

HONEST, THE MARTIAN ATE YOUR DOG

by
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Dedicated to:

My Parents for setting me on this road

My wife for keeping me on this road

Dickens, Dumas and Pratchett for showing me
the road

And above all, God, without whom there would
be no road.

Chapter 1 - Normal gets held up

The world invariably worked the same way – one guy did all the work, another got all the money. Being held up was no different. It was tiring work, for the guy being held up. Where were the Cheese when you really needed them? Always arrive after the criminal had made off with the loot. Safe for them, but what about me, thought Normal. Normal shifted from foot to foot on the cracked macadam of the old highway. The crevices on the road mirrored the larger fissures in the landscape surrounding them – the devastation caused by bygone wars.

"You should say, 'Stand and deliver!'," he said, staring at the famous Dick Turpentine.

Dick had not lived up to Normal's expectations of a glamorous highwayman. He was a scruffy looking individual dressed in dusty clothes. The dust hid any distinguishing elements of style or colour in the clothes. The dirty brown bandana covering the lower part of his face muffled his voice as he spoke.

"Huh?" said Dick.

"When you hold people up, like you're doing with me, instead of saying 'Give me your credits!', you should say 'Stand and deliver!' or 'Your credits or your life!' That's much more highwayman-like," Normal explained patiently, schoolmarminess dripping from his every pore, as he switched from foot to foot again.

"You're telling *me* how to be a highwayman?" Beneath the scraggly hair, Dick's eyebrows reached for the sky.

"Well, somebody's gotta. You're not doing such a good job of it. All those stories about how dashing you are ..." Normal's voice trailed off as Dick scowled at him.

"Oh, I dash alright. When the Cheese appears, I dash away like the dashingest of dashers," said Dick in an injured tone, cut to the quick at the impugning of his abilities.

Normal waved his hand dismissively, then tensed as Dick brought the gun up sharply. "That's not exactly what I meant."

While somewhat scared, he'd also been rather exhilarated to be held up by the great Dick Turpentine on this lonely stretch of highway. It had been rather disappointing to learn that the outlaw lacked a dash of the dashing.

Normal considered his options and tried again, "They also say that you steal from the rich and give to the poor. You do give to the poor, don't you?"

"Umm ... yeah." Dick looked around like a hunted rabbit, struggling to think of a name, any name, that would qualify. [Thinking had never been Dick's strong suit.] "Yeah. Yeah, I do. There's poor Mrs. Robinson. I give her some credits every once in a while. I stay at her place, but still, she's poor and I give her money. That counts, right?" Dick paused, he'd found himself at the bottom of his mental list much sooner than he'd expected.

There was silence for a moment. Normal wondered how you made small talk with the person robbing you. Did you compliment him on his technique? Strike that, he told himself wryly. He'd already nuked that bridge.

He was saved from further rumination by Dick, who beamed a beatific smile and continued, "Then there's Suzy over at the Young Men's Recreational Centre [They'd wanted to call it the Young Men's Center of Activities, but somebody had pointed out

that young men generally had only one center of activity and that it was the sort of thing one just didn't discuss in polite circles – or even polite squares. In fact, polite squares got bent out of shape far sooner than polite circles.]... Poor thing, sometimes she stays out in the cold all night waiting for somebody to come along. That's just not right." Sympathy for poor Suzy's plight and outrage at the cruelty of society fought a full-blown campaign across the landscape of Dick's face.

"You mean she's a woman of the night?" Normal could feel the flush spreading over his face like an army of red ants across a sandwich. He'd always been a country boy, even though he'd lived his whole life in the city.

"Nah, she does business by day as well," replied Dick, obviously relishing Normal's discomfort. Normal could almost see Dick, smiling evilly like a maniacal imp, within the cramped confines of the cell that was Dick's mind. "It's just that folks are a tad skittish about approaching her during the day. Guess you could say those who do business with her are the real folk of the night."

Each time Dick said "business", Normal felt his face turn a deeper shade of crimson. Normal wondered if the highwayman was going to keep saying "business" just to see how many different shades of red he could get out of Normal. Perhaps Dick took pity on him. Instead of pressing his attack, Dick switched gears.

"Say, what's your name?" he asked.

"Normal, Normal Kint." Normal started to put his hand out, ready to shake hands. Dick tensed, his finger tightening on the firing stud. Normal realized

his mistake and withdrew his hand in double-quick time. He shuffled his feet and tried to look everywhere but at the blaster while Dick watched him intently.

Chapter 2 - Kathryn Kint is confused

"Normal did what?" bellowed John Wylie. He wasn't a large man by any stretch of imagination. [Of course, throughout history, there have been more Herculean efforts of stretching the imagination than a simple adjustment for a vertically challenged guy. "Honey, I spent the whole night working at the office" tops this list.] In fact, it was safe for most people [unless they happen to be leprechauns, gnomes, elves, brownies (not the chocolate kind, the other kind) or really, really short people well below three feet in height,] to describe him as a small man - a very small man, indeed, since it would be quite a stretch for him to reach three feet. But he sure did have a pair of lungs on him. A stranger who heard him, but hadn't seen him, would have sworn that he was a giant of a man because of the way he could roar.

He was roaring now and Kathryn Kint looked at him in consternation. She had been with Wylieworks for just a couple of months and she still wasn't used to the constant furies of her employer, which came and went like people through the turnstiles at the magway station.

"I ... I ... I really have no idea what he did, John," she said, hesitating. She wondered how best to phrase

things since she didn't want him getting worked up again. "I came back from visiting my mother for the weekend and Normal was gone! There was no message. He hadn't said anything to the neighbours ..."

"I'm not worried about that idiot husband of yours, Katy! Tell me what happened to your dog!" snapped Wylie, pacing the room as if he was determined to wear out a groove in the floor.

The walls of the small room were covered in posters. What space there was left was taken up by life-size cutouts of people. In his line of business at Wylieworks, Wylie dealt with a lot of people and he liked to surround himself with little bits of memorabilia from them. This would certainly have been fine if Wylie got bigger offices, but in these cramped quarters, Kathryn was beginning to feel uneasy under the accusing eyes of all those people, pleading to be let out.

"Ringo? It's sweet of you to be concerned. It really is." She paused, unsure how she could verbalize it. "He's gone, John! Ringo's gone!" she burst out, distraught. "I don't know what happened to either of them! At first, I thought maybe Normal had taken Ringo out for a walk or something. Not that it's likely ... he just hated my baby. He says Ringo's unclean and full of germs. Now they're both gone and I have no idea where!"

If Kathryn had been a different kind of woman, she would have burst into tears at this point. But Kathryn was made of sterner stuff, and while her lower lip did tremble a bit, that was the only indication of what she was feeling. She was an attractive woman, if you liked thin-faced blondes

with sharp features who could melt you with a smile or reduce you to cowering in terror with a withering stare. But at the moment, smiles and withering stares were the furthest things from her mind – she was worried about her baby. Of course, she was a little uneasy about her husband's absence as well.

Chapter 3 - Dick Turpentine bags a queer fish

"Err ... can I lower my arms now? I won't try anything, as you people say in your parlance," asked Normal, his arms already creeping down of their own accord due to weariness.

"Us people? Which people would that be?" Dick bristled, an edge to his voice, bringing his blaster up again to cover the customer. [Dick preferred to call them "customers". "Victims" had such a negative vibe, and he had enough negativity in his line of business already because for some inexplicable reason, people just didn't seem to consider being robbed a positive thing.]

Had it been nighttime and the moonlight glinting off the blaster's barrel, it would have made one of those jolly old paintings – deserted road, dashing highwayman, a full moon adding a touch of silver to everything, and the cowering victim pleading for his life.

Unfortunately, it wasn't nighttime, they weren't in the scenic highland moors favoured by artists, and the highwayman didn't look the least bit gallant. In fact, it was just afternoon, and the sun was still about, shining on a desolate landscape littered with chasms

and mounds of earth through which the highway rolled on and on like an amateur attempt at bandaging the wounds inflicted on the land. Rocks, dirt and more rocks was all that the eye could see for miles around – not a hint of heather, nor a sprig of gorse.

Dick Turpentine, while as famous as the highwaymen who did get put in paintings, wasn't exactly the sort you wanted in a painting, at least not if you wanted to sell it.

"You know, highwaymen." Normal paused, staring at Dick with his head tilted to one side. "In fact, I think I would like to become one," he added, nodding his head.

Dick stared in puzzlement at the strange catch he'd gotten tonight. This one was an odd fish. Normal was a thin-faced, stubbled man in a nondescript suit, whose unkempt hair was just a tad too long. Dick guessed the guy must be around his own age, somewhere in his late twenties, approaching middle-age and not quite sure what to do with it. [Nobody knew what to do with middle age, which is quite possibly why mid-life crisis was invented.]

Dick had been doing this gig for a few years now. Some of them begged, others threatened him with anything from eternal consignment to radiation poisoning to a good hiding if they ever got their hands on him and he wasn't holding a gun. But none of them had responded to a hold up quite like Normal. Dick was beginning to wonder about the guy's sanity. He decided that it might be a good idea to let Normal lower his arms. Who knows, maybe he'd just snap because he had his arms up for too long. Dick motioned hurriedly with his blaster for Normal to lower his arms as images of flies with their

wings pulled out flitted through his mind like bats in a belfry.

"You want to become a highwayman, eh?" Dick asked, his mind racing, trying to come up with a way to deal with the situation in a diplomatic manner.

[And most of the time, when Dick tried to come up with stuff, he came up with jack. But that's Dick for you.]

Normal was still staring off into space, and he spoke as if thinking something out loud, "Yes, I would. I hadn't planned on this but you know, come to think about it, I think I'd like to become your sidekick. You can be the Lone Avenger or the Lone Highwayman or something like that, and I could be your faithful companion. I can call you Kendo Sword or Come-o Hero."

"Hmm ... If you were my companion, I wouldn't be a lone highwayman, now would I? And what's with the sword bit? Why would you call me a weird name like that? Not that people don't call me names all the time, mind you, but they're your common, honest-to-goodness names like thief, rotten scoundrel, bastard, and so on. None of this weird sword or gun stuff ..."

"A sidekick is supposed to call you some incomprehensible name. It's all in the book." Normal was clearly hurt that Dick would dare question anything from "the book", whatever it was. Dick had the feeling that the guy would pull the book out and start quoting chapter and verse if he probed any further.

"Books? I never trusted books. Too many words in 'em. I did like the ones with pictures though," said Dick with a wistful smile. "When I was little, my

parents had this picture book with stuff from before the Chaos Wars. Bunny rabbits wearing clothes and talking snakes and frogs - or was it a toad? - driving cars. All colourful and cheerful and lots of fun. I thought life would be like that, but boy, was I wrong. Look at me now, holding-up people on the highway."

Dick frowned. He didn't like to tell people too much about himself. It didn't pay to reveal information about oneself in his line of work – it had a habit of coming back to haunt you; quite often, it brought the Cheese along. This guy Normal was different from the other customers, though. There was something about him that made you want to talk about yourself – and it wasn't fear of him being a lunatic either.

"No traumatic events from your childhood that drove you to a romantic life of crime? No bandits attacking your house and killing everybody but you and then leaving you to swear eternal vengeance over the corpses of your parents? That's a bit disappointing." Normal shook his head. He'd hoped to have much better material to work with. He then brightened up. "Oh, well. Guess we have to make do with what we have. But I'll need a name for myself if I'm going to be your sidekick. Something short and snappy like Finch or Pluto or Guido or Sancho ..."

Normal looked at Dick in expectation, as if waiting for Dick to conjure a name out of thin air.

"Just hold on a minute there! I didn't say that you could be my sidekick or anything yet," replied Dick, deciding to take control back. If Normal kept on going with his airy dreams for much longer, he might decide that Dick needed a whole bunch of merry highwaymen. "How did you happen to be on the

highway with no vehicle anyway? I've never met a lonely traveller on foot before ... at least not this far from the city."

Normal sighed the kind of sigh used by stressed schoolteachers and suffering mothers everywhere. "Ah, it's a long and complicated story. Would you let me be your buddy if I told you that I was on the run, just like you?"

Dick noticed the hopeful look on Normal's face, like a puppy that wants a bone but isn't sure whether it'll get a bone or a boot. He looked everywhere but at Normal, wondering how he could get away from this nut job. Nothing, not even a bolt of lightning from the clear afternoon sky, arrived to deliver him. When faced with no escape, the best strategy was to procrastinate in the hope of deliverance. "Why don't you tell me the whole story? It sure doesn't look as if either of us is going anywhere for a bit. Once I've heard the story, I can decide on the whole sidekick deal."

"Ah! Don't want to show me your secret hideout till you know you can trust me, eh?" Normal gave Dick a knowing look. "The difference between you and I is in the fact that while you're on the run from the law, I'm on the run from my wife." Normal made the statement with a flourish as if he expected a drum roll any moment, and the marching band to follow soon after.

Dick scratched his masked chin and nodded, thinking not so much about Normal's revelation as about a means of escape. "That's a new one for sure. I've heard of guys on the run from the girl's father and guys running away with a girl to get married or even of guys running away from the woman they married

because she was a shrew, but running away from your wife and then wanting to become an outlaw? That sure is a new one. You've got my attention. Tell me more."

Normal hesitated for a moment, as if unsure how to start. "First, for the record, she's not a shrew or anything, okay? She can get a bit ... umm ... temperamental at times and she does have a mean throwing arm, not to mention a wicked aim, but I do love her. It was all that mutt's fault!" he finally said, with some heat.

"Another guy?"

"No, a dog!"

"Yeah, only a dog would come between a man and his wife!" declared Dick, ready to show his solidarity with other upstanding males of the species. It was always a good idea to get pally with these nutty types. They might not go psycho on you then, Dick reasoned. He took a quick peek up the road hoping perhaps the Cheese would appear and get him out of this particular bind. Nary a vehicle or person was in sight on the long snake of the road as it wound in and around the rubble towards the horizon.

"No, I mean a real dog of the four-footed variety, with a tail and all."

"Oh." Dick was nonplussed. When you have nothing, lob the conversational ball back. "What happened with this dog?"

"It's like this. I've always hated her dog. It's a whiny little scraggly mat of fur that's never liked me. Growls at me any time I come near. Not that I really want to get near it, mind you. Probably full of fleas and germs," the other replied, shuddering.

"You have problems, man, and I don't mean the part about wanting to become an outlaw. Sheesh, lighten up. How bad could a dog be?" Dick realized that he was getting impatient. That would not do if Normal was crazy. He'd better watch himself. [Not that Dick had ever had any success doing that. He usually went cross-eyed trying to watch himself.]

"Considering that the mutt has cost me my wife, my job, and my house, not to mention the fact that I'm being held up, I'd say it was pretty bad, wouldn't you? But do you wanna hear the story or not?" asked Normal in a sharp voice before pausing for a moment and then flashing a ghastly lop-sided smile at Dick.

"Sure, sure. No need to get mad. Not that I'm suggesting that you're mad, mind you. Go on with your story," Dick replied, beginning to sweat. First Normal had snapped and then grinned at him like a death's head. The guy was coming unhinged for sure. Dick just hoped that he wasn't around when the whole door came crashing down.

"As I was saying, my wife's had that mutt for years, from before we were married. I've been trying to persuade her to give it away forever. But she can be bombed [Damnation had been replaced by bombing as a means of eternal torture after the great wars. After all, as they say, better the radiation you know than the afterlife you didn't.] stubborn when it comes to certain stuff and refuses to even consider the notion. The grenade that obliterated the city was when Ringo, that's its name, made a mess on the living room carpet yesterday. Can you imagine having to clean up all that smelly stuff? Ugh!" Normal grimaced as if he could still see the mess in his mind's eye. Perhaps he could. These nutty-types

had all sorts of stuff going through their crazy brains. Why not a little dog poop as well?

"You clean up the doggy-do even though you hate it? You must love your wife a lot!"

Normal smiled rather sheepishly. "Nah, I usually don't do that stuff, I don't think my stomach could take it. Kathryn, that's my wife, does the cleaning up, but she was away for the weekend visiting her mother. She promised me that the mutt would do its business in the little area we have set up for it, and I wouldn't have to do anything. She said that it was just going to be for a couple of days," he said in a rather plaintive voice.

"So what happened?" prompted Dick, still racking his brains for a way out.

"What could happen? I wasn't going to clean it up, and I couldn't stand the smell or the thought of having that dirty, smelly, germ-ridden beast in the house any longer. So I took it out and sold it to a Martian." Normal said all of this in one gulp as if he needed to get it off his chest. He now stared at Dick, expecting, nay, challenging, the highwayman to say that he'd committed an act of cruelty beyond comprehension.

Chapter 4 - Kerr finds a quest

Ringo was barking. He was barking his little doggie head off. Ringo was barking because he was angry. And what had made Ringo angry? It was the little Martian – the one who bought Ringo from Normal. The Martian, whose name was Kerr, had taken Ringo to his spaceship as soon as he could.

Sure, the Martians had been around for decades and people were supposed to be used to them by now. Still, most folks just didn't regard them with much favour. People being people [If they hadn't been people, they would have been vegetable or minerals and that just wouldn't do.], they found something which looked like a little woolly pillow with stick-like arms and legs poking out of it rather unsettling. In fact, some folks tended to be so darn unsettled, that they'd outright attack the Martians. Of course, that was perhaps the last thing they did on this side of existence [except perhaps to scream, "Aaaargh!". Of course, some have been known to scream other things, but "Aaaargh!" for some reason, was the most popular cry amongst these ephemeral individuals.] since the Martians had such powerful weapons that they reduced these misguided humans to ashes in an instant. That sure was one way to keep the gene pool chlorinated, as one wag had commented.

While their weapons would have enabled the Martians to beat humanity with two out of their three skinny little arms tied behind their backs, for some inexplicable reason [inexplicable to humans that is. Martians understood the reason – if you went around beating up everybody you found, soon you had a lot of people needing bandages and only you left to bandage them up.], the Martians preferred peace to all out bloodshed. They would resort to weapons only when there was no other alternative. This made them appear all the more alien to most humans, who couldn't understand why the Martians didn't just take over the world.

Maybe it was the influence of all the old stories they'd heard for centuries - tales of bug eyed

monsters from outer space taking over the world. While the Martians weren't, in truth, bug eyed [In fact, they weren't even from Mars since life on Mars had died off a long time ago. But some wit - most people usually prefixed it with "dim" or "half", when referring to this anonymous individual - had dubbed them Martians when the aliens had first landed and the name had stuck like egg yolk to a new suit.], it just didn't feel right that any self-respecting alien would go against this age-old code of alien-kind. This was not to say that anybody wanted any stinking aliens taking over the world, mind you, but this kind of passive behaviour just didn't seem natural. Of course, nobody thought of asking the Martians about this aberrant behaviour. Perhaps they didn't want to tempt fate.

The Martians, on their side, understood humanity well enough to know that it was best to stick to their ships unless they had business outside. This was why the Martian had come back to his ship with Ringo as soon as possible. Now that he was home, safe and sound, he moved on to the next phase in any Martian meal – first you caught or bought the food, and then you tested the food.

The tests were standard. All Martians learnt from a very young age to be careful about what they put in that little slit in their bodies that passed for a mouth. It must have been a survival trait, and an effective one at that. You just couldn't go around stuffing your face with anything you found lying around on a planet like their home world, and hope to have your race survive for long. [Acid rocks, poisonous plants, exploding pods, sausages and that nameless brown

gruel served in prisons and schools everywhere – they had them all on Kerr's home planet.]

Thus, the Martians had evolved a system of food testing that rivalled anything found in that sector, or any other sector for that matter, of the Fifty Galaxies. Even if the food proved to be edible (not to mention quite delicious, as the Martians had found dogs to be), they put each individual item of food through a rather thorough battery of tests [Kerr's people just didn't believe in 'if it looks ripe, give it a bite, if it don't make you shite, you can eat it alright'] before it was put in the Martian equivalent of a Mr. Chef. The Martians considered this to be simple common sense. [It's a good thing that the Martians weren't human - common sense being very uncommon amongst humans, the Martians would have died out a long time ago.]

As can be imagined [perhaps only by a dog, though.], being prodded, poked and having tiny bits of hair and skin sliced off his body by lasers wasn't Ringo's idea of fun. He had quickly identified the Martian as the source of his problems and now snarled and growled at him. He'd pause every once in a while to give vent to howls of outrage at the treatment he'd received and then resume his constant mad barking which seemed to say "You just get within reach of my jaws, you overgrown pillow, I will take the stuffing out of you!"

At the moment, Ringo, looking like a woolly blanket himself due to the fine long white hair that covered all of his body, was leaning against his cage and growling at the Martian as it approached the cage. Ringo was the sort of dog who looked rather unbalanced – his long coat of hair made his body

look big, and that in turn made his head look small. It also made him look as if he was always leaning forward. The effect was further accentuated now because Ringo actually was leaning forward, trying to get at the approaching Martian.

It was a rather large room in the ship. The biggest room in a Martian ship was reserved for the food storage, preparation and testing and this was it. On one side of the room, you could see large boxes and bales and stacks of various foodstuffs. The central portion of the room was equally divided between the food testing and food preparation tables. Kerr had been working at one of the testing tables, going through a sample he'd gotten from Ringo. This was the sixth or seventh sample he'd obtained so far.

Kerr was perplexed. He'd run the tests several times over and they still said the same thing - Ringo was not a dog! It looked like a dog, sounded like a dog, and even smelled like a dog. The human who'd sold the creature to him for a large number of credits (and it had been a pretty hefty sum even for a Martian - he'd never had dog before) had appeared quite genuine in his declaration that it was indeed a dog. Kerr had been eager to try out this rare delicacy that so many others of his kind raved about.

It was getting more and more difficult to get a good mutt roast. The humans, in their own topsy-turvy fashion, were now getting rather nasty about the sale of dogs to Martians for food. Never mind the fact that the poor animals were starved and ill fed, never mind that some of the human cities were teeming with dogs who had no owner and were scrounging around for scraps thrown into garbage heaps. Never mind, too, that most humans never even gave one of

these mongrels a second look (except perhaps to complain to the city authorities about them), but let a Martian come along and offer to take all that trouble off their hands - in a most humane manner of course - and all of a sudden, they get humanitarian and decide that the poor doggies were better off starving in the streets than being eaten by those wicked, nasty Martians! Kerr suspected that the ones who made trouble were the ones who didn't have any dogs to sell to the Martians - the real reason they made trouble was because they weren't the ones who got their grubby paws on some credits.

Kerr had often wondered how, or even why, humanity let dogs continue to roam their cities in packs when they had made as many advances in technology in such a short time as they had. [The humans had a lot of help from many different alien races of course but still, it was always amazing what they could come up with given the right incentive – such as the chance to idle away time or to kill, maim or hurt somebody else.] They hadn't simply climbed the ladder of technology, they'd leapfrogged up it, two rungs at a time.

In fact, he'd never seen a species like the humans for surrounding themselves with gadgets that made life easier. And yet, they still continued to have slums in their cities, dogs roaming the streets, and cockroaches in their houses. *Inexplicable! Were they just too lazy to take care of these problems, or were they, at some subconscious level, unable to live without these reminders of how their lives used to be in what they called "the old days"?* [Humans also tended to prefix the "old days" with "good", though given that they complained about the "old days" such

a lot, Kerr couldn't understand what had been so good about them.]

He came out of his reverie and began thinking again about the problem he'd been mulling over - the inexplicable test results. Only one conclusion could be drawn - he'd been deceived by the human. He had been duped into buying another animal which resembled a dog down to the tiniest detail. The puzzling thing was that he'd never heard of any such animal. Nor had a search of his race's rather extensive databases provided him with a previous case similar to this. But the test results were infallible, therefore, he must have been the fallible one. He'd let a human trick him! He could imagine the sneering pity of his fellows if they knew a mere human had deceived him with such ease.

He knew how most of his people considered the humans. They thought the humans were amusing creatures who were several rungs below them on the evolutionary ladder. Perhaps quite similar to the way the humans had considered Chimpanzees - Kerr had learnt all about them (and other simians who now no longer roamed the almost non-existent tree tops of this world) in his research into this world's history. To be tricked by such creatures! Oh, the ignominy of it all! They were sure to take him down at least a couple of rungs in his crèche's totemic ranks if the story ever got out.

There was only one possible course of action - he must find the human and get his credits back. At the same time, he must teach the human a lesson so he'd never forget that it never paid to pull a fast one on one of the alien races. Yes, that was it! He must make sure that no other human tried such a trick again!

With the decision made, Kerr sprang into action. He had to find the human and he had to do it fast! He decided that it would be wisest to take the fake dog with him. The logical course of action would have been to dispose of it then and there instead of taking it with him, but Kerr was disposed to be cautious. All the members of his race that lived to reach adulthood had learned the value of being cautious and covering all the bases - in the school of hard knocks, his world tended to start with a ten-ton truck right on the noggin in kindergarten.

Kerr took Ringo with him and set out to search for the human, Normal. He didn't have a clue as to where the human would be, but decided that the best place to start was where they'd first met - at the Electric Drum.

