. Up on the bridge, Huw's slight hunger had turned into a ferocious lust for nourishment, the rumblings from his godly stomach overpowering the roar of the engines. Without a second thought he reached out and grabbed the telephone that was sitting next to the captains chair. In any normal circumstance he would have stopped to ponder why there was a telephone on the bridge of a starship, but at this particular moment time was of the essence.

His index finger extended and quickly dialled in the required number, 127.0.0.1. Within seconds a cheery female voice answered the phone. Not waiting for her to say hello, Huw shouted down the phone, "Take Away, please", and with a zing he fizzled out of sight as he was sucked down the phone line.

Deep in the far past Captain Admirable Remedy peered closely at the marbled surface of his newfound briefcase. Across the matte black of the case were dotted flashes of white and other multicolours, including one unusually bright orange spot. There were also some grainy lumps in concentric circles about the brighter spots.

Androi peered over the Captain's shoulder.

"OH!" he bellowed. "NOW THAT'S interesting!"

Admirable Remedy picked himself up off the floor and shook his head. "Argh my ears"

"It was formerly INSIDE my briefcase. Now it covers the leather casing as if IT'S BEEN VACU-FORMED!"

"Or sandwich-wrapped" mused Remedy hungrily, realising that the tea he had drunk hadn't really filled him up. "Waitaminute *WHAT THE RARS ARE YOU ON ABOUT?!*"

Androi pointed at the surface of the briefcase.

"THAT'S THE universe, Sir!"

"Covering the case ...?"

"THAT'S RIGHT!"

"Ohhhhh-kaaaaay"

In the middle of the PHPWok village on Bendor a bottle of supa-strong Dish-Wash appeared. It totally confounded the remaining PHPWoks, who had never seen anything of its like before.

Admirable looked at the briefcase in awe. The universe fitted perfectly around it's leather exterior, at about an inch thick.

Remedy pinged the science lab.

"Doctor Clock, please come to my quarters immediately."

"Why, what's wrong captain?"

"We-ell, I've been sort of experimenting with that tea; It's amazing what a cup of Publisher Gold tips will do; and I've come across something you might want to see. I have the universe in the palm of my hand."

"I suppose with the awareness the tea gives you of all time and space you *could* indeed say that you've got the universe in the palm of your hand."

"Not quite, Dr Clock. I'm talking literally. I actually have the universe in the palm of my hand ... in the form of a briefcase."

"Are you sure you're not drinking too much of the tea, captain?"

"Just get up here and see for yourself," growled Remedy.

In the deepest depths of space, a quasar coyly sidled up close to a nebulae. In astronomical terms it said to the other, "Fancy seeing *my* blackhole?" The nebulae blushed a pink radiance of red dwarfs, glanced around, and furtively nodded.

"That's illogical, Captain," affirmed Dr Clock. The GE Problem's science officer shook his head, and stepped closer to the briefcase.

"Well poke yer finger in!" dared Admirable Remedy. "You'll soon see what's logical and what's not!"

"OHHH, I WOULDN'T DO THAT too much, sirs!" quavered Androi anxiously. He instinctively knew not to mess with something as big as the Universe: there would be consequences, he was sure of it.

"Nonsense!" snapped Dr Clock. "There is really only one way to disprove this idiocy I don't know, the universe covering a briefcase" and he poked his finger into the matte surface.

+++ ... N thats how I N ded up here, if U C wot I mean? +++
finished Sson of Eric, the heroic E-Wap held fast under 24 chained padlocks on the briefcase podium in the HMS Server Four's secure Brig.

"Yes, yes, you poor soul!!" mothered Dear Drew, the WebWorld9's Station Counsellor, as she paced back and forth in the small confines of the cell. She was empathising with the imp, and was rarsingly angry. "I can clearly see an Easy-Puss Complex here, no wonder you feel so patrified, so enshadowed by your Father."

She was punching the air as she punctuated the points, and was now quite animated, waving her little arms about her head. Sson noticed she was also turning a shade of green.

"I think you need to be booked into my Psycho course, for some intensive hypno-regressive therapy!" demanded Drew. There came a loud tearing screech, and Drew's blouse began to rip as her body began to inflate to match her vexation.

Sson watched in horrified awe as she strode to the door, now double her size and height, and, with one fell swoop, punched her way through the secure holding door.

"LET US OUT!!!" she cried, as the door fell from its hinges.

+++ O good 1! +++ applauded Sson of Eric.

The big green angry leprechaun stormed out to face 'Guns' Mademincemeat.

+++ R wot about me? +++

Nick, Wilma, Steff and WW-TwoOh entered the Upper Promenade, and their mouths dropped open in amazement.

Surrounding the great golden flowering Direc Tree smaller sub Direc trees had sprouted : along with other such bright sunny yellow shrubs and undergrowth, the whole area was slowly turning into a jovial parkland. And the patrons of the Promenade were strolling in awe, their outstretched fingertips brushing against the golden leaves, their voices chanting a reverential mantra of hope.

'Guns' Mademincemeat jumped out of his chair at the loud crash. He grabbed his favourite Gatling Blunderbu\$\$\$ and headed out of his office to investigate.

Treading carefully, he slowly crept down the corridor towards the brig.

He peered round the door, and was met by the grin of Sson of Eric. The door of the cell was on the floor and Sson of Eric was still chained to the podium.

+++ Hi. How R U? +++ chirped Sson.

"What the rars happened here?", demanded 'Guns'.

+++ Well, Dear Drew got a bit angry N stormed off N N incredible slk +++

Guns was about to reply when a large shadow loomed into view.....

"I'm going to have to take this back down to the science lab to run some tests". For the last ten minutes Dr Clock had been trying to persuade everyone to let him have the briefcase.

"Is that really a good idea ?" questioned Remedy. "You know what happened when I found that bowl of petunias. You had to experiment on them, didn't you, and then you went and dropped the bowl and smashed it."

"But this is a grand discovery, Captain. You have to let science take a look at it."

"If I may SAY SOMETHING", shouted the robot.

Both men turned to face Androi, "WHAT!"

"WELL AREN'T YOU forgetting, it is MY BRIEFCASE"

Admirable and Dr Clock picked themselves up off the floor.

"Yes, I think I will let you take the briefcase down to the lab", Remedy said while secretly thinking, *and that robot will probably follow you too.*

"That's quite alright Captain. I can see where your coming from. It's probably better that you keep it", Clock replied smoothly.

While they were both arguing, Androi picked up the briefcase and rolled through the doorway.

Captain Hard-Grafft Slogs was pretty certain that a Klick-Ons game of Ten-'Nys did not involve a pair of thermo-nuclear missiles, and he was definatate that a great big drooling panting shaggy dog was not required for the intricate rules of the game.

Clearly the quintet of white-clad Klick-Ons were standing around bewildered. And the audience was listening, silently watching in stereo sensurround ; never a good sign.

The Klick-Ons down in the arena suddenly realised the relative scale of the giant dog, and it dawned on them that being hit with a deluge of golden water from its hindquarters was not only unpleasant but also highly smelly. They sidled out of the way, passing the two missile launchers that were trained at separate ends of the auditorium.

Snazz hurried over to Slogs. She looked quite ... fetching in her apron. "Captain, I don't like this at all," she whispered to him.

"I agree. Something's up. It makes me want to Take Control or something ..."

Sandy, who had mastered the Double Ketchup Dollop, and was thus immensely popular, fought her way through the crowd of hungry patrons who clustered around her ; this wasn't too hard since everyone was looking at the missiles and the huge dog. She noticed Roger Signal Wilco was also staring open-mouthed at the Sports Arena, and hissed at him to catch his attention.

He brought his head around, but she could see the infintely puzzled look in his eyes. She vectored over to Roger, and, grabbing his arm, roughly hauled him behind her as she made for the other two. "You're going to have to keep your mind on what's important if you want to stay with the Server!" she chided him.

"Ah Sandy!" greeted Slogs. "Glad to see you are on the ball and all that!" He glanced around and back down to the Arena. "You know? All this is reminding me of"

"The HMS Server!" completed Snazz, the plumbed amnesia now fully lifting.

"Of course! Where's our ship??! We need to get back to it and fast!" confirmed Slogs.

Shrugging off his refreshments tray, he led his command crew out of the WebWorld9 Sports Arena.

Androi, following the instructions hurriedly called out by Dr Clock behind him, marched through the ship's corridors and into the Science Labs. He turned and faced the quizzical doctor, hugging his universe-coated executable briefcase tightly to his chest. In fact he was hugging it so closely the spongy one-inch-thick universe was getting a bit squashed in places, and the stars and planets in those sectors were finding they were uncomfortably sharing each other's gravity wells.

"Right Mr Joyrider," began Dr Clock, "if you'd care to place the briefcase on here"

"No. I'm not leaving IT ANYWHERE, AND I'M not going anywhere. You may look at it, BUT I WILL KEEP ONE HAND ON IT AT ALL TIMES."

"Fine, fine" answered Clock agreeably, gesturing at the examination table.

As Androi was placing the case on the table, Dr Clock noticed the differences to his laboratory : normally, being so single-minded, he rarely took much notice of his surroundings, even if they were his own premises. But now he was certain something was amiss. He looked about him, trying to put his finger on it.

"Why" he began, as one photographic memory compared polaroids with the another, "..... are the cabinets creeper-covered tree trunks, and why are the sensor monitors slowly spinning discs of light?"

Androi followed the doctor's gaze. "Probably because THE FABRIC OF THE PRESENT and future tenses is well tense?" he suggested helpfully. "The Past Participle is struggling with the Present IMPERATIVE AS IT ALIGNS with the Future PERJORATIVE."

Dr Clock, eminent Physicist that he is / was / will be / might be, raised his eyebrows and looked at the android with a confounded bewilderment. This was too much.

Saleem and Fen left Jirk with Crisko in the WebWorld9's command centre, and the hefty task of regaining some sense of order, and hurried back into the more populated sections of the space station. Well, they would normally have been more populated, but the strange objects that were slowly appearing all over the station were catching everyone's attention.

The two elbowed through the knotted nuclei of stunned people, on their way to meet up with the others.

"At least Wilma and Nick are back together again," sighed Saleem knowingly.

"Ah! The young Fat Warrior is still alive then?" enquired Fen. "Surely, he is the Son of Fat," he added reverentially.

"So, what do you think is causing all these apparitions?" asked Steff in the now forested Higher Piers.

"I really don't know," replied Nick. "But if I was back on the Helpdesk I know what I would be advising!!"

"Cheers!" agreed Steff.

"Saleem would know for sure!" answered Wilma. "Where could she be when you need her??"

"Well she normally appears out of the blue when you least expect her," advised Nick.

"So let's make things easier for her, and head out away from these crowds," suggested Steff.

"Great idea!"

"Cheers!"

And they worked their way back out of the Central Promenade.

Slogs and his command crew navigated their way to the WebWorld9's docking ports and hangar bays with the natural flair that comes easily to all Server Farm Fleet members. But the sight - or lack of it - stumped them.

"So where is she??!" demanded the Captain of his missing ship.

"There *are* one or two ships that are ummm currently empty" suggested Snazz carefully.

"Oh, but we couldn't!" protested Wilco. "The schedules would be completely and totally thrown into disorder. Besides, it'd be *wrong*."

"HMMMMMMMMM"

Dr Clock peered around Androi's massive metal hand at the universe covering the executable briefcase.

With electro-photo-synthesisers, he prodded at the one inch spongy coating.

"So we are clearly too tense here," agreed the Doctor.

"THAT'S RIGHT, sir, there is very little space-time continuum BETWEEN THE STARS," affirmed the android. "The origins of the universe ARE STUCK UP AGAINST THE PRESENT. AND DON'T FORGET THAT IT IS continually evolving out into the future. Gravity's being stretched, and time is BEING SQUEEZED."

"HMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM," concluded the eminent Physicist.

"DUNNO WHAT YER GONNA do about it, though."

'Guns' slept peacefully. The fact that a great big hairy green arm had thwacked him on the back of his head had helped.

Dear Drew, now reduced down to her normal 5 foot height, returned to Sson of Eric, who was still held fast under the secure chains on the podium.

"This is clearly a nasty case of abuse and exploitation, you poor, poor thing," she remarked. She bent over the slumbering form of the Security Officer, and fumbled at his belt. She withdrew a slender multi-faceted key and strode over to the primary padlock.

With a flick and a twist of her wrist that would have made a discerning PHPWok proud, the 24 secure domains unlocked with a loud and satisfying click. She helped the grateful E-Wap down from the podium, and led him out the door.

"Who's this??" she asked of Sson, nodding down at the lifeless form.

+++ I B leev he S the Security Officer U hit O 4 the hed....+++ replied Sson, hesitantly. His father's Heroic shadow frowned at him.

"ME??!" cried Dear Drew aghast. "Oh no! Don't say that Big Green Leprechaun reappeared....??"

+++ Ummmm yss?? +++

"Damn! She's back again....."

"I'll need to run a few more experiments to determine the exact consequences of the universal configuration.", answered Dr Clock. He moved to the other side of the lab where his site-scope machinery was humming silently.

"Androi, bring the briefcase over here and place it on that vibrating platform"

Androi picked up the briefcase and followed Clock's instructions.

"You may want to let go of the case while it's in the machinery", the Doctor mentioned to Androi, "I'm going to be sending an electrical current through it."

With the pull of a lever a strange squealing sound emanated from the machine. Dr Clock hit the refresh switch and the machine settled into a low hum. Two electrical rods came out of each side of the machine and inserted into either side of the universe. Clock turned the power on, and a surge of electrical energy flowed through the stars.

After a few minutes, several stars near the top of the universe started to glow brighter.

They seemed to be forming a pattern. Clock turned up the power and the pattern became more pronounced. Characters could be made out : 127.0.0.1

"I'VE NEVER SEEN it do that BEFORE", Androi said to Clock as the machine was turned off and the 6 digits melded back into the rest of the universe.

"Very curious", replied Clock, "they look like spatial co-ordinates."

Clock reached for his SMS communicator and pinged the bridge,

"Clock here, Captain, I've discovered something very interesting. The universe covered briefcase has revealed some co-ordinates."

"Co-ordinates?" Remedy asked quizically.

"Yes, Captain, co-ordinates. 127.0.0.1 to be precise. Perhaps we should investigate."

"Hmmm, but will it be dangerous?"

"I'm not sure captain, but if it is we can always ransom Androi and the briefcase!"

The Captain paused. "Yes, okay then, we'll go, but get me some more of that urine first will you."

"Of course, Captain," the Doctor replied smoothly. "Clock out"

Somewhere downstairs a comm pinged.

"Stardotstar here."

"This is your Captain speaking. Bring up the astrometrics computer. Find out where 127.0.0.1 is located."

"I'll just feed it into the computer. It'll only take a para-minute"

Twenty para-minutes later, the latest model of the RA Astrometrics mark 4.05 computer made a slight pinging noise.

"Captain are you still there", Stardotstar asked.

"Oh what, Yes."