Chapter 5 - Dick Turpentine makes his getaway

"What? You sold the dog to one of the aliens? Don't they eat dogs?" Dick, not the swiftest when it came to catching up [his strength rather was in not letting others, most notably the Cheese, catch up.], was still struggling to absorb all that Normal had told him.

Normal shrugged. "Yeah, they do, but can you blame me if Rover Roast sounds delicious to them? I just sold them the bombed animal. What they do with it is their lookout!"

"Isn't that a bit ... cold?"

"No, I'm told that they heat up the ovens before they make the roast ...," began Normal, all wrapped up in his description of Martian culinary habits.

"I meant selling your wife's beloved pet to a Martian!" Dick was beginning to wonder if Normal was crazy or if he was just stupid. [When Dick wondered if somebody was stupid, that was saying something. About the other person's IQ, that is.]

"Oh, that. Yeah, I did think of that afterwards," Normal admitted with a hint of contrition. "That's my problem, I never think things through before I do them and that's why I always end up in messes like this. By the time I thought of Kathryn and what she might say, it was too late. I was back at home, and the dog was probably on its way to Mars, or wherever those bombed aliens come from. Besides, I don't actually know this alien – they all look alike, you know. I just met it at a bar."

"You've been meeting aliens in bars? Just what do you get up to when your wife's away?" interrupted Dick, fascinated by this new facet in Normal's character.

"It's not like that – I was at the bar looking for somebody to buy the dog!"

"Sure, sure ... we've all been there at one time or another," replied Dick, soothingly.

"What? At the Drum?"

"No, I mean at a bar looking for somebody to ... umm ... buy our dog ...," Dick leered.

"Huh, fancy that, I thought I was the only one," said Normal, wide-eyed. "But to get back to what I was saying, how in Teller's name was I supposed to find the Martian anyway?" If it was possible for somebody to look both helpless and defiant at the

same time, Normal would have been that person. Dick wasn't sure if he was pleading for help or just making excuses.

"So you're running away from your wife and going to Donagar because of a dog. Is that what you're telling me? Isn't that a little drastic?" Dick decided to use a bit of logic, which was as interesting a spectacle as a butcher using a scalpel, and just as effective.

"Drastic's my middle name!" Normal looked Dick straight in the eyes and drew closer as if to impart a great secret. He continued in a lower tone, "Well, not really, I never had a middle name, you know. Always hated that," said Normal, drawing away. "All the other kids had middle names, but I never had one. But I do have this bad habit of doing drastic stuff. Like that time I destroyed a brand new holovision set because they showed an image of a cockroach. Did I tell you that I hated creepy, crawly insects?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm getting the picture," said Dick, thinking to himself that in fact, it was more like the whole art gallery. He was on uneasy street, heading straight downhill towards fear junction. "How'd you end up in the middle of nowhere, on foot?" he asked, to keep Normal's mind occupied, just in case Normal was prone to homicidal rages as well as destroying household furniture.

"Did I tell you Kathryn gets mad? I love her to death, but boy, can she get mad! When she's mad, she's got this habit of throwing stuff at people ... Well, mostly me. And she's a good enough shot that she usually hits her mark. I tell you, she sure can put quite a dent in my credit card, not to mention my

head, with all the stuff she throws around. Anyway, I figured it's safest to be somewhere else till she cools down. You know, till it's safe to return home and explain stuff to her." Normal finished with the air of one who says, "There, that should explain it all. Doesn't it make perfect sense now?"

"Yeah, I got that bit ... well, most of it anyway. But that still doesn't explain how you ended up here." Dick resisted the urge to scratch his chin again – he'd been told by his publicist that it made him look lousy.

"If you'd hold your turbos, I'll get to it. Sheesh! It's like this: I hitched a ride with this guy who was on his way to Donagar. I figured I might as well save some money. He wanted to know why I was going to Donagar, and I told him the whole story. Guess what? He was a dog lover. I just can't catch a break! The guy gets upset at me and leaves me in the middle of nowhere and takes off. Can you believe that?"

"That's not a trick question, is it?" Dick wasn't sure of anything by this point, least of all, how he was going to handle the loony that fate had dropped in his lap.

"What?"

"Never mind." Dick waved his blaster dismissively and hurriedly lowered it as Normal looked ready to dive to the ground. "Yeah, so here we are," said Dick, not quite certain what else he could say.

"Yep, here we are. You're not a dog lover by any chance, are you now?" asked Normal, looking in apprehension at Dick and his gun, now pointed, like Pinocchio's nose, at somewhere between the ground and him.

Dick, however, had his own worries. His worry was that he had no idea of what to do with this crazy guy. He didn't want to turn his back on Normal and walk away since Normal might take it into his head to follow Dick all over the place, asking about joining Dick's outlaw band or something. On the other hand, he couldn't stay here since he knew Normal would bring up the question of becoming his sidekick, and saying, 'Sorry, the vacancy has already been filled!' didn't sound like the safest course of action either, not when you were dealing with a nutter.

"So how about that sidekick job? I think I'd make a pretty good sidekick," began Normal, confirming Dick's worst fears. Dick looked around in the wild hope of finding something, anything, to distract Normal. He could have whooped for joy at the sight of fresh hope moving towards them along the highway in the form of a hoverbus - the sleek, rounded, red tube of the passenger compartment nestled amongst the inflated tan skirting, looking for all the world like a giant hotdog rushing down the gullet of the black python that was the highway.

"Oh drat, there's a hoverbus!" He tried to hide his relief but didn't quite succeed. "Can't hang around, gotta do that dashing thing, you know. I'm sure you can take the hoverbus to Donagar. They'll stop for you since you are stuck here in the middle of nowhere," he said over his shoulder while running off towards the shoulder of the road and safety, away from the crazy, crazy man.

"Wait! What about the sidekick job?" asked Normal after the departing bandit, hope still apparent in his voice.

"If it doesn't work out in Donagar, why don't you look me up? We can figure something out and we'll definitely do lunch," Dick shouted as he made his getaway and left Normal alone on the road, looking back and forth between the departing highwayman and the approaching hoverbus. As he ran off as fast as his legs could carry him, Dick wondered if the sight of hoverbuses made Normal hungry, too.

Chapter 6 - John Wylie goes on a trip

Wylie paced round and round his desk, like a dog chasing his own tail, all the while pulling on his right-earlobe – a sure sign that he was thinking. At last, he appeared to make up his mind. "Yes, that's what must have happened! Somebody's got them both, confound it! Billions of blinking, blathering, blinded baboons! Barbarians!! Body snatchers!!! Ballerinas!!!!"

Wylie was working himself up to a rage, as he often did, and Katy looked on in silent misery, unable to voice her fears since she had no idea how her employer would react. She watched Wylie rant and rage and pace the room, half expecting him to start frothing at the mouth. She wanted to ask him what he meant, who had got her darling Ringo (and of course, Normal too, she thought, doing some mental editing) but she didn't want the infuriated little man's anger directed at her. She knew from her limited past experience that Wylie's anger, while it had a tendency to burn white hot like a supernova, subsided almost as fast as it flared up. All she had to do was wait in

silence while Wylie wound down like a clockwork toy.

"Porcupines!!! Porcine, ponderous, peregrinating pumpkins!! Pontius Pilate on a plate! Pirates! Pollywogs! Pandora's pancake pullers!" Wylie raged on and then, without warning, as was usual for him, he stopped to draw a breath and then fell silent. He began pacing again at a furious rate, pulling so hard on his right-earlobe that Kathryn was afraid that the whole ear would come off. He was a small man but didn't have the usual disproportionately large head and stunted bodies of those affected by dwarfism. In fact, he looked more like a small child who had dressed up as an adult – if a small child could manage to look rather muscular and have an elegant goatee, that is.

"There's no help for it, Katy. I guess I'll have to go after them and get it back," he said after a while as if he'd come to a decision.

"Get what back?" asked the bemused Kathryn.

"Never you mind what, Katy. I don't want to involve you in this any further. I'll find them myself. Just mind the office for a few days while I'm gone, will you?"

"But John, where are you going? What happened to Ringo and Normal? Why won't you tell me anything?" Kathryn was fast approaching the point where she would, under normal circumstances, have grabbed Wylie and tried to shake some sense out of him. But she'd just started on this job and wasn't sure that it was wise to be that familiar with her employer just yet. *Besides*, her pragmatic side whispered, *if something's happened to Normal, you're going to need this job.*

"It's for your own good, Katy. The less you know, the better it is. Certainly for me, but probably for you as well," Wylie said as if he was thinking aloud. He then looked up at her and his expression became kinder.

"Come now, child. Don't worry. Your husband and your dog will be fine. I promise that I'll get them back safe and sound. Just take care of the office and tell anybody who might inquire that I'm away on business but will be back in a couple of days," he said, giving her a rather weak smile. He might even have attempted to pat her hand if he'd been tall enough to reach it.

"Are you sure you'll be back in a couple of days?"

Irritation flared in Wylie's eyes for a moment. "Of course I'll be back in a few days! Even if I'm not, just keep on telling them that I'll be back soon! They don't have to know how soon I'll be back! I'll have my comm unit turned off. I'll contact you when I can and let you know if I have any further instructions for you."

"But ... but ... how can I reach you if there's an emergency?" This really wasn't going well. First Ringo and Normal disappeared with no warning, and now her boss was trying to skedaddle off somewhere. What was going on? Was she going to be left husbandless, dogless and now, jobless too?

If Wylie had a chance of whispering in her ear, he might have attempted it. Instead, he stretched up on tiptoe and said in a rather low voice, "I guess you'll just have to manage the best you can, Katy, because I don't want them to trace me using my comm unit."

"Them? Who's them?" asked Kathryn, pouncing upon the word. She wondered if it was possible that Wylie had gone insane. He had become a total paranoiac all of a sudden, and it wasn't as if he was a government agent or a detective or a teacher or some such profession where a little bit of paranoia was part of the territory. He was just an agent. Not a government agent, but your run of the mill agent for the graffiti glitterati, as they called themselves - the street artists. She didn't know what had come over Wylie for him to start acting in such a strange fashion. But there was nothing she could say since she was afraid that anything she said would only result in triggering one of his sudden rages. She contented herself with nodding her head as he gave her a few more instructions, took some items out of his cluttered desk drawer, stuffed them in his pockets and turned to leave.

"Oh yes, hope you remember that Jello's got a job at the Electric Drum today?" said Wylie, turning back.

"I haven't forgotten. She'll be fine. She's had gigs like this before," said Kathryn, sharply. She was a little irritated that he would doubt her efficiency. After all, she'd been working here for several months now.

"Yeah, just making sure," said Wylie, giving her a grin which seemed to say that he knew he'd managed to irritate her, as he continued out the door. He stopped short as he was about to leave the room. "Oh yeah, they'll be here soon. Bomb it!" he said, almost to himself. Then he turned back to Kathryn. "There will be a bunch of guys looking for me. Tell them that there's been a little complication and that

they should call you-know-who for further instructions."

"Who?"

"They'll know who!"

"But you said to tell everybody who asked that you'll be back in a few days. So how do I know who should call whoever-that-they-know and who should be told that you'll be back soon?" Kathryn was beginning to lose all patience with her employer.

"You'll figure it out, I'm sure. Well, see you soon, Katy!" With a cheery wave, John Wylie left his office. Kathryn found herself alone, worrying about her husband and her dog. While most of her mind was occupied with worrying, there was a tiny part of her mind debated with itself trying to figure out what she should tell whom and wondering who these mysterious strangers were.

Chapter 7 - Enter the Debian Raiders

"Guys, this might be turning into a bit of a rough trip. There's massive solar activity from the system we're heading for, and it's wreaking havoc on the navigation systems. Buckle yourselves in," said Sal over the comm unit in the lounge. The ship shuddered like an asteroid rammed by a runaway shuttle.

The Debian Raiders sitting in the lounge of the spacecraft groaned in unison. It had already been a rough trip. They'd lost their way once because Rod had forgotten to update the star maps. Then they'd had that little mishap at the refuelling station due to Alb complaining about their food and threatening

them with Ziggy's Galactic Guide. [No, he hadn't threatened to write to the ZGG. Instead, Alb had threatened the owner with a thump on the head with the guide. It was a big galaxy and the ZGG was rather bulky. But then again, Alb took his food seriously.]

And now this. What else could go wrong? They gripped their arm-rests a bit tighter, as if willing the ship to land in one piece instead of ending up scattered over the landscape in a million pieces. All of them, that is, except for Cal, who appeared to think that this was as good a time as any to get things off his chest.

"Ben, you asked me a question once, 'What has you all tied up in knots when you wake up sweating in the middle of the night?' You still wanna know? I've been thinking about it. Been thinking about it a lot. It's not the work. I love the work. I've always loved the work. It's the game. The game, Ben. And I was so good at it. I made sure all the right people liked me. At night, I'd go through the checklist in my mind: Am I cool with Jon Bovi? Am I cool with Mr. Onionson? Am I cool with all the people who can help me? Am I cool with all the people who can hurt me? Nobody thought I was weak or a loser. There was nobody I was offending, nobody I loved. *That* game, Ben. But guess what? You taught me how to live outside of the game. You taught me how to *live*. And you know what scares me even more? That I'm going back in."

Ben stared at Cal, perhaps wondering how he'd ever managed to say all of those things. Ben had never spoken a word in his entire life. Being mute would do that to you.

Cal was a round faced, curly haired, slim individual with a cheerful smile, and he was smiling now that he'd gotten the whole monologue out of his system. Cal's smile was as familiar to Ben as was his own. In fact, it was his own since Cal happened to be Ben's clone.

Since they were clones, maybe Cal did know what Ben might have said in that mythical conversation, the one which had never taken place. Or rather, it might have taken place, but certainly not between Cal and himself. Cal did have a habit of launching into these soliloquies where Ben had a starring role, and Ben was content to listen to Cal going on. Ben knew that he himself couldn't have said what Cal attributed to him any better. It was the best of both worlds as far as Ben was concerned. He never had to say a word and yet, Cal would say the things that Ben knew he'd have said for sure if he'd been able to talk.

"Damn right, we are going back in, Cal!" interrupted another one of the people crammed [one might have said "like sardines in a can" except that sardines would have kissed their can and given thanks to the big fish in the sky if they'd seen how crowded it was in this particular spaceship.] into the little spacecraft's lounge, with considerable heat. "We've been out of action for too long and people are saying that the Debian Raiders are a bunch of has-beens. It's time to prove them wrong! Come on, show me the credits!"

Ben looked at the new speaker, though he needn't have bothered since he knew the speaker's face as he knew his own. That was because it *was* his own face, more or less, since the speaker happened to be his

clone, too. But then again, everybody in the ship was his clone. Or rather, everybody was a clone of each other or of some other individual who'd be the original to their copies or ... He checked his thoughts, he'd been down this particular mental avenue before and it was a dead end street. Better to retrace his steps and concentrate on the conversation between his brothers.

"You're right, Rod. *I* might be scared of getting back into the game but the Debian Raiders need to get back out there where things are happening. We've got to let them see that, when it comes to mercenaries, there isn't a better outfit in the Fifty Galaxies than us!" replied Cal, eager for action now that he'd voiced his fears and gotten them off his chest.

He looked around the lounge of the little spacecraft as if seeking confirmation and was rewarded by nods from his brothers – some enthusiastic, some reluctant. The stars flashed by in milky white streaks on the viewscreens as the ship rocked and rocketed on towards its destination.

"By Bacu, we're going to show them that the Debian Raiders haven't gone soft! We've got a shelf life of ten years, tops. Our next contract's gotta bring us the credits that'll last us, and ours, a long time. In the mercenary biz, we're just a blip on the long range scanners. Blip, we'll be out of this game in five years. What's my family gonna live on? Huh?" asked Rod, turning to face the rest of his brothers.

"Aw, stop yer bellyachin', Rod! We all know the reasons for this job and the fact that we've gotta make enough to retire on, soon," said Tre, joining the conversation.

"Yeah, none of us are getting any younger and the mercenary trade isn't for old men. But then again, I suppose it's not even for young men. But everybody's got to make a living, right?" added Rus, giving Rod a lopsided grin. [Everybody said that being a mercenary wasn't for old men. Mostly due to the fact that there were hardly any old mercenaries around – people took this to mean that old men did not like the mercenary trade.]

"This job should set us up sitting pretty. It's the kind of deal that should bring us a lot of publicity. Everybody in the Fifty Galaxies will be talking about us soon, you can be sure of that!" said Rod, looking at the others almost as if pleading for their agreement.

"That's for sure! After this mission we'll have jobs coming our way like debris to a black hole!" said Tre with enthusiasm, nodding his head like a puppet on speed.

Several of the others nodded in agreement as if they'd had the same thought. Not surprising since the Debian Raiders tended to come to about the same conclusion on most matters, which is what made them a good mercenary unit - the fact that they could act in concert even when they hadn't planned it out that way. Of course, there were instances when it worked against them - like the time on Rigel 7 when they'd all gone after the same girl, or that time they'd all decided to use the same bar window to escape a fight on Carillus. But most of the time, it worked out in their favour.

Some people assumed that being clones, they'd all think, act and feel the exact same way. That just went to show that most people didn't understand clones. The life experiences you've had dictate your

reactions and behaviour, and even clones couldn't have the exact same life experiences. Otherwise, they would have turned out to be twelve peas in a very big pod.

Of course, they'd look a lot more like each other if Ben hadn't gone and gotten his hair singed off for good in that selfsame brawl on Carillus; or if Rus hadn't grown that moustache to impress his girlfriend. One had to accept that kind of thing sometimes, even from your own clones.

The ship did another wild belly-flop as the comm unit crackled to life again. "Rod, you told me to let you know the moment we entered the planet's atmosphere."

"So?" Rod was irritated. He didn't like to be disturbed when he was on his favourite subject – credits.

"We've entered the planet's atmosphere," said Sal's clipped voice. Nobody knew how his voice became clipped - maybe it had been those training lasers on the military academy he'd attended. None of the others had had a hankering to join the military. They'd preferred experience from the school of hard knocks, or so they'd said. In reality, they'd spent most of their time in bars while Sal was in the academy. They had indeed gotten a lot of hard knocks, but mostly from falling off bar stools after a night of heavy drinking. Sal had come away with his clipped voice and the rest of them had a good collection of mugs swiped from a variety of bars in the system - it had sounded like an equitable exchange at the time.

That was before Sal had proposed that with his military experience and their practical experience the logical career path for them to follow would be to

become mercenaries. They should have thought things through at that point. Unfortunately, the school of hard knocks as experienced at a bar tended to leave one with a rather reduced capacity to think matters over in a coherent and logical manner. They figured that one out later – much, much later. By that time, it was too late. Sal had already committed them (and more to the point, their total credit reserves) to being mercenaries. From those confused beginnings, a legend had been born. [Most people said that it certainly was a legend, but one about a bunch of fumlbers so inept that they bungled all jobs. But what did they know?]

Rod called his comrades to order. It would be time to get to work soon, and a good leader always made sure that his troops were well prepared. Sal insisted that he was the leader of the outfit due to his superior military training, but Rod knew in his heart that he was the real leader. After all, he had been the first of their batch out of the cloning vats, and it should be evident to anybody that this meant that he had more experience than the others did – even if it was by a few seconds. Even a few seconds had to count for something, right? [The Sekhunds of Clocca would certainly have agreed. They spent their lives counting the multitudes of Sekhunds, believing that when each and every Sekhund was counted and tabulated, their world would end.]

This bickering about leadership had resulted in several botched jobs and had been the main cause of the semi-retirement from which the group was now emerging. Rod was determined that the mistakes of the past should not be repeated again and that the Debian Raiders should rise from the ashes like the

Pyrobirds of legend, to take their rightful place in the mercenary annals of the Fifty Galaxies. To this end, he and Sal had discussed matters and divvied up their individual responsibilities. Rod would defer to Sal when it came to matters strategic - Sal had absolute command when they were in the field of battle. Rod would lead at all other times. This arrangement appeared to work fine so far - at least as far as Rod was concerned. Sal might not be so sanguine since he hadn't received the mantle of leadership yet.

"Okay, guys, let's go over the job one more time to make sure we are clear on the details!" said Sal's disembodied voice over the intercom while the ship shuddered like a man with the ten-day Ligian fever on the tenth day. [The shuddering and shivering stopped on the eleventh day because the patient was one of two things - cured or dead.]

"Umm ... shouldn't we be worrying about the ship instead of going over plans?" replied Sax, looking out one of the viewscreens nervously. "Besides, we all know the details, Sal. Come on, how hard can it be? We go in, meet the guy, get the package and then deliver it to our client's representatives on Merx IX!"

"Sax, careful planning is the only way to do a job right! We need this job if we are to leave our mark and make some credits. When will you get it through your head?" snapped Rod, looking at his brother as if Sax needed a few more brain cells to start a neuron party.

"As long as we don't leave a mark on the planet's surface on landing ..." muttered Alb, munching on a sandwich.

"We've already gone through all the plans, everything's in place, and we don't have anything else

to discuss! Come on, Rod, be reasonable!" said Cal, looking at Rod like a kid pleading for one last ride on the merry-go-round.

"You guys are impossible! So what if we've already discussed the plans? We should also plan for the unexpected!" Rod always thought planning would solve everything and blamed lack of planning whenever anything went wrong.

"And how do you propose to do that? Consult a priest? Read some borra-borra leaves? Gut a devil-lizard and read its entrails?" snapped Rus.

"Mmm ... devil-lizards... I'm hungry!" interjected Alb, who'd already wolfed down his sandwich, heading towards the auto-chef.

"You're always hungry, Alb!" chorused half a dozen voices in unison.

"Oh, fine! Just don't expect me to watch your backs when the unexpected catches us off guard! Don't say I didn't warn you!" said Rod, giving up any attempts to plan further. Sal chose that particular moment to chime in over the intercom.

"If you're not strapped in, better do so now! We are in orbit around the planet and I am about to go in for the landing. This crate's not in the best of shape and it might be a bit of a bumpy ride. Just hang on tight!"

The others checked their seat belts and straps while still muttering and complaining about Rod and Sal and the duo's obsession with plans. Alb was the last one to strap down since he had to first wash down the last bits of his latest sandwich with a drink. The ship settled down a bit once it entered the atmosphere, and the Raiders were beginning to heave

sighs of relief and unclench their fists when things took a turn for the worse in a rather abrupt fashion.

At first, it was just an imperceptible shuddering of the framework, but bit by bit, the shuddering spread to every strut, metal plate, nut, bolt and welding seal on the craft. The Raiders found themselves shaking along with the ship like dolls in a dryer, sliding down a flight of steps, which in turn was being dragged along the railway tracks. At least, that was as close an approximation as anything was.

"Oh boy, this doesn't look too good. Maybe we should stop?" asked Tre, holding on tight to his seat's armrests and looking straight ahead.

"What, right in the middle of entering atmosphere and just hope to hang around?" replied Rod, trying to turn around to stare at Tre. For his pains, he almost had his head snapped off due to the shaking of the ship.

"Well, hanging around sounds much better than being blown to a million pieces," retorted Tre. He appeared to be praying in between talking – or at least, his lips were moving silently even when he wasn't talking.

"Who bought this pile of junk anyway?" asked Rlo from the back, perhaps in an effort to divert everybody's attention.

"Don't knock it. It got us this far, didn't it?" Rod scowled.

"Yeah, but what's the point of coming this far if we can't make it to the planet's surface?" replied Tre, still staring straight ahead.

"Guys, it's possible that it just got a teensy weensy bit worse than a bumpy ride," interrupted Sal over the intercom.

"How much worse?" asked Rod, trying to keep the panic out of his voice.

"Depends on how much more could go wrong. But I'd suggest that you prepare for a crash landing or even ejecting out."

"Can we do anything to help?" It was Rlo again.

"Well, you can do what every mercenary does when in a tight spot. You can start praying! Talk to you in a bit, I got a ship to land ..."

Prayers looked to be in order as the ship juddered and shuddered its way through the atmosphere like an ailing patient for what seemed like aeons to the apprehensive Raiders. At last, the ship stumbled through the cloud cover and the Raiders could see the ground below on the viewscreens. It looked as if they might make it after all and the Raiders collectively began releasing that one breath that they'd been holding ...

Sometimes, fate leaves the death card hidden till the last possible moment – it makes for better dramatics that way. The poor craft, which had held up under all that was thrown its way with such bravery till now, gave up the ghost at the last moment and fell apart moments before touching the ground.

The Raiders had landed.

Chapter 8 - Normal takes a bus ride

Normal sat back in the comfortable cushioned seat of the hoverbus. It was one Shima of a life, running from one's own wife, because of a dog. *At*

least I can't complain it's a dog's life, he thought, with a little mental chuckle.