"The computer has finished it's search. The co-ordinates are not on any of our galactic star charts."

Hmmm, so we're going into an unknown area of space. I could become famous for this, Remedy thought to himself, the first person to chart the area of 127.0.0.1. It has a nice ring to it.

"Thanks Stardotstar, Captain out."

Remedy turned to the Bridge crew. "Take us to 127.0.0.1, engage."

The kitten and puppy stopped their tumbling amongst the baby-soft toilet paper, and regarded each other. They glanced at the film crew stationed behind the camera.

"I'm sure my agent didn't say anything about this," whispered the cat from out of the corner of its mouth. It was somewhat startled to find it could talk.

"Yeah," agreed the puppy, also taken aback by its newfound communicative skills. "I signed up for rolling fields and loads of sheep. Nothing was said about bog roll."

Several hours later, the GE Problem reached a very black area of space with no stars absolutely positioned anywhere. Remedy was a little annoyed that the place was so bland.

"Stardotstar, can you get a fix on our position?"

"Of course captain, give me a moment....."

Right, I have an answer. We appear to have left galactic normal space and are now travelling through local space."

"Local space? Never heard of it", replied Remedy.

"Well it's been a theory for many years Captain that a local space exists somewhere that can be accessed from any part of the universe."

"Right. Well save me the jargon, we'll just have to explore a bit."

A few minutes later upon the viewscreen a large signpost loomed into view.

"Take us in to to get a closer look", Remedy ordered.

Winger instructed the navigations helm to sidle in closer until the legend on the sign became clearer.

~~~~~  
~~~~~Aunty Norton's Truck Stop~~~~~  
~~~Just turn right at next local junction~~~  
~~~We sell all kinds of snacks. Burritos,~~~~  
~~~Tortillas, Smoothies. We even deliver to~  
~~~any part of the universe within 25 minutes~  
~~~~~

"Well, I am feeling a bit peckish. Follow that signpost!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Quirk was dutifully wiping down a glass. His famous bar had enjoyed another busy night, and, now the following morning, it was time to gear up for the next alco-fest.

Suddenly, without warning, the bar appeared packed full again, throngs of humans cheerfully slurring their way through an anthem, carelessly waving their glasses high above their heads. The IDS monitors hanging from the ceiling were buzzing with imagery, projecting scenes of sporting carnage as one team threw an oval-shaped brown ball over the heads of the other players.

Just as Quirk opened his mouth to articulate the puzzled frown that had spread across his face, the meleé disappeared, and he was back to his normal, currently empty, bar.

"Okaaay....."

\*\*\*\*\*

The GE Problem pulled up on the gravel, outside a tardy and rundown looking highway caff. An underside hatch swung open, and a boarding ramp lowered. Captain Admirable Remedy led his bridge crew down onto the landing apron. It was slightly chilly.

"Hmmm, that's odd," noticed Winger. "I can hear the rumble of heavy traffic somewhere .... over .... there ..." she pointed off in the hazy and empty distance : the horizon plane joined the gravel and the bright perennially-autumn blue sky in a smog laden yellowy haze.

Stardotstar, Head of Astrometrics, glanced at the building and the cluster of starships parked nearby. "Well it certainly seems busy. The premises look a bit shabby, but it does seem popular," she remarked. "The inside is probably quite different!"

Admirable sniffed the air, and his stomach growled. "Lovely bacon smell in the air!" he smacked his lips. "I could do with a hearty fry-up!"

They walked towards the creaking double mosquito doors, and regarded the flashing neon sign that stood near the entrance.



~~~~~  
~~~~~Aunty Norton's Truck Stop~~~~~  
~~~~~You HAVE arrived!!! ~~~~~  
~~~~~We sell all kinds of snacks. Burritos,~~~~~  
~~~~~Tortillas, Smoothies. We even deliver to~~~~~  
~~~~~any part of the universe within 25 minutes!~~~  
~~~~~ The ONLY place for lo-calorie ~~~~~  
~~~~~ polyunsaturates! ~~~~~  
~~~~~Babychanging and multi-species toilets too!~~~  
~~~~~ Battery recharging available. ~~~~~  
~~~~~ on request ~~~~~  
~~~~~

"Oh good!" cried Androi Joyrider, who still held fast to his battered black executable briefcase. "They DO BATTERY recharging HERE!"

Remedy stepped up, opened the outer wire door, and pushed open the inner. The others followed behind him into a dark, slightly smoky, and what seemed to be a very big diner for truckers and the occasional travelling family. At the foot of a short flight of steps was a wraparound bar, with drinking tables and booth niches to the side ; the restaurant was towards the rear left, while the services were on the righthand side. A small band of juke boxes softly played a selection of live numbers.

The crew began to descend the steps, but a wall panel recess lit up with a loud gurgle. A short thin lady on high heels and dressed in severe black appeared from nowhere. She had a halo of red fuzzy hair which bobbed when she spoke. "Greetings, and welcome to Aunty Norton's Truck Stop," she beamed. "I'm Aunty Norton, and this is my Establishment. We serve all kinds here. You have entered a greasy caff gourmet's delight! Good honest home-made fare! You HAVE arrived!"

"Why, thankyou," acknowledged Remedy.

"Out of curiosity," asked Stardotstar, "where exactly are we? Other than an address of 127.0.0.1, I believe we are in local space ....??"

"Precisely! You are at the Truck Stop at the end of the universe, the start of the universe, middle, top, bottom, side, and centre of the universe! Give us 20 minutes to rustle up your order, and we can deliver to any part of the universe in 5 minutes! We are YOUR local host!"

"Good good!" Dr Clock rubbed his hands together, warming to the idea of a permanently on-call take-away.

"Well let's check the menu, shall we??" suggested Scotty Stef.

\*\*\*\*\*

The doors to Lift 3 opened, and Dear Drew and Sson of Eric entered the empty bridge of the HMS Server 4. Classical music was strangely blaring from the ether and a phone handset was sitting off the hook near the captain's chair. The disquieting sight of deep space filled the viewscreens.

Dear Drew automatically picked up the handset and replaced it on the hook. "Ah can't abide clutter, t'be sure, no."

She glanced around. "Oh no-one here," She sounded more disappointed than puzzled.

+++ I M sure we can fly ths thng +++ said Sson optimistically.

They looked positively at the myriad controls, the flashing buttons and racks of switches. They gave up looking positively.

Lift 2 *swished* open, and Guns staggered out, rubbing his head.

"Ohhhh ....."

He took in the empty bridge, and his two captives, who seemed much less of a threat now.

"Where's the Captain? And everyone else? And where is that music coming from? And Where the rars are we?"

"I don't know," replied Drew. "On all four counts."

+++ Ths pls reminds me F the 'Married Sellers', N N usually M T hi strt stor centr +++

Guns strode over to a red console - one of three emergency desks - and keyed in a block of auth code.

"This will engage the voice recognition command activator, which will make steering this thing a damn sight easier!" And he plopped down in Slogs' chair.

"Server 4?" he announced.

There was a pause, and then a rusty grating sound echoed. { Affirmative? } It sounded suspicious.

"Let's try some inertial thrusters to begin with, shall we? Oh, and turn off that music will you?"

Again, a long pause.

{ You want me to turn off that music? }

"Yes, Hel."

{ Ooh, I don't know if I can do that. After all I don't know where it's coming from, if you see where *I'm* coming from? }

"But it's part of the ship, part of *your* internal matrix," reasoned Guns.

{ Ahh, yes, that may well be the case. But it's a new upgrade you see, what is known as an *undocumented feature*. And without the proper documentation I can't do a lot really }

"Ok, ok," Guns answered the machine, "let's forget about the music and just focus on firing the thrusters."

{ You want me to fire the inertial thrusters? }

"Yes, that's right."

{ They're not going to like it, you know. And I don't know if I ought to put them under such strain and stress. }

Dear Drew stepped up beside Guns. "Now don't worry about it. We all have to make the first move at some point in our lives. It *is* actually very life-affirming and formative, character-building as your confidence and ego blossom and bloom ...."

Sson of Eric was feeling better already.

{ Oh, okay, if you put it like that, I can see you make a good point. }

"That's right," agreed Drew.

"Yes, after all, firing the thrusters isn't so great a challenge after all ...." put in Guns. He remembered now why Captain Slogs had elected to disable Hel, the

on-ship AI.

{ We-ell, here goes ..... } And Hel actually gulped in trepidation.

\*\*\*\*\*

Saleem and Fen caught up with Nick, Wilma, and Steff in the Promenade intersection. They made short shrift of their reunion, and quickly discussed the situation at hand.

"So the robot and his briefcase have disappeared?" confirmed Steff.

"So it'll be much quieter!" grinned Wilma.

"Cheers!!" he agreed.

"But we also have all these new objects popping up all over the place!" warned Nick.

"Lots of new introductions ..." cackled Fen ironically.

"Something's bending the space-time continuum," explained Saleem. "I'm not sure what exactly .... but we ought to find out soon."

Suddenly, the micro-comm pinged on Steff's belt.

"Steff here, cheers?"

"Steff!" his Captain's voice returned with relief. "Where are you? No, don't worry, get over here ..... where's 'here'?" he asked somebody nearby, "Well, I don't know, Steff, do a trace route on this ping, and come and join us : we're about to comander a ship, and we'll need you!"

Steff blinked. "Cheers? I'll be bringing a few people along for the ride, Captain!"

\*\*\*\*\*

"I'll have a foamy wrapped tortilla, as well, I think," agreed Stardotstar, nodding her order to Aunt Norton. The prim lady scribbled a shorthand code in her notepad, and headed for the kitchens.

As Captain Admirable Remedy's crew settled down to enjoy their appetizers, they naturally tuned in to the surrounding hubbub. After all, they weren't going to listen to each other when they were off-ship if they could help it.

"I don't know what this universe is coming to."

"All sorts of strange things have been happening."

"Bill and I and the kids were just cruising along, and this squid appeared .... swimming through a clump of trees?!"

"My trucker's yorkie bar melted!!! A yorkie bar! Melting indeed!!!"

" 'Ere! I've got a bug in my hot dawg!"

There was a scrape of chair and a moan, and a hot dog sailed through the air, splattering against the wall near Remedy's group.

"Well, it certainly does seem a lively place," noted Dr Clock, wiping a splatter of tomato ketchup from his sleeve, "full of ... ummm ... atmosphere ...."

Androi's black executable briefcase was gently vibrating and faintly humming unnoticed at his feet. The universe was now inside local host space, and it really wasn't happy.

\*\*\*\*\*

Saleem, Wilma, Nick, Fen and Steff had joined Captain Slogs in one of the cavernous docking bays on the WebWorld9, and hurried on board a ship that confirmed its affiliation with the Home Server Farm Fleet. When one shipjacks, one might as well choose a vessel one is familiar with, the Captain had reasoned.

Sandy immediately settled into the Number Two station and with practised ease flew through the warm-up. In moments she had the ship humming. "Captain we are ready to escape! At your command!"

"Punch it!"

Sandy engaged the engines, and they accelerated ... only to find the ship was shuddering backwards. She slapped the brakes on hard before they rammed into the back of the bay.

"Whoops!" was all Sandy could say.

"What on earth was that??" Nick demanded.

"The whole ship is backwards!" answered Snazz.

"My goodness, what kind of ship is this?!"

\*\*\*\*\*

From the bowels of the XML Closedplanet Q-Rob chuckled knowingly.

The Dark Lard of the Sieve looked at his surroundings in the core of the XML ClosedPlanet and smiled to himself. He was moving away from the WebWorld9 but he could feel the fat. *He was here.*

Q-Rob drew his spatula, the mold was glowing a wicked red gleam, and the Dark Lard grinned evilly. He was ready this time and he would make sure nothing went wrong.

Old Fen stood with his companions on the bridge and suddenly felt a familiar twinge. It would have to be finished and it was obvious that he would have to do it right this time. The Sieve Lard must not escape.

Q-Rob ran from the engineering deck with a stride of purpose : this would be no normal encounter, this would be a strapping knock down fight to the finish, he would see to that, he would be on the side that won. These Spatula Warriors could not be allowed to survive.

Nick on the other hand talked blissfully with Wilma and Saleem never realising that doom was approaching, and failing once again to recognise the Fat within. Saleem, however, knew exactly what was coming and for the first time in a while did not really know who to cheer for in this impending battle.

Fen made his way to the aft section of the ship and felt Q-Rob's presence before he saw him. He was one with the Fat now and little could interfere. A glow was

surrounding the Lard and his evil intentions were written all over his face.  
"So we meet again old man. I truly hope for the last time!" Q-Rob said in anger.  
"Ah maybe so, but the Fat is with me : if you strike me down I will become more powerful than you could possibly imagine!" Fen announced, and immediately wondered where his false bravado had come from!  
Fen withdrew his blue spatula and looked up at his nemesis with a sense that he was about to get a really good thrashing. He gulped and took a deep breath as the first in a long series of arcs of red spatula flew in at him.  
Fen could tell he was in trouble...  
The old man twirled and brought his blue spatula up in a *blinding blancmange*! Q-Rob parried the *'blancmange* with a *sweet-n-sour stirfry*, forcing the aged Spatula Warrior back against the wall. Fen thwacked the red spatula up and away, ducked under Q-Rob's arm, and rolled back into the comparative safety of the centre of the Core chamber.  
Q-Rob spun to face his slippery opponent. "The Fat is with you, old Spatula, your bulk serves you well!" he hissed.  
"You'll see I'm full of surprises, Rob," countered Fen, using the familiar name insultingly. "The Lard allowed me to slip right through your fingers back there!" he spat.  
Enraged, Q-Rob strode forward, stabbing his fiery red spatula ahead of him. Fen stepped back with a flurry of *boeuf wellington*, expertly segueing it into a *Toad-in-the-Hole*. The air was alight with red and blue sparks.  
Fen's arthritic age was catching up with him, but he was making sure his opponent had a run for his money. Q-Rob glanced over at a jumble of cables behind the old man, and with a crabbing motion of his fingers, ripped them from the wall, releasing green shards of dancing electricity and much outgassing. Just as Fen jumped out of their way, Q-Rob leapt with a *fatal flambé*, bringing his red spatula down upon his mortal enemy in a breath-taking *baked alaska*.  
The spitting red blade sliced through Fen's brown overcloak, which billowed out, and fluttered to the ground. Fen's body was nowhere to be seen.  
Puzzled, Q-Rob stepped forward and poked at the empty cloak.  
WHERE WAS HE??!

On the bridge, Nick doubled up in pain, and clutched his sides.  
"Ooooo, darling, are you alright?" demanded Wilma, putting her arms around him.  
"Oh .... oh .... really bad .... indigestion .... and .... cramp!" he moaned.  
"It has happened," intoned Saleem sombrely.

\*\*\*\*\*

Meanwhile, on the bridge of the HMS Server 4 three disparate individuals were exhaling a heartfelt sigh of relief, and trying to persuade the paranoidly pessimistic A.I. known as Hel that firing the boosters had been a good idea. Saint-Saens *'Aquarium'* was drifting placidly across the bridge.

{ We-ell ... I can give you a statistical rundown of the engine stress following the thruster firing .... } offered the AI reasonably.  
"No, Hel, that's not necessary," dismissed Guns. "Just lookup a suitable Reverse IPS, and get us on a Return Trajectory back to where we came from."

{ Oh ..... a Reverse IPS lookup? Ooooooo, don't know if I can subject the tags to one of those ..... }

"JUST DO IT!!!" screamed Dear Drew, a faint tinge of green casting over her face. She was just as keen as Guns to get home, and so was the classical music as it shifted gear into Beethoven's '*Ninth Symphony*'.

Guns wandered over to Snazz Hashcake's station. On the comms desk was a creased and disarrayed Stellar Sun newspaper. He gathered the papers together, and turned to page 31.

"Ah, let's see what the horoscopes have to say ...."

Dear Drew rolled her eyes, and planted herself in the Captain's Chair. Sson of Eric, the heroic E-Wap with an emotional complex, jumped up and down excitedly, and skipped over to Guns. He leapt up on to Snazz's desk, and peered over Guns' arm.

+++ Wot S mine?? wot S mine?? Im Or N +++

Guns frowned. "Ah," realisation dawned, "Orion, you say ....?" Sson nodded.

"Orion ... Orion ... oh here we are : Friends make you feel wanted, but beware of hidden agendas, not all is what it seems to be today! Oh dear, you seem to be picking arguments for the sake of it. The Stars are aligning for a happy relationship, and all you need now is for your Life to fall into shape. Legal matters are also relevant at the moment. Call me now on my Sexy Starline to hear what the Stars have to say about a lady in green! Call : 127.0.0.1 now!"

Sson looked up at Guns.

+++ ooooooooooooo +++ he breathed in awe. +++ wot do U thnk it mns?? +++

Guns shrugged his shoulders. "We could phone the Sexy Starline for more information ..." he suggested.

\*\*\*\*\*

Captain Remedy and his crew were just tucking into their dessert, when the phone on the frontdesk rang. Aunty Norton zipped past on a pair of rollerskates, a platter of steaming panfried tubules held high.

"Can one of you nice peeps just get that for me, please ....?" her voice trailed off in the direction of her fast receding frameset.

Remedy coughed nervously, and glanced at Dr Clock, who glanced down at his caramel sauce. "Wing ...?" he started.

Winger bounced his glance across to Androi, who was fiddling about with an AC/DC dial up adaptor.

"I'll go!" offered Stardotstar brightly, always keen to be noticed for some promotion that would get her out of that infernal hellhole known as Astrometrics. She pushed back on her chair, and knocked against Androi's briefcase, which wobbled unsteadily. The hubbub in the Diner was still loud enough to drown out the humming that emanated from inside the case. She made her way towards the phone, her brain vectoring a straight line, whilst her feet followed a gentle arc. "Oh dear," she muttered, "that Iron-Brew I had with my tortilla was stronger than I'd thought!"

She made it to the ringing phone, and lifted the quaintly curved receiver to her ear.

"Good morning / afternoon / evening, delete as appropriate," she read from the

cue card that was pinned to the wall in front of her. "Aunty Norton's Truck Stop, how may I help you?"

"Oh, oh .... erm ..... hello, I would like some of the ... ummm .... sexy starline, please, if you have some?" came the voice from the other end.

The line was crackling, and Stardotstar had to stuff her fingers into her other ear to begin to listen to the man's order. At least she had had some practice at that what with Androi's decibels. "Sixteen pralines, was that, Sir?" She scribbled the order onto a notepad.

"Yes, that's right! For Orion, please!"

"Sixteen pralines, and four onions? Certainly, Sir. And to where would you like it delivered?" she enquired in her best secretarial voice.

"Yes, today's divination, what the Stars have in store for Love and Romance."

"Server Four, was that Sir? I have your Caller Line ID on my screen here now, I'll send it straight back to that address in 25 minutes time, alright? Thankyou for calling Aunty Norton's Truck Stop!" And she hurriedly put the phone down. She'd had enough of her unpaid work experience.

Aunty Norton slid past in a blur, snatching the notepad from her hand. Stardotstar smiled faintly, and rejoined the others. "I don't think I'm cut out for waitressing," she said, as she sat down next to Androi, bumping his elbow.

The dial up adaptor slipped from the robot's clunky fingers, bounced against the top edge of the battered black executable briefcase in a flash of blue sparks, and fell onto the floor. Androi bent down to retrieve his battery charger.

\*\*\*\*\*

Guns put the phone down, and turned to face Sson.

+++ N?? +++ the little E-Wap asked eagerly.

"We-ell .... I think she will get back to us shortly ...." Guns replied slowly, not too sure how his conversation had gone.

Dear Drew shook her head, and sat up in the Captain's Chair. "You two .... horoscopes .... I don't know ...." She cleared her throat. "Hel? Sweety?" she added. "How are you doing on that Reverse thingy?"

{ I have the preliminary report back in now. But I don't think you're going to like it much .... } outlined the AI compassionately.

".... Why? What do you mean?" asked Drew carefully.

{ It really isn't going to do you any good, you know .... }

"Try me," she replied through gritted teeth.

{ Your brain might not be able to rationalise what the report says .... }

"Just .... tell ..... me ..... Hel ....."

{ It seems that the destination spatial coordinates, according to the Ship's Logs, will be The Home Server Farm Fleet Top Secret HeadQuarters on Alphabravo in the Fonetic System. And the timeframe for this was back in Chapter 7. But it also appears that we have the Jorbaean SpaceStation WebWorld9 on the Sixteenth Deck, and the Universe covering a Black Executable Briefcase that was in the Past, and is now currently in Local Host time and space. At Aunty Norton's, to be precise, where they do an exceedingly good burrito, so I'm told. }

"Pardon?"

{ I told you you wouldn't like it }

Guns had been half listening to this exchange - a rather artistic photograph on page 3 of the Stellar Sun had caught his cultural attention - and he now glanced

up.  
"Hel ..... we don't have a 16th deck ..... do we??"  
{ Well you do now }

Then the phone rang.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Ask her for the bill when she next wheels by, will you Star?" asked Remedy agreeably.  
Stardotstar nodded, and looked around for Aunty Norton's slender frame to catch her attention. The place was getting busy now.  
Unbeknown to the others, the briefcase's humming had now been replaced by a faint, and definately irate, voice that came from deep, DEEP, inside the case.  
"Let me out!!! When I get back to you, Rob, you won't stand a chance ....!!!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Nick sat with great trepidation on the deck of the ship as his stomach heaved and tossed. He looked up and peered into Saleem's eyes.  
"What is going on?" he demanded. "You know something about this, don't you?"  
Saleem looked down almost piteously, "Fen has crossed over..." She stared intently to see if her misdirection had the proper effect.

Wilma, hand to her mouth, started to say, "Oh Nick I am so s..." She stopped as she saw Nick pick up his Spatula with the expression of a man determined.

Nick looked at Captain Slogs seeking some sense of agreement. Slogs returned the look with a glance that said, "Well now you're in a pickle, boy."

Nick nodded and resolved that he had to face this thing that caused such grief. He must finish this Dark Lard of the Sieve once and for all.

Suddenly he noticed a spectral motion in the corner, it was Fen!

Fen looked at him, "When... get back to Rob... won't stand a chance..."

Nick stood dumbfounded as he tried to understand what his master was trying to say but he took as affirmation that he must now strike his enemy before he grew even more powerful!

\*\*\*\*\*

Guns turned from questioning Hel, and picked up the phone. "Yes, HMS Server 4 here?" The line was again crackly.  
"Good Eve .... ton's Truck ... Diner. Your order is .... now. *We have already charged your account.* Than ... bye."  
Guns frowned, and a loud beep sounded from the handset.  
Without warning, a multi-coloured food paste squirmed and oozed its way out of the receiver, hanging in a ponderous spaghetti-like string and all ready to fall to



the floor.

Sson grabbed a nearby clipboard, and in one deft move swung it under the glob just as Newton's Downward Thing took hold, and caused it to drop. It was followed by some plastic fork-spoons, and a small business card that said :

```
~~~~~  
~~~~~Aunty Norton's Truck Stop ~~~~~  
~~~ Thankyou for Ordering with us ~~~  
~~~~ We hope you enjoy your meal ~~~  
~~~~ We deliver to any part of the ~~~~~  
~~~~ universe within 25 minutes ~~~~~  
~~~~~ Call now on 127.0.0.1 ~~~~~  
~~~~~ Have a NICE day ~~~~~  
~~~~~
```

Guns picked out the card from the paste, and turned it over. It said :

```
~~~~~  
~~~~~Aunty Norton's Truck Stop ~~~~~  
~~~~~ Fortune Cookie ~~~~~  
~~~~~ The love of your life will ~~~~~  
~~~~~ make Uranus go red ~~~  
~~~~~
```

"Oh, there you go!" exclaimed Guns. "That must be what you get from the Sexy Starline?! Nice of them to add on some food, though ...."

The doors to Lift Two *swished* open, and Steff's ASP droid, TT, stood facing them.

"Mister Mademincemeat, Sir! Oh am I glad to see you!" he wailed. He had obviously been taking lessons from WW-TwoOh.

\*\*\*\*\*

"WHO ARE YOU TALKING TO????!!!" cried Wilma, very upset that her beloved was talking to the corner of the Bridge.

"Fen? Fe-en ...??" moaned Nick, his blue spatula hanging limp in his hand now that the rush of Lard had left him. "He ... he was there .... just now ...." He pointed into the corner where the brooms and mops were leant.

"There, there, young man," exclaimed Captain Slogs, putting his arm about Nick's shoulders. He turned to Wilma. "Why don't you take him down to the Medi-lab for a bit .... wherever that is!!"

Wilma nodded, and led Nick away from the Bridge.

Slogs returned to his command crew. "Sandy, advance us to the rear, will you? Snazz, check out the Comms unit, and see if you can hail Headquarters to report the theft of Home Server Farm Fleet property. Steff, see what these engines are capable of." He rubbed his hands together, and grinned evilly : he would get his ship back, and someone would pay.

THEN they would try and figure out what had been happening to the Universe, and why there were all these new additions appearing where they weren't wanted.

Fen stormed up to Slogs and waved his hands in front of the Captain's face.

"Oi! You! Fat Captain!! What's goin' on??!" he screamed.

Slogs wandered over to a nearby console which was quite colourful and looked really important.

"Sandy, I wonder what this tells us? I wonder if it's as good as our old Primary RA Files PC?"

Fen was enraged at this snub, and went to pull at Slogs' arm : his fingers simply slipped through the sleeve. It was a bit of a shock.

"Oh. Bugger and Rars."

Wilma and Nick soon found themselves in a small but well-equipped Medi-lab : the shelves were full of bottles of brightly coloured pills. She sat him down on the edge of a bunk, found a mild sedative, and applied it to Nick's forehead.

"He was there .... honestly ...."

"Of course, dear ...." Wilma replied absently. At his look, she changed tack.

"Ummm .... how was he?"

"Well .... he looked like a badly tuned TV set ... full of zig-zag lines .... like a hologram ....."

## CHAPTER 12

Captain Admirable Remedy and his crew slowly ambled out of Aunty Norton's Truck Stop. They didn't really want to leave, and enjoyed the last whiff of burnt bacon as they stepped out onto the gravel and regarded the nondescript horizon. The motorway traffic could be heard faintly rumbling by.

Remedy sighed, and clapped his hands over his rotund belly. "Well, let's be off then shall we? I think we can put that down as a resounding and successful .... umm .... conquest." He turned to his Number Two. "Winger, you, ah, have one of their take-away cards, don't you?"

"Yes sir!" she replied just as eagerly.

They all trooped back on board, fully replete with that after-the-sunday-roast feeling. So content were they that they failed to realise they were missing Androi Joyrider.

On the bridge, the Captain gave the signal to lift off, tracing their route back to Jorbae. As the engines spluttered into life and dragged the ship kicking and screaming against Local Host's gravity, Remedy looked around the command centre and remarked, "Hmmm, seems quieter than usual".

Winger glanced about. "Oh! That noisy android! We've left him behind!"

"Oh well, it can only be an improvement!" laughed Scotty Stef.

"B-b-but .... I need his briefcase for the exact coordinates of the universal configuration!" explained Dr Clock, slapping his hand against his forehead.

"Oh, don't worry!" said Remedy expansively. "I'm sure that a chap as clever as you can work it out! In fact, give me some more of that funny tea, and I'm sure I could sort it all out for you in a jiffy!"

Dr Clock looked at his friend doubtfully.

The GE Problem accelerated away ..... somewhere.

\*\*\*\*\*

Back at Aunty Norton's, Androi was finding himself in a rather peculiar situation.

He recalled Stardotstar bumping his elbow, and the dial up battery adaptor charger falling to the floor. He was certain that he had lent down to retrieve it ..... but then a crackling myriad of kalaidoscopic electric blue had suffused him ..... and his back, to use a human term, had 'given out'!

So, now he was doubled up, chest against his legs, staring down at the floor and the battery charger, which was zinging away to itself. Curiously, the Universe, which covered his black executable briefcase, sounded vexed.

\*\*\*\*\*

THHHHHHHUUUMMMMMMMPPPPPPPPPPPP!!!!!!!!!!!!  
KKRRRRRRRRRAAAASSSSSHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!

{ Uh oh }

The motley crew of the HMS Server 4 picked themselves up off the floor.  
"What the RARS was that?!" exclaimed Guns Mademincemeat from a tumble of E-Wap, Psycho-Counsellor, and ASP droid.

Mozart's '*Requiem*' picked up tempo in the background.

+++ sum @ bg, 4 shr! +++ Sson was reverting to his High FM so shaken up was he. Eric, his father's ghost, frowned down on him, he could tell.

"Any ideas, Hel? Even 'preliminary reports'?" demanded Drew, with just a hint of sarcasm.

{ Hmmmm. Doesn't look too good .... }

"Now don't you start ....!" she threatened the onboard and pessimistically compassionate A.I.

{ .... ummm, well, it looks like a brickwall .... a BIG brickwall ..... and lots of them, stretching off into the distance .... }

Guns gasped, which was a difficult alliterative manoeuvre. "Hel, open up the viewers," he ordered. The Security Officer turned to the others. "I've got a really bad feeling about this ...."

The viewports opened to reveal a red firebrick surface slammed up against the windows. The side screens showed a walled corridor stretching off, with intersections leading away at random points along the corridor. It looked uncannily like a maze.

"I've only ever heard of this, and only as a scare story in Home Server Farm Fleet Training corps .... I still can't believe it ....?!"

"WHAT IS IT??!" screamed Drew, a tinge of green colouring her cheeks.

+++ S dngruss??! +++

"Dangerous? Dunno .... could be .... the Universe has detected an infection, and has thrown up its firewalls, partitioning the many sectors and subsectors of space, and creating a labrynth of walled corridors, controlling and limiting all movement!" He paused for breath. "I don't know HOW we are going to find our way through the universe now .....!!"