He lay back and tried to get some sleep, but Kathryn's face kept popping up in his mind's eye like some angry jack-in-the-box. She wasn't really a bad sort; he loved her a lot and she loved him as much. The trouble was that she loved that mutt as well and he just couldn't take it. Not that he was the jealous type, mind you. It was the thought of all the fleas and germs that drove him nuts. He hoped she would forgive him. Maybe he could get her one of those new robot dogs. *What were they called now? CCs? Yeah, that was it! "Cybernetic Canines"!* *The things they came up with these days - the world sure had changed a lot since the Martians arrived.*

He gazed in sombre introspection at his reflection on the plasti-glass window; his hair really was too long. Kathryn had been bugging him to get a haircut for weeks now. Perhaps when he got to Donagar. Maybe that'd make Kathryn more amenable towards forgiving him when he returned? He could always hope.

He sighed and lay back on his seat again. There was nothing to see out there except for desolation. He was feeling gloomy enough already and didn't need to be brought down even further by looking at the dreary landscape outside. Soon it would be evening and the landscape would be covered in the bloody red rays of the setting sun. *A fitting colour indeed for this land, which has seen so much bloodshed*, Normal thought despondently.

The vehicle came to a sudden stop. There wasn't a scheduled stop for a while and they'd just picked him up. What now? Was it another person walking

the highway? Or had Dick Turpentine decided that he really could use a sidekick? He craned his neck to see what had happened. As he did so, the question flitted through his mind as to how you could crane your neck - *it's not as if you were one of those newfangled androids who could telescope their necks like two stories up - bombed peeping toms! They've got no morals, that's what's wrong with them - just steel, plastic and wires... no emotions. But that description could fit Kathryn when she was mad too... Maybe there wasn't much of a difference between humans and androids after all.* He mentally shook himself, time to find the reason for the unscheduled stop.

Normal peered between the other passengers towards the front of the bus. Geez, it was the Cheese! For a moment, the panicked thought ran through his mind - and boy, could those thoughts run like the wind when they were panicked - as to whether Kathryn had sicced the police on his trail for turning her beloved pet into a Martian masala meal. The thought was as short-lived as he figured his marriage to Kathryn would be. This was, in all likelihood, just another routine graft stop. Ever since Chu and his gang passed the Feenster and Meaney Graft Act, it was a common occurrence for the Cheese to stop public conveyances to get their daily quota of baksheesh. There was no escape - on one hand, you had Dick Turpentine who preyed on lone travellers on the highway, and on the other, you had the Cheese pouncing on any commercial passenger vehicle. *When you're stuck between the law and the outlawed, you had nowhere to run,* he thought. It would be just his luck if they picked on him.

The officer, a giant of a man with blond hair bleached almost white by the sun, had been looking over the passengers like a vulture appraising a carcass ripe for the picking. And now, the Cheese was looking straight at Normal as if he could see right through Normal's soul to the soles of his rather worn-out shoes. Normal wished that there was some way he could turn invisible or just apport out of the hoverbus and appear somewhere else far away from the accusing eyes of the Cheese. But the Cheese had already turned away and was questioning another passenger.

Normal whispered a silent prayer to all the deities of Kabul City and promised them an offering each this time. When he got back to Kabul City, of course. [The Kabul City Deities' Association had given up filing breach-of-promise law suits about these hasty promises of offerings which never seemed to materialize after the crisis was over. If they had an offering for each time this happened, they'd need hundred times the temples, mosques and other places of worship than they currently had, just to hold all the offerings.]

He wriggled further down in his seat to be less conspicuous a target. Maybe he shouldn't have tried that - trying to look inconspicuous just made you stand out all the more. The Cheese was looking in his direction again. Maybe he should have tried to look nonchalant like the guys in the trivid movies did, but then again, he'd always thought that those poses looked rather fake and contrived.

Normal wondered if perhaps his guilt was written all across his face for everybody, especially the Cheese, to see. The Cheese certainly was looking at

Normal as if he was a thick wad of notes dropped on the sidewalk. [In reality, this would never happen in Kabul City. A wad of notes dropped on the sidewalk in Kabul City had a name - a riot.] Normal's heart began beating faster and then dropped like an elevator which had its cables cut as he noticed the cop begin to move in his direction ... and then, the Cheese stopped to hassle another passenger.

Normal's poor heart, which was trembling like the bunny rabbits he'd seen in picture books as a kid, couldn't take much more of this unbearable tension and guilt. He wanted to get it over with, to know what was going on. Was the game up already? Was he to be dragged back in ignominy to Kabul City to face the wrath of Kathryn?

The Cheese was on the move again and he was now headed in Normal's direction in earnest. He had a look in his eyes that Normal didn't like. Normal now wished that he hadn't wished that he wanted to find out what was going on. There were times when one should be perfectly happy with ignorance. Normal considered his options and running didn't seem to be in the list. There was nowhere to run to anyway.

Maybe he could brazen it out. Maybe this was just routine for the Cheese ... "*Yeah, right!*" said his pessimistic inner-self. He began praying to the Kabul City deities again, promising them double what he'd promised earlier if the Cheese would just leave him alone. *Maybe I just look like an easy mark - better an easy mark than a marked man*, he thought.

The cop loomed over him like his Aunt Petunia when she'd caught him sneaking a peek at the girl

next door through his bedroom window. "What's your name, buddy?" the cop rasped out.

"N-N-Normal, Normal Kint, sir" he said.

The Cheese took his notebook out, looking all official. He even licked his pencil stub as if about to write something down. [The Kabul City Cheese didn't believe in splurging on all the new technology such as handheld computers. They figured that graphite had been good enough for their ancestors and it was good enough for them – it had the added advantage of being cheaper, too. Besides, licking your computer wasn't as satisfying as licking a pencil stub.]

Normal let out the breath he'd been holding - this had the familiar routine of a shakedown.

"How do you spell it? Normal as in formal or is it more like in thermal?"

Normal heaved an internal sigh of relief. Yep, the Cheese was just looking for a bit of graft. All he had to do now was not do anything stupid which might arouse the guy's suspicion. He tried to answer with as casual a tone as he could muster.

"It's Normal just the way I said it."

"Strange to have a guy named Normal" the cop grinned, amused at his own cleverness. Normal grimaced inwards - why him? Why'd he always get the comedians?

"Blame it on my parents. My brother's got it worse, they named him Verbal and he hardly speaks a couple of words a day. Apparently, we're named after a great uncle of ours."

"So your uncle was Normal, too?" The cop smirked again, perhaps imagining how he'd use this routine at his next Comedy Night appearance.

"No. Funnily enough, he was called Kaizer Soze. Go figure! My parents never explained how that was supposed to work. You'd think if you were named after somebody, you'd actually have their name. But, oh no, not my parents! They're just weird like that."

The cop clucked in sympathy. "Yeah, I hear you. Take my name for instance. My grandpappy used to say that his boss would always say 'If I had my druthers, I'd always take old Carruthers.' His boss apparently found that amusing, though I've never seen anything amusing about being named John Carruthers myself." The Cheese seemed to realize that he'd been getting too chummy with Normal and so reverted back to his official persona, the one where the police treated every victim [the Cheese called them citizens under their protective care, but a victim is always a victim, whatever name they are given.] to their patented stare – the one a python gives a rabbit just before it swallowed its mesmerised victim.

"Where are you bound today and what's your business there?" he growled.

"I'm just on my way to Donagar - got some friends there ..."

"These friends of yours, have they got a name? Have you known them long?"

Normal had had enough of the cop's questioning. It was obvious that the Cheese was not suspicious of him. So, it was time to get a little tough, time to show him that he wasn't a complete pushover. "Look, officer, is there a reason for this questioning? Can't a guy even take a bus ride anymore without getting hassled?"

"Okay, fella, no need to go all emelkay [nobody knew what this meant but it was something which

had survived from the ages past. Some said that maybe it was somebody's initials since it sounded like letters but everybody else scoffed at these misguided few, obviously, they were words of power or some mantra, they said.] on me! I'm just doing my duty as an officer of the law!" He looked as if he was about to turn away towards another passenger but then hesitated and turned back towards Normal. "Let me see your ID tag. Normal Kint sounds way too much like a name that you'd picked off the top of your head - and speaking of heads, you need a haircut!"

Normal reached into his tunic and pulled out his ID tag. Bomb those aliens and all this new technology that they'd been introducing since they got here. Not that he was against all new technology - god knows he wasn't a Torvoldite. It's just that there were too many ways to be hassled these days - ID tags, credit cards, vidphone marketing, android riots. Life used to be so bombed simple in the good old days.

The Cheese scrutinized the ID tag carefully, even turning it over as if he expected to discover something hiding away at the back. He grimaced, wrote something down on his notepad and then handed it back without a word.

Yeah, no soap for you today, Cheese - at least not from me! thought Normal, with an inward grin. The Cheese had been expecting to find something so that he could pull Normal up on some minor technicality. Then Normal would have had to get out of it with a little greasing of palms - par for the course. Ah well, he'll find another patsy soon enough, thought Normal

as the Cheese turned and made his way towards the front of the bus.

Normal's spirits rose with the hoverbus as it resumed its journey a few minutes later. His exuberance was short-lived however. He remembered that the Cheese had written down his ID number. Surely he'd include the details in his report, wouldn't he? And what if Kathryn had reported him missing? Even if she hadn't done that yet, she was bound to go to the Cheese sooner or later and if this cop's report was to be cross-linked to their search for him, they'd know he was bound for Donagar. He'd just have to trust in the inefficiency of the Kabul City Cheese, he decided. After all, they did the least possible work they could and finding a missing person wasn't likely to bring in any credits.

But the fear continued to niggle away, hiding in the dark and not-often-dusted corners of his mind. *I'll just lay low in Donagar till Kathryn calms down and then maybe I'll call her. Or send her one of those CCs as a gift before I vidphone her ... Those CCs act just like real dogs without the microbes, dirt, or fleas. They say that they're real smart too. What could be better?* thought Normal, trying to drown out his fears by thinking as hard as he could about other matters ... and failing miserably.

Chapter 9 - Wylie looks for Normal

"Blast it all! Where could that insane, imbecilic, irrational idiot have disappeared to?" John Wylie was flying into a rage. Wylie and rages were a lot like

ships and spaceports; he was always either flying into one or flying out of one. He had thought that it would be a simple matter to discover where Normal had gone. After all, how difficult would it be to find a man with a dog? Just inquire at the apartment Normal and Katy shared and find out if anybody had seen Normal leave the place. Nothing in life ever turns out to be as simple as it looks at first.

Of course, they knew who Normal was at the apartment complex and Wylie'd even found several people who saw him leave the apartment the previous day with the dog. But then the blasted blathering, blinking, blinded bonehead had taken it into his head to walk somewhere instead of using a hovercab. How was one supposed to track a man on foot? People on the street never noticed anything!

Wylie had walked the streets in vain, stopping this person and that, asking them if they'd seen a man with a dog the day before. All he'd got for his pains was the kind of look which said that they were trying to decide whether it was safe to run. That was, of course, after they had figured out where the voice they heard was coming from. [People had this insane notion that Wylie would jump on their back and ride them all over the city if they turned from him and ran – it was something to do with ancient fears of midgets.]

He really hated this world! Why couldn't these humans be a normal height instead of being so inconveniently tall? Was it so hard to realize that there were short people in the world? Was that such a hard concept to grasp? Imbeciles! Ignoramuses! Interbred iguana's with inverted intelligence indicators! Why'd he have to end up here of all

places? Oh, of course, that'd been his own fault, hadn't it?

He had picked this world as a safe haven. He'd thought that the best place to lose oneself was in a crowd. [Philosophers through the ages have pondered the question of who came up with such platitudes. All the races in the Fifty Galaxies had at least a few such sayings. When you stopped to think about it, they either were overly simplistic or not at all logical. For instance, the humans had a saying which went "a centavo saved is a centavo earned". What did that mean anyway? How could one earn something by saving it? Didn't one have to earn it first if one were to save it?]

This world had looked ideal in many respects for getting lost. It was a recent enough discovery that it didn't have all the technological trappings that an older world would have. He didn't want people being able to locate him with no effort at all just because the world was an established one and everything ran like clockwork, where all arrivals were registered as a matter of course. A newly discovered world like this where many races moved in and out at will was the ideal choice if one wanted to lose oneself from the rest of the Fifty Galaxies.

The accidental similarity in physiology had been an added bonus. He looked so much like the humans, except for his height, or rather, lack of it, that most humans never realized that he was as alien as the "Martians", as they insisted on calling the Gaddians. So he had thought that this world would be the ideal place to lie low and run his business till the time was right for him to make his move. Unfortunately, he

had not factored in the humans and their irrational behaviour!

What reason would possess that hare-brained, addle-witted fool to walk off with the dog? Or perhaps he had not walked off? Maybe he'd taken the dog out for a walk and something had happened? But he knew that Normal didn't like the dog much. It was the very situation that he'd discovered at Katy's house which had prompted him to take this particular course of action. How could he have miscalculated so badly? There was nothing for it but to keep on looking and hope that he found a lead.

"Excuse me, sir?" said Wylie and waited impatiently for the man to look around and finally decide to look down. Why was it so hard for humans to look down anyway? Was it something in their physiological make up?

As Wylie had expected, the man looked around him as if there were invisible beings addressing him. They'd believe anything, even a voice out of thin air, but they wouldn't believe somebody short could be talking to them? Interminably inbred, imbecilic idiots! Finally, the man looked down.

"Oh, I didn't see you down there! Yes?"

"Have you seen this man by any chance?" Wylie flashed a solidograph of Normal, for what seemed like the thousandth time, at the stranger. "He might have had a dog with him ..."

"You mean Normal? I know him ... We've had a few drinks at the Drum a couple of times. Why are you looking for him anyway?"

"I'm a friend of his wife's ... Actually, I'm her boss and Normal's been missing since yesterday. Just

trying to find out what happened to him," Wylie hurried to explain.

"Really? I saw him at the Drum just yesterday! Didn't get to talk to him though. He seemed to be in a hurry."

"Are you sure it was him? Did he have a dog with him?"

"Why in Shima would he drag a dog into the bar? He doesn't like animals much. Not enough to buy one a drink anyways!" smirked the stranger.

"Thank you. I'll head on over there and see if I can find anything ..." said Wylie over his shoulder as he hurried in the direction of the Electric Drum ... and promptly slammed into somebody who'd been walking in the other direction. Unfortunately, the other person was tall and that, combined with Wylie being diminutive enough to win the shortest man alive contest, resulted in bowling the person over.

It would have stopped there had the person that Wylie slammed into not grabbed the nearest person for support. He only succeeded in pulling the second person down and the second person naturally grabbed onto a third. This resulted in a domino effect which would have been wonderful to watch, as long as one wasn't within grabbing distance of the human domino or had not caused the whole fiasco in the first place. However, one advantage of being compactly built was that he could squeeze through the tiniest of spaces, and a tangle of arms and legs was no great obstacle to Wylie. He nimbly crawled through the cursing, shouting, screaming, wriggling human mass and made his way towards the Electric Drum in search of further clues as to the whereabouts of Normal Kint.

Chapter 10 - Normal meets Zafar

Normal was depressed. He missed Kathryn. He missed her smile. Her presence. The way she lit up a room when she entered it. The way she would touch him from time to time when they were together as if to reassure him that she was still there. He missed all that and more.

It was true that she could be a real terror when she was mad. It was also true that a couple of times in their relationship he'd felt as if he'd rather be somewhere else – this had nothing to do with her deadly aim with ordinary household implements and utensils. [Most people have failed to grasp the damage potential of a well aimed plate. This is due to the fact that they have not been at the receiving end of a flying plate. Flying saucers had nothing on them.]

But those dark times were rare, she was the sweetest person you ever knew most of the time! He wished he hadn't been such a fool as to get rid of that mutt of hers. That had always been his problem - he tended to act on impulse and it never failed to come back and haunt him.

The view outside wasn't helping his mood much. In fact, it was further aggravating his depressed state of mind. The hoverbus was still passing through the war ravaged areas left over from the era of the great wars - the time before time began. In fact, it was mostly like that wherever you went in the world. The fact that it was such a part of your life didn't help make it less depressing when you had to stare at the signs of such great destruction.

He wondered, for the millionth time, what his ancestors must have been like to have caused devastation on such a huge scale. The wild lands, as they were called, were utterly uninhabitable. They were still radioactive in some parts and in others the geological upheavals had been such that there were great rifts in the land which had created deep chasms. Add to that the fact that strange mutated creatures roamed the wild lands, and you had some pretty compelling reasons not to go there.

"An extremely depressing sight, isn't it?" said the passenger on his left, breaking into his thoughts almost as if he'd read them. Normal turned towards his fellow passenger, whom he'd ignored completely since he'd sat down. He was a small, frail looking old man with a permanently thoughtful look etched on his face and he had an almost tangible aura of untidiness around him. It was as if he radiated untidiness, as if all the untidiness in the world emanated from him – or he attracted it like a magnet. His clothes were untidy, his hair was untidy - in fact, if they'd ever decided to search for a poster-child for untidiness, the old man looked to be a shoe-in. Normal stared at him, giving him the whatchu-talkin-bout-old-man look.

"I meant the wild lands ..." the man hastened to clarify. "Oh, I am sorry; I haven't introduced myself, have I? My name's Zafar Supari. I saw you gazing out the window. You realize that all that destruction and devastation out there was caused by our forefathers?"

"Well, I had only one - so you must have had three," replied Normal with a straight-face. "I had no idea that our combined fathers were capable of all

this destruction! As far as I can recall, mine didn't do much in the way of destruction except to break a couple of windows and a plate once, and Mom wouldn't talk to him for a week over that!"

"Oh that's really droll, it is," the old man smiled dryly. "At least you didn't pick on my name - you have no idea how much I've had to suffer with a name like Zafar. But forgive an old man for straying ... are you one of those who believe that our ancestors did all that or do you belong to one of the other camps?" Zafar pointed to the destruction outside the plastic-glass window.

"You mean the ones who claim that aliens disguised as humans started the Chaos Wars? I don't really buy into that. Most people seem to agree that we, or rather our ancestors, did this. Of course, I sometimes wonder if we are just forcing ourselves to believe that so we'd think of the human race as being actually capable of something – even if it was in our past." Normal paused a moment as if considering something. "Come to think of it, we never seem to be at a loss when it comes to finding new ways of destroying things, so I guess it's not too much of a stretch. Still, it's hard to believe our ancestors had the power to wreak so much havoc when just a couple of decades ago we were struggling to just stay alive."

"But wouldn't that also indicate how good we are at destroying things? What could be greater than the destruction of civilization itself?"

"You have a point there," replied Normal. "Oh and I'm Normal, Normal Kint," he added as an afterthought.

"Nice to make your acquaintance," said the old man with a courteous bow of his head. "These days

nobody remembers our past!" he continued with a little sigh. "First there were all those years of struggling to stay alive after the Age of Chaos. Then we had all these rapid changes after the aliens arrived. That has made a lot of people forget all about our ancient heritage. Sure, it might not be a heritage that we might want to remember but still, if we forget the mistakes of our past, we are doomed to repeat them."

"So you're a scholar of history?"

"Well, that's my field of study - I'm a historian. I work for the University of Donagar and I've been engaged in trying to unearth more data about humanity's past - especially the years before the Age of Chaos. But facts are scarce - most of the time all you have to go on are legends and folk tales. While they might have a germ of truth to them, the problem is in finding which bit is true." Normal could imagine Zafar wringing his hands at this point, but the old man failed to live up to Normal's imaginings.

"You mentioned the Age of Chaos?" continued Normal, warming to the subject and his companion. "I've heard stories about the Age of Chaos since I was a child. They say that all of humanity was fighting against one another and that they had great weapons that could destroy whole continents. But I've not been able to find anything concrete on the GlobalNet at all except for the same old stories. Are those stories actually true?"

"Absolutely!" began Zafar and then the scholar in him appeared to have a word with the human in him. "Or rather, as far as we can determine, most of what has been passed down by way of word of mouth about the Age of Chaos appears to be correct. The

great wars between nations during that time were the main cause of the destruction of human civilization as they knew it at that time. They used bombs that wiped out entire cities and billions of people. In a matter of days, we tumbled from the heights of technological achievement to scrabbling in the ground trying to find our next meal ..."

"And then the aliens arrived and we were back to being on top of technology?" finished Normal.

Zafar gave Normal the kind of look teachers reserved for that one kid who always appeared in every teacher's classroom - the one who sat at the very back of the class, always got five as the answer to two plus two and who giggled uncontrollably whenever the teacher said certain words. "This is not exactly the top rung of the technological ladder, you know. Besides, quite a lot of our people are still living under almost the same conditions that existed before the aliens arrived."

"You can't do anything about the technophobes," Normal shrugged. "The Torvoldites hate all new technology because they think technology caused all our problems of the past. They claim that they don't want to repeat the mistakes of our ancestors. What can you do with people like that?"

"Oh, it's not as simple as that, you know," replied Zafar, smiling indulgently at Normal. "The influx of new technology since the intergalactic trade route was opened has meant that we've suddenly become engorged with technology. Our people aren't assimilating all of it fast enough and so, it's only the cities which are actually using the tech we've received. Most of the people living outside the cities still don't know how to use all these gadgets. Some of

them haven't even heard about a lot of these toys. We need to educate them first."

"Is that so? I thought that the only ones who didn't use the new technology were the Torvoldites. But then again, what do I know? I live in the city. I'm sure you know the trends, and the causes, better than I do," said Normal in a conciliatory tone. He then paused as if considering something, "You ever wonder why the aliens are giving us all this tech for free?"

"Well, as you probably know," began Zafar as if he was back in the lecture rooms of his university, "the first aliens to discover our world were in search of a better trade route between two sectors of the galaxy. We were in an uncharted sector of the galaxy that had not been visited in millennia. They discovered that not only was our planet right smack dab in the middle of the new route that they'd charted out but that the planet was inhabited by sentient beings."

"Yes, every child growing up today knows all of that, but that doesn't explain why they'd be giving away technology without asking for anything in return," interrupted Normal impatiently.

Zafar raised a finger, as if gently chiding a not too bright student. "Yes, being human, we would certainly think that way but apparently, these aliens have a different code of conduct that they have developed over the ages. The Martians, as everybody insists on calling them, were the first to discover us and soon the other races followed since our planet was an ideal stopover point. However, they needed our cooperation to build bases here. While they could have easily taken over the planet by force, what I've

learnt indicates that their code prevents them from doing so. Since they needed our help, they had to build our technology and science up to a level where we'd be of use to them. The bottom-line is that the tech isn't free – we are paying for it in land, resources and manpower."

"I still don't understand why they didn't simply take over the world - they could have ..."

"Ah Pinky, trying to take over the world isn't that easy," replied Zafar with a smile. All he received in return was a blank stare from Normal. Zafar looked to be on the verge of explaining his cryptic remark but then he just shook his head as if to say, "Never mind".

"Yes, most humans don't understand that attitude," continued Zafar with a weary smile that said that he'd heard this particular view many times before. "But these aliens have been meeting new races for millennia and they've learnt over the ages that force is counterproductive in the long run. So they try to enlist a new race's help rather than take them over. Of course, they appear not to forget that a new race that they encounter might not always feel the same way as they do. So, they don't give us all the good stuff at once - certainly not any of the more powerful weapons. It's rather straightforward and logical if you think about it a bit," concluded Zafar, as if this was something that should have been self-evident to Normal.

"I suppose you're right," agreed Normal, nodding his head reluctantly. "I still don't trust them though, especially those Martians. I'm sure they have something up their sleeves ..."

"Never mind the fact that they don't have any sleeves, eh?" chuckled the old man.

Normal grinned and responded, "You know what I meant!"

"Yes I do my friend. But then again, you're not alone in that view either. Most of humanity still looks at all aliens with suspicion."

"Well ... they're not normal people and we have never liked anything that's not normal." Normal paused a beat and then grinned as he said, "Guess that's why everybody likes me, eh?"

"Indeed!" The old man smiled back. "And of course, since they're not normal, you don't know what to expect from them whereas we know exactly what to expect from another human, don't we?"

"Yeah, they'll either try to cheat you, lie to you or steal from you. You can always depend on a fellow human!" said Normal with a wry chuckle.

The continuous background noise of the hoverbus' air jets, which had played counterpoint to their conversation, changed at this moment. Zafar glanced out the window and turned back to Normal. "Ah, we're stopping at a rest station. It would be good to stretch our legs. Maybe we can continue our conversation later?"

"Sure, I'd like that," replied Normal as he got up and stretched, ready to get off the hoverbus and perhaps get something to eat.

Chapter 11 - Wylie at the Drum

The Electric Drum was humming. Or rather, it would be more accurate to say that the Electric Drum was drumming up business at a steady rate. The

Drum, as it was commonly known, was busy all the time since it had the two key elements that any successful bar needs - the right location and the right kind of clients, the drinking kind. The fact that the Drum was run by a bunch of wild young girls did not hamper the success of the business either.

There were many stories about the Drum but they weren't the kind that your wife liked to hear - not unless a blackmail letter accompanied the story. Many types of people passed through the doors of the Drum, some were upright and some were not so upright - the people, not the doors. However, all the previous clients of the Drum had had to face one inescapable fact - they had to open the doors first. For the first time in its history, a customer came through the batwing doors of the Drum and he did not have to open the door first. It was John Wylie.