{ What's left of the Universe ..... } muttered Hel, dismally.

\*\*\*\*\*

The XML ClosedPlanet rocketed backwards away from the WebWorld9 space station. A foreboding silence had settled upon its crew as they tried to get to grips with the nuances of this 'mirrored' spaceship and the gravitas of their self-imposed mission.

The tension would have been broken by the muttered curses of the ship's ghost if they could hear him. Since they were not privy to the oblique references to Spatula Manuals, Cookery Books, main menus, recipes for 3-point plans, and Larding Seive Lards, they continued on in their oblivious world.

Except for one.

The back of Saleem's neck tingled, and, unusually for her, she had decided to hang around with the Server Four's command crew a little bit longer. Not only was Nick's fateful destiny hanging in the balance - down in the ship's core, to be precise - and not only was her beloved universe somewhat worse for wear and desperately needed a dose of night-nurse, but things were going to get very interesting very soon. She could tell. Old Fen had gone on to the Great Bin, but she had the funny feeling that the old codger was still floating around somewhere nearby. And it wasn't just his rank and phlegmy breath.

Q-Rob shuddered as the shiver ran over his shoulders and down his spine. Whenever he had that feeling of someone walking over his grave, he would vow to hunt that individual down and kill him slowly. And painfully. But this time, he intuitively knew that he would never find this particular culprit.

He shrugged, and left the chamber to its darkness and the old Spatula Warrior's brown overcloak.

Time to take back his ship, he thought mercilessly.

He came to a metal service ladder, grasped the steep handrail, and set his foot on the third rung. He felt smug and, above all, powerful as he pulled himself up three steps at a time.

When he was halfway up, a great jarring crash pounded across the hull, and Q-Rob was thrown back down to the floor of the chamber.

"What NOW??!" he exclaimed testily.

\*\*\*\*\*

"It was there a moment ago, Captain ..... honest!" Winger whirled back to face the IDS monitors. The GE Problem's scanners displayed a pitted and red-coloured texture on all except one compass points : the remaining one simply showed a brick walled corridor leading back in the direction from where they had come. Above and below were starfields, tantalisingly inviting an escape trajectory. "Well Jorbae and its rather tasty tea isn't now!" snapped Remedy, a tantrum on the verge of a breakdown. He struck a reliable pose, who crumpled to the floor, but did little to ease the Captain's frustration. "Get Clocky up here NOW!" he roared. His renowned strategic mind came to the fore. "In the meantime, head down there, and make for the stars."

The crew hurried to center the align thrusters, and the GE Problem dipped nose-down towards seemingly open space. The primary nodeship of the Rars fleet bumped like a balloon against an invisible wall that shimmered like a heatwave. Reversing the thrusters' alignment proved the same was true for the alluringly inviting space above their heads. The brick walls remained either side of them.

"Okay, okay," muttered Remedy through clenched teeth. "We go thataway ...." he said, pointing in the direction offered by the open end of the cul-de-sac. "Where's the know-it-all Doctor??!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Old Fen stood in darkness... he was very confused. He almost thought he had seen Nick and the others. He was sure of it.

But now he was very unclear of where or when he was, for it was always important to know when it's happy hour no matter where you were! He walked for what felt like miles looking at various shapes of nothing that drifted in and out of view. A background noise of what seemed like motorway traffic buzzed on the far reaches of his hearing. He was bemused and confused all at once.

Finally some kind of building appeared out of the murky grey nothingness. It was tall and wide and looked similar to a gigantic breeze block. Fen looked up at the building, and gulped in trepidation. The Spatula Warrior in him decided that he would enter.

In the foyer of the building sat a robot. It regarded him with a patronising air, trying to measure him up for some reason that the old man could not figure out. Fen watched the 'bot carefully.

"So weese ye pess, thin?" demanded the droid disinterestedly in an accent thicker than syrup. Clearly, the robot developers had felt that an incomprehensible accent made it more user-friendly.

Fen tried to get his head around that one, "*Where's...got that one*, but the rest was a bit foggy," he apologised politely.

The silence was filled with the robot looking at Fen intently. Finally it gave a very metallic sigh. It was apparent to its receptors that this person would not just go away. Logic number Two would have to be utilised.

"Okey, loik mayt, I will layt ye go up if ye will joost git out o me heer, okey?" the bald robot announced.

*Strange place this*, mused Fen and he fled to the nearby lift.

The Site Map in the strange building's lift (the only one of six that was working) showed a restaurant and bar on the Second Floor, which was called 'Fudd'. Since Fen was eager to orientate himself towards the local Happy Hour, he leaned forward, and stabbed the big round TWO on the control panel with an arthritic finger. The doors clanged shut, and inertia took hold with a grumble.

\*\*\*\*\*

Androi was getting a little peeved. Not only was he still stuck in this doubled-up position, but no-one had spotted his predicament! He had had time to reflect on his posture, and a recent data archive retrieval that he had ordered up behind his photoreceptors had shown him the battery charger falling from his grasp, striking his battered black executable briefcase, and creating a crackling myriad of kalaidoscopic electric blue all about him.

Something was up with his universe-coated briefcase!

\*\*\*\*\*

"Oh Rars." Captain Slogs' trembling hand lifted to his mouth in utter shock and

horror. The scanners and viewports showed a red firebrick all around the XML Closed Planet, and the long-range monitors confirmed the walls were slipping into reality in a widening circumference.

"What is it, Sir?!" demanded Snazz Hashcake.

"It can't be ..... could it ...??" whispered Sandy, the Captain's Number Two.

"Nah .... surely not ...?" pointed out Roger doubtfully.

"It is," pronounced Slogs. He closed his eyes, and quoted the Home Server Farm Fleet's Cracked Manual from memory. "The Universe has detected an infection, and has thrown up its firewalls, partitioning the many sectors and subsectors of space, and creating a labrynth of walled corridors, controlling and limiting all movement!"

"But that was just a scare story for naive newbies ...." dismissed Roger.

"Well it's certainly scaring ME now!" retorted Snazz.

"What can we do??" demanded Sandy.

Slogs paused, and not for effect.

"... I don't know ..."

The paracetamol and band-aid had done its work, and Nick was feeling much better. He and Wilma had returned to the lift on their way back to the XML Closed Planet's bridge, but a great THWWAAAACCKKKK had jolted the ship and the liftcar plummeted to the basement where it was caught by the magnetic repulsors.

After making sure they were alright, Wilma used her Trusty Sonic Screwdriver™ to confuse the control panel, while Nick levered the doors open with his Blue Spatula. They stepped out into the gloom of the emergency lighting of the basement.

"Y'know, luv, we make a pretty damn good team!" Nick winked at Wilma, who flung her arms around him, and drew him into a passionate embrace. Suddenly his spatula lit up between them with a bright electric blue.

"Ooooooo, darling ...." breathed Wilma.

"Erm .... thankyou, but it's nothing to do with me!" He held his spatula aloft. "The bright blue .... there must be danger about ....! Fen told me it lights up as a warning when Evil is about!"

The two of them crept out into the basement to investigate.

\*\*\*\*\*

Fen was helping himself at a self-service alco-bar on the Floor known as 'Fudd', when two black-banded cleaning robots cycled by, chattering to themselves. The old Spatula Warrior caught some of their words, and they seemed to be moaning about the sterile cleanliness on the 'Godd' floor. They had come from the direction of the Lifts.

Intrigued, and only slightly plastered with drink, Fen returned to the one working lift, and stepped inside.

He peered quizzically at the control panel again. 'Grundd' to 'Fudd' were clearly marked, but the rest of the floors seemed to smudge into a mess called 'Wurrk' ; far above these, a bright and shiny, and above all, *polished*, button indicated 'Godd'. With the decisiveness only attributed to Spatula Warriors, Fen slapped the button, and the Lift doors closed behind him .....

Fen stepped out into a chamber of milky filtered light and conduits. There were pipes simply *everywhere*, and everything shone with a permanent cleanliness that would make Cleaning Staff in each and every universe shudder with job insecurity. The air was slightly moist, though the surfaces of the pipes were bone dry.

Ahead of him was a great arched doorway, through which light played in dapples and spots. He clambered over the pipes and stepped through this portal, and found himself facing a vast sheet of curved glass. Above him, in the centre of the rounded ceiling was a slowly rotating patterned sphere - a gobo - the kind one might find in an old-fashioned disco. It was this that was casting the patterned light ..... and gave the place a distinctly wet feel.

As his rheumy eyes adjusted to the lighting, he noticed fine wires hanging down from many pinholes in the ceiling. And on the end of the wires were lumps of sponge-like material.

"Huh, 'sall dun by wires, innit?" slurred Fen critically.

Suddenly a great darkness was cast across the dappled chamber. Fen turned to face the shadow looming into the glass pane, and was frozen to the spot. A damp patch appeared down one trouser leg.

"Hallo M'Mammos!" boomed a jovial voice. "How're you this fine mornin'?"

The hanging sponges all about Fen suddenly jiggled and danced as their wires were pulled to and fro. Fen could discern a muffled reply on the outside of the glass curvature.

"Oh fine, luv. And you?"

"Someone's been muckin' about with the Universe again, there're firewalls ALL over the damn place!"

"Firewalls you say, Guardian dear? Oh well, we'll let Procline know, and it'll be Done in a jiffy have no fear ....."

"Oh, I'm not bothered so much, but it really is a nuisance when yer trying to make yerself a nice cuppa."

"Oh, tell us about it ...." M'Mammos sympathised.

"Oh well, mustn't grumble. See ya later dears!"

"Bye-bye Guardian".

The shifting darkness departed, and Fen was bathed in light again. Before he could move a muscle, the sponges were yanked upwards on their wires, and disappeared through the holes in the ceiling. As they went, Fen briefly glimpsed fingers through the holes, pulling on the wires and drawing the sponges



away.....

"HmMMM, Procline, I presume ...." he muttered.

Fen took a look at the holes and determined that one may not live on bread alone, but at the same time realised that curiosity was a rather strange invention that some companies tried very hard to stamp out. Fen always felt that too many people learned (posthumously) that curiosity hardly kills as many cats as it does humanoids.

So knowing that he was in a very particular company he made a quick escape to the lift. It was time to check out this floor called Wurrk. So he hit the button labelled six and quickly descended. Like so many people Fen seemed to ignore the fact that this lift had started from a '0' floor known as 'ground' while the actual 1st floor seemed to be the second! Never one to worry he hummed to himself and wondered how his protégé was doing on his own.

Fen stepped out into a room in complete darkness, and immediately wondered if he had now made the right choice. He really would not know until much later but he was sure at that particular moment it was the wrong one.

As he stepped forward, various ceiling panels started to flicker above him, and a 6 metre square brightened around him. He felt like he was in Big Trouble now, but he couldn't see any reason for it and decided to continue. Suddenly he saw forms in the distance and he knew that he was glaringly illuminated as he walked, and was as obvious as a teenager caught doing something that he shouldn't when a light went on.

It was now apparent that the figures in front of him were wearing familiar robes. He was getting just a bit concerned that he was in Real Trouble now: there in the center of this cavernous floor sat two beings with large hooded brown robes sitting in front of several panels which were displaying quite a lot of green and red glowing lights. They turned and sombrely regarded Fen.

Recognising their hooded overcloaks and apparel, Fen immediately raised his Spatula in salute .... and then sheepishly realised he didn't have his sworn weapon anymore! Nevertheless, the two recognised the hand motion, and replicated it, before silently turning back to regard their flickering monitoring monitors. One of them indicated a spare swivel chair to one side, inviting Fen to join them.

Fen was shocked and surprised to realise that these were two of the fabled Council of Twelve in the High Spatula Temple of the Galley ; the Low Temple was another place altogether, and never talked about in the company of strangers. They *twentyfour7monitored* the multifarious Mainframes, they were the Guardians of Peas and Justice. They were diametrically opposite to the Great Bin, which was the End Product of All Things. Fen had only ever heard about them as vague myth from his own Master back in the really old days. And this chamber of almost complete darkness was just how he had pictured them!

All was peaceful ... calm ..... still ..... passive .....

Suddenly, a red light began flashing on one of the monitor screens! The Two Venerated ones jumped.

"Argh! By Customer Logic!" swore one of them.

The other nodded, but his fingers flashed over one of many keyboards in front of him, and in para-secs the red light had backed down to a sullen pulsating blue.

"It's nothing .... it'll be green again, soon enough ...."

The three waited in anticipation, and several para-secs later they all breathed a sigh of relief when a green dot replaced the blue. Then they quickly glanced at each other as if to say, "Did YOU breathe a sigh of relief just then?! It certainly wasn't me!"

"Everything's coooooool," murmured the one sat on the left. The one in the middle nodded professionally, and Fen went, "Yep!"

\*\*\*\*\*

The blue spatula drifted through the gloom, and Nick followed it tentatively. Wilma followed Nick close behind. She wouldn't admit it, but she was scared rarsless.

Ahead, they could make out a figure crumpled on the deck. It was rubbing the back of it's head. They rushed over, and helped him to sit up.

"Ohhhhh .... my head ..... what did we hit?!" he asked.

"I don't know, but it wasn't a laser blast!" answered Nick grimly.

"What are you doing down here?" enquired Wilma. "Are you a mechanic?"

Q-Rob looked up at her. ".... mechanic ....? Yeah ..... I think so ....."

Wilma looked at Nick. "The poor chap must be concussed. Let's get him back to the Medi-bay, his memory will soon return, he'll know who he is and he can tell us everything then ....."

\*\*\*\*\*

9 hours 53 glockenspiels and 25 para-secs had passed in reflective silence in the High Temple, and Fen felt quite at home, his troubles almost forgotten.

His two companions yawned, stretched, and stood up, just as the square lights flickered into action at the far end of the chamber near the door Fen had entered through earlier. Two robed figures were striding up towards him and his new-found friends, whilst about a dozen or so others - in simple tunics with a strip of rank hanging vertically from about their necks - wandered into the rest of the chamber, which Fen could now see was filled with similar, but more sparse and less flashy-looking, monitors on desks. Intrigued, he stepped over for a closer look.

As the newcomers sat at their desks, and placed strange archaic curved contraptions over their heads, he realised they had an intransiency about them and their machines. They weren't exactly 'ghosts', but they weren't *all* there : clearly the lights were definately on now, but it was as if no-one was in!

"Good morning, Connexions, Jim speaking, how may I help you?" said one individual to Fen's right. Fen glanced over at the speaker, and then did a double-take, his eyes going wide! On from 'Jim's' station was a colleague who ..... notwithstanding his pale features ..... looked EXACTLY like Nick .... his Spatula Learner and The Chosen One!!!

"Nick! You're here!" the old man exclaimed jubilantly. Nick glanced over his shoulder, a puzzled look on his face. He then returned to stare intently and blankly at his screen. He seemed tied to his machine by this headpiece. Fen was rooted to the spot, in both relief and confusion, and not a little surprise.

'Jim' sounded as if he was 'wrapping' up a conversation he had been having to himself. Fen glanced back at Nick, and noticed he was now looking very puzzled, and a little wary. A bemused look was rapidly giving way to pre-emptive fear .....

Before Fen's eyes, Nick's face suddenly stretched to a point on the monitor screen. The whites of his eyes were the first to disappear, and soon followed by his floppy fringe. His shoulders were next sucked in, and finally his legs, the soles of his shoes giving a final wriggle as they passed through the screen.

Fen blinked.

".... thankyou for calling, goodbye ..... CUSTOMER LOGIC!!!" Jim swore as he closed his conversation. "You won't believe this, Nick, but ..... Hey?! Nick! Where's he gone now?! I'd better put him on '600' ...." and Jim leaned over to tap a code into Nick's telephony point. He shook his head.

So did Fen.

\*\*\*\*\*

Q-Rob was staring at Nick and Wilma with a slightly quizzical expression on his face. He felt something about these two... *What was it?! Something about a number ... and selecting it ...*

Nick looked kindly at his fiercest enemy and wondered just who he was. It was difficult not to feel some affinity. He himself was often confused and lost within the grand scheme of things. It was hard not to appreciate someone else in a great deal of confusion ; after all, he lived in it most of the time.

Wilma had some sneaking suspicions but she tried hard to hide them from either party.

Suddenly the ship lurched wildly again tossing all of them into a great heap. Q-Rob was convinced now that he was a mechanic of some sort and felt, as a mechanic, he should do something engine related.

"I'd better head somewhere or other," he paused trying to figure out where he should go. "Somewhere with an engine."

"Like an engine room perhaps?" Nick tried helpfully.

"Y-yes an Engine room..." Q-Rob paused. It did not sound quite right.  
"Ah, er no, Engineering, that is where you should go," Wilma said. She was beginning to arrive at an awful realisation, but the kind that sat teasingly on the tip of one's tongue.  
"Right, off I go then...umm where would that be then?" Q-Rob looked a bit helpless now.  
"Oh for goodness sakes man, follow the maps, they're everywhere in this blasted ship! Just remember to go in the reverse of the direction it says and you will never be lost!" Wilma said at last, unwittingly shoos their greatest enemy out of the corridor like a spoiled child.

\*\*\*\*\*

Fen wandered back to the area that housed the two robed figures and the monitoring screens. As the daylight filtered through the venetian blinds, he joined them hunched up over their desk, their hoods pulled tightly up to ward off the vitamin D of foggy solar radiation.

He had just seen his Apprentice across the way ..... and then had watched him disappear!! His senile old mind couldn't take it, and he felt a good sit-down with his High Spatula brethren would help clear his confusion .....

As he made his way back to the two members of the Spatula High Council, a flickering behind him caught his eye. Fen turned, and before he could say "The Black Hole of Ars", the desk of uniformed people faded from view, revealing it to be a three dimensional hologram! It was briefly replaced with a picturesque view of a mountain towering above a green forest and cheerful stream, before settling on a new view inside a refreshments establishment whose legend proudly announced it as *Standback's*.

With a blinding flash of intuition, Fen recalled the teaching myths described how the High Council's Command Centre would archive every log and branch of past events. Satisfied, Fen returned to the monitoring desk, and the two brethren.

\*\*\*\*\*

Within para-minutes the engineer fellow was back, this time wringing his hands sheepishly. Q-Rob was bewildered, but not just in the face of the backwardly-compatible vessel. Wilma frowned and opened her mouth to speak when Nick, a bright, cheerful, and above all *helpful* smile on his face, stepped forward and pointed out a ship's deck map on the far wall.  
"There you go, old chap .... looks like Engineering is ... thataway ... I think!!" Nick pointed.  
"Oh, oh, thanks a lot, mate, I'll .... ummm ..... head off .... that way .... then ...." Q-Rob trailed off lamely, and hurried off in the opposite direction to which Nick was indicating. The very sudden entanglement with his Hydra-part had brought back a rush of memories and he was quite dazed and confused. *He* was now becoming more and more *aware*, and had recognised Nick for what he *truly* was, and didn't really want to hang around to find out why he was a One or even Chosen.....

Wilma turned to Nick. "Luv ..... that engineering guy ..... I have an awfully bad feeling about this ....."

\*\*\*\*\*

It was nearly closing time at the 24seven Aunty Norton's Truck Stop Café. Well, 'closing time' was that brief lull in the hectic flow of truckers and holiday travellers, but it allowed the waitresses-on-skates to skootdotcom around the tables with fresh damp cloths.

Alain da Croissant sauntered out of the kitchens. He was the Chef Masteur at Aunty Norton's, with the rolling eyes that marked him out as a genius. He flicked cigarette ash from the end of his gitane and scored a bullseye in a steaming soup being swept past by one of the petite waitresses-on-wheels. He liked neatness and symmetry and "things being in their place". The fact that his kitchens habitually failed the Health and Safety Hygiene Reports every year was evidence that he was fastidious in the neatness of his messy working conditions, and the fact that the Health and Safety Hygiene Inspector never left his Kitchens alive (generally par-boiled, and garnished with parsley) was testament of "things being in their place".

He strolled through the dining areas, up mezzanines, and down cinque-ports, basking in the fawning glory his satiated customers proffered him. He ambled past one table in the corner, and took a second glance. He stopped in his tracks and roared :

"VHAT IZ ZEESS THING DOING 'ERE?!" he pointed accusingly at the lower (metal) back of Androi Joyrider. Empty tables were not a concern - they came and went in the ebb and flow of cut-throat e-commerce - but this individual was making Aunty Norton's look UNTIDY!

Alain da Croissant stepped around the table to where Androi was doubled up, and kicked the robot's briefcase. As the case went tumbling under the table, he demanded, "Zit up ant order zometing! Don't just slouch zer!!"

"I can't .... my back's ... ummmm ..... gone?" a metallic voice wavered. "Ah. I know orl about zat," Alain grumbled. " 'Ere, you take my arm ...." Alan fetched the battered black executable briefcase and plumped it in the narrow space that was left of Androi's lap. The chef gasped at the sight of it, but he put one arm around the robot's shoulders and gently eased him off his chair.

"I vill take you into ze Kitchens. I 'ave got zum .... ahem .... medeesinal lickoor zher...."

\*\*\*\*\*

The Universe rumbled with the after-effects of a huge interstellar shake-up, and the firewalls descended. The red brick vista was replaced once again by colourful nebulae and pinpoint bright stars.

A thousand and one and more starship captains all breathed a collective sigh of relief, and, as one man, thought, "Back to normal at long last!"

All, except for certain individuals of the Home Server Farm Fleet, who had already seen far too much to believe .....

\*\*\*\*\*

In the back of the Restaurant Alain was getting the medicinal liquor out : he had a few vats of the stuff and the tax free nature of it meant keeping it locked away. Androi continued to moan about his sore roto disks and how his mechanics just weren't what they used to be.

"OOOH if only I HAD been given a few more up-to-date RAMMED BUSES," He groaned.

"And maybe a mute button az vell," Alain muttered under his breath, "Ah 'ere ve are now, ziss iz ze good stuff, mind."

Alain pulled out some black tar-looking goo which was labelled 'McGunieces 99% Proof that you have no better life than this Ale'. He poured it for Androi who was now looking longingly at it.

"I 'ave juzt got back from ze Galaxy Wormhole in ze Grammer quadrant and I bought ziss at their Zmuggling-for-Free shop. It iz zed to make all of *la vie* zeem vurthvile," Alain said as he poured two glasses.

Androi grabbed his glass and with one massive gulp poured it down his neck compartment ....

The robot stood up, announced, "FRIEND .... I LUVS YOUSH ..." and then collapsed in a heap on the floor completely stupefied, a puddle of spilt black goo forming around him.

"You normally dilute ze lickoor viz ze vorter," remarked Alain absently. He picked up the briefcase, wriggled his fingers and chuckled.

The Universe looked up and sighed knowing it was in safe hands. Alain took the briefcase and stuck it up on a shelf marked alt.binaries.WW9, alongside several other battered black executable briefcases that contained special recipes, cook books, and tingly-tangly spices. Then he locked the cupboard door.

The black goo that was McGunieces Ale and that now surrounded the still robotic form of Androi began to swirl, little ripples of vortex moving the star speckled tar. Then, without warning, the large robot suddenly sank into the midst of the black pool, and like the flow of mercury, every last drop of the Wormhole Ale followed Androi and disappeared from the floor.

Alain smiled. Rammed buses were never a good idea, after all.

\*\*\*\*\*

The red walls of fire-brick dissolved and the expanse of stars re-appeared in a shine of brilliance.

"PUNCH IT!" cried Guns Mademincemeat and Dear Drew in unison.

+++ Lts gt out F ere!!! +++ added Sson of Eric.

Hel, the on-ship AI, applied the Mach XP Only When You Really Have To TM, and the molecules of the Server 4 visibly stretched as the starship elongated to a vector of light.

TT, Steff's ASP droid, hurried to get a dispatch off to Home Server Farm Fleet Top Secret Headquarters on Alphabravo in the Fonetec System, and alert them of their imminent arrival.

Unfortunately for the crew, they were unaware of the state Hel had now put them in .....

\*\*\*\*\*

"Ah! FINALLY!! Clocky! Where have you been?!!" demanded Captain Admirable Remedy, as the ship's doctor entered the bridge. Not waiting for an answer, Remedy stabbed a finger at the viewports and monitors. "Brick walls. Explain."

The doctor peered over his Captain's peeved shoulder. "Brick walls, sir? Ummmmm .... where exactly?"

The captain returned a look of pure thunder at his doctor who was clearly *deliberately* being slow now just to rattle him. He spun on his heel and glared at the firewalls .... that were conspicuous by their glaring absence.

"Where ....??" he began. "How did you ....? Thankyou doctor, for your invaluable insight, you have proved your worthiness once again."

Dr Clock beamed. He thought that was the safest and quietest response.

Stardorstar gingerly stepped forward. "Sir .... there might be a problem in returning to the capital of the Second Rars Empire ...."

"Jorr-Bayy?!" demanded Remedy with a look of horror on his face. "What do you mean??"

"It doesn't seem to be on any current starcharts, it seems to have disappeared...?!"

"Hmhmhmhmhm, Doctor, have you any more of that tea ...?" the captain enquired.

"Yes sir. In fact I have a pouch of dried shreds of it here ...." And Dr. Clock revealed a small leather pouch full of black-yellow strips of stringy leaves.

"Winger, get me a cup of hot water *now*." The captain turned to his navigator and doctor. "I've noticed that this 'tea' has some rather interesting effects ..... and it's damn tasty too!"

Winger approached with a mug of steaming water, into which Dr Clock sprinkled some tea leaves. Remedy snatched the mug from them, and sipped it furiously and noisily.

One eyeball rotated, while the other went milky. His mouth did a passable impression of a goldfish. The captain swayed on his feet.

"Oh dear .... was it one leaf too many, I wonder ....??" began the doctor. Remedy raised a shaky finger up at one corner of the main viewscreen. "Tha ... tha .... tha'way ..... Jorr .... Jor-Bayy was that way ..... triple speed ...." but the sight of the prehistorically positioned star system was too much for him, and he crashed forward in a heap on the deck, snoring loudly.

Clock quickly confirmed his vital signs were stable, and Winger instructed the crew to enter their new trajectory.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Snazz, patch through to the Home Server Farm Fleet again and see if they can locate our ship for us will you, dear?" instructed Captain Hard-Grafft Slogs. "Now that it's been reported stolen, someone may have picked it up ....." he added hopefully.

"Sir, message from Wilma," announced Sandy. "She thinks we have a formidable enemy on board and we ought to quarantine him ASAP!"

"Ay Es Ay Pee?" exclaimed Slogs. "What's that when it's at home, then???"

"Don't know, sir, some code that she uses perhaps? She might be in danger!"

"Oh, where's Guns when you need him??!"

"Sir!" Snazz called out. "Headquarters are reporting a possible ID on the Server 4 ..... but ....."

"But ...?"

"Their long-range scanners describe it as a shaft of light ....."

"Oh no ..... NOW what??!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Fen sat down behind his brethren, and watched them intently as their fingers moved graciously over their keyboards, managing the red and green flickering lights before them. As Fen was just getting interested in the proceedings, the small clock ticking away at the corner of one of the monitors flicked to 18:00 and the two hooded figures abruptly stopped, stood up and left. It happened so quickly, Fen didn't have a clue what just went on.

A few moments later, another figure appeared. The newcomer sat down and placed upon the desk a packet of frozen sandwiches, before starting to tap away at the keys as the lights started to flash again. Not sure what had just happened and not knowing where his hooded brethren had gone, Fen decided to stay where he was and observe this new figure.

Slowly the tuniced figures started to leave, and a few hours later, the only people left in the high temple were Fen and the new figure, who Fen decided to call *Nextshift*, for some reason only he could comprehend.

In the new silence, Nextshift stopped tapping away at the keys and sat back relaxing for a moment, before taking a small rodent from his pocket and throwing



it at the screen. The rodent clung to the screen and started to crawl around at the commands of Nextshift. The rodent's nose twitched and a window opened on the monitor entitled '*Express Lookout Newspost Application*'. Nextshift moved toward the keyboard again and started typing into the new window. Fen could just about make out the writing as 'alt.binaries.WW9'. Immediately several lines of text scrolled up the monitor at frightening speed. Fen almost fell off his chair at the onslaught of information which Nextshift appeared to be able to read. A moment later, the rodent twitched again, and the information paused. The rodent crawled over to a small picture of a briefcase which read universe.exe.

\*\*\*\*\*

Waffle Cream sat at the foot of her bed growling. She was getting tired of all the whinging of the various wives, girlfriends and significant others. All they did these days was wonder when the males would come home and what foolishness they were getting up to with the Jirk.

Waffle could understand, her own beloved SpareRib was among them. She was, as every wife, deeply suspicious of him when he was out of her sight. She figured it was time to call a tea-break Counsel to determine the best course of action in order to get them back where they belonged.

The great Counsel was a massive unwieldy thing as all the Female PHPWoks gathered about the Great Wok in preparation. For once there was complete silence in the village as even the younger ones knew something remarkable was about to happen.

"Sisters, we have assembled to return that which has left us. We must gain the males back or this home of ours will not be whole. It is time," Waffle said solemnly.

All of the various female PHPWoks looked out at their compatriots in both fear and glory: it was time to call in the *Sizzle*.

So the chant began, it grew louder and louder until all that heard it were living in fear of ever hearing it again.

For home and fat  
We conquer all  
For young or old  
all will fall  
Sing Tra lalala

They repeated this terrible anthem over and over, ascending higher and higher until some of the Tourists in the undergrowth below cried out in pain, and many were knocked completely unconscious. It was deafening and horrible to behold. Truly, it was.