Wylie pushed through the thronging crowd. The cacophony inside was deafening. It was a wonder that anybody could hear anything in there. But still, most people appeared to be carrying on conversations without any trouble at all. There was a large crowd gathered at the bar. One of the bartenders, a good-looking, red haired young woman, [in fact, all the bartenders at the Drum were young, good-looking and of the female persuasion. This was the long sought after golden formula to get men to drink far more than was good for them.] was engaged in what Wylie assumed to be some sort of a strange human ritual, at the bar. She was performing some kind of fast paced dance which involved various twirling bottles and glasses as well as a lot of shouting and cheering.

The crowd was stomping its feet and loudly proclaiming their appreciation of the dancing. Wylie decided to give that a miss - when you were short, there were certain places that you learnt to avoid. [If you were smart, you learnt this by observing your surroundings. However, there is nothing like a good stomping to stamp a lesson indelibly on your mind, as many a dwarf and midget would tell you.] He walked to the other end of the bar and hauled himself on to a stool.

"Hey, we don't serve kids in here, the juice bar is on the next street!" jibed one of the others sitting at the bar. He looked to have been imbibing freely of the establishment's hospitality.

"My friend, you really shouldn't make me angry," Responded Wylie conversationally.

"Why? You think I wouldn't like it when you're angry?" responded the other.

"You might not like what I could do to you. Didn't your mother ever warn you not to pick a fight with a man who reaches only up to your groin?" replied Wylie with a wicked smile.

While the words may have reached the other immediately, it took a while for the meaning to sink in. Wylie could almost tell the moment since the other spluttered, glanced down hurriedly, stammered something incomprehensible, paid for his drink and moved over to the other end of the bar. One of the bartenders, a young woman, with blonde hair this time, walked over with a smile. [They didn't serve smiles at the Drum though they might walk over with one - smiles were free and so don't make any money.]

"Couldn't help overhearing what you said to that guy. Pretty neat trick, if you can pull it off!"

"I thought that was the whole idea?" grinned Wylie again.

The bartender laughed out loud. "You're a card, you are! What will be your poison?"

"Wouldn't that be the pharmacy? Or the hospital? Or even that little hole-in-the-wall diner over by Chryme Alley?" smirked Wylie.

"You're funny." But the woman didn't look amused. "What will you have to drink?"

"Oh, why didn't you say so? I'll have a Martian Red Rum, if you've got it?"

"Sure, coming right up!"

"So anything new going on in these parts?" inquired Wylie, making conversation. [A scientific method for making conversations has not been discovered yet – this is the kind of secret for which scriptwriters and novelists, not to mention aspiring Romeos, would pay a fortune.]

Wylie idly wondered about the phrase "making conversation" - *You didn't really make a conversation, you had one. Sort of like a baby. Now that he thought about it, it was exactly like a baby, at least for humans it was. You needed at least two people to have one - and sometimes, both people didn't want to have it but they still did. Interesting.* He must remember to put that down in his journal later.

"Well ... nothing much, except for all that business with Boss Chu."

"You mean the city boss? Something happen to him?" Wylie was interested despite the pressing nature of his assignment. Boss Chu controlled the

whole of Kabul City. It was true that he was a gangster but then again, maybe they had hit upon a good solution when they let the mobsters run the city. You at least didn't have to deal with the politicians who became goons (or the goons who became politicians) and your everyday street-corner variety thug too. You just had one kind of thug to deal with and you knew exactly where you stood with them – usually, being menaced at the end of some sort of weapon and having to hand over your cash, if they managed to corner you in a dark alley.

That was far better than handing over your cash for inexplicable intangibles, like social security or medicare. [It was better to see your money go and know that you'll never see it again than to see it go and be told that you'd see it again someday, and then never get to see it again anyway.] A knife, on the other hand, was pretty solid. You saw it and you knew precisely why you were handing your credits over – because the thug at the other end of the knife might not have had the benefit of a good education and might not understand that "your money or your life" is not the same as "your money **and** your life".

Wylie wondered if perhaps this matter with Boss Chu was somehow connected to his search for Normal. Maybe Normal had been kidnapped - not that he could think of any particular reason for anybody in the Fifty Galaxies wanting to kidnap Normal. Unless of course, annoyance merited kidnapping these days, he mentally amended.

"Apparently, some guy's stolen something valuable from Boss Chu. Some say it's a microchip, others say it's microfiche ..."

"That sounds fishy."

"You're quite the comic aren't you? Maybe we should sign you up for an act here ..."

"Nah, I can't handle my liquor ... Plus, I'm on a job already, looking for a friend of mine. Normal, Normal Kint. You wouldn't happen to know him by any chance now would you?" Wylie asked the bartender, hopefully.

"Sorry ... thousands of people come in here daily. Can't keep track of 'em all ..."

Wylie's spirits plummeted like a stalled rocketship. He'd been pinning his hopes of finding somebody at the Drum who might have seen Normal. Now it was back to combing the streets and the streets of Kabul City didn't turn up anything good when they were combed.

"Now there's the kind of name that you don't forget often - Normal Kint! Bet there can't be two Normal Kints in the whole planet. I met a guy by that name just earlier today ..." said a man sitting a couple of stools down from Wylie, breaking in on his gloomy reverie.

"Well there ya go - you can always find what you're looking for at the Drum," said the bartender, moving away to attend to another customer.

Wylie leaned forward, peering past the other patrons sitting at the bar, trying to find the man who'd spoken. The speaker was a big man with a shock of straw blond hair turning white. Something about him screamed cop but then again, nobody probably would hear that over the really loud shirt that he had on. Wylie nodded at the guy.

"Oh, you met Normal? Today, you say? Let me buy you a drink ..."

"Why, thank you kindly! If you don't mind, I'll join you over there - this shouting around people business can be hard on this old throat of mine," replied the man, getting up from his bar stool.

"By all means," responded Wylie, signalling the bartender, "Another of whatever my new friend is having!"

"My name's Carruthers, John Carruthers. I'm a policeman."

"You don't say! I wouldn't have taken you for a cop at all. I'm John Wylie - I am an agent. I represent street artists, find new talent, that kind of thing ..."

Carruthers nodded noncommittally. "Sounds good. So what's your interest in Kint?"

"He's married to one of my employees. She returns home from a trip and he's gone! She was really worried about him and I thought I'd ask around and try to find him ..."

"Trying to do my job for me, eh?" the cop raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Well ... we weren't sure if he was really missing or if he'd just gone off somewhere and forgotten to leave a note for his wife. Somebody I met said that they'd seen him here. So I came over here ..."

"He's not here, that's for sure! The last I saw him, he was on a bus bound for Donagar. But it's funny how he'd go off to Donagar without letting his wife know ..."

Wylie could almost see the mental machinery slowly lumbering into action in the cop's cranium. "Oh, I'm sure something or other must have come up. Maybe he did leave a note but Katy, his wife, never found it. You know how it is ..." he said hurriedly,

attempting to divert any further interest in the affair on the part of the law.

"Yeah, in my line of work, half the time the MP, that's what we call a missing person," he confided as an aside to Wylie, "is back at home by the time their loved ones file a report and go home. There we'd be searching high and low for them, and the next day we get a call saying, 'Oh it's OK, they came back last night - they'd gone out for a pizza.' Why can't they let us know immediately, I ask you?"

"I know. People, I tell you! Anyway, thanks for the information. Guess I'd better get back to the office and let Katy know that Normal's fine," remarked Wylie, putting a few credits on the counter and sliding off his stool.

"Yeah, thanks for the drink! Look me up any time you're here again. I'm usually here most evenings when I'm off duty."

"Will do!" replied Wylie, and then strode out with a cheery wave to the cop. He had to keep down the urge to break into a run towards the nearest hoverbus stop. *Donagar? What possessed that confounded, careless, canine-stealing crack-brained cretin to go to Donagar? Did he have the dog with him still?* Wylie had been tempted to ask the cop about the dog, but it hadn't seemed wise to arouse his suspicions further. Even cops sometimes tumbled on to things. [Though for some strange reason, the one thing that cops most often stumbled upon was the location of the nearest doughnut shop. This curious phenomenon had been observed with regards to not just human cops, but policemen everywhere in the Fifty Galaxies. Incidentally, some of the worlds in the Fifty Galaxies did not have doughnuts but it was

remarkable how many did – fried batter with a hole in the middle seemed to be as much of a universal constant as the concept of zero.]

He just hoped that the blasted dog was safe!

Chapter 12 - The Raiders in Chryme Alley

The Debian Raiders never did anything in half measures. This time was no exception. When they decided to crash-land, they crashed and burned with the best. However, to once again highlight the fact that there was no justice in the universe, instead of going down in flames as they should have, the Raiders recovered from their first contact with the new planet thanks to their ejection seats.

One by one, they arrived at the meeting place. The poor ship which had laboured so hard to bring them to this planet bid goodbye to this world by way of little explosions and a few hisses and crackles, in the background. Despite the fact that none of them were seriously injured, the crash-landing had left its mark upon all of the Raiders. Some had torn clothing, others had dirt and grass smears and still others limped over carrying their gear. Alb was the last one to arrive since he'd been unlucky enough to have his ejection get caught up on the one single tree that stuck out like a sore thumb from the landscape. Alb was munching on some leaves and was going into raptures about how good they tasted. Except for that tree, it was just empty land, grass and shrubs and lots of huge rifts – no trees, no animals – for as far as the eye could see.

Once they were all accounted for, Rod suggested that they change their appearance. This started a heated debate amongst the Raiders, as almost anything did, about the merits of this idea. They really didn't need a disguise since they were physiologically identical to the race that inhabited the planet. At least, that's what their reports had indicated. So, a change of clothing and some time with their hypno-trainers should have been the only preparation necessary for this mission.

Or rather, that would have been enough if you'd been sane. But then again, it could be argued that you never went into the mercenary trade if you were the least bit sane. Rod had decided that an exercise in disguise would help them stay at the top of their form. While some of the Raiders muttered about what form Rod would end up in if he kept this up, they eventually went along with Rod's decision since they knew from bitter experience that it was better to give in than to argue when a notion got into Rod's head. [Notions usually found it really difficult to get into Rod's head – his brothers said that it was because how hard-headed he was. Rod believed that it was because all the good notions were already in his head and there was no more room in there.]

By all rights, the Raiders should have had no equipment at all due to the fact that their ship had gone up in flames. But experience can be a great teacher for even the most thick-skulled student given that the said student has the lesson knocked into his skull enough times. The brothers had had this particular lesson ingrained into them so many times that they now insisted on custom ejection seats for any ship they used - the seats had to be redesigned to

hold not just a Raider but his gear as well. So the Raiders, while without any means to get off the ground, did at least have all of their equipment and weaponry at their disposal.

Now that a decision had been made, the Raiders set to with a will, putting in some inspired work with paint and powder, from which they emerged looking a lot like clowns. [This was something the Raiders excelled at - they usually emerged from all of their missions looking like clowns.] While some unkind souls might have argued that this was the proper look for them, the Raiders decided that the new look wouldn't do. It was back to scrubbing their faces clean and a change of clothes. Finally, the Debian Raiders were ready to be on the prowl.

Navigating the ravaged land turned out to be a mission on its own. The chasms at some points were so deep that you couldn't see bottom. Given that the Raiders were not the best when it came to navigating and that they weren't very familiar with the land around Kabul City, it was another testament to their incredible luck that they got out of the badlands and made it to the city at all. But they did make it and they even managed to get through the city gates without much hassle – it was evening rush hour and the guards were too busy controlling the outgoing traffic to worry too much about newcomers. But the Raiders did not go unnoticed for long.

It had been a while since they'd been off-planet and they had completely forgotten the fact that twelve identical-looking individuals taking a stroll might cause some stares and comments. Their memories were jogged soon enough - in fact, almost as soon as they got out of the crowded lanes and were seen as a

group, and periodically thereafter. A hasty council of war by the roadside had resulted in Sal coming up with the idea that splitting up into smaller groups might be the way to go since it might not be as noticeable as a large group of identical individuals. Thus it was that the Raiders made their way slowly towards the heart of Kabul City in ones and twos.

The cavalcade of clones which was proceeding on its merry way came to a sudden halt when they turned in to Chryme Alley. [This wasn't a new battle tactic whereby they became a single fighting unit by chanting some ancient mantra. They'd investigated the possibilities of doing that but it had not panned out. The cost of ancient mantras had been prohibitively steep. Even an instruction manual on the five-point palm exploding heart technique cost an arm and a leg, not to mention a heart, these days.]

Or rather, Sal, who was in the vanguard, stopped on hearing a voice which came from the deepest, darkest depths of the alley.

"That's 'im! That's 'im! Grab 'im! Oh no wait, the one behind 'im, that's the one! No, the other one! They're all 'im! Get 'em all!"

"What in tarnation? Varlet, step forth and let me see with mine own eyes who accosteth me!"

As the words left his lips, Sal realized that his hypno-trainer had probably slipped a relay again. The words sounded a bit strange – though they had every right to sound strange since he had not spoken this language before in his life. A quick mental review of the latest knowledge that his mind had acquired was all he needed to see that he needed to change a few things in the way he spoke. He hoped that he'd get it right on the next try.

"Varlet? Is 'e speaking to us Abdul?" came the same voice from the recesses of the alley.

"I mean, what's up, dude?" asked Sal, trying again.

"I'd say you, bro! And probably fairly high too ... and definitely swinging by your neck, when Chu gets a'hold of you!" said the speaker while stepping out of the murky depths of the alley into a slightly less dark patch of, well, darkness. Sal could see that he was an unsavoury looking character - bewhiskered, dressed in black [as any self-respecting criminal would tell you, not only does black allow you to blend into the darkness, it hides dirt and grease stains well.] and probably smelled bad as well. That was a comfort - they had tangled with scores of unsavoury characters in their career and knew how to handle them. The only problem was that the usual venue for meeting such people had been the local bar – not a dark alley in a strange city.

The first man, if the term could be applied to him [he looked more like what a man would be if he had been all used up and then thrown out on to the garbage heap], was joined by others who appeared out of the dark like moths drawn to a flame. They were carrying a motley assortment of weapons which were all now pointed directly at the Raiders. A faint aura of menace hung around them as if it just couldn't bear to leave them. The aura was as much a part of them as the dirt-rings around their necks, or the rather strong smell of unwashed bodies – or perhaps, the aura was due to these things. Sal looked behind him for the support of his comrades but only Rod and Tre had followed him into the alley. There wasn't a sign

of the rest of the Raiders. Rod, who'd been sidling up to him, chose that moment to whisper,

"You know Sal, fear gets a bad rap. I don't want anybody in our outfit that doesn't get scared."

Sal tried to keep his voice steady, "Then I'm definitely your guy."

"Just don't get negative on me, now!" replied Rod who'd just realized that while a healthy dose of fear was good for you, there was also such a thing as an overdose.

"Affirmative," Sal responded in his clipped voice, you could barely notice the tiny tremor in it.

"OK, compadres, what seems to be the problemmo?" asked Rod turning to face the menacing group.

"Yeah, don'tchu know who you're messin' with?" piped in Tre.

"Chu knows who you are boy ... err ... boys! But have you plumb gone and forgot who Chu is?" asked one of the thugs.

"Enlighten ... I mean, tell us, who is this Chu? We have no idea who he is or what he's got to do with us!" Sal replied.

"They're trying to play it dumb, eh Abdul?" said the thug who'd been doing most of the talking so far, turning to another ruffian in his group.

"Oh you should know all about that Mario," jibed the only female in the group. *Do you call her a thuggess or a mobstress*, wondered Sal.

"Can it, Lisa!" commanded the one named Abdul, clueing Sal in on who was in charge. "It sure looks like them but I didn't know there was more than one of 'em though ..."

"Must be twins," broke in Mario.

"Triplets, you idiot!" snapped Lisa.

"Whatever!" snapped the leader, glaring at his team members. Then he turned back towards the Raiders. "One of you, or maybe all of you ... who knows if all of you were working together? ... stole somethin' valuable from Boss Chu! I've seen you when you were at the Boss' place. And guess what? Boss Chu wants his stuff back. He sent us to get it back, see?"

"But my good man, we have just arrived in this fair city! Upon our honour, we have no idea who this Boss Chu is!" exclaimed Sal, treating Abdul to a scouts-honour-cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die look.

"Yeah, whatchu talkin' 'bout, Abdul?" added Tre, utterly destroying the effect of Sal's look.

"That's Boss Chu to you, you double-crossing rat! He sure knows what he's talking 'bout, 'cos he's sayin' give his stuff back and maybe he'll let you live. Or maybe he'll just give you a quick death," responded Abdul, evidently enjoying the discomfort of the Raiders.

"Yeah, instead of torturin' you for days like he did with the last guy who pissed 'im off," chuckled Mario, sounding like a gurgling toad.

"But we told you, we don't know what you're talking about!" replied Rod, in a valiant effort to take sense where sense had never been before.

"That's too bad for you then. Guess we'll have to do this the hard way!" said Abdul and motioned to his band of merry cutthroats. The Raiders watched mesmerised as the gangsters started moving towards them in a purposeful manner.

"Do somethin', Sal!" pleaded Tre.

"This is a situation for diplomacy Tre, and diplomacy requires patience."

"Well, we've got patience in spades! We are being attacked by mental patients and if we don't do something soon, we are going to end up being patients who are patiently waiting for every bone in their body to knit properly!" whispered Rod urgently.

"OK boys, that's far enough! We have no idea who you are or who this boss Chu is. We'd be happy to come over and clear this matter up with him but we can't do that just now as we are already late for an important business meeting. I'm afraid that if you don't step aside, we're going to have to go through you!" said Sal, stepping forward to meet the approaching thugs.

"And how do you think you're gonna do that?" asked Abdul, bringing his gun up to bear on Sal.

"We will beat a bloody trail through you, we are highly trained mercenaries!" said Sal, taking a combat stance. The goons facing them did not appear in the least bit fazed by this display of martial skills. In fact, they looked rather amused, if anything. Sal's brothers, realizing that fists against guns would only result in spilt blood – theirs – simply took up their guns and aimed them every which way. There certainly were a lot of places to aim at, but just not enough guns on their side.

"Err .. Sal, maybe we should think about going back to diplomacy?" asked Rod looking from one thug to another and seeing nothing but glee at the prospect of an ass-whupping.

"Umm ... I'm beginning to think you're right, Rod," said Sal, turning around to speak to his brother. But then, a gleam appeared in his eyes as he caught

sight of something behind Rod and his whole posture changed. Sal turned around, straightened his back and faced their opponents with new confidence. "You might as well give up now or we'll have to hurt you," he said, looking Abdul in the eye. [This was no mean task – they say that if you look into the abyss, the abyss looks back at you. In the case of Abdul, his eyes were an abyss of iniquity, sin and corruption and looking directly into that abyss required a special kind of person. But then again, when it came to such things, the Raiders were nothing but special.]

"Oh yeah, you an' what army?" sneered Mario.

"That would be us, hombre!" said a voice from above. Heads turned and faces glanced up so fast amongst Abdul's group that it was a minor miracle that none of them got whiplash. The rest of the Raiders lined the buildings on both sides of the alley, their weapons trained unwaveringly on the group of thugs below them. The thugs stared, and then they stared, and then, stared some more. If their jaws hadn't been so tightly clamped, they certainly would have dropped with a resounding clang to the street. In unison, like a bunch of clockwork dolls, they looked at one face and then another of their enemy – always encountering the same face. They kept on going back and forth, back and forth, like hypnotized mice, almost as if hoping that they'd made a mistake.

"Did you know the others would do that?" whispered Rod.

"Heck no, I was expecting them to rush in here and help us!" replied Sal.

"I guess somebody in there had more sense than you then – we'd better watch out or we might have a new leader in the group."

Sal was about to make a sharp retort but Abdul chose that moment to break the silence which had been gripping the thugs in a tight embrace.

"What in Shima is going on? Three of them, fine. But a dozen of them?"

"We are as much in the dark as you are and you'll notice it's very dark here, ha ha. But seriously, we don't know even as much as you do! And while we'd love to stay and chat, we really must get going. So I guess we'll just have to catch up on stuff some other time. Good morrow to ye!" said Sal with a cheery wave and walked straight towards the still gaping thugs.

For a long, tense moment, it looked as if the grime of Chryme Alley might be washed off in a bloodbath unlike any other that Kabul City had seen before. [Speaking of bloodbaths, it is said that in ancient times, a Queen of Kabul had bathed in the blood of asses to remain forever beautiful - even she would not have seen asses the likes of the Debian Raiders.]

The three Raiders kept walking and Abdul's merry band of thugs stood their ground and even brought their weapons up to bear on the advancing Raiders. Then Abdul looked upward once again at the guns trained on them and sighed. He motioned to his companions to move out of the way and his cohorts obediently parted, like a little boy's hair when his mother applies a comb, to let the three Raiders pass.

The three, deciding that questions about the puzzling encounter they'd had could wait for later, moved at a fast trot to get out of the alley and rejoin their comrades at the other end of it. Their mercenary training finally coming to the fore, they immediately

hunkered down, got their own weapons out, and provided cover for their brothers to come off the upper buildings. [Their military training was very good at camouflage - up to this point, it had only been apparent due to the Raiders' lack of any military training whatsoever.]

Then, in that peculiar military formation which looks a lot like constipated ducks waddling towards water, they proceeded to move out from the vicinity of Chryme Alley in an orderly fashion, each team providing cover for the other, while the thugs that they'd just confronted watched silently. The Raiders were sure that the expression on the faces of their opponents was one of impotent fury, but an impartial observer might have said that it was more like perplexity. However, whether what perplexed them was the Raiders' funny walk or the confusing encounter that had just taken place, was a mystery.

Chapter 13 - Normal meets the android

Normal stepped off the hoverbus suffused in a glow of relief. It was good to be able to stretch his legs after sitting down for so long. The hoverbuses were far more comfortable than the vehicles they'd had before the aliens arrived, but it still didn't make sitting down for long stretches of time any less tedious.

Normal looked around but realized that he needn't have bothered. The rest station was the same old carbon copy building that you saw everywhere on the highways – blocky, long, functional and yet

totally unaesthetic. The surroundings were the same old blasted terrain that you saw everywhere in the world. It was a mute testament to the fact that you could never get away from your life – no matter how far you ran.

He wished for the umpteenth time that he'd taken an airship to Donagar. But that would have cost more and he didn't want to have to explain *that* to Kathryn - provided she'd cooled down enough to forgive him for what he'd done with the mutt in the first place. The airship ride would have been so much faster. Plus, he wouldn't have had to put up with all the hassles he'd had, or the Cheese. Of course, the Atmos weren't much better when it came to greasing palms. With his luck, he would surely have been stopped by an Atmo when they disembarked at Donagar. Sometimes he wished that things had stayed the way they had been before the Martians came. He certainly wouldn't have sold the mutt to a Martian if there were no Martians to sell to! Ah well, no use crying over dropped bombs. [Some believe that this saying came into usage during one of the great wars – a long forgotten general had cried after a bomb was dropped that it should have been dropped on the next country over since they were much weaker. Unfortunately, the general had not had much time to cry since his own country was bombed out of existence soon after.]

Normal was walking over to the rest station when a disturbance caught his attention. It was a large crowd of people milling around, yelling, making comments, arguing, chattering and pointing at something at the centre of the gathering. His curiosity aroused, Normal ambled over, eager to find out what

was happening. He had considered ignoring the commotion and going over to the rest station, but the same kind of curiosity which compels most people to stop and gawp at a gruesome murder scene or a violent accident kept him going - you just couldn't resist the urge to see and to learn. He wondered if all the alien races were as curious as humans or if this was a trait unique to humans. Based on his limited experience with the few races he'd encountered, the aliens had not appeared to be as curious as humans or cats. But it was a huge universe out there, so there must be other alien races out there that were much more inquisitive than the ones he'd met. They wouldn't be exploring the universe if they weren't curious, now would they?

The gathered people were craning their necks to see someone - or something. He elbowed his way through the throng, ignoring the protests and snarls of those he shoved out of the way. The crowd turned out to be watching - or rather tormenting - a man. A slight, frail-looking, dark haired man wearing torn clothing. He sported several minor scratches and scrapes, obviously inflicted by what was beginning to look a lot like a mob. A member of the mob was on the verge of hurling a stone he held in his grubby fist at the man on the ground when Normal grabbed his arm.

"Here friend, what seems to be the problem?"

"The problem? The problem *friend* is that we've got a dirty android on our hands! We mean to make sure that he doesn't go around taking jobs away from honest folks no more!"

Normal looked at the man, or rather android as now appeared to be the case, on the ground with

renewed interest. One of the earliest technologies introduced to the planet by the aliens had been robots. All the alien races used robots of one kind or another to do most of their hard work. Normal recalled how they'd had huge robots clear out the land and build the first space port that the Martians had set up. Later, they'd brought in different models - each one suited to a different task. The androids, however, had been a rather recent introduction.

One of the more humanoid alien races had figured out that they could alter the physical appearance of some of their older model used androids, refurbish them a bit and sell them here. It brought them a tidy profit on a used model and people who wanted cheap labour found an acceptably human-looking source of manpower – or rather, android-power. That was of course, until androids began to be so ubiquitous that the natural prejudices of humanity kicked into high gear. It was as if all the hatreds, biases and phobias that humanity had been slowly leaving behind after the Age of Chaos had wakened like an infant in the middle of the night and had burst into full, screaming, rage.

There had been instances of androids being hunted down by angry mobs armed with clubs and flametorches. Then there were the businesses which made use of androids, quite a few of them were attacked and destroyed. People who talked out in support of androids had found themselves ostracized and sometimes, treated the same way that the androids themselves had been treated – with extreme prejudice. [When it came to humanity, prejudice wasn't a state of mind, it was an action - quite often, lethal.]

Things had gotten so bad that governments all over the world had had to step in to curb the growing violence against androids and their employers. They'd enacted strict laws making the destruction of androids a serious crime that carried hefty penalties.

[Governments everywhere in the Fifty Galaxies had a habit of stepping in when rich people were affected – the poor counted only if they had votes or provided a good PR opportunity. You had to be rich to afford an android and if you were being attacked, of course it mattered.]

That had been about a year or so ago.

Unfortunately, the laws appeared to inflame people's resentment even further. The anti-android groups saw the new laws as proof that the androids were treated as if they were on the same level as human beings, that soon they'd be given the same rights as "normal folk". Of course, due to the severe penalties for destroying androids - who were private property -, most couldn't do anything except to glower in resentment each time they saw an android and mutter about how the world had come to such a stage that a human being would soon be a second-class citizen on his own planet. However, there were also the strays.

The strays were androids that had been let go by their owners when the violence had first started. The owners had feared for their own lives and had given the androids their freedom, letting them fend for themselves the best they could. While most of these strays had been captured and destroyed by the mobs soon enough, some had learned to escape detection and blend in with the human populace and to pass as human.

Every once in a while though, a stray would be discovered and he or she would usually meet the same fate that had been meted out to so many others of their kind at the hands of humanity - destruction. Normal wondered why they let themselves be destroyed without a struggle when they had the strength of ten or twenty humans. He guessed that they probably had some sort of built-in safeguards to prevent them from harming their masters, or perhaps even any sentient being. But then again, at times like these, it begged the question as to whether human beings, while sentient, did indeed deserve to be called human when they obviously lacked any such compunction about another being - whether artificial or natural.

Normal stared at the presumed android on the ground again. He really had no liking for androids and wanted to just walk away and forget about the whole incident. But there was that side of him which cried out against any situation where one individual was picked on by a mob. There was something inherently wrong about that whole scenario. Against his better judgement, Normal decided to jump in with both feet.

"Come on now, how do you know for sure he's an android? What if he's just a normal human being like you or me?" Normal asked the man-with-the-stone.

"You think we're stupid? [This question, when asked in that particular tone, almost always merits the answer "Yes".] Lobo over there has a scanner. It's for detecting metal and stuff - he uses it for prospecting. That's how we discovered the android. What's it to you anyway?" he asked, turning a suspicious eye on Normal. [He could turn only one eye suspiciously,

the other one was a fake plastic one and wasn't capable of suspicion, though it could give out an eerie, green glow in the dark.]

"I'm just an interested bystander, that's all. OK, say he's an android, what if he belongs to somebody? Do you know the penalty for destroying an android which belongs to somebody?" asked Normal, oblivious of the fact that using logic against a mob is as useless as trying to stop a tidal wave with a bucket of sand.

"You think if it belonged to somebody it would've stayed silent?" sneered the other.

Normal considered simply walking away and again rejected the notion. This situation seemed to call out to him. He had always been for the underdog (*well, except for when the underdog happened to be a dog*, he amended). The androids might be cold, calculating machines but they still didn't deserve to be treated like objects. He couldn't explain why he felt this way but he did and he'd always believed in acting on his impulses. So act he did. [Unfortunately for Normal, he'd never learnt to differentiate between the impulses which got one killed and the ones which could be safely indulged. The fact that he'd survived for so long went a long way towards negating the theory of the survival of the fittest.]

"Shouldn't all of you reconsider what you are doing? This could be a legal matter – destruction of private property and so on ..."

Like a lumbering behemoth that gradually becomes aware of an insect buzzing at its ear, the mob had become aware of Normal and his interruptions at last. It now turned its attention from the android to Normal.

"Hey mister, this is none of your business! Why don't you just get back on that bus of yours and get on out of here?" snarled a non-too-friendly looking, bearded individual.

"I guess I've just made it my business. Why don't you guys leave him alone and go about your way?" snapped Normal. A score of voices answered him.

"And what if we don't? Are you gonna make us?"

"You know unattended androids are fair game, mister! We aim to have some fun and nobody's gonna stop us!"

"This android isn't yours, mister! Go on now, beat it!"

"And what if the android is mine? What if I were to say to the android, 'I employ you!', as I just did, are you still going to carry out this ... this lynching?" queried Normal.

The mob animal hesitated. Some of the individuals looked to the others as if for leadership - unsure what response to give. The hirsute man that Normal had noticed earlier seemed to decide that great leaders weren't made, or born, but stepped forward when they were needed. He stepped forward, and with him came the wicked looking pitchfork that he carried.

"Mister, we aim to make an example of this here android! We don't want it and its kind taking jobs away from honest folks! And if you're gonna stand in our way, you might have to join him!"

Normal looked to the crowd behind the hairy man, looking for some sign of support. He found support there, but it was not on his side.

"Attacking me is going to be a criminal act for sure, you know!" he said desperately, trying to back

up and wishing that he hadn't gotten involved in this mess after all.

"The Cheese around here are reasonable – they don't hear anything over the sound of credits hitting their bank account," grinned the leader. He motioned to a couple of people in the crowd, "Ibrahim, Jake. You two hold this guy while I teach him to mind his own business from now on."

Two men detached from the crowd and moved forward slowly, as if not quite sure they wanted to get involved and yet, unable to say no with the eyes of everybody on them. The crowd surged closer, like mobs everywhere, eager to see blood spilled. As long as it wasn't their own.

Normal looked all around for assistance from any quarter, hoping against hope that his desperate gamble earlier would work out. His heart lifted from the bottomless pit it had dropped to as he saw that his million-to-one shot might actually be succeeding.

"Are you sure that's how you want to play it?" he asked the leader with a smile.

"Yes, I'm sure!" glowered the other, irritated and slightly disconcerted, by Normal's smile. No sane man should be smiling like that when faced by an angry mob.

"Even if *my* android is behind you and is tenderly holding your two associates in case they hurt themselves with those nasty weapons of theirs?"

The other hesitated for a moment, perhaps suspecting a trick, and then spun around. There indeed was the android, no longer cowering on the ground but instead holding up Ibrahim and Jake without any discernible effort. The two men were

desperately kicking their feet in the air and struggling in vain to get free of the android's iron grip.

"He really is an android!" the bearded man snarled, looking from the android to Normal and back again.

"You weren't even sure, were you? All you wanted was your bit of fun!" accused Normal.

"Doesn't matter! I guess you think you outsmarted us, binding him to you that way ..." spluttered the leader.

"As you said, doesn't matter. He is my android now and he and I are walking out of here," responded Normal. "Why don't you nice folks just go on home and reconsider the error of your ways?"

"Like Shima we will! Even your android can't get us all. So we will get you in the end!" shouted the leader, taking a step towards Normal, which coincidentally, placed him a step away from the android.

"Ah, but who is going to go first?" asked Normal with a serene smile. "You realize that he can snap an arm or a leg, or even a neck for that matter, as easily as you would snap a twig? So who wants to be the first brave ... and dead, man?" Given his earlier speculations, Normal was certain that the android wouldn't harm any other human being unless he had no other choice - for instance, to save his master's life. At least, he hoped that this was the case now that the android had been bonded to him. He prayed that the mob wouldn't know that.

"We've got guns! Tommy, go get the guns!" screamed the would-be leader.

Normal's mind raced. There was no way for even an android to handle a mob armed with guns - not

that the android could have handled even an unarmed mob, not if they'd decided to rush him all at once. But Normal knew his fellow humans well enough to know that they wouldn't do that – at least not now. They would have just rushed the android when they were all worked up and were acting as part of the mindless mob animal. But now that their zombie march had been halted and the momentum interrupted, they'd think twice before resorting to violence – especially if there was a chance of retaliation. However, if they had guns and could take down the android from a distance with impunity, that would be a different story altogether. Fortunately, Tommy, whoever he was, didn't appear to be in a hurry to comply with the leader's request – perhaps because he was afraid that the android would turn on him if he did. But that too wasn't going to last long.

"What if I were to tell my android to drop those two nice gentlemen he's embracing so lovingly and to make sure that you don't do anything stupid which might end in people getting hurt? Of course, in order to do that, he might have to twist your arm a bit, literally. Did you know that some of these androids don't even know their own strength? They say that one of them pulled a head off a baby once, trying to dress it or something ... Of course, I don't believe such stories – its all just a bunch of hooley!" he said in a conversational tone of voice.

"You ... you wouldn't dare!" The leader didn't appear convinced of this though. He obviously was thinking that this was exactly what he'd do if he was in Normal's shoes. [Not that they would have fit him, Normal was a size 8 whereas the other guy was at least a 12.]

"Why don't we all take a deep breath, relax and try to sort this out like old friends?" said Normal pleasantly. "My android will now let those two rather docile gentlemen go and simply hold on to you sir, to make sure that you don't do anything stupid."

The android had complied with Normal's words almost before they were out of his mouth. The bearded leader had no opportunity to protest or to react - he was securely held in the android's grip and was as helpless as a newborn babe. And the thoughts of a baby - a particular one who lost their head, literally - was probably going through his mind over and over again. Normal smiled.

"Now, why don't you show us where these guns are, eh? People might get hurt - especially us - if people play with such dangerous toys. We'll just make sure that these guns are taken care of so no harm can come to anybody. Then we'll be on our way while all these other nice gentle-people stay right here to make sure that no accidents happen. We don't want anything bad to happen to anybody because they decided to make a sudden move, now do we?"

The leader struggled vainly in the android's vice-like grip though it was evident that he wasn't going to get anywhere. At last, realizing that his struggles were in vain, he ceased his thrashing about and snarled, "Alright, I'll show you where the guns are, but don't think this is the end of it! We'll get you!"

"Now, now! Don't you think you should consider your current situation before you make such inflammatory threats, my dear sir?" inquired Normal gently. The leader simply glared at him, fury radiating from him like heat from the sun.

"Now, about these guns ... where are they?"

"They're over there. In the trunk of that hovercar," said the leader, trying to point with his chin.

"Ah, how convenient. We did need some means of transportation since I don't believe the bus is leaving just yet. I guess we'll just take advantage of the charming rural hospitality we hear so much about and take that hovercar off your hands. I'm certain that you will thank me one of these days for taking those dangerous weapons far, far away from here!"

"Yeah, we will be sure to thank you personally ..." gritted out the leader.

"I'm sure you will" replied Normal, smiling sweetly. "Now, you can accompany us over to the hovercar. It's only polite to see your guests off, right?"

As the bearded man muttered something about seeing them off to Shima, they backed away slowly from the mob to the hovercar. Normal watched the crowd while the android carried the leader effortlessly at arm's length. The crowd, deprived of leadership, seemed unsure of what their next course of action should be. Some individuals made as if to move towards the retreating pair but desisted when Normal looked at them and wagged an admonitory finger. Most of them simply watched the retreat sullenly and silently.

Once he was in the driver's seat, Normal called out to the android. "You, get in with him, wait till we're off the ground and then throw him out!"

The android complied without a word as Normal revved the engine and pushed the throttle all the way up. The curses of the mob leader followed them as Normal manoeuvred the hovercar on to the highway.

Then, with the auto-pilot engaged, he turned to the android.

"OK, then. I'm sorry we didn't have time for introductions in the middle of all that. Thanks for following my lead – it could have gotten pretty hairy if you hadn't. I'm Normal Kint by the way, you got a name?"

"I'm called Johnny Goolbhai," replied the android formally. He then paused for a moment, cocking his head as if in thought, and then asked, "A verbal contract of employment is binding on this planet and you did employ me back there, did you not, sir?"

Normal stared for a moment and then laughed out loud. "Yes, indeed I did. I have no idea what I'm going to do with you though," He looked around, taking stock of the situation. "We have a trunk load of guns, a mob on our heels and a fistful of centavos in the ashtray. We're also three thousand clicks from Donagar. So you and me, Johnny, are going on a road trip!" he said as he disengaged the auto-pilot and pushed the throttle all the way up.

Chapter 14 - Kerr at the Drum

Kerr's eyes almost popped out of his head. They could have - his species had eyes on stalks that retracted into their body. In this instance, he did want to pop them out to get a better view, but he decided to restrain himself - humans had a curious aversion to popping eyes. Maybe it was this whole negative association they had between aliens and bug eyes.

Kerr looked again. If he wasn't mistaken, that was a Denebian – and he knew that he wasn't mistaken. They looked a lot like humans except that they were

much shorter due to the gravity on Deneb V being around three times the gravity of the human world. Kerr hadn't known that there were any Denebians in this sector at all. Their home planet was at the other end of the Fifty Galaxies. *What was the Denebian doing here*, he wondered. Perhaps he'd been mistaken? There *were* humans that short. But the physiognomy and the way the person had carried himself was wrong somehow for a human. But what was the point of speculation? Maybe it was a stray Denebian or it could have been a strange human after all - they did tend to come in all shapes, sizes and colours. He needed to get his mind back on the business at hand and stop this idle wondering.

He didn't like crowds – and in particular, he hated human crowds. They had this curious reaction towards aliens - they'd look anywhere but at him directly. He was also quite certain that they muttered things beneath their breath when his back was turned. As far as Kerr was concerned, this was strange behaviour - unless you were engaged in a mating ritual. And an amorous human wasn't something that Kerr was really keen on contemplating.

Unfortunately, the Electric Drum was where he'd met the human, Normal Kint, and where the fake canine had been palmed off on him. So, this had seemed the best place to start his search for Kint. Sure, it was a very crowded place, but perhaps the crowd would work to his advantage. Maybe they wouldn't know everybody who came there but surely, somebody must remember him at least. Or so he hoped.

There was a big crowd at one end of the bar where a female was gyrating like a mad ballerina on

top of the bar. Kerr could see that a lot of twirling bottles and glasses were involved in whatever she was doing. He wondered what that was all about. Maybe a human courtship ritual? It sure did look like a mating dance what with all those human males clustered around the female. They looked like a slobbering pack of Dzingos looking at a tasty bit of meat. Maybe the humans ate their females as part of the mating ritual? Not that any of their exhaustive data on the humans indicated something like that, but he must make a note of it for later investigation. [Kerr's people had a very lucrative business in trading anthropological and cultural data about various races to other races.]

Kerr headed towards the bar since that looked like the best place to start. The bartender might have a lead on Kint, if anybody did. He tried to get the attention of the bartender but she was busy with another customer and wasn't looking his way. So, deciding to wait for her, Kerr hauled himself on to a bar stool next to a large blond-haired man. [All humans looked large to Kerr but this one had that special looming quality that angry mothers and bill collectors all over the universe had inherited as a special talent from an often bountiful, and sometimes quirky, maker.]

The man glanced casually in Kerr's direction as if to see who the new arrival was ... and then his gaze sharpened.

"Hello, what have we here?" said the man, almost to himself. Since no answer appeared to be expected of him, Kerr simply sat there, Ringo's leash clutched in one of his three arms, still trying vainly to catch the bartender's eye.

"Did I tell you that I am an officer of the law?" the blond man asked. Kerr looked around to see who the man was addressing and realized that he was the one being accosted. He wondered why the other man was offering him this bit of information.

"You are? How very interesting!" Kerr responded.

"Are you familiar with the Feenster and Meaney Graft Act?" This looked to be another non sequitur. Kerr was beginning to wonder if the man was inebriated. He decided that it was best to play along. These humans sometimes got violent when they had imbibed too much of the beverages served at the bar.

"Yes, I've heard about the law," replied Kerr, turning away from the man in the hope that he would go away. But it appeared that the blond man was not to be deterred.

"You realize that the Feenster and Meaney Graft Act prohibits an officer of the law from explicitly asking for a bribe?"

"So I've been informed," said Kerr shortly, wondering if he should perhaps get and up and walk over to the bartender.

"And you also realize that an officer *may* accept a bribe if given by a citizen - or an alien - of their own free will?"

It was the blond officer of the law again. These humans just didn't get a hint! Kerr wondered if he should ask to be left alone but decided to humour the fellow for the moment. "I believe that was how it was worded, yes."

"OK, as long as you understand the law clearly." Carruthers, for it was he, paused as if waiting for something. He then waited a bit more as if waiting for

somebody who was extremely slow to catch up. And then he waited some more for those who were so slow that the race was over and a new one was being run when they approached the finish line. Kerr, taking the policeman's silence as an indication that the conversation was over, had already forgotten about Carruthers and was again signalling the bartender. Finally, when he couldn't take it any longer, Carruthers burst out, "OK, that's it, you're under arrest!"

Kerr, startled, looked back at the policeman, as if wondering who was being addressed this time. There appeared to be no question as to the party being addressed since Carruthers was looking right at Kerr. "But I haven't done anything!" Kerr protested. "How can you arrest me just like that? And under what charges? "

"Public indecency ... and owning a dog without a permit!" snapped the officer, pulling out his ubiquitous notebook.

"Indecency? How do you mean?" Kerr was confused. These crazy humans. At times, nothing they did made any sense.

"You aren't wearing any clothes! How do you think all these nice, well-bred people feel about that?"

Kerr looked around. Some of the nice, well-bred people - like the girl dancing on the bar - had barely enough clothing to not catch a cold. And the way the males were looking at her, Kerr had a feeling that a cold would probably be loath to pass her by. Some of the other nice people were staring so hard at her that they stopped just short of a large neon sign over their heads indicating what they were thinking. Their thoughts certainly would appear to centre around

clothing too - but it certainly wasn't about putting more clothes on the girl to preserve her nice, respectable status. Then again, some of the other nice, well-bred people were drifting towards him and the police officer and the looks on their faces didn't seem very nice at all. Kerr was beginning to wonder if it had been a wise move to come on this search for Kint, at least, to this crowded bar.

"There are conventions ... aliens are protected from this kind of harassment ..." Kerr stammered.

"Harassment? Are you implying that I, an officer of the law, would harass an alien visitor to our planet? I'm shocked!" The outrage in Carruthers' voice would have done any mother, or politician, proud. "I'm just trying to do my duty! You shouldn't have anything to fear if you haven't broken any laws."

"But I have not! My people do not wear clothing. Surely, you've met others of my kind? We've had contact with humanity for years! As for the canine, you have hundreds or even thousands of them roaming your streets with no permits!"

"Who're you calling Shirley? And what's that about permits? Are you calling our fair city a dump now? Is that it?"

"I did not say that ..." but Kerr could see that the situation was already careening out of control as more and more humans began drifting towards the altercation. They didn't look very friendly. In fact, they looked decidedly unfriendly. He might have entertained the hope that the looks were meant for the policeman. After all, weren't policemen disliked or hated or even feared on almost every planet of the Fifty Galaxies? He might have entertained the hope but it wouldn't have enjoyed itself much - when it

came to deciding between hating one of their own and an alien, the humans always got their priorities right ... or wrong, depending on whose point of view you took.

"Is the bombed alien giving you any trouble?" asked one of the men in the ever growing crowd gathered around the duo.

"What's he doing with the mutt? Is he one of them dog-eating aliens?" asked another.

"I'm a police officer! I can handle this. Please go about your business!" said the blond man flashing his badge. But Kerr could see that he was getting worried. A human crowd appeared to develop a mind of its own. Not much of a mind as minds went, mind you. It was more like the mind of a homicidal maniac with a single-digit IQ than that of a rocket scientist, but definitely a mind. The blond cop seemed to know this about crowds better than Kerr himself. Kerr could see, even if the crowd couldn't, that the policeman was on edge. The ring of people around Kerr and the cop continued to get larger and they thronged even closer.

"Disperse, all of you! Now!" shouted the blond man but he might as well have been a mute man standing on the tallest mountain on the moon and screaming at somebody on the planet below. The crowd was well on its way to becoming a mob.

"How do we know you're really a cop?"

"Yeah, you're probably in league with the alien! Trying to get your friend away from us, aren't you, you rotten alien-lover?"

"We should string the both of them up!"

Kerr could see where this was heading and it didn't look as if it was going to be a pretty sight.

Heads were going to be broken - not to mention bones and perhaps even necks - and he hoped that his vitals were not going to be on the list of casualties. He wondered if it would be a good idea to try to deter the mob by menacing them with his weapon but then again, it looked as if they were well beyond the reasoning stage - if a mob ever had such a stage to begin with. The situation hung frozen on one moment of uncertainty where the mob was making up its collective mind to charge, the blond man was bracing for an attack and Kerr was calculating the possibilities of survival. Then, it all came crashing down because Ringo decided to make his move.

Ringo had accompanied Kerr under protest. He didn't like this walking pin-cushion that had hurt him so much. Besides, he missed his loving mistress. He wanted to be home. He didn't like this crowded place or the smell permeating all these strange people - a mixture of fear, excitement and anger. He was trying to get as far away as possible from all the strangers but one of them had other ideas ... because he stepped on Ringo's tail. Hard.

Ringo's reaction was immediate. He bit back. Hard.

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction, they say. The next sequence of events went a long ways to prove this. The man that Ringo had bitten jumped back. The people he pushed in the process pushed him back. He slammed into the blond haired man. The blond haired man lashed out with his fist. Fist connected with head. Head snapped back. The crowd screamed in rage and fell upon the blond man and Kerr. Result - a free for all where the other bar patrons did not hesitate to join in. In fact, instead of

hesitating, most of them jumped in with obvious glee. This was when Kerr discovered something important about bar fights - height matters. All the action was taking place at the human level and as long as he stayed below that level and avoided the thrashing feet and the falling bodies, not many people seemed to care about him at all. They were too busy beating up (and being beaten up by) their fellow humans.

Kerr might have escaped totally unscathed and even made his getaway if not for one thing - a furry bundle of fury. Ringo's little canine heart was pumping hard. He'd been stepped on! Nobody was going to step on him and get away with it! So it was that a madly barking ball of fur and snapping teeth launched itself into the midst of the biggest bunch of struggling humans. The problem was that Kerr was attached to the other end of the leash on Ringo. In another brilliant example of action and reaction, Kerr found himself dragged into the middle of the heaviest fighting. It was so heavy that he found himself unable to move, pinned underneath a man who'd been felled by a well-aimed beer mug.

There the police found him, much later, when they arrived at last to break up the fight and arrest all those involved. Kerr had certainly appeared to be involved since his dog still had his jaws tightly clamped around the same man who'd stomped on his tail earlier. So it came to be that Kerr found himself herded off to jail along with Ringo and a barful of patrons of the Electric Drum. He prayed that news of this particular misadventure never made it back to his crèche-mates. The incident with the dog was bad enough, but to be arrested by local law enforcement for brawling? Oh, the ignominy of it all!

Chapter 15 - Raiders at the Drum

"Rod, look! A Gaddian! And what's that other creature that he's got on a leash? I've never seen a race like that!" said Sax, stumbling over himself in his excitement.

"From what I recall from the hypno-trainer, it looks like one of the native quadrupeds. They call them dogs or something," chimed in Rus.

"Don't be daft! What would a native animal be doing associating so closely with a Gaddian? You know how they are, they don't even like the company of their own kind. They're very picky about that kind of thing. I know you wouldn't have forgotten that after that time on Ronux Ten," chuckled Cal.

"Do you have to keep reminding me of that?" said Sal, scowling. "Wonder what all the commotion is about over there? Aren't those law enforcement officers of this planet? I mean the ones bundling out the Gaddian and the other people? You think they broke some law?"

"I don't know and I don't care! We are on a mission and by Bacu, that's what we're going to do! Come on people, we're not gonna see any credits if we sit here gawping at some local mob riot or something! Let's go! Show me the credits!" snapped Rod.

Rlo had been quiet during this whole exchange, standing there with his head cocked and a faraway expression on his face. [A faraway expression is what you see when you see somebody from far away. Usually, they look much better, till you get close to them. That was probably when the expression "warts and all" came into being. Of course, there are pedants

who claim that it wasn't "warts and all" at all but "warts and moles" – this just goes to show that scholastic types will find just about anything to argue about.] Now he looked up and said, "Shhhh! Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" asked Wen.

"That! That music! Isn't it so beautiful and haunting? It's almost as if it speaks to you!"

"You mean the music from that bar? What about it? This is no time to be daydreaming about music, we have other things to do. Besides, Rod will start screaming like an enraged fisherwoman if we don't get going and nobody wants that."

"No, no ... we must go there! I have this strange feeling that we should go over there. Besides, shouldn't we find out what happened over there? If it's something to do with non-human beings, it might be relevant to us. We might even find out why we were attacked back there by those hoodlums!"

"About that ... I've been thinking ..." broke in one of the others.