Suddenly at the highest possible crescendo, a great globule of bubbling stringy

fat ejected from the Wok and shot high into the sky, spearing the storm clouds that had gathered above.

Within moments a starship appeared, hauled down by the sticky gloop through the cloud cover. The frantic jerking of the fuselage showed the pilot was trying desperately to escape the fatty tractor beam as it was brought to the surface of Bendor. It hung precariously amongst the treetops, a spoon's throw from the PHPWok village.

The female PHPWoks gloried in their handy work as Waffle walked up to the cockpit and called out, "The WebWorld9 spacestation, Jorbae, please, and step on it!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Chief Sparerib and his party, on the other hand, was just getting out of *further* detention in the WebWorld9 cell blocks. Dado had been none too pleased with them, and had been gnashing his teeth when he was led away by Crisko.

Morga had fervently told the great Chief that he knew it was closing in on the time of the great moon and they needed to make some plans, double quick, involving the Chosen One.

"I don't know, Morga, this all seems so iffy to me, trusting our fate to some boy," the Chief remarked sagely as they made their way back to the promenade. "It seems rather foolish if you ask me."

"But Chief, we need to resolve this now! We need these E-Waps out of our lives for good or we will never be able to live in true peace," Morga said devoutly.

"Besides the time of the prophecy is coming and the fat grows thick on the Great Wok of life." Morga waved his ceremonial wooden spoon enthusiastically. "It is time for action not just words. We *must* act before the uniting or we will be unable to defeat the enemies of existance."

SpareRib was perplexed at his Head Chef's words. "Alright, alright, you *are* the Wisewok, after all, not me... We shall do as you require and prepare, but first... a *drink!*"

And a mighty cheer went up with that.

\*\*\*\*\*

The E-Waps themselves were deep in thought, the battle for the universe was lost but Master Voda now knew that he had a score to settle and that could hardly go unnoticed for too long. Those PHPWoks would *pay* for their insolence.

+++ The tm hs kum 2 S cape +++ he announced, glowering at the guard beyond the glowing force field. +++ Pol E Fon X +++ L 2 Getha! +++ There was the sound of a reverse vacuum as the cell of E-Waps took a deep breath.

The little floating midgets started to glow with power and they began to slowly bleet out an almost recognisable tune. The Security Officer made his last mistake when he started to hum along...

The Officer's world exploded, as he and the Nort-Afee Security shield shattered.

The E-waps quickly exited the brig, and set off a quicktime pace to the most crowded section of the station: the Promenades! Little did they fear the forces of the PHPWoks, who were loading up on liquid courage at that same moment.

\*\*\*\*\*

Androi however woke up very confused and very lost sitting under bushes beside Tubby Honest with a sign that said :

-----  
WILL BE QUIET FOR OIL  
-----

Androi simply nodded and decided that that was as good as anything.

\*\*\*\*\*

Q-Rob suddenly started to wonder why he was running away from the one person above all others he wanted to destroy.

With an evil gleam he immediately did an about-face, drew his weapon and started to race back the way he had come. The end was coming and he *knew* he would get the *ultimate* reward!

## Chapter 13 - Unlucky for all!

Conman Abdullah was enjoying his stint at Teskos, especially now that he was titled 'Deputy Manager Work Placement Trainee'. It had a certain ring about it that he admired. And besides, the Eee-store owner often left him to his own devices. In fact, the boss would leave the shop as soon as Conman walked in!

But he was missing his weekly fix of Pandora with the Extra Big Ones, and three days too early, he impatiently left the storecentre to its own capable running, and went in search of Tubby Honest, the Pandora Sales Rep.

He wandered through the leafy glade that was the Upper Promenade, marvelling at the variety of green flora and fauna that really shouldn't be there but no-one really minded since it brought a dreamy smile to everyone's faces, when he tripped over a metal leg.

"OUCH!!!" boomed the leg.

"And wha' about me?!" Conman demanded indignantly from where he lay sprawled on the mossy turf. "Hehehehehehe", he giggled.

The bushes rustled, and Androi leaned forward revealing himself. "Oh sorry Sir, WAS I IN YOUR WAY?"

Conman couldn't tell if this metallic decibel modulator was being sarcastic or was genuinely concerned.

"Never mind, what are ...?" began Conman, and then he stopped abruptly: he recognised that duffel coat and shoulder bag ANYWHERE! He dived at the corners sticking out from under the leaves and yanked hard: out toppled Tubby Honest, scratched and dirtied, and fast asleep!

Tubby opened his eyes with a splutter.

"Wha yo want, then, ay?!" he asked groggily.

"An Advanced Copy of next week's Pandora's Weekly, please!!" beamed Conman, shaking slightly with the anticipation.

"Ha! There's no such thing as an Advanced Copy of Pandora's Weekly, you idiot!" replied Tubby. But the maniacal look in Conman's eye brought Tubby's gloating to a silence.

Androi picked up on this.

"Actually Sir, IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR AN Advanced Copy of next week's Pandora's Weekly, in the FUTURE, so to speak, THEN I MIGHT BE OF assistance ....."

\*\*\*\*\*

The Shaft of Light that was the HMS Server 4 travelling at Mach XP Only When You Really Have To™ speed.... ummm..... sped through the inky void. The *Ride of the Valkyries* followed behind them.

+++ Oooooo I say, ths S fst, innit? +++

\*\*\*\*\*

Nick and Wilma hurried back to Captain Slogs on the Bridge of the XML Closed Planet with the aid of the fourth setting on her ACME Trusty Sonic Screwdriver TM.

"Oh there you both are!" beamed Captain Hard-Grafft Slogs. "I was beginning to get a little worried about you two ..."

"Captain! We have Our Adversary on board!" exclaimed Wilma breathlessly.

"Yes, Snazz received your message. But Guns, you see, m'dear, is not with us at the moment, and we currently have a pressing Priority One ....."

He glanced at Sandy, who was leaning over a quite colourful and really important-looking console, and raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Almost there, Sir ..... we've nearly enabled a connexion with the HMS Server 4 if we can but only hold our present course and speed ..... we should be intercepting her very soon ....."

Slogs beamed.

His Ship was within their grasp.

Whoever stole his Ship would pay.

And then this Adversary chap would find that Captain Hard-Grafft Slogs was not a person to dandy with.

"Where in the star speckled RARS am I now?!!" screamed Q-Rob from one of the XML Closed Planet's myriad of identical and nondescript corridors.

The backwardly-compatible email mirrored spacecraft had utterly confused him, and he was too pent up with anger and frustration to meditate his way clearly.

He sat down in a huff, and began to collect his thoughts together.

Concentration made the perfect omelette.

And Concentration would get him out of this mess, and deal a sweet revenge.

Saleem, shimmering in her spotless gown, turned to Wilma and Nick.

"So! What's *bin* going on, then?" She giggled at her own joke. "What have I missed?"

Wilma opened her mouth to reply, but Sandy interrupted her.

"Captain! We've lost the HMS Server 4!! Incredible! It's simply turned on to a new trajectory, ninety degrees from its current course?! We have no chance now in intercepting her..."

Slogs strode over to the monitors of the quite colourful and really important-looking console. "*Rars it to Hell!!!*" he roared. He took a deep breath. "Signal, What is it's heading now, can you tell?"

Roger Wilco Signal peered intently at his charts, and fiddled with an abacus.  
"It's the WebWorld9, Sir," he answered after a while.  
"Not that damn place AGAIN?!" moaned the Captain. "Oh well, how are we going to get there?" He switched Comm Channels. "Stef? Can we make it to the WebWorld9 ..... in triple time?"  
Stef answered immediately. "Ahhh, no Sir, no-can-do, I can tell you that right now! Cheers!"  
"Cheers," grumbled the Captain.  
"The WebWorld9 space station?" asked Saleem. "Pas probleme! I can get you there before you can say 'Click-to-empty-the-Recycle-Bin!'"  
"You can??!" replied Slogs, wide-eyed. "How??!"  
"Through the Network," answered Nick and Wilma together.  
"That's right," beamed Saleem.  
Slogs paused. "Wait-a-minute! Like what happened when I sat on that toilet on the 16th?!"  
Saleem nodded, the wide grin still on her face.  
"NO WAY! That .... mode of transport gave me the heejee-beejees! AND I lost my favourite watch."  
"Come Captain, you'll all be fine with me ...." assured Saleem.

\*\*\*\*\*

Fen, venerable Ol' Spatula Warrior that he was, intuitively recognised the briefcase icon entitled 'universe.exe' for what it truly had to be, and leaned forward, shoving Nextshift out of the way with a sharp elbow.

As Nextshift sprawled out of his swivel chair, Fen jabbed his finger against the monitor screen, panicking the small furry rodent and sending it scurrying for the nearest crumbs lodged in the keyboard.

Activating the universe.exe, Fen saw the screen turn a deathly shade of BLUE, and then a loud silence of light burst out in a spray pattern from the briefcase picture.

Fen beheld stars and novas and planets and galaxies and peoples and cultures, all embryonically unfolding from the briefcase. He heard the portentous pounding of Carl Orff's '*O Fortuna*' as a shaft of light singed past his ear and smashed into the universe, prismatically radiating all the 8 colours of the known rainbow .....

\*\*\*\*\*

Within the HMS Shaft of Light, Dear Drew groaned and clutched at her head.  
"Ah, be goin' wi'd ya, now, fer sure ....!" she rambled in an oirish accent. Her hand and face was 'greening' a tinge of danger .....

Sson and Guns looked at each other apprehensively. They had heard and seen this before, and fearfully knew what to expect.

*But why now??!* Nothing had angered the erstwhile Station Counsellor?!

As a great big green Leprechaun began to tower above them, TT called their attention to the main viewport.

"What the rars is that?" gestured the ASP droid.

+++ A bg gldn pot +++ Sson identified +++ N S cming THS  
WAY!!!!!!!!!! +++ the little E-Wap wailed. The spectre of his Heroic Father threw up his hands and stormed off, determined to annul his cowardly son from the Eric Estates.

"It's a cauldron!" described Guns, as the huge vessel came spinning their way.

"And there's coloured light spilling out from inside it .....??"

\*\*\*\*\*

At the end of every rainbow, it is said, you will find a pot of gold. It is also said that you will find a cute pixie from the Land of the Leprechauns, but since most people were greedy capitalists, no-one really believed such a far-fetched and fanciful idea as this, and preferred instead to fight each other for the pot of gold.

\*\*\*\*\*

Waffle Cream, all 3 furry foot high of her, gave a piercing look at the pilot of the deep space tug, 'Nostrilomo', that said, with sharply pointed daggers, "If you even think about decelerating or deviating course or asking for a respite or offering your opinion or wanting to pop out to the local with your mates or assure me that the shelves will be up by monday or persuade me that we really REALLY need suchandsuch technical gizmo gadget ..... then I will skin you alive, roast your spine, and refuse sex for a month."

She followed the Look with the Sweetest of Smiles, and Ridley, the grease-stained pilot, closed his mouth, returned to the controls and focused.

WebWorld9, that cosmopolitan hellhole of a jinxed space station, to be avoided at all costs regardless of the spurious supply of mint condition Pandora's Weeklies, was only a matter of para-secs away now, and with any luck he himself wouldn't even have to set foot on the accursed place. He could use one of the external docking arms, and get these rarsing teddy bears.... these FINE ladies... offship.

He didn't know how his dear tug had been forced down over that strange forest world full of... tourists of all people..... but these culinary creatures were clearly worse than parasitic aliens.....

\*\*\*\*\*

The HMS Shaft of Light splintered its way through the blazing light of the Brave New Big Bang, and found itself saying "Hello" to a prism of infinte and indefinable carats, and "Goodbye" to its coherent White Light.

The Eight Colours of the Known Rainbow, the artist once formerly known as the HMS Server 4, bifurcated at a right-angle tangent, and colourfully headed towards the WebWorld9....

.... Which illusorily orbited the planet of Jorbae .....

.... Which was also on the 16th Deck of the HMS Server 4 ....

.... Which was the Rainbow ....

.... Which was in a Universe that was on the outside of a Battered Black Executable Briefcase ....

.... Which was now discovering the Joy of StartUp ....

.... Which was occurring in the High Spatula Temple .....

.... Which also housed the back end of M'Mammos, the supa-sapient single-celled organism ....

.... Which was on the 9th Deck of the HMS Server 4 ....

.... Which .... Oh dear. Never mind.

{ It is the future you see } intoned Hel, the A.I.

"The future ...?" whispered Guns, marveling at the vastness of the cauldron, its encircling lip now passed from their view.

Hel nodded. Well, he didn't, but he made an affirmatively nodding sound. He wasn't going to worry them with the small detail of the current nature of the HMS Server 4, since, not only would they not need to know, he fathomed, but the good Captain would NOT be impressed.

"ARRGGGHHHHH!!!" interjected the Giant Leprechaun. Sson was distracting it with charades, buying time for TT to figure out a way of Lepresuction, and reduce this thing in size. Amazingly, Sson's txt mssgd hand gestures were fascinating his audience, and the little E-Wap was starting to consider a career in show business once all this was over.

"Will we die?" hazarded Guns.

{ Difficult to see. Always in motion is the future. Always *about* to happen, always one step *ahead* } hedged Hel.

Guns nodded wisely. Damn clever, this on board A.I., he thought.

\*\*\*\*\*

Androi was leading Conman and Tubby Honest through the WebWorld9 and towards the huge Sports Arena, which was now empty, what with a giant dog and two thermo-nuclear missiles sat in the middle of it.

"All points of time and space at the same... time??" Conman was incredulous. Tubby wasn't, what with him being an ex-Hydra, now reformed to a new life, but what had caught his attention was the promise of Advanced Copies of Pandora's Weekly!

Androi nodded, and went on. "This was because it HAD BEEN VACU-WRAPPED, IF YOU WILL, ABOUT my beloved briefcase. I really miss that briefcase, you know...." the robot added whimsically.

"And so the tightness of the universe coating meant that the past and the future were pretty well scrunched up against the present....." explained Tubby.

"THAT'S RIGHT," confirmed Androi with a boom. "BUT I DON'T HAVE it anymore.... unless...."



"Unless??!" demanded Conman, eager to get his hands on such a plaything. Androi stopped dead in the corridor and turned to face them.

"My sensors indicate a THERMO-NUCLEAR DEVICE IN THIS direction. I have the last known co-ordinates of my briefcase LOCKED AWAY UP HERE..." he tapped his head which rang with a metal tinngg "... The intense heat of a nuclear whiteout THAT IS HELD WITHIN THE missile's warhead would allow me to PERFORM A ROLLBACK AND regenerate the briefcase, bypassing the .lck file that currently PREVENTS ME FROM DOING SO MANUALLY."

"Why haven't you been able to do so before?" enquired Tubby.

"THE PROCESS REQUIRES a level of intuition that I lack, a certain NIMBLENESS OF DEXTERITY, a dollop of sheer rarsing luck...." he trailed off, though kept his gaze on Conman Abdullah.