"Later, Ted! Now we must go over there! Surely a bar's a good place for picking up local news in any corner of the Fifty Galaxies?" asked Rlo, interrupting Ted.

"Oh fine, I guess it won't do any harm to take a little detour," conceded Rod. "But only for a few minutes - and no drinking when you're on a job!"

"Aww, stop being such a wet blanket Rod!"

"Yeah, you're sounding like our mommy!"

"Well, you bunch are such babies that you need a mommy!" retorted Rod while they all made their way over to the Electric Drum. Rlo had taken the lead,

still seemingly under the spell of the music which had enraptured him.

The Drum was full of smoke from all kinds of weeds, pastes and powders which were inhaled, burnt or smoked by a variety of races, both human and non-human. There were little pockets of different alien races standing, sitting, slithering and some even floating in their own little atmospheric-bubbles, all around the bar. The owners of the Electric Drum had realized that when their clientele was as varied as it was, that it was wisest to cater to all tastes. So, there were several jukeboxes playing a variety of music. Scattered in between the jukeboxes, there were other sensory-stimulating devices which were probably more common on some of the further reaches of the Fifty Galaxies.

Rlo headed straight for the jukebox which had been playing the tune that had captivated him, but then stopped in his tracks as if he'd been hit full on by a charging Drinthian boar during mating season. Wen, who was just behind him, snapped, "Will you watch where you're going, Rlo?"

There was nary a word from Rlo. One by one, the other Raiders drew up and soon, most of the Raiders were staring at Rlo in curiosity. Rlo however, was totally unaware of their attention since his own was concentrated on something else – he was staring at a human female as if he'd never seen one before, which to be fair, he hadn't till that day. All that remained to paint a picture of utter surprise was for his jaw to drop open.

"What's up Rlo? What are you staring at?" asked Wen again.

Rlo still remained mute, utterly engrossed in what he was looking at and his thoughts. Wen put his hand on Rlo's shoulder and shook him and then repeated the question. Rlo started as if waking up from a dream. "Wh... whuh? Oh yeah. Will you look at her? Isn't she the most beautiful creature you ever saw?" he gushed.

"Who? Where?"

"Are you talking about food?" asked Alb.

"That human female! Don't you have eyes?" Rlo was getting excited. He didn't understand how his brothers could not see the vision of loveliness that he was seeing. But there are times when even clones act differently from one another.

"Oh her, so what about her?" replied Wen. He then paused and looked at the female more closely. "She does look pretty but we are on a mission and we can't afford distractions. You know that's what Rod would say."

"So we're not talking about food?" sighed Alb, his visions of tables loaded with scrumptious goodies fading in to disappointment.

Rlo wasn't paying any attention. He had only one thing in mind and it wasn't food. "Don't you think she's absolutely gorgeous?" he mumbled while continuing to look at the female.

"Rlo, you must have caught a bug or something, first the music and now the human female. What's going on?" asked Wen in concern.

"Yeah, he's caught a bug alright - the love bug," laughed Rus.

Rlo wasn't listening to their quips. He just stood there, feasting his eyes on the vision of loveliness that only he seemed to be able to discern. His heart was

full of strange seething emotions and he wasn't sure what he was going to do. A little corner of his mind which was not drowning in a sea of sensation tried to scream out that he had to get moving, that they had a job to do but it was overwhelmed by the roaring waves of emotion.

If you stare at somebody long enough, they eventually feel your gaze on them and look at you, or so it is said. This actually appeared to be the case in this instance since the girl eventually looked up and caught Rlo's intent gaze upon her. She had long beautiful brown tresses framing a face where the most prominent features were her sparkling brown eyes and a nose which was slightly too big for her face. However, the overall effect was one of vivacity and joy. She also had the kind of posterior which seems to attract men's eyes like a magnet. Now she was walking towards the Raiders and Rlo wasn't sure whether he should run or simply stay rooted to the spot and enjoy her beauty as she moved ever closer. The distance between them wasn't large enough for such a lengthy debate, even if it was a mental one [some might say that all Debian Raider debates were mental but one mustn't be cruel towards the handicapped], and the girl was standing in front of the Raiders within moments.

"Hello guys! Welcome to the Electric Drum! Anything I can get you?" she asked, smiling cheerfully at the collected Raiders but seemingly trying to avoid eye contact with Rlo.

"You work here?" whispered Rlo.

"Yes," she responded, briefly glancing at Rlo and then switching her gaze back to encompass the whole group. "My name's Jello. Can I get you guys

anything?" She looked uncertain for a moment and then continued, "I hope you don't think me rude, but how come you all look alike? Are you twins ... I mean whatever they call so many of you?"

"Forsooth ... I mean, yes, something like that," answered Sal before any of the others could say anything.

Jello appeared to hesitate for a moment, as if unsure how to proceed, then she plunged in. "Are you guys by any chance here on a job? They weren't exactly clear about the clients at the agency ..."

Sal stared at the girl for a moment before turning to Rod and whispering, "Do you have any idea what she means? Of course we're here on a job but how does she know about that? And what did she mean by the agency? Does she mean the Intergalactic Mercenary Priorate? Is she here on a job as well?" Rod only shook his head, as if to indicate that he was as confused as Sal was.

"Yeah, we are here on a job. But listen" But any further questions Sal might have had were forgotten for the moment as he saw some of the team heading towards the bar. Sal hurriedly excused himself and ran after his brother clones. It was obvious that he wanted to make sure that they didn't get distracted from the job.

"Hello! My name's Rlo," said Rlo, grabbing the opportunity with both hands. "Can you tell me what this music is? I think it's so soulfully beautiful."

Jello looked at Rlo with renewed interest. "Oh, you like it too? I love that song! It's so dreamy. It's called 'Strangers in the Night' - it's from before the great wars. I find it to be so romantic! Do you know

the words? It's about two people falling in love at first sight," she continued smiling enthusiastically.

"A man could die for a love like that," murmured Rlo, gazing soulfully at the girl.

"I agree! Not many people think like you," replied Jello, treating Rlo to one of her smiles, which promptly rendered that hapless individual incapable of any thought whatsoever.

"He doesn't think at all and he's probably gonna get himself killed if he goes off all dreamy like that while on a job ..." muttered Cal under his breath before walking over to join Sal and the others.

Rlo ignored Cal and his remarks. Left alone with Jello, he only had eyes for her. He realized in a remote corner of his mind that he had lost all control of other faculties and was trying to make his eyes do the work of at least two or three other sensory organs.

They say that eyes can talk, but the trick is in understanding what they are saying. The eyes, while they might act as a fairly acceptable mouth, are really terrible at being ears. However, Rlo and Jello appeared to be the exception to the rule since Rlo's talking eyes had no problem whatsoever in getting through to Jello's listening eyes. Or maybe, like other people who listen to their own inner voices [or, the voices in their heads, which are much more interesting and have a lot more to say], Jello was listening to something that Rlo certainly wasn't saying. Whatever the case, the two of them stood there staring into each other's eyes while the rest of the Raiders, who had been dragged back by Sal, stood around, shuffling their feet and wondering how to deal with the situation.

Sal whispered to Cal, "Do you think perhaps we should knock him on the head and drag him off?"

Some of the other Raiders seemed to brighten up at the prospect of knocking somebody on the head but Cal shook his head, "No, better not. The humans might consider that abnormal behaviour. And I don't think you want to draw any more attention to us, do you?" That got vigorous nods from both Sal and Rod.

"Maybe we should just kill the female and Rlo would snap back to normal? Then we can go get something to eat!" said Alb hopefully.

That earned Alb some dark looks but no meal. While Alb muttered about how he had a high metabolism and needed to keep his energy levels up, the others gave the dilemma of Rlo some further thought - they'd never seen Rlo like this. So who knew how he'd react? In the end, the Raiders decided to do what most people do when confronted by the unexpected - they did nothing. They waited around for a while (Wen even tried poking Rlo once in the ribs but got no response) and finally drifted off in the direction of the bar, to await Rlo's return to the here and now.

"What'll you guys have?" the bartender asked automatically, before doing a double take. "Woah! Either I've been sampling too much of the merchandise or you guys are twins or something. Which is it?"

The Raiders were becoming used to this reaction by now. Rod fielded that one with, "We're brothers. And we'll have a ... umm ... what's the usual drink that people ask for?"

"Depends on where you're from. We get all kinds in here. I take it you're either new to drinking or new

to the planet?" asked the bartender, picking up a glass and polishing it.

"Is it that obvious?" asked Sal, keeping things ambiguous. "We'll have what he's drinking. It looks good."

"That's a Boringian Twister. It carries quite a punch. Are you sure you want that?" asked the bartender doubtfully.

"I'm sure we can handle it. Hit us."

She did, and then the drink did, and then they felt as if they'd certainly been. Hit that is. By the time they recovered from the effects of the drink, Rlo had rejoined them. He was still smitten but at the same time, he was totally out of his depth and floundering. He wanted to ask the others about the turmoil within himself but each time he was on the verge of doing so, he found that he didn't have the words to express what he was feeling and so kept quiet. And so, the Raiders sat quietly at the bar for a while.

Eventually, Rod, apparently recalling their earlier encounter, asked the bartender, "Hey, you know somebody called Chu?"

"Boy, you guys really are from another planet aren't you? Everybody knows Boss Chu! He's the biggest - and I'm not talking about just his size, mind you - Boss on the planet! He's got his fingers in every pie there is!"

"Mmm pies! Where can we get some?" asked Alb while several Raiders shushed him to silence.

"Whatchu talkin' 'bout girl? He in the caterin' bizness?" asked Tre.

"Chu won't be doing much talking if he heard you say that, my friend," grimaced the bartender. "It'll be his goons who'll do most of the talking ... and they

aren't reputed to be great conversationalists. In fact, they say that a conversation with them is a right painful experience."

"So we gathered from our first conversation with them," responded Sal dryly.

"Ah, already met Chu's Chihuahuas have you? No wonder you asked for Boringian Twisters. But you seem to have survived the encounter in a lot better shape than most people. Why, just last week ..."

"I'm sure that's an interesting story, but we gotta get going," said Rod hurriedly, paying the bartender and getting up. Rlo knew what his brother was thinking. They'd learnt from long experience that once a bartender got started on a tale it would be hours, and many drinks later, before they left the bar.

"Let's just get to Baker Street without any further detours, shall we?" asked Rod, looking meaningfully at Rlo before turning back to the bartender, "Do you know how we can get to Baker Street from here?"

Jello, who'd just walked up to the bar, replied before the bartender could respond. "Baker Street? I live near there! You guys visiting somebody there?" she asked, looking at Rlo.

"An associate of ours," replied Rod shortly. "Can you tell us how to get there?" Rod was eager get going, he obviously didn't much like this delay and was thinking about the fact that the further they tarried, the further they got sidetracked from making credits.

"Actually, I can do better than that," said Jello brightly, glancing at Rlo again. "I can show you. My shift's over and I was about to head on home. I can take you guys there."

Rlo could see Rod hesitate and looked at his brother questioningly. "I'm not too sure about this," Rod muttered in response. "You're already acting weird, no telling what you might do if you associated with her for much longer."

Rlo gave him the kind of look which could only be described as a puppy-dog look, and Rod relented. "Oh, alright! It's not as if we have anything to lose!" He nodded to Jello. "Sure, we'll wait for you as long as it doesn't take too long. We've already delayed enough as it is."

"Oh, no problem, I just need to get my stuff and we can go!" replied Jello happily, smiling at Rlo.

"OK, we'll be right here," replied Rod, while Rlo nodded enthusiastically and beamed like a lighthouse on fire.

The Raiders did not have long to twiddle their thumbs [this was a favourite pastime where the Raiders came from - everybody twiddled their thumbs and there were national championships to find the best thumb twiddlers on the whole planet] as Jello was back sooner than they'd expected. Jello took the lead without a word and the Raiders fell in behind her. Rlo immediately took a position close to Jello, pushing a couple of his brothers out of the way in the process, and began engaging her in conversation.

"So Jello, you live close to Baker Street?" was his witty opening gambit.

"Yeah, I live just this side of the street, in a Bolo. Actually they call me Jello from the Bolo at work," she confided, smiling at Rlo.

"Wow, a real Bolo?" Rlo was thrilled. He didn't know how to talk to Jello about how he felt but military equipment was another matter – he didn't

know much about it but still could talk as if he did. "I didn't know people could live inside one! Doesn't it have all that circuitry and stuff in there?"

"This is just a shell, probably left over from the old days. I needed a place to stay and I figured that this was as good a place as any. Didn't even know that it was a Bolo till somebody told me about it later."

"You're all on your own? What about your parents, family?" asked Rlo, digging for information.

"Nope. Don't have any. I'm on my own in the big bad city!" She smiled again at Rlo. *She sure smiles a lot*, he thought. But he liked the way she smiled at him. It made him feel good.

"All on your own, huh?" Witty conversation just didn't come near Rlo, it was afraid that it would lose its edge.

"You got it! So what about you? Are you guys from around here?"

What Rlo might have said in response to that would never be known, at least not for the moment, since they were interrupted by a voice from a dark alley that they passed. [Alleys, as a general rule, do not have voices. At least, no talking alleys have been discovered anywhere in the Fifty Galaxies yet – not even in Kisel where most life is silicon based and the streets talked back at you.]

It said:

"Psst ..."

Chapter 16 - Normal and Johnny in the wild

They had been driving along for a while in silence – the android didn't seem to have the human compulsion to talk just for the sake of talking. Normal was beginning to like him already. Thinking about it, he realized that he was all too human himself. Now that there was nobody talking, he felt the need to step into the breach.

"So Johnny, how did you end up at that rest station? I already know about the scanner and how they discovered you, but what were you doing there in the first place?" asked Normal, at last breaking the silence.

"As you might have surmised, I'm one of those androids they call 'strays'. My master let me go when the anti-android riots started and I've been trying to survive on my own ever since then."

Silence settled over them again for a little while. The fading scarlet rays of the setting sun painted everything in rosy hues. It did nothing to improve the view. Normal tried humming a tune but that just didn't seem like a good substitute for some good old conversation. Normal broke the silence once again. "Had you been at that rest stop a long time or did you just get there?"

"That, as the politicians say, is a long story. [It usually isn't though – it condenses down to "I lied" or "I stole" or "I cheated" but they sure do take their time getting to that bit ... some never ever actually get to that part in their story because people had gotten bored and left halfway through.] I am a tailor by profession ..."

"Johnny Goolbhai, tailor. That just rolls off your tongue, as if it was just made for you," interrupted Normal, smiling.

"Indeed," said the android impassively.

"But do go on, you were saying?" prompted Normal, lest the android fall back into his silent reverie.

"I had been in search of any tailoring jobs that I could do ..."

"Do you get many jobs?" asked Normal, interrupting again. "What with all the new material, factories, ready-made garments and so on, I wouldn't have thought a tailor had much business these days."

"Actually, there are still many places on this planet where people prefer human tailors to the machine shops. I've been making a living by moving from one remote village to another - doing some tailoring here, some mending there and so on. It's not a bad living."

"So what's your secret?"

"I beg your pardon? Secret?" If he had been capable of frowning, the android would have done so.

"The secret for your need to work," explained Normal. "It's not as if you need food or water to survive"

"Ah, of course! I believe it's an inherent part of our design - a conditioning so that we *need* to work, we *have* to work."

"Sort of like a built-in compulsion? You go crazy if you don't work?"

"Perhaps. It is as good a conjecture as any given that I haven't had any access to research facilities to determine if this were so."

Normal stared at the android. An android in search of self-discovery? "You wanted to find out about yourself? Discover why you felt the need to work?"

"Of course! Don't you want to find out what motivates you?"

"Hmm ... now that you mention it, no, not really! I simply go with the flow. I do what I feel like and don't worry about the reasons."

The android was silent for a moment, as if he was considering something. The hovercar sped on over the highway – a silent vehicle on deserted road. They could barely hear the noise of the blowers inside the car. Everything was so calm, quiet and serene. Not a person was in sight. It was as if the whole world had gone away and left Normal alone with an android, riding the roads.

"Given the fact that you are human and I an android, it is inevitable that we find certain facets of each other's personality that we cannot fully comprehend," said the android finally.

"You can say that again! On second thoughts, don't!" Normal turned towards the android. "Say, you aren't the kind of android who takes idioms literally are you?"

"Absolutely not! That kind of android only appears in your trivid movies – you know, comic relief, laugh at the stupid android, that kind of thing. The latest android models are capable of advanced semantic analysis that would surpass the abilities of most humans. Besides, the kind of android who can't understand common idioms would pretty soon be extinct on this world – survival of the fittest and all that."

Normal was sure that there would have been a smile on the android's face if he'd been capable of smiling. But then again, Normal told himself, he didn't know for certain that the android couldn't smile. It appeared that there was a lot he didn't know about androids. Most of what he knew, or thought he knew, came from popular culture such as trivids and holovision. Travel the world, meet new people and learn new things, he told himself wryly. He turned again to the android, "Sorry, go on."

"May I ask you a question first? I'm curious, how is it that you came to my aid when most humans would rather see an android be destroyed?"

Normal tried to think of the reasons and they seemed strange to even himself now. What do you say, 'I'm for the underdog?' Where do you begin what prompted you to a decision like that? He finally managed to say lamely, "I guess I just read too much."

"What does that have to do with your attitude towards androids?"

"Well, all that reading puts strange ideas in your head," said Normal, smiling deprecatingly. "Notions such as, if you stand by when an injustice occurs and do nothing, you are as much to blame as those who committed the injustice. Or, that with great power comes great responsibility. You know, the kind of thing which makes you proud to be human because you can come up with such ideas and ashamed because we need the sentiment to remind us to act accordingly."

"With great power comes great responsibility ... the Leetist philosophy? And this is a bad thing?" the

android cocked his head to a side, looking for intents and purposes like a curious human.

"Yes and No. Yes, I was referring to the Leetist philosophy and no, it's not a bad thing. In fact, I think it's one of the greatest heritages we've got left from the days before the great wars."

"Your original tone of voice and body language implied otherwise ..."

Normal could see that the android was confused. He almost felt sorry for it, what hope did it have in understanding humans when even humans couldn't understand themselves? "Oh pay me no mind. It's just a shame that people don't read so much anymore," said Normal, voicing the thought that had entered his mind.

"Yes, otherwise the world might be a better place than it is."

Normal wasn't sure if the android was being sarcastic or sincere. "Oh, probably not. Humans being what they are, we'll always find a way to mess things up."

"Your reading does not seem to have cured your cynicism, I see."

Normal was sure that he'd seen a hint of a smile on the android's face. Maybe they could actually smile, or at least, fake it? "It was my reading which instilled this cynicism in me, in the first place!"

"Indeed. I presume reading about one's own race can be disillusioning at times, but how did reading come to be so sidelined?"

Normal wondered if the android was perhaps trying to steer the conversation into safer channels. "Ah, we are such a lazy race, you know that?"

"Indubitably, why else would androids have been here on this planet in the first place?" was the dry reply.

"You've got a point there," smiled Normal, conceding the point. "Well, anyway ... people tend to get their education and entertainment the easiest possible way they can. So with all this new technology around, I guess reading became just too much work for most people. Why bother with books when you have holovision and trivids?" Normal shook his head sadly. "Of course, the problem with those is that they tend to do most of the thinking for you. So you end up thinking the way most of 'society' thinks. You become so lazy that you won't even think for yourself and then what happens? You become a conformist, almost an automaton."

"In effect, you are saying that humanity itself has become almost robotic?"

"I'd never thought of it that way but I guess you're right," said Normal, looking at Johnny with renewed interest. When humans became robotic, perhaps robots could become human too?

"Ironic. Androids are forced to become more human in order to blend in and humans become more robotic in order to conform with society," commented Johnny, echoing Normal's thoughts.

"Yes, it's rather funny in a sad kind of way. But do go on, you were talking about how you came to be at the rest stop ..." Normal prompted, curious about Johnny and the events that had shaped him, *it*, he corrected himself.

"Certainly. As I mentioned earlier ..." began the android again.

"Before we went off on a tangerine ..."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh don't mind me, I'm a chronic interrupter - one of those annoying human habits, you know," grinned Normal.

"Yes."

"You didn't have to agree quite so readily," replied Normal. He was surprised to find that he was actually enjoying the conversation. "But before we go off on another tangerine ..."

"Don't you mean tangent?"

"It must be catching - now you're doing it too!" said Normal, laughing out loud.

"Interrupting? I decided to learn from you." There was that almost-smile again from Johnny. "An android which cannot blend in is usually blended into a hovercar. As spare parts."

"Oooh, you made a funny!" chuckled Normal. "But do go on, continue your story ..."

"I'd been looking around for tailoring jobs and there was this advertisement on the GlobalNet. It said that they needed some regular tailoring work done at that rest stop - something about ancient fabric which was too fragile to be stitched by machine. So I applied for the job and they asked me to come over, I'd just gotten there when I met the Sheik."

"Sheik? Like one of those kings from the Saharan states?" Normal just couldn't help himself, like that eager kid who sits in the front row of class, he just couldn't help interrupting and asking questions.

"Not this chap." Johnny shook his head. "He called himself the Milk Sheik. He's an aphid farmer or some such thing."

"Yeah, I hear that aphid farming is really booming these days. I suppose it was inevitable that

they'd find an alternative source of milk since grazing land is so scarce and the remaining cattle herds are slowly dying away," Normal said, almost to himself. "So this guy must be something like the cattle barons from the old days. Milk Sheik, heh. But here I go off on a tangerine again ... so what about the Sheik?"

"He was on his way to St. Jeeves and had quite the entourage with him. He had seven wives and each of them had seven cats and each cat was under the care of seven cattendants - and don't pin that one on me, that's what they called the attendants, I didn't make it up."

"Sounds like quite the mathematical puzzle," said Normal trying to figure out how many people were involved.

"Hardly. It was more of a logistical problem than mathematical for the Sheik. The poor man had his hands full with that retinue. I'm told that one of his wives actually had a brawl with the wife of another aphid farmer before I'd gotten there. They say that she was having a screaming fit about how her Milk Sheik was better than the other one's." Johnny shook his head almost impatiently, as if he'd realized that he'd strayed from the straight and narrow path of the narration. "But to get back to my story, on my end, it wasn't mathematics or screaming wives that was the problem - it was the cats. The cats could sense that I wasn't human and they set off a caterwaul that upset the Sheik's wives. It also brought a crowd over and faster than you could skin a cat, those yowling felines and shrieking females were replaced by the howling mob that you encountered."

"Not quite the story I expected," said Normal, as the android finished his story and looked at him as if

waiting for a reaction. "But then again, I'm not sure what I expected in the first place. But I do have a question, surely you must have had quite a few opportunities to go off-planet? How come you never took them?"

"First of all, my name's not Shirley ..." began Johnny.

"More acquired learning?" interrupted Normal. "It works better if you said it with a smile..."

"Indubitably. I just find working those muscles a bit of an effort."

"You can actually smile then? Wow!" responded Normal while trying to remember how many muscles a human needed to smile. He knew he'd read it somewhere but for the life of him couldn't remember how many it was now.

"But to answer your question, there are many reasons why I never tried to leave this planet ..."

"Name one," challenged Normal.

"For one thing, I am fascinated by the human race."

Normal grinned sardonically. "We certainly are fascinating. We're probably the sole race in this universe, or any other for that matter, which is capable of poking a baby about to cry, in the eye, just to make it cry."

"But then, once you'd made it cry, you'd probably pick it up and try to make it stop crying," countered Johnny.

"Yeah, we are an enema, wrapped in a puzzle, twisted around a conundrum. All you need is a sharp edged weapon to cut us wide open," grinned Normal.

"Don't you mean an enigma? And what was that about a sharp edged weapon?" asked Johnny, displaying almost human signs of nervousness.

"No, I did mean an enema because we inevitably tend to be a bit of a pain in the posterior," grinned Normal. "As for the weapon, I was referring to a legend about this ancient leader who'd used a weapon to cut through a puzzle that nobody else had been able to solve. So typically human don't you think?"

"Indeed. That's what makes you so fascinating - your inherent reliance on violence tempered by your capacity for great deeds. Ah, if you humans would just let yourselves be what you are capable of being ..."

"I think you've got the wrong race there, Johnny," said Normal giving Johnny a look that said that the android might need to get his circuits checked.

"Maybe I have, maybe I have. But is it possible that it's you who's got the wrong race?" queried Johnny as the hovercar continued to speed along the highway, taking them ever closer to Donagar.

Chapter 17 - Kerr in jail

"Hey, anybody see the Cahuengas play last night?" asked the police officer as he led Kerr into the jail cell. A volley of hoots, jeers and other uncomplimentary noises which appeared to indicate that the other denizens of the cell held no love for the Cahuengas, whoever they might be, was the sole answer to his question. [They would have used a trout as an answer since almost everybody appreciates being slapped around with a trout, but unfortunately, they didn't allow any fish in the jail – apparently,

visiting hours were too short to handle carting in a huge water tank.]

The cell was crowded. The smell of unwashed bodies and the odour of stale urine mixed with a few other olfactory elements struck you almost like a physical blow. In fact, if the stench had been any stronger, you would not have recovered consciousness for a good couple of hours. Kerr noticed that his cellmates were eyeing him sharply, which was no surprise when you were a non-human. The odd thing was that it wasn't the usual suspicious yet fascinated stare that most humans gave him when they saw him. Instead, this was more the interested gaze of a Rigellian ringett which had come across a shiny new pebble.

There had been an imperceptible air of tension in the room while the police officer was there but it disappeared almost as soon as the occupants were left to their own devices once more. Kerr wondered if he was going to discover the results of human prejudices at first hand, surrounded as he was by a roomful of human ruffians. He looked around for a possible means of escape but did not see anything remotely likely. [You get into this kind of bad habit when you've watched too many human trivid movies. In them, there is always a means of escape from a heavily guarded jail, you just have to discover it. Most of the time, even a person with a single-digit IQ can find it, which just seems to be a reflection on the quality of officers in the police these days.]

"Well what do you know? A Gaddian! They have gone and put the granddaddy of all aliens on this planet in jail! Now doesn't that beat it all?" commented a burly individual who looked as if he

was the majority shareholder of the smell of unwashed bodies in the room.

"You know of us? That's intriguing! Most humans simply call us Martians ..." What was even more intriguing, thought Kerr, was the fact that the man had spoken in perfect Galactic - not the pidgin-Galactic that most of the humans spoke. Every word was articulated in the proper manner, even those guttural ones which gave the humans so much trouble.

There was a chorus of snickers at this remark. Kerr wondered what was so amusing about his comment. Come to think of it, most of the humans in the cell were still behaving as if having an alien amongst them was the most natural thing in the world. [Having an alien amongst them should have been a pretty natural thing for most humans after two decades of being around aliens but humans being humans, what was natural to them was usually the most unnatural thing imaginable.] This just didn't feel right.

"Yeah we know Gaddians, Thulians, Vulcans, Denebians, Daxamites, Machians, Skrulls, Borogovians, Ronuxians and a lot of other non-human races," chimed in a scrawny looking individual, again in perfect Galactic.

Kerr gaped. These were the strangest humans he'd seen yet and if you lived on this planet, you saw strange humans every day of the week. "You sir, seem to be remarkably well informed about beings not of this planet," he managed at last.

"It just stands to reason seeing as all of us in this room are non-humans!" chuckled the scrawny man.

"Oh?" Kerr was nonplussed. Was this some sort of human trick to learn more about non-human races? "All of you look pretty human to me."

"Well, that's because some of us tend to be a bit more circumspect than you Gaddians when going amongst humans," responded the scrawny man. "We like looking pretty human since pretty aliens don't stay looking pretty too long when they walk alone amongst humans, especially if you turn your back to them and look kind of puny."

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with jumping a guy who's not looking at you! It's up to them to watch their back," retorted an unsavoury looking, squat individual lounging in a bunk in the corner. In fact, he looked so unsavoury, that Kerr was sure that even the carrion-eating Cathartids might need an appetizer, or blindfolds, before starting on him.

"Yeah, you wouldn't see anything wrong with it now, would you? You Thulians have refined single combat to such an art form that it involves three people holding down a fourth while the fifth beats the living daylights out of the fourth!" It was the scrawny guy again.

"So what's wrong with that?" The Thulian appeared ready to launch into a demonstration of single combat right then and there – as long as he had the backup. "There's only one guy doing any fighting! How much more single can that get in combat? Anyway, it's all about survival of the fittest my friend! Live with these humans long enough, you too will pick up some interesting things."

"Oh never mind him, the funniest thing is that even the one lone human in this cell is an alien!" chuckled another scruffy-looking man with hair that

reminded one of a mop which had been involved in a mob fight.

"What? Has he been assimilated?" asked Kerr, interested despite his current predicament. A good assimilation was always a treat to watch.

There was general laughter from the denizens of the cell again. Kerr was beginning to feel like the time when he'd talked about his crechemates to his Voldarian classmates - as if he was the butt of some hidden joke that he just wasn't grasping. He looked from one to the other of his fellow inmates seeking the source of their amusement. The scrawny man came to his aid.

"Oh don't mind us! I'm sure we all had similar reactions when the humans first dropped another human amongst us and said he was alien," said the scrawny man, in a placating tone. "While it might not be readily apparent, some of these human exoshells that we wear have some very intricate sensors and we can easily detect the humans from the non-humans. This human puzzled us for the longest time."

The scrawny man had pointed at a man who had not spoken till now. He simply sat in a corner and looked in turn at each person who spoke, like an inquisitive bird. Kerr couldn't really discern any difference between him and the others in the room. "So why do the humans call him an alien then? Is it another manifestation of their strange sense of humour?"

"While I like their fighting style, these humans definitely are crazy!" It was the Thulian again. "They aren't really consistent even in their fighting styles. Can you believe that some of them actually have this crazy notion called fair play and insist on opponents

facing each other in a fight? Sometimes I wish that the Drinn-Thundarian war which led to the series-of-random-events-building-up-to-a-crisis Crisis had never happened! Then we'd never have had the Fifty Galaxies pact and we'd actually be able to beat some sense into these humans!"

"Yeah but without the Fifty Galaxies pact, you Thulians would have been under the heels of the Ronuxians when they first discovered your civilization. I'm sure they'd certainly have enjoyed 'beating' some sense into you too considering how much they hate violence ... when it's directed at them," interjected mop-head. "But I guess most of us do agree with our Thulian friend about the humans being crazy. This custom of calling one of their own an alien is just another manifestation of their craziness."

"Or maybe it's just linguistics, they just don't seem to like anything alien and so, they probably called anything that was different alien, at least till they had actual aliens to hate." It was the burly man, the one who had first spoken to Kerr when he joined this bizarre group in jail.

"So they call people who are different from them, aliens? That sounds crazy, they're all different from each other! Anyway, what's different about this particular human?" asked Kerr. "Isn't he wondering about all of us speaking in Galactic?" added Kerr as the thought struck him.

"Despite being the first race to land on this planet, you Gaddians have sadly neglected your anthropology." The burly man shook his head as if he couldn't believe how badly neglected anthropology was. "If you'd done your homework, you would have

known that when some humans call others aliens, they usually are from a different region and probably speak a different language. Hence the term alien. In that respect, I guess they do resemble us. The humans in this city can't understand either of us."

"There never was much money in anthropology," retorted Kerr.

"That's typical Gaddian thinking - always worried about the bottom-line! Of course, if the Merxian corporations were involved, they would have found a way to make even anthropology make money for them. In fact, didn't they actually do that on Deneb III?" mused the burly man, scratching himself under a hirsute armpit.

"So this lone human cannot tell the other humans that we've been talking in a different language?"

"Oh, he might not even realize that we aren't speaking the same language as the humans in this city. But more to the point, he won't be able to let the other humans know about it. Worst comes to worst and he did manage to get the point across, they'd just chalk it up to the fact that he's 'foreign'. Another one of those interesting human concepts," chuckled the scrawny man.

"I tell you, these humans are crazy!" it was the Thulian again but Kerr ignored him. He was deep in thought. Kerr was intrigued by the concept of an alien human. It was the sort of weird anomaly that you kept running into over and over when dealing with the humans. They were never logical and never consistent. But their little foibles were always so interesting. Maybe the Thulian did have something when he said that one of the Merxian corporations might be interested in an anthropological study of the

humans. There might be some money in anthropology after all! But that would have to wait for a time when he was out of here and could put together a proposal. For now, he must try to find a way to get out of here and get back on the trail of the human who'd cheated him. No matter how successful he was in pushing through a deal with the Merxians, that would never clear his reputation if he did not settle the matter of the dog once and for all.

Any further plans were cut short by the appearance of one of the officers of the law. The term officer of the law made Kerr think of the humans and their inconsistencies again - these officers of the law weren't much better than common criminals. But then again, given that the city itself was run by thugs, it was appropriate enough, though somewhat paradoxical, that the police corps was composed of just the elements they were supposed to keep in check, mused Kerr.

"Where's the alien? Hey alien, come on forward! It's time for you to get out, buddy. You've been here long enough and we need the cell space for paying guests," said the officer pointing at the group of inmates in general. There was general milling about in the crowd and it wasn't apparent whether the human alien stopped forward or he was pushed by somebody, the Thulian perhaps. However, there he was standing alone - staring at the officer with what looked like a mixture of incomprehension and terror.

"Yeah you, John Doe. Come-on-now! You-come-with-me-see?"

For some reason, the policeman appeared to be under the impression that speaking slowly and enunciating his words with exaggerated care as if the

words were made of some precious crystal which might break at the merest touch, would somehow convey what he said to the other. While the human addressed as John Doe certainly did not seem to understand what was said to him, it did look as if he understood the accompanying gestures. This fact was confirmed when he walked hesitantly towards the officer.

"That's-a-good-fella-me-lad. Let's-get-you-out-of-here-now-shall-we?"

The policeman half-led, half-pushed the bemused John Doe along, all the time carrying on a one-sided conversation in his fragile-as-crystal sing-song voice. Kerr wondered what John Doe must think about all of this - probably that foreigners are crazy. But there was no time to dwell on the human. He must find a way out for himself.

"Isn't it a curious coincidence that all of us who are not of this planet find ourselves sharing the same prison cell? Do you think maybe the humans know you aren't human?"

"Actually, it isn't that much of a coincidence," smiled the burly man. "Most humans know enough of the ways of this city to stay out of trouble. But these humans have such strange customs that we are the ones who end up falling into trouble wherever we go!"

"By the Fifty Galaxies, none of the standard protocols work here! I have had the standard training on interacting with humans, myself. But their culture, mores and standards are so different from one location on this planet to another! How can you keep track of all of these little nuances?" growled the Thulian.

Kerr looked around the crowded little cell, the walls that had graffiti scrawled in a hundred different languages, it looked like. He looked at the peeling paint, the general air of grime and dirt and the overall impression that a cleaning crew had not been that way since dinosaurs walked the planet. He then turned back to the Thulian and replied, "You know what they say, if you can't eat the Snark, don't hunt it."

"Well, I guess you didn't do too well either, for all your talk, Gaddian. You're stuck here choking on your proverbial Snark, aren't you?" snarled the Thulian, in response.

"The officer said that I was indecent - that I wasn't dressed properly. It made no sense whatever!" cried Kerr plaintively, his eyes popped out and started writhing on their stalks. [Amongst Gaddians, this was a sign of distress or confusion. Gaddians took good care not to be distressed or confused when amongst large gatherings of humans lest they have more things to be distressed and confused about – such as a frightened human mob.]

"After first mentioning the Feenster and Meaney Graft Act?" smiled the scrawny man knowingly.

"Yes ..."

"Just how it happened to me," nodded the scrawny man.

"And me," added the Thulian.

"I wouldn't be surprised if that was how most of us ended up here. I've been thinking about it and I believe that they were trying to solicit a bribe. They arrested us because we wouldn't give them one," said the burly man, as if pronouncing judgement on a weighty matter that he had considered long and hard.

"But they are not supposed to solicit bribes, that's the whole point of their Graft Act!" Kerr's eye stalks were doing a veritable fandango by now.

"That's the paradox of these crazy humans! They make laws to stop something and then they try to find a way around those laws!"

Kerr could see the other aliens in the cell agreed emphatically with the burly man's assessment. Not that he disagreed with it, he'd found the humans as difficult to understand as had his fellow cellmates. There were a lot of credits to be made in chronicling and analyzing the motives of these curious creatures but that would never happen if he rotted away in a human jail. He had to get out soon and get back on the track of that odious Kint. "I'm sure that we can spend hours talking about these humans and their strange behaviour, but I'm in the middle of a critical situation. Do any of you know of a way in which I can get out of here quickly?"

"Ah, therein lays the rub," smiled the scrawny man ruefully. "When they bring you in on some trumped up charge, they normally throw one of us out. Apparently cell space is at a premium. The problem is that they have been very consistent in the way they do it, they throw us out in the same order we arrived in."

"FIFO ... or should that be GIGO?" chuckled the burly man.

"Well, can't argue with it being first in, first out ... but watch who you call garbage. You are the one with a human-shell that is a mortal insult to the olfactory organs!" scowled the Thulian.

"I'm going to be here for days or even weeks!" moaned Kerr, ignoring the byplay amongst his

cellmates. His eye stalks were in such a frenzy by now that they were likely to get hopelessly entangled.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that just yet," countered the Thulian. "I bet that you will be out of here pretty soon."

"Unless you know of a secret tunnel, I don't see how that's going to happen," replied Kerr, scarcely daring to hope and yet doing so at the same time.

"Nope, there's no other way out we know of ... Hang on though, come to think of it, you might be able to get out by bribing them. But you won't have to do that because I know that you'll be out of here soon. I'm even willing to bet on it!" said the Thulian in gleeful tones.

"Now that makes it a bit more interesting! You're honestly willing to bet on the Gaddian leaving before any of us?" asked the scrawny man.

"I didn't say that he'd leave before any of us. I said that he'd leave soon and I bet that all of us will be leaving with him." Kerr could see that the Thulian was enjoying the bafflement of the others. Try as he might, Kerr could not see what the Thulian was going on about.

"Alright, let's say that's what you said. You're still willing to bet on this outcome?" The scrawny man appeared to be bent on getting the Thulian to put up or shut up. Kerr wondered which world the scrawny man came from. Maybe they were traditional enemies of Thulians? There were certain sectors of the galaxy where an asteroid might fall at random and would always hit an enemy of the Thulians but it was hard to tell where anyone was from when they all looked so ... so human.

"Yes."

"What will you wager?"

"Hmm ... how can we make this interesting?" the Thulian smirked. "I've got it! If I win, one or all of you will do whatever I ask ... within reason, of course!" he hastened to add.

"And if you lose? You'll do whatever we ask, provided it's within reason?" countered the scrawny man.

"Yes."

"Hardly seems equitable given that all of us might have to do something if you win ..." demurred mop-head.

"We'll all be out of here if I win, so what do you care?"

"True, true. But I'm afraid that you have no chance of winning this wager my friend ..." began the burly man when the Thulian interrupted him.

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong!" replied the Thulian snapping his fingers in glee. [The Thulians in their natural form were endowed with many tentacles that they used in a variety of ways to express emotions. They'd twirl them when surprised, waggle when discomfited and snap them together when overjoyed. Of course, when you are stuck in a body which has decidedly fewer appendages, you had to make the best of it.]

"Sometimes it pays to study these humans a trifle closer than it would seem to warrant. Did you know that they have something called the Cult of the Dead Cow in this city? They have a procession every year where they parade the streets with effigies of dead cows. Apparently its some sort of celebration of the fact that cows are going to be an extinct species soon."

"And this bit of trivia is relevant to us how?" the irritation in the scrawny man's voice was plain – it couldn't have been any plainer if it had been miles and miles of open grassland.

"All in good time my friend, all in good time," replied the Thulian, smiling his irritating smile again. "You also realize that most of these humans were part of an agricultural society mere decades ago and so, venerate cows? To them it's some sort of holy symbol of fertility or something. Or maybe it's just that the cows are dying so fast that they are held sacred because of their rarity." He paused as if for effect. "Anyway, the point is that when the Cult has their annual procession, there is always some sort of an altercation between the cult members and those who oppose them. Guess where all these troublemakers end up when they have these inevitable fights on procession day?" asked the Thulian and then stood there smirking beatifically at the others.

"Ah I see enlightenment dawning ..." he continued, enjoying the dawning comprehension on the faces of his audience, "Today is the parade of the Cult of the Dead Cow. Listen closely for the beat of the drums that will lead us out of here my friends!"

Kerr could now faintly hear what the Thulian had already picked up with his sharper ears - the sound of drums and flutes, a sound which was drawing ever closer.

Chapter 18 - Raiders and Chu's Chihuahuas

The voice called out again. "Psst ..."

The Raiders looked at each other and at Jello, uncertainty written plainly on their faces. [The Raiders had the kind of face on which a lot of things could be written. Some people even tried stamping on their faces thinking that one form of communication was as good as another. Unfortunately, their idea of stamping wasn't conducive to good communication.]

Their experience from years of being mercenaries did not include knowing how to deal with a voice from a dark alley. Bullets, yes; all sorts of power beams, yes; even arrows and spears. But a whispering voice from an alley? That was not something that they could boast of on their resume.

Sal decided that he should take the initiative and prove his leadership skills. Maybe it would show Rod, yet again, that he deserved to be leader. "Yes?" he responded.

"You guys wanna buy a nuclear device?" whispered the unseen voice.

Sal was perplexed. Was this how they did a little bit of street corner sales on this world? *They really had a bizarre concept of the bazaar here!* "No! Why would we want a nuke?"

"Are you carrying any nukes?" asked the voice.

"Of course not!"

"How about a nuclear weapon that could blow up a whole planet when it comes in contact with the planet's atmosphere but can be safely contained by a force field?" asked another voice. The listeners got the impression of somebody being boinked (it was a very definite and solid boink) on the head, followed by a hissed, "Shut up!"

"Err ... no," said Sal, not quite sure where it was leading but reluctant to walk away in case there was a point to all of this rigmarole.

"Are you carrying any other heavy-grade weaponry then? Portable plasma cannon? Rapid-fire taser assault rifle?" shot back the voice.

"No ... but listen ..." Sal was getting restless, talking to unseen voices from alleyways did that to you.

"OK, how about any backup personnel? Do you happen to have a secondary group lurking in the shadows ready to step in and save your cured-pork-flesh-of-choice?" the voice from the shadows got more insistent.

"Nope, we're on our own. What, may I inquire, is the point of this questioning?" Sal had decided that it was time he got insistent in turn.

"You'll find out soon enough, don't be so impatient! So it's just the thirteen of you then, nobody else?" asked the voice as if it wanted to be certain of something.

"Of course! And for the last time, no, we don't want to buy any nukes!" snapped Sal, preparing to walk off from these apparent madmen.

"OK then, reach for the sky! We're taking you all in!" snapped the owner of the invisible voice, coming out of the shadows at last. It was a member of the gang that had waylaid them earlier, the one called Abdul. As if to punctuate his order, Abdul was waving a menacing looking blaster.

It didn't matter that a lot of these worlds were still assembling the technological ladder - let alone be on any of its rungs - but almost the first thing they wanted to acquire when contacted by other races was

weapons. *That really said a lot about all of us,* thought Sal, waxing philosophical for a moment.

"Reach for the sky? But nobody can do that! You realize that the sky is just an imaginary demarcation that you've made up out of ... umm ... thin air, right?" asked Cal, bewildered.

"None of your lip now! You lot have an appointment with Boss Chu and he's just dying to meet you!" snapped Abdul and then he paused, as if reconsidering his words. "Actually, it might be you who'll be doing the dying ... but the sentiment's still valid."

"But listen my good man ..." said Sal as other members of the Chihuahuas, holding a veritable salmagundi of weapons, materialized out of the darkness to menace the Raiders.

The fact that some of them were holding their weapons backwards did detract a tiny bit from their menace-quotient. However, one couldn't blame them since those particular weapons had been made for the Ganglian Snake-men. [The Ganglians had such a twisted-around physiognomy that you would swear that they were looking backwards when they were looking forward. This was very useful if you were a Ganglian – for instance, Ganglian teachers never have the kind of spitball problems that human teachers do - but deadly if you were a human trying to use their weapons – deadly for you that is.]

Lack of experience on the part of the attackers was compensated for by the weight of numbers and the fact that they did have their weapons out and pointed, even if it was at themselves. As they say (actually, nobody had ever uttered this particular saying but nevertheless it sounds like a good saying),

a houseful - or was that a full house? - of armed gangsters always beats twelve of a kind.

"I am not your good man because I'm b-b-b-bad, bad to the bone! And if you were talking to Lisa here, she ain't even a man!" smirked Abdul. Then he dropped the smirk and adopted what he probably assumed was a serious expression. "If you guys don't come with us peaceable like, I'm gonna turn Lisa and her brother Brat loose on you first. They call them the Terrible Thompson Twins in these here parts. They're real artists when it comes to carving people up. Some call their technique Alpine but others say it is more Lupine. Either way, I'm sure you don't want to be a work of art now, do you?"

Sal considered the options - it looked like a military situation and so the mantle of leadership devolved upon him. Anyway, Rod didn't seem inclined to lead when lead (of the flying kind) was imminent. They were faced with an armed enemy and they were outnumbered. Fighting was an option - it always was - but not one that they would choose unless they had a death wish.

There were always idiots who might chant some stupid slogan like "Never give up, never surrender" and charge into the cannon's mouth but Sal preferred a more pragmatic approach - never give up, never surrender ... just run away so that you don't have to. Unfortunately, flight wasn't an option at this particular moment unless you had a preference to be shot in the back instead of the front. "When all else fails, talk!" had been the motto of his old military instructor, and Sal decided to give it a try.

"Prithee kind sir, let us take a moment to palaver ..." he began but paused when he saw the puzzled stares that he received.

"Huh? What's that gobbledegook? You think you're better'n us?" asked Mario, bristling at the perceived insult.

"You're damn right we are!" muttered Kar under his breath but shut up fast when Sal directed a withering glare in his direction.

"I'm trying to find a way out of this situation here! Would you mind not interrupting?" Sal whispered to his team in general and Kar in particular.

"Anything I can do to help?" inquired Rod.

"Just don't make me nervous!" snapped Sal before turning back to face Chu's Chihuahuas.

"Umm ... excuse my mode of speech - we are foreigners you see ..."

"Oh foreigners, that explains it!" said Abdul nodding sagely as if this simple fact was enough to overturn the dynamics of the situation. As far as he was concerned, it did.

Everybody knew that foreigners did all sorts of bloody strange stuff that made no sense to you at all. After all, that's why you called them foreigners. They drove on the wrong side of the street, spoke in funny accents, had all sorts of weird rituals and addictions to strange beverages. Sometimes they even had totally different types of governments. Imagine letting somebody who claims to be honest run your city when you know that you'd rather trust an honest to goodness crook than a crook who claims to be honest! Bombed foreigners!

Sal took this to be a hopeful sign. "Yes, we are but recently arrived in this fair city and are somewhat perplexed by the confrontations we have been having with your band"

"Band? We ain't no stinkin' singers! Tell 'im Abdul! We are honest crooks, we are!" interrupted Mario who was still smarting from the previous mortal insult, as he saw it.

Sal was becoming ever more aware of the morass of language through which he had to thread his way because of the faulty hypno-trainer. Try as he might, he just couldn't get the hang of the local speech patterns. The languages skills inculcated in him in mere hours indicated that he was on the right path but the results spoke otherwise. There was no help for it but to try again.

"My dear fellow, I simply meant that we have no clue as to why you seem so intent on taking us to see this Boss Chu person ..."

"Oh yeah, that's a likely story! We saw you ... well, at least one of you, at Boss Chu's place just the other day, acting all friendly like. I told Abdul then that you di'n't seem on the level. Right shifty you looked too, di'n't I Abdul?"

"Yeah, you would know 'bout bein' shifty now, wouldn't you Mario?" jeered the flaxen haired girl that Abdul had called Lisa.

"Hey, I'm all legit now! I work for Boss Chu, the same as you," burst out Mario.

"Cut the chatter you two! You guys say you didn't steal nuthin' from Boss Chu? Well, then you guys got nuthin' to worry 'bout right? Just come on over, say hi to the boss, explain it all and I'm sure

he'll be real understandin' ..." said Abdul in a reasonable tone.

"Hang on fellas," interjected Tre, who appeared to speak the language of the Chihuahuas, at least much better than Sal could manage. "Are you guys sayin' that somebody who looked like us was with yer boss, a coupla days ago?"

"Yeah, sure as shootin'!" That was Mario again.

"Not the way you do it, you'd miss a bus at three paces!" jeered Lisa while the combined Raiders broke out in a staccato burst of chatter.

"Well, all of us got here just today ..."

"Yeah, ask anybody and they'll say ..."

"Hey Sal, you think"

"Shut up Cal, We'll discuss this later!" snapped Rod.

"Yeah, after yer interview with Boss Chu I'm sure y'all will feel real eager to discuss stuff. He usually has that effect on people," smirked Abdul.

"But we've got places to be, people to kill ..."

"Oooh, he's trying psychology on us Abdul, I've read about it. They did it all the time in the old days, used psychology they did ..." said Mario, pointing accusingly at Rod.

"You? Read? Don't make us laugh Mario! You get Brat to explain the kiddie trivid movies to you!" said Lisa, sniggering.

"Oh, fine Lisa! Somebody tol' me 'bout it once, are ya happy now?" asked Mario in an injured tone.

"Fascinating as all your discussions of literary achievements are, I'm afraid we really must take our leave ..." began Sal, trying to edge past the assembled Chihuahuas.

"Oh yeah, you an' which army?" asked Mario, waving his gun all over the place and causing a few of his team members to take cover.

"Very witty, Mario. Really snappy comeback!"

"Abdul, if she doesn't stop pickin' on me, I'm gonna belt her one" whined Mario.

"Will you two pipe down?" snapped Abdul, glaring at both Mario and Lisa. "Sheesh, it's becomin' so that I'm gonna have to drop one of you from the gang! We've got enough trouble without me havin' to deal with the two of you as well. And as for you clowns, no more arguments! You're comin' with us and you're doin' it now!"

"Oh no, we are not! We are leaving. Now!" said a new voice. They all turned to see who had spoken. It was Jello. While Sal had tried his desperate measures and the Chihuahua's bickered, Jello had been slowly moving - not away from the crowd, that would have been noted by the Chihuahuas - but towards the centre.

Now, she stood right in the middle between the Raiders and the Chihuahuas and both parties were looking at her as if wondering if she'd lost her mind. However, instead of losing her wits, she looked like the man (or woman) who'd found half a brain in the land of the witless. Given the current company she was in, some might have argued that this might not be too far off the truth.

"Oh yeah? You an' which arrgh ..." Mario's voice trailed off into a series of gagging noises as Lisa took matters, or to be more precise, Mario's throat, into her own hands. Abdul didn't even bat an eye at this sudden turn (or more appropriately, twist) of events and continued to stare intently at Jello.

Criminal life wasn't conducive to longevity for some inexplicable reason and a long-lived criminal was usually an indication of somebody with good instincts and reflexes – not to mention an abundance of luck. Abdul was perhaps the oldest in his merry band of cut-throats, cut-purses and just plain cut-out-for-the-gallows riffraff. His instincts were honed to razor sharpness on the whetstone of experience. In fact, if his instincts were to be sharpened any further, the whetstone of experience itself might not have escaped unscathed. So when Abdul went quiet, his cohorts were immediately aware that something was afoot. [Of course, it is possible to argue that what was afoot must indeed be a foot since it couldn't be a hand or some other appendage which patently was not a foot - but quibbling about such details might seem a tad unseemly and so it is best not to delve any further into the matter.]

"Hey, aren't you ..." began Abdul, careful not to make any sudden movements, imitating a tightrope walker who has just noticed somebody at the other end of the rope who is nudging the rope with a sharp knife.

"Yeah, I'm Jello from the bollo, your ordinary girl around the block – nothing more, nothing less," said Jello looking Abdul right in the eye. "I've lived in this city long enough to know where I'm going and where I'm from, don't be fooled by my looks." She paused to draw a breath. "I know how you lot think. You're Chu's goons and you aren't in this biz for the glory. If you can't walk away from it, or at least be dragged, or carried or trundled away, you aren't interested in a fight. I like that about you guys. You're

pragmatists. And I know what you guys can't refuse ..."

"What's that?" asked Abdul, on cue.

"A good offer. And boy do I have just the offer for you." Jello held out her arm showing the object that she'd been holding all this while.

"A thermite grenade?" Abdul drew in a breath. "That sure is a powerful argument lady!"

"Yeah, it can really knock your socks off!" smiled Jello calmly.

"And half a city block besides. Now you know you aren't gonna use that! You'd kill yerself and your friends along with us. That's not gonna help you at all," said Abdul, apparently trying to be reasonable.

"If we go with you to see Boss Chu, I get the feeling that we aren't coming out of that meeting. At least, not alive. So whether we die here or there, it doesn't really matter to me. But you guys now, you have a choice. So what do you feel like today? Walking away or being blown away?"

"She wouldn't dare ... now would she Abdul?" quavered Mario, massaging his neck and glowering at Lisa.

"Shut up, Mario! She would. I can see it in her eyes!" snapped Lisa, flexing her fingers again as if considering all the alternate means of silencing Mario.

"Yeah, we've got nothing to lose. In fact, dying here probably would be much less painful than at Boss Chu's," said Jello, giving the assembled Chihuahuas a come-on-punk-make-your-move look.

Rlo had been gazing at Jello during this whole exchange with undisguised admiration. He appeared unable to contain himself any longer and sidled up to

her and whispered, "You're absolutely stupendous! A man could get killed for a woman like you!"

"Don't be too hasty with those words, we all might still be. Killed I mean," she whispered back.

Abdul was considering his odds and while he did have a lot of oddities about his person, he didn't think that being blown to bits would help in the least bit in evening things out. In fact, it was more likely that he would end up with a few more odd scars being added to his personal appearance when he reported to Boss Chu that their latest mission had been a bust. But better a bust than a blast, Sal could almost see him thinking.

"This isn't over you unnerstan'? You guys got lucky again, but don't expect your luck to hold out all the time! Come on guys ... let's go!" snapped Abdul, motioning to his underlings. Some of them looked hesitant, as if wondering what Boss Chu's reaction might be to this latest fiasco.

"But Abdul, we can't just let them go like that!" Mario whined.

"Well, I'm tellin' you we are gonna! There's some news I'm sure the boss is gonna wanna know anyway ..." he said, casting a dark glance at Jello. Since the alleyway was somewhat dark to begin with, the dark glance completely missed its mark. [It was this kind of scenario which had prompted a group of scientists to get together to work on a light glance, so that people wouldn't miss it in dark places. Such are the vagaries of fortune that their venture capital proposal to the Merxian corporations had had an unfortunate spelling error which had resulted in the scientists finding themselves doing research on

developing light lances. It is rumoured that they are currently working for the Gedi knights.]

Chu's Chihuahua's faded back in to the shadows of the alley with surprising swiftness and the Raiders were left alone once again. They stood there for a moment, obviously wondering if the Chihuahua's would materialize from the darkness again like that old, nasty uncle (or aunt) from your childhood who appeared at every holiday to pinch your cheeks. Their only reward was silence. Not quite the silence of the dead, but the kind of silence which you get in any city; not exactly an absence of noise but rather an absence of the immediate presence of noise.

"Err ... Jello ... I mean Miss Jello, shouldn't you put that thermite grenade away now?" asked Alb nervously. "Explosives make me nervous, especially when they are liable to blow me up."

"Who would have thought that my make up case would come in so handy?" said Jello, with a smile that tried to be cheery but failed to reach that last rung in the ladder of cheeriness. Sal could see that the encounter with the Chihuahua's had shaken her more than she wanted to admit.

"Say what?" asked Alb, looking puzzled.

"This isn't a real thermite grenade!" laughed Jello, throwing the grenade up in the air and catching it deftly. "It's my make up case. Sure, it looks like a thermite grenade but that's because I used an old thermite grenade casing to make my own make up case."

The Raiders stared for a moment in incomprehension. Most ideas took a while to sink in with them and the idea of a make up case was uncharted territory for them.

"Oh man! You sure put one over those dudes!" Tre snickered, once he'd figured out what had transpired.

"Yeah, you sure are something Jello!" agreed Rlo, smiling at her warmly. Jello smiled back at him and then commented, "I didn't think this job was gonna be that dangerous. Those guys are the real deal, not some play actors."

"Nah, they are just two-bit gangsters, nothing real about them," said Cal dismissively. "Why, Ben here knew that the moment they appeared. He told me that even Jello could take care of them and that she could do it with her hands tied behind her back. Yes he did!" Ben looked at Cal in mute admiration as he always did when Cal divined his thoughts with such accuracy.

"But ..." began Jello and then shook her head as if dismissing something. "Oh never mind! I'm sure he would have told me about it if he'd known about this. But I sure am going to have a talk with that weasel the next time I see him. I do have a non-violence clause in my contract you realize?"

The Raiders stared at her in puzzlement. They had no idea what or who a weasel might be. A few of them opened their mouths at the same time to ask her what she meant but she forestalled them by continuing, "Hey, what was all that about somebody who looked like you? It's weird enough that there're twelve of you who look alike, don't tell me there's another one running around out there somewhere?"

"Umm ... you see, it's a long story ..." began Rlo, looking at his brothers as if for support – or permission. The other Raiders stared back at him impassively.

"Well, why don't you tell me while we keep walking? There is no point in hanging around here, is there?" asked Jello, glancing at the alley from which the Chihuahuas had appeared.

Taking the hint, Sal gave the order and the Raiders set off again in the direction of Baker Street with Jello in the lead. Rlo looked again at Sal in mute entreaty as if asking permission and this time Sal nodded his head briefly, giving him the go ahead to tell Jello all about it.

Chapter 19 - Wylie on the bus to Donagar

Wylie was working himself up to a rage, again. Considering how short he was though, there wasn't much of a distance for him to work up to. The hoverbus was crawling along at a snail's pace and the doltish, dunderhead of a driver had been stopping too often and too long at all the halts! He wished that the neutered numerologically-challenged narcissistic numskull would hurry up and get to Donagar instead of dawdling like a damned drowning duck draped in down diapers!

He tried to calm himself as he felt his rage gaining the upper-hand. He knew what happened at moments like this. He lost all control of his temper, started a fight with somebody and got arrested. Thank all that was holy for the Feenster and Meaney Act! At least, he could grease some palms and get out of jail quickly. The only drawback was that they were already beyond the Kabul City limits and not all city states recognized the Graft Act. So he'd better watch

his temper, he reminded himself. [Not all states recognized the Graft Act officially. However, it had been an unwritten law for millennia before it was legislated. Some claim that graft was as unavoidable as death and taxes and that along with those two it made up three of the four horsemen of the preapocalypse. According to the Jokers, the preapocalypse precedes the main event and prostitution apparently was the fourth member of the merry band.]

Wylie decided to go over his plans. He needed to figure out how he would proceed once he got to Donagar. He had to find that inimically idiotic imbecile Normal and Donagar was a huge city. He had no idea where the dopey dunderheaded dodo might have gone. In fact, he still had no idea what the blasted, blithering blinking bonehead might have done with the dog! What if the dog wasn't in Donagar? How was he going to find the mangy mutt? Wylie discovered that his thought process was leading him on a chase very similar to the one that every dog reserved for his tail. [Unless of course, it happened to be one of those unfortunate varieties that did not have a tail.]

Wylie looked out the plasti-glass but there was nothing to see but the desolation of war-ravaged land - the same thing you saw over and over wherever you went on this blasted planet. So many centuries, perhaps even millennia, and yet the signs of war remained. He thought of the other parts of the world which were uninhabitable because of radioactivity - well, at least uninhabitable for normal people. There were stories of strange mutations roaming the radioactive plains delivering mail as if they could

retain some semblance of their bygone past. [As some wag put it, delivering mail plainly allowed them to push the envelope.]

Others reported meeting a band of shamans who roamed the radioactive plains preaching a credo of cyclical renewal about how the world would one day return to normalcy and be radioactive in its totality again. Most of the non-human races gave the radioactive areas a wide-berth. They appeared to have an aversion towards any reminders of the martial past of the human race.

As it always did when he thought of the war-torn areas on this planet, Wylie's thoughts turned towards Deneb V. Ah, to be back in the wonderful meadows of that glorious planet, basking in the warm rays of its yellow sun and listening to the carolling of the foogles! His time on Deneb V had been all too brief. If he had known that his stay there was going to be so short-lived and that he'd never be able to return, perhaps he might have approached things in a different manner. But there was no point in worrying about Spilk milt as they said in Deneb. [The Spilk was an extremely fast, aggressive and amorous fish and if you had reason to worry about its milt, then there really was no point in worrying about it since it was too late for you already.]

The hoverbus was slowing down again, damn that dim-witted dweeb of a dawdling driver! He wished that the moronic, mealy-mouthed mutant maniac would get to Donagar fast instead of stopping everywhere. Then he looked out the plasti-glass again and saw that instead of stopping at a regular bus stop, they were in fact, pulling into a rest station. While one part of his mind fumed at the further delay,

another part of Wylie couldn't but feel some relief at the thought of being able to get out and stretch his legs. He hated being cramped up in these little hoverbuses for hours on end. On this planet, they thought that the hoverbuses were the ultimate thing in luxurious travel. That was because most people here had never been off-planet. Compared to those slow, plodding wooden carriages they still used in the more remote areas, the hoverbuses were indeed the height of technological advancement. But that was if you didn't know of matter-transporters or zeta rays. There were rules about introducing too high a level of technology to planets which had just been discovered. So it looked as if he'd have to suffer these damn dirigible death-traps, at least till he could leave this place and move on to a different world.

There was some sort of hullabaloo going on at the rest station. People were huddled together in little groups, talking, whispering and gesturing. Others were running here and there, apparently trying to galvanize people into some sort of action. Of course, as so often happens when people try to organize things, there were a lot of organizers but not enough organizees. Everybody had a different plan and they were all talking at once trying to convince the others that their plan was the best one. Since each person was convinced of the brilliance of their own strategy, it looked like a very long debate indeed. Wylie opted against asking any of the debaters about the cause of all the excitement. Instead, he walked rather casually past a few of the little groups.

"Android ... rip head right off ... droid-lover ...terrible place ... eating sandwiches ... crash ... knock ... head off ...shocking ... teach him a good

lesson ... kidnap ... call the Cheese ..." It was a jumble of words that didn't mean anything much to anybody. However, Wylie had heard enough to gather that an android was involved. He had feared that it might have had something to do with Normal, but there had been no mention of a man with a dog. Perhaps there was nothing to worry about.

He decided to see if he could find somebody to talk to. Now that he had a vague glimmering of the events that had taken place, it was time to flesh out the picture a bit more. Perhaps one of these people might even have noticed a guy with a dog. Now wouldn't that be a stroke of luck? Not that luck and he seemed to be on speaking terms of late but hey, didn't they say that luck was what you made of it? [There was only one kind of luck to be found in abundance – the bad kind. There wasn't much you could make out of bad luck unless you were a bookie. They did make quite a bit out of bad luck - when it happened to other people.]

Wylie was looking around for somebody who might prove to be a source of information when his roving glance settled on the tiny old man. He was standing to a side watching all the hubbub with a look of bewilderment. This old coot was the untidiest person that Wylie had ever seen. Not a thing about him was in any semblance of order. His hair was sticking out in every direction, his clothes were rumpled, and one of his shoe laces was untied. In fact, he looked as if he'd been in the centre of a huge fight and had escaped by the skin of his teeth. Wylie decided that the old man made ideal information-provider material and approached him.

"Hello. We just got here. I'm on my way to Donagar. What's the big fuss about?" he asked, mustering up a smile.

"Oh ... hello there!" the old man smiled tentatively. "I was on my way to Donagar too. But our hoverbus has been here for a while now because of this unfortunate incident with that young man. He didn't seem like the type to start any trouble either."

"Oh? What happened?" asked Wylie, his curiosity aroused. This sure sounded like Normal, he was always so ... well normal. Not the type at all to rock the boat. But then, when you least expected it, he'd go do something utterly unexpected and ruin everything, stupid, senseless, simpering simpleton that he was!

"Well, there was this young man on the bus sitting next to me," began the old man slowly, as if he was concentrating on getting things exactly right. "He was so funny too. He made this joke about multiple fathers ... how did it go? Something about ...err ... he had one father and I had three ... No, no ... Oh dear, I was never any good at jokes." He shook his head sadly. "I never got it when they pushed me into the corn field and screamed 'Zafar in suckatash, Zafar in suckatash' either ... But that was a long time ago ... Now where was I?"

"You were telling me about the young man sitting next to you?" replied Wylie, struggling to keep his temper under control.

"Oh yes, he had the oddest name too - Normal. You normally wouldn't expect a name like that ... but I guess they really couldn't have named him abnormal, right? That wouldn't have been ...umm ... normal," smiled the old man, delighted perhaps at

having discovered the secret behind humour for the very first time.

"Yes, yes," said Wylie, eagerly. "So this guy - Normal - what did he do?"

"Well, he did make that joke about many fathers as I was telling you and then we had this nice conversation about ..." began Zafar with a bemused expression.

"I'm sure you did," said Wylie, barely managing to stop himself from snapping. "What I meant was, what did he do here to cause all this ruckus?"

"Our bus stopped here, as I believe I mentioned before, and there was some sort of an altercation. They had this android you see ..." tried the old man again.

"Who? Normal and the dog? They had an android along?" interrupted Wylie.

"What dog?" asked Zafar, flustered. "No, no there was this bunch of thugs ... some of them are still around here somewhere. Such unruly people ... reminds me of my childhood again. There were so many rude and inconsiderate kids back then. They always used to chant stuff at me going 'Zafar the little whiny brat - suffer, suffer, suffer' It wasn't very nice ... I still have nightmares about them ..."

"I'm sure you do, blast it!" Wylie was surprised at himself - he had not erupted in fury yet. But he could feel his anger simmering like a volcano about to erupt. It looked as if that ichthyotic, iconoclastic idiot had lost the dog! Maybe he had it in some sort of a travelling case? Or maybe the dog was still in the hoverbus over there in the luggage? He had to find out. "I mean what happened with the android?" he asked in a softer voice, forcing himself to be calm.

This was too important to mess up by getting angry at the wrong time.

"Oh they were going to lynch it or break it into spare parts or something like that. So this young man ..."

"Normal," prompted Wylie.

"Yes, Normal. He goes in and stops them. I don't know what happened though. I was over at the restrooms when it happened ... I have this problem with my bowels you know, old age and so on ..."

"Yeah, I'm sure you do, I don't think I need to know all the details though, if you don't mind," responded Wylie hurriedly. "What happened to Normal? Did they tear him to pieces too? I know how these mobs can get."

"They say that he held three people hostage at gunpoint. Of course, then I also heard somebody say that he tore somebody's head off. I can't believe he would have done that. He was such a nice young man!" Zafar seemed ready to cry. Whether this was at Normal's plight or because of the glare that Wylie was directing at him, was something that Wylie didn't bother to speculate upon.

"Oh it's the nice ones who always tear your head off," Wylie gritted out. "Believe me, I know. Sometimes I feel like tearing my own head off just because of the frustration they cause me! But I digress, where is the guy if they didn't kill him?"

"They say that he stole somebody's hovercar and ran, or rather drove, off. Everybody's saying he is bad to the bone. They are trying to go after him. At least, those men over there want to go after him but nobody else really seems inclined to do so ..." The old man paused for breath.

"Afraid that they might actually catch up to him if they follow, eh?" smiled Wylie sardonically.

"These mobs are all talk. They talk big when there's a bunch of people behind them pushing them on, but when it comes to one-on-one, they fold like a napkin. Bah!"

"I'm sure you are right ... Mr. ...?"

"Wylie. My name's John Wylie." Wylie dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "Listen, I'm actually a friend of Normal's. You wouldn't happen to know if he had a dog with him would you?"

"Oh, nice to meet you Mr. Wylie," said the old man with enthusiasm. "My name's Zafar Supari. A dog? No, I don't think Normal had a dog with him. It's funny that you should come by just after he'd been by. It's such a small world!"

"You don't know the half of it! There are worlds which are a hundred times the size of this one. This really is a pretty small world ..." Wylie caught himself. The old man was staring at him as if wondering what he was going on about. Wylie thought of making some excuse and walking away. Maybe somebody else from the bus might help him with locating Normal's luggage. Then again, as his old squadron leader for the milking platoons on Deneb V used to say, "Milk 'em dry till the load's high, everybody cries if you're a lil' bit shy." [Deneb V was famous for their aphid farms which produced milk for that entire sector. As usually happens when a product becomes too popular, meeting the demand becomes the driving force behind the suppliers. Nobody cares about the poor aphids that were milked dry, literally.]

"You wouldn't know if Normal left his luggage in the hoverbus would you? He must have left in an awful hurry. I can get his luggage to his wife at least ..."

"Oh no, I noticed that when he got on the bus. He had no luggage at all. I thought it kind of strange, after all, he was going to Donagar and it's such a long trip."

"Yes, I suppose," replied Wylie shortly. "Would you excuse me? I have to go call a man about a dog."

Wylie moved off as fast as he could. Damn, damn, damn and quadruple damn! Where could that decidedly demented, deliriously deviant, devilishly diabolical dog be? Did Normal know the truth? Had he perhaps hidden the dog somewhere and was on the run to protect Katy? He hadn't thought Normal capable of that. Or maybe he was trying to sell it to a third party? He just didn't know what was going on and Wylie had never liked what he didn't know. What you didn't know could get you killed, sometimes by the person you least expected.

Chapter 20 - Normal and Johnny meet the Droids

Normal's mind had decided to take a stroll down Speculation Lane via Curiosity Avenue. He was wondering about the thugs they'd left behind at the rest station. Were they coming after Normal and Johnny? That might prove a tad inconvenient. He was supposed to be trying to lay low and not get in further trouble. But so far it sure didn't look as if he was doing too good a job. But then again, what could he

have done? He supposed that he could have kept on walking while they beat up the android or even destroyed him. He could even have participated in their acts of hooliganism, if he didn't have a conscience that is. Bomb that conscience and bomb Stan Lee! And bomb those hooligans who had gotten him embroiled in another mess!

It was getting dark now. The beams of the hovercar's lights cut through the darkness like twin photon beams. Johnny was gazing out the window at the dark, shadowy bulks that sped past as the hovercar whizzed along. Normal had nothing to occupy his mind. The hovercar had an automatic navigation system and could drive by itself and Normal didn't want to fall into the oh so human trap of talking for the sake of talking again.

He wondered for a moment about the android and his lonely journey through a world that hated him – *it, bomb it, it*, he told himself. There must be other strays out there, surely. Normal toyed with the idea of finding them and leading a crusade to gain them the right to live amongst humans.

Normal abandoned all plans for an android Jihad and grabbed the controls of the hovercar in a hurry. There were two people standing by the side of the road and waving to them in a rather animated manner. Quite an incongruous pair they looked, too. One was tall and thin as a reed. He was waving his arms and gesticulating madly, doing a pretty good impression of a weed caught in a gust of wind. The other was short and squat, there were no contours or breaks on the landscape of his torso. It was all one big blocky body out of which two arms and a head sprouted out like branches from a tree stump.

Normal debated with himself about whether to stop or not. It was possible that this was just another encounter with Dick Turpentine. After all, Dick was an expert at separating poor saps from their credits and then disappearing into the badlands like a ghost and he knew all about picking the right target. Dick always appeared to know when the Cheese were about and would strike only when the coast was clear. Some claimed that he even robbed the Cheese when he could get away with it. The more fanciful folks believed that he was in reality returning the credits he stole back to the poorer villages in the more remote areas and that he was a philanthropist disguised as a criminal.

Having known many criminals disguised as philanthropists, Normal wasn't sure that the other kind did exist. However, his philosophy had always been that anything was possible in an ever varying world and that the impossible was sometimes more commonplace than the mundane. But when faced with the possibility that they might be falling into a trap set by Dick Turpentine, Normal wasn't so sure that he was feeling in a charitable enough mood to contribute to a fund to help sick children in an orphanage in a far off village. Especially not when he'd offered to be Turpentine's assistant and all he'd gotten in return was a wave and a parting "Look me up if things don't work out".

Normal decided to ignore the people by the side of the road and drive on. However, Johnny appeared to have other plans. He turned to Normal and asked, "Aren't you going to stop? What if they are in some sort of trouble? This place is totally deserted and there is no sign of their vehicle."

"That's what worries me!" responded Normal, pushing the throttle forward some more.

"But they might have had an accident! Shouldn't we see what we can do to help? I can handle the two of them if there is any trouble," persisted the android.

Normal considered Jonny's words and decided that perhaps the two strangers were in some kind of trouble indeed. He pulled the throttle down and the hovercar began to slow down. However, he still felt the need to argue. "I'm sure you can handle those two but what if there's a whole bunch of mutants in hiding, just waiting to jump us?"

"Hide where? It's all flat desolation for miles around!" replied Johnny, pointing out the window at the treacherous landscape. It had been full of dark and shadow shapes which would have provided cover for an army just minute ago. Now it was as flat as a week old, open bottle of soda. Normal silently cursed the unhelpful landscape for not having a sense of the dramatic.

"There might be holes in the ground," said Normal, reaching for straws. "I've heard that those muties have underground caverns where they have huge machines that they use to grind up the bones of normal folks, or so my babysitter used to say when I was a child."

Johnny's comments on this insightful and acute anthropological observation by such a qualified and trained professional were to remain forever unuttered since they pulled up to the two strangers at that point. Much to Normal's relief, the strangers didn't drop their overcoats, pull out hidden weapons and shout things like "Your credits or your life!" In fact, it looked as if they were rather glad to see the new

arrivals. Both of the strangers started babbling incoherently at the same time.

"Slow down guys, I can't understand you!" Normal shouted over the babble of the other two voices.

"Oh, I'm sorry! Shush, Reeltu, let me do the talking!" said the tall one. "I'm so sorry to inconvenience you, but we are in a spot of trouble and were wondering if you could take us to Donagar, or as close to Donagar as would be possible on your way to wherever you're going."

"Why exactly would I want to do that? How'd you guys end up here in the middle of nowhere anyway?" Normal wasn't feeling in a charitable mood.

"Well, it's a rather complicated story," the tall one replied. Then he brightened. "We can tell you all about it once we are on our way, if you were kind enough to help us out. You were the first people to even stop for us. We've been here for hours. We thought we might be able to catch the hoverbus to Donagar but for some reason it seems to have been delayed," he continued, glancing down the highway as if he expected the hoverbus to magically appear any moment now.

"Yes, it was ...umm ... delayed at the last rest station." Normal looked at the strange duo, weighing things. "I was afraid that you might be a trap set for us by