"You want luck?! You want dexters?! You want intoo-thingummyjigs??" the trainee demanded. "Then.... *LOOK NO FURTHER!*" he beamed.

Androi nodded, and they continued to the Sports Arena.

\*\*\*\*\*

Master Voda led the E-Waps with determination. He held his nokia out in front of him, and it was zeroing in on the most powerful source of aggressive weaponry it could find.

They came to a junction within the WebWorld9. A billboard showing various athletic feats pointed to the right. Voda's nokia swung to the right all of it's own accord.

+++ Ths way! +++ he commanded.

The PHPWoks, considerably more Merry and somewhat Worse For Wear, rolled out of the Tex-Mex themed winebar, slurping down the last traces of those wriggly little worms that lived at the bottom of those all too shallow yellow bottles.

"Can't shee... shee the World fer the..... fer the timber," hiccuped Morga happily, as he stepped out onto the Promenade decking and into the nearest tree trunk.

"Whoooooopshhh," he giggled, plopping straight down onto the turf.

"Whasch joo wiv a drunken Tailor?!" Chief SpareRib sang heartily.

" 'Ere we go, 'ere we go, 'ere we go-o-o-o...." chorused the rest of the PHPWok tribe, carooming into the back of their chief.

" 'Ere, whassup?! Whoosdatden?" the Chief peered quizzically and drunkenly at the nearest furry chef-to-be. He held up a finger of admonishment, opened his mouth to retort.... and lost his balance.

SpareRib turned to Morga who lay next to him. "Wha' wa' tha.... 'bout a Proph... Proph.... Profiterole, again?!"

Morga answered with a snore.

\*\*\*\*\*

Androi flung open the doors to the vast sports arena, and beheld the immense

silence of the pan-olympic capacity. Silent, save for a soft panting, punctuated every now and again by a slobbery slurp, and the almost imperceptible hummmm of two thermo-nuclear missiles.

Tubby regarded the view.

"Hmmm," he mused. "Will the dog be a problem? He is a bit... big...." he pointed out.

"Oh no, not at all," assured the robot. "My INITIAL PRIORITY ONE WARNING SENSORS CAN FIND NOTHING but cuddly and loveable emanating from THE BEAST."

Tubby flapped his hands frantically. "Shushh, shushh! There's no need to startle him!"

"So now what do we do?!" demanded Conman, starting to get a little bored with it all.

Androi indicated the two warheads. "We need TO ACCESS THOSE TWO DEVICES and part dismantle them."

Conman rubbed his hands together with glee. "Right then! Off we go ....!" And he marched off down the seating tiers.

\*\*\*\*\*

The 'Nostrilomo' was docked, and Ridley was grateful to see the last of the furry backsides depart his ship as the female .... sorry, Warrior Horde, of PHPWoks marched down the embarkation tube, wooden spoons, rolling pins, and other various kitchen utensils held aloft.

Ridley breathed a sigh of relief, and settled back into the cockpit. As he disengaged the holding claws, he absently scratched an itch on his chest. A sudden urge to retch overwhelmed him, but he managed to swallow it down, cursing the furry females and their lice to the Seven Holes of Quadrant Minor.

"Right, Ladeeez! We need to Find our Menfolk!" bleated Waffle Cream to her sisters. The pitch and timbre of her voice carried throughout the station, and the male of the species everywhere cringed in expectation of a Clip Round The Ear, or worse, the Sharp-End of Her Tongue.

The PHPWoks gathered around an interactive menu. The forested Promenade looked both homely and suspicious, what with it housing bars and restaurants, and other such base forms of entertainment. The trees made the womenfolk feel reassuringly at home, though.

"To the Promenade, dears!" she chirruped, and nearby dogs whimpered. "Rolling Pins at the Ready ...!"

\*\*\*\*\*

".... Ladeeez! ...."

Chief SpareRib opened one eye. Uh oh, he knew that voice, that high lilted strain, as if put through a colander. He grimaced, and nudged Morga. He grimaced again as the World rolled behind his eyeballs.

"...Promenade! ..... Pins .... Ready!!"

"Morg ... Morga!" whispered the Chief. "Wake up, you damn fool! Get up, quick, THEY'RE here!!!"

"Wha' ...?!" Morga screwed his eyes shut, but got his elbows under himself, and shuffled upright. "Not ... the WomenFolk ....??!"

SpareRib nodded, sobriety taking hold faster than he dared to imagine. The other PHPWoks were also rising, and all were in panic.

"What are we gonna do?! ..... They'll skin us alive at Gas Mark 7!! .... They'll baste our spines in cranberry sauce!!!" they whimpered.

"PULL YERSELVES TOGETHER!" ordered their Chief, who hoped no-one could see the damp patch on his shorts. "We buy ourselves time, we go in the opposite direction ...." he glanced around, and saw a sign that led to the Great Sports Arena. "We go thataway!!" he pointed.

The PHPWoks set off at a run.

Waffle Cream on the other hand had the scent of blood going through her nostrils, and this aroma was now leading them away from the Promenade and further into the centre of the space station. As the horde of females passed signs that indicated the Sports Arena, readying for the kill, they ran headlong into the aforementioned E-Waps. The furry PHPWoks were instantly suspicious of the E-Waps. The floating midgets on the other hand had recognised their mortal enemy and were determined.

+++ Wpe thm out, all F thm! +++ Voda said with glee as he raised his nockia.

The PHPWok Womenfolk as one let out a loud war cry and nearly deafened the E-Waps, before launching at them with their weapons. It was absolute mayhem.

Morga instantly recognised the war whoop of angry PHPWok females and with one terrified look at the Chief he began searching the arena for any way out. But it soon became apparent that the horde of females were not, in fact, coming their way. Morga knew that they had turned their blood rage on some thing else and guiltily breathed a sigh of relief.

Chief Sparerib knew better as he dusted himself off. He reached for his frying pan

and turned to his brother PHPWoks. "Oh MenFolk, pride of the PHPWoks, it is apparent that our females have engaged our enemies. We must never let them take them, we will fight them in the arena, we will fight them on the promenade, we will win our battle to save them... *we will NEVER surrender!!*"

The roar of the PHPWoks was a wonder as with one voice they started to sing and sing and sing....

"Hi ho, hi ho, its off to war we go, hi ho, hi ho!!"

The song and stirring speech turned the PHPWoks around and they ran straight into destiny... well sort of, it was more like a mess: the PHPWoks found the E-Waps locked in a furious struggle with their female counterparts. The Womenfolk were swinging their various implements with fury but the more technologically advanced E-Waps were hitting some telling blows as they felled many of them with stun blasts. Chief Sparerib waved his mighty wooden spoon and roared into battle.

\*\*\*\*\*

With a slightly dry heave, the RARS fleet lunged into CD drive heading in the direction that Captain Admirable Remedy had so valiantly pointed out a few moments earlier, while under the strange effects of the urinary tea.

As the hallucinations began to wear off, Admirable suddenly awoke with a slight yelp, and took up his position once more upon his chair.

"Ahh yes, yes, everything's fine, good", Remedy nodded and tried to look authoritatively at the crew. "I assume we are now heading in the correct direction, are we not?"

"Well, your finger was a bit shaky so we couldn't pinpoint the location exactly, but we should be close enough." Winger replied.

"Yes, umm, okay, but let's stay at CD drive speed shall we. I want to try and actually get to our destination for once..."

A moment later the comm pinged, and a female voice wafted through the speaker.

"Captain, Stardotstar here. There seems to be a small grey dot on the siTeskope monitors...."

"Well, what are you telling me for, clean it off. I won't stand for a dirty ship"

"Ummm, no Captain, it's not a speck of dirt, it's an actual object out in the universe."

"Oh, right. Well okay then, carry on."

"But Captain we seem to be headed straight in its direction."

Remedy turned to his favourite aide, Dr Clock,

"Doctor, what do you think we should do here in this situation?"

"It might be a good idea to find out what it is", Clock answered.

"Ahh yes, jolly good. You always were the intelligent one, Dr Clock" He beamed a smile at the doctor.

"Stardotstar, can ya teell what it is, yeet?" he asked in a strange drawling accent.

*Hmm, must be a strange side-effect of the tea,* Clock thought to himself, while acutely observing the Captain for any other strange occurrences.

"Well, Captain, it appears it could be a space station. If I zoom in just a bit, I can make out some small lettering...." Stardotstar paused. "Ahhh... '*Under Construction*'."

"Hmmm, how odd. Perhaps we should investigate. Set a course for that station."

"Captain, we're already headed in that direction."

"Very good, we'll carry on this direction then."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Pass me the hydro-spanner!" instructed Conman from his precarious perch atop the lefthand thermo-nuclear missile.

Androi nodded, and bent down. He unfastened a small clip on his right shin, and swung open a utility hatch. He dug around inside, and passed the required spanner to Tubby. The sounds of furry screaming and high-pitched biting drifted down from the entrance. It would have made an omelette curdle.

Tubby shuddered. He wandered over to the missile, and lobbed the hydro-spanner up into Conman's waiting hand.

"I don't know how we're going to get out of this one!" he moaned, nodding towards the far end of the Arena where they could all hear the muted sounds of fighting.

Conman just giggled, and returned to his Flashy work.

\*\*\*\*\*

Saleem bin Dion led Captain Slogs and his command crew away towards the trash compactor of the XML Closed Planet.

"The garabge chute is a wonderful idea! What an incredible smell you've discovered!" announced Slogs sarcastically. The strange lady, sorry, *Lady*, had gone too far this time!

"It's the only way!" answered Saleem. "If I am to get all of you through to your precious ship in less than a para-sec, without any ..... ummm .... side effects .... then this IS the only way!"

"Saleem's right!" agreed Wilma. "Nick and I have been through the Network a few times now. It's not comfortable, I grant you, but it certainly gets you to your destination! And if Saleem is with us ...?" Saleem nodded.

"And if this trash compactor is the only way to get us all through at once, then I say we go for it!" Nick punched his fist high in the air in hearty agreement. The Fat was welling in him now, he could tell, and privately he was a little worried by what it forebode. And it was clear to him it wasn't a simple case of indigestion.

Slogs glanced around his crew, to Sandy, Stef, Snazz, Wilco, and the others, and finally nodded his head.

"Okay, we're going in, and we're going in fast!"

Saleem cycled the refuse door open, and they all stepped inside the chamber. The

Eater of Bin Souls slammed the door shut behind them with a loud KLANG!

\*\*\*\*\*

A bright star of light caught Captain Crisko's eye, and he glanced up from the dog-eared copy of Reader's Digestable he was lovingly re-reading. Although the shipping of these issues had become erratic now, even dragging out old copies from his personal store was providing him with plenty of excitement now that Life aboard the WebWorld9 space station had settled back into its cosy humdrum existence. Sure, there were giant dogs and great forests aboard, but he could see they were a popular new decoration, and was loathe to order their removal. And besides, how *did* you persuade a big shaggy dog to "move along"?!

The speck of light was indeed steadily growing in size. Just as he was about to raise a full check with his command crew, he could plainly see the play of colours like a maelstrom on an artist's palette.

*That's pretty*, he thought. "Kia-Ora," he turned to his nearest crew member, "that star thingy ... yes, I know it's pretty .... appears to be coming towards us. Can you get some sort of reading on it, please?"

Kia-Ora nodded, and turned to her console. But before she could do anything more, the HMS Shaft of Light was upon them, and drilling down into the station!

\*\*\*\*\*

The great doors to the Arena burst open, and a tumble of PHPWok and E-Wap came rolling through, a blur of nails, teeth, nockias, and wooden spoons.

The PHPWoks - wives and all - scampered along one edge of the Arena circuit, the E-Waps along the other, both sides taking the opportunity to gasp for breath.

They faced each other.

Far down the other end of the huge chamber, under the shadow of the Great Dog, Conman worked feverishly on the other missile head. The nucleus of the first missile lay in one of Androi's outstretched hands. Tubby was re-wiring cables from the robot's ankles and ears, with an elbow bypass thrown in for good measure.

"GOOD! THAT ONE goes here, and THAT ONE goes THERE!" Androi beamed, keeping the thermo-nuclear warhead steady. Tubby duly re-clipped two cables to where they should go.

"And here comes the other on ...!" announced Conman, lobbing the remaining football-sized warhead down from where he straddled the righthand missile.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOO .....!!!!!!!" cried Tubby diving for the deck.

"Oh that's alright," composed the robot, catching the round device squarely in his free hand. "A magnetic ATTACHMENT CAN BE QUITE A handy thing, you know!"

Tubby glanced up through his encircled arms. "Oh.... of course... I knew that.... So, what do we do now? And will our *friends* over there," he nodded at the war-mongering midgets, "be in our way?"

"Oh no, I don't THINK THEY'LL BE A BOTHER at all!" mused the robot.

"Conman, you stay up there, you MIGHT BE NEEDED to ... ahh ... *catch* the briefcase, so to speak ...."

\*\*\*\*\*

Q-Rob, lost in the maze of emailed corridors, got to his feet, and resigned himself to the fact that he had lost his opportunity to purge, once again, the universe of the sneaky Spatula Warriors. *It was that 'luck' thing that those mortals kept going on about, wasn't it?* he angrily cursed. *The 'bad' kind.*

The chess player knew, however, that it was simply not possible to avoid this confrontation, for the great and mysterious all-encompassing fat demanded that he meet his enemy in an Ultimate Duel of the Fates.

The only problem now was that he couldn't sense anyone on board the vessel. As ridiculous as it sounded this really vexed him : to think that *he*, high deity, Dark Lard and chess champion 3 years running, was being stood up! It beggared belief!

Q-Rob sighed and leaned against a recycler embedded in the wall. He put his hand where Destiny could reach and was promptly sucked into the Bin.

\*\*\*\*\*

The culinary PHPWoks were now in trouble, they were being beaten to a *mash*, and badly too. Waffle Cream had twisted her arm on an E-Wap forehead and her cadre of PHPWok females were mostly knocked out or wounded.

The Menfolk were doing little better as the E-Waps' technological advancements were causing their enemies to fall before them. Master Voda was chuckling quite tunefully.

Chief Sparerib for his part was feeling quite tired, his globs of fat had been all but used up and he had broken his wooden spoon over an E-Wap earlier in the battle. He was now standing beside Waffle and Morga trying to decide what to do next.

"We must retreat Chief, or we will come to a sticky end, I'm afraid," Morga remarked sadly.

The Chief looked around the battlefield that was the sports arena. He saw, for the first time, the oversized dog sitting beside the Nuclear missiles. Something clicked in the furry brain, but sadly it wasn't inspiration.

"Ah! I think it is time we attacked him!" he pointed excitedly at the dog.

"Chief are you mad??!!!!" Morga said.

"Yes we must get closer to that one!"

"Closer?!" cried Morga and Waffle Cream together.

"Yes...that will do nicely!" Sparerib took up a fallen spoon and charged at the dog screaming at the top of his lungs.

In the far corner of the Arena, an unused utility door was shoved open, but not even its loud rusty creak could attract the attention of any of the participants. Cunningston, team leader of Third Line Engineering & Plumbing poked his head around the service hatch, and regarded the view.

"Lads," he announced to the shuffling movement behind him. "I think we've finally found something." And his small crew gratefully left the gloom of the service tunnel and gathered to watch the meleé before them.

"MY MY, they ARE GETTING a little bit CLOSE don't YOU think?!" Androi said as he saw the little Wok roaring in their direction.

"Well, it is an interesting strategy," Tubby remarked, calculating that it was sure to cause chaos.

The dog for its part could not really decide what to make of the little fellow and, until he was hit with a glob of fat in the eye, was mildly amused. But now he was furious.

"Hmmm, well WHATEVER WORKS, I GUESS..." Androi quickly returned to his work.

The Great Big Softie that was the enraged dog smashed indiscriminately through the rank and file of PHPWok and E-Wap, its breath stunning the smaller hordes to submissiveness, its bark deafening them, and its waggly tail swept all to the side!

And then suddenly, in the midst of Wooden Spoons and Nockias, female utterances and rancid canine breath, the ceiling above them glowed red .... and orange ... and yellow ... and green ... and blue ... and indigo .... and violet .... and the other colour ....

... and then in a myriad of dulux, a multi-coloured rainbow dropped from the burning roof and plopped to the Arena floor with a great DOLLOP, neatly separating apart the two armies!

A great golden cauldron sat where the dollop of light had just been, with the ominous and warmongering tones of Holst's '*Mars*' emanating from within.

+++ Wts ths thn?! +++ demanded Master Voda, suspiciously.

"Back up lads, it's another one of their infernal hi-tech-tricks!" warned Chief SpareRib.

The dog sniffed the golden pot.

A strange scrabbling sound came from inside the cauldron. It was getting louder



as the music crescendoed.

The armies, like that proverbially curious cat, crept closer. So did the giant dog. What WAS inside that thing??!

\*\*\*\*\*

Saleem silently breathed a sigh of relief : there was a light up ahead, piercing the gloom of the Bin Network.

"Nearly there!" she called out heartily, though the tangibility of the floe felt strange to her, and she was privately concerned what lay ahead of them. She could tell it was something portentous .... but at the same time she had the same bad feeling ... *behind* her?!

She shrugged. The past and the future were funny places, after all, and not to be trodden lightly. Or believed, either.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Great Big Green Leprechaun swung herself over the Cauldron's golden lip, and stepped down onto the Arena floor. She glowered, and looked about her. She glowered even more.

The dog whimpered and backed up.

Master Voda swung his Nockia and aimed it at her, adjusting for full transmission. But his current deputy volted over to him, and pulled him back by the shoulders, twittering something into his Chief CO's ear in High FM.

Chief SpareRib's shorts were already wet and brown and uncomfortable. He'd put up a good fight, he knew, and was sure Songs of Recipes would be sung about him for many years to come. He and Morga took a step backwards.

But the huge Leprechaun didn't advance with menace. Instead, she glanced back inside the cauldron with concern, leaning in, and offering her hand to someone.

Guns Mademincemeat grabbed Dear Drew's hand and the golden lip with his other, and hauled himself into the Sports Arena of the WebWorld9. He didn't look menacing or angry, in fact just a tad perplexed. And relieved, of course. He glanced back down into the cauldron and leaned in : planting both feet firmly on the floor he yanked the little E-Wap, Sson of Eric, out, and plonked him down beside him.

Sson was holding something.

+++ N E 1 wnt N E NT Norton's fsh N chps? +++ he offered.

Guns nodded. "They're damn good! Just came in now as a courtesy gift for Regular Customers. That's us," he added, with a grin.

TT, Stef's ASP droid, popped his head over the rim of the cauldron. "That is correct. I can affirm that they are especially good in times of stress, high in Polytechnics and other Fats."

+++ Ys, give Ps a chance! +++ urged Sson of Eric, tucking into a spoonful of small green balls.

Chief SpareRib and Master Voda, who was overjoyed to see the heir to the Eric Empire alive and well, pondered the little E-Wap's words : '*Give Peace a chance*'. PHPWok glanced across at E-Wap, who met the other squarely in the eye.

As one man - well, small furry bear and cowled midget - they walked towards each other (okay, one of them floated), and clasped the other's outstretched hand of peace and friendship.

They shook hands.

And the Chamber resounded with a heartfelt sigh.

Even Androi and his friends were wrapped up in the drama.

..... And just at that point, the goal posts flared, and the space between them shimmered, and out stumbled Saleem bin Dion, Nick, Wilma, and Captain Slogs and his crew.

Wilma was the first to recover : "I thought we'd be coming out of a bin, or something ...??"

"Well, yes, normally ..." Saleem looked about her.

"Eurghhhh ..." said Slogs, shuddering all over.

"I suppose these goal posts are bins ... of sorts ..." wondered Saleem aloud.

"Well, they certainly were in my day!" laughed Nick.

"Hey, I wonder what's going on here ...?" asked Sandy.

Snazz Hashcake squinted. "Guns?! Is that you?? It *is* you! It *is* you!!"

"And there's TT, my ASP droid! Cheers!" grinned Stef.

"But what in RARS' name is that big green thing?!" demanded Roger Signal Wilco.

"AND WHERE'S MY SHIP????????!!!!!!!!!!!!!" proclaimed Slogs, getting vexed now that he could see his ship was nowhere to be found.

Saleem closed her eyes a moment.

"Well, technically, paradoxically, THIS is inside the 16th deck of your beloved ship .... but if you want to know where it is in a .... ummmm .... *real* sense, then it's over there ..." she pointed into the middle of the two armies, and in particular at the great golden cauldron.

"THAT'S THE HMS SERVER 4????????!!!!!!!!!!!!!" cried Slogs incredulously.

Saleem nodded. The Shaft of Light. And she was too late. Oh well, never mind.

She was about to open her mouth to add an explanation (admittedly a lengthy one, that would probably last about 13 chapters), when the back of her neck tingled. She glanced behind her.

"Oh no," she muttered. "Not now, not here .... not through my Bins ...."

"What is it?!" demanded Wilma, grabbing her Trusty Sonic Screwdriver™.  
"It's Q-Rob .... he's nearly here .... and Nick will HAVE to face him now ...."

\*\*\*\*\*

Androi laboured feverishly, his internal workings calculating the trajectories of all possible improbabilities. Tubby Honest wasn't idly spectating either. The two of them had discovered that three of Androi's node ports were a little encrusted from decades of under-use, and subsequently, the cable modem jacks were loose in their sockets. "It could HAPPEN TO anyone," Androi had bellowed remorsefully, wishing now in hindsight he had been a *little* more methodical with his housework. So Tubby was sprawled about the robot in a contortion that would have won any of Nick's fabled Grand Master Naked Twister Championships, with one foot propped up against one low modem port, and both his hands wrapped round Androi's torso similarly holding the cables fast.

"Mustn't forget to INCLUDE ALL OF EINSTEIN'S FAMILY ..... EVEN THE MORE obscure relatives ...." the robot muttered to himself. "OH .... AND ALLOW FOR the Jorbaean wormhole near HERE ...."

"Hurry up, will ya?!" spat Tubby through gritted teeth from somewhere near Androi's groin. He really didn't expect to have to go through ALL this just for some Advanced Copies of some proxy magazine .... still, it was Pandora's Weekly, after all, so it'd be worth it.

"I have to be EXTRA CAREFUL, NOW .... arrrrrhhhhmmmm ..... you see ..... 'CAUSE ..... ummm, divided by seven ..... what with my old FRIENDS HERE NOW ..... and multiply it BY ITS TANGENT ..... and their ULTIMATE ADVERSARY, I REALLY ought to do a good job of this ..... AND DON'T forget the pie ..... SINCE BY PERFORMING a regenerative rollback ..... plus the circumference of THE UNIVERSE ..... I might BE ABLE TO HELP them out, as it were, if you see where I'M COMING FROM with this situation , hmmm ...?"

It was all gobbledy-gook to Tubby, who had given up after the second split eardrum.

\*\*\*\*\*

Q-Rob was framed between the goalposts, and He blazed. Gods! How He blazed! He was so char-grilled, McKentucky would have powered their nuclear reactors off him!

He grinned. Evily.

His nemesis was before him, cowering, the Chosen One had Chosen this day to die, and it was a good choice of day!

Q-Rob raised his mighty spatula, glowing redder and spitting with sizzle now that it had been preheated.

"I have you *now*!" exulted Q-Rob. "The Fat may be with you, but you are NOT a Spatula Warrior yet ....."

Nick knew as sure as he once had a father who worked for the postal service in Croydon that he had to draw his weapon and face down his opponent. He withdrew his own spatula, which hummed a positive blue, and raised it en-garde.

With cold assurance Q-Rob stepped between the goalposts.  
"Come, come young Nick, let's end this shall we?" he sneered.  
"Umm, well if you insist," Nick gulped and waited for the first assault.

The Dark Lard of the Sieve leapt and swung his spatula at Nick's head. Nick ducked and in a *toasted* sort of way backhanded the sizzling weapon away. At the collision, an incredible sound filled the Arena, and sparks showered all about.

As the warriors fought, the crowd watched absolutely captivated by the duel. The spatulas collided again and again creating a light show as the swords sparked off one another.

They crossed blades as Nick blocked a vicious *sunnyside-up* with his own *scrambled* manoeuvre. Cracking their swords apart, they circled one another, drifting closer towards the nuclear missiles and the three erstwhile seekers of the Universe.

The two warriors parried and beat, thrust and whipped at each other. Then Nick fatefully made a crucial error in judgment. He mis-timed a *folding flapjack* and ended up taking a hot spatula to the hand.

"*Arrgghhh!*" screamed the young man, dropping his sword. He held his branded hand to his chest. "Fen why didn't you help me?" he whispered, and closed his eyes. The Fat flowed.

"Now young Nick," hissed the Dark Lard, "You will die!"  
Q-Rob swung a blow that would decapitate, but Nick, with lightning reflexes, ducked, and rolled to one side, sweeping up his fallen spatula.  
"Impressive! Most impressive!" his black clad enemy hissed.

Nick climbed to his feet, and held his head high.  
"Now, Sieve, there *will* be an end to this, once and for all! I *am* a Spatula Warrior, like my father was before me!" Nick announced.

Q-Rob narrowed his eyes in pure anger and hatred. "Old Fen never told you what happened to you father, did he?" he spat.  
"He told me enough!" retorted Nick.

But just at that point in time and space, all of Androi's involved labourings to engage Einstein's Family into a nice neat row and simultaneously perform a regenerative rollback came *online* and from within the locked cupboard at Auntie Nortons' kitchen a certain battered black executable briefcase disappeared. With a *Swish* and a *Flash* it reappeared above the head of Conman who himself had forgotten all about the thing and was looking at the raging war down below him.

With a slam, the Universe-coated briefcase hit Conman in the chest, who suddenly and empirically realised that Mister Newton had a point about apples and found himself doing a pretty good imitation of one as he went flying off the

missile, the briefcase close behind.

"No Nick ... I am your...." Q-Rob began just as a 250 pound Conman hit him squarely on the head knocking him senseless. And just to add insult to injury, the briefcase suddenly popped open its lid, and *swallowed* Q-Rob inside with one fantastic gulp. The lid snapped shut with a satisfied *click*, and the case settled itself upon the deck like a rattling penny.

Nick and all the rest in the now silent Arena were absolutely dumbfounded.  
*Could it really be over?*

\*\*\*\*\*

On some nondescript floor of a nondescript office building, Fen sat chortling at the program that he had just started. It had sent the computer into a rainbow of colours and from out of it popped a stunned former deified member of the Hydra.

"So Q-Rob we meet again," Fen said.  
"Am I dead?" Q-Rob whispered incredulously as he looked about him.  
"May as well be, you're on a helpdesk now!" Fen smiled.  
Q-Rob gasped, horrified. "*NOOOOOOOOOOOOO!*"

\*\*\*\*\*

The crew of the WebWorld9, Saleem Bin Dion, the crew of the HMS server 4, the PHPWoks, the E-Waps, Tubby Honest, Androi Joyrider, Nick, Wilma, a large shaggy dog, two thermo-nuclear missiles, Cunningston and his team, and Conman Abdullah waited. In fact they had been waiting for about an hour for any sign that Q-Rob might return. With nothing out of the ordinary *still* happening, Saleem reached between the goalposts and retrieved a bottle of champagne from the bin network which she had been saving for such a special occasion. She cracked it open and the festivities began.

\*\*\*\*\*

Meanwhile, somewhere not too far away, the Rars fleet was approaching the station.

A comms *ping* broke the silence.

"Captain, Stardotstar here. I have an ID on that space station. It's the *WebWorld9*."

Captain Remedy jumped out of his chair in shock, spilling his tea all over himself.

"Oh Rars, could we really actually be finally here?!"

"It's definately the *WebWorld9*, Captain", stardotstar replied.

"Winger, patch me through to the rest of the fleet."

Winger, the delightfully, delectable comms officer pressed a few switches and an SMS channel was opened to all 23.7% of the Imperial Rars Fleet.

"This is Captain Remedy speaking. We've finally reached the *WebWorld9* station. All the hardships we've been through over the last couple of months have not

been in vain. Prepare for battle, we are going in."

Stardotstar, was meanwhile, doing a few calculations in her astrometrics lab, when she suddenly realised something was not quite right.

"Umm, Captain, Stardotstar here again."

"Not now, Stardotstar", Remedy whispered, "This is my big moment."

"But, Captain.."

"Not now I said. Tell me later", and with that Remedy cut her off.

*Oh well, I suppose I did try to warn him*, she thought to herself.

"We're almost on top of the station captain," said the navigations bloke, who had been flying them around for the last few months, yet nobody really knew who he was.

"Very good, I'm going to look forward to this. Put her on the main IDS screen."

A picture appeared on the viewscreen, and Remedy suddenly looked confused.

"I thought this was meant to be the WebWorld9" he demanded.

On the viewscreen was a very large yellow 'U'. Remedy fiddled with the monitor controls for a moment and zoomed out the picture, slowly revealing two words, 'Under Construction'.

"Get me astrometrics on the comm," instructed Remedy.

"Uhhh, yes Captain?" Stardotstar replied carefully.

"I thought you said this is the WebWorld9."

"It is, Captain."

"But all I can see on the IDS is some strange writing"

"That's what I tried to tell you Captain, it is the WebWorld9, but we appear to be slightly undersized."

"What do you mean undersized?"

"Well, Captain, what you're looking at is a sign on the side of the station"

"That's impossible. It's too large to be a sign. Nobody makes signs that large. I can only just make out all the lettering at minimum magnification."

"That's what I meant by undersized. It's not a large sign Captain, we just seem to be shrunk, about 100,000 times smaller than the station."

"WHAT?!" Remedy exclaimed. "SHRUNK?!" and with that he passed out.

## **THE END?**

**But which one? And in what time frame? AND WHERE??**

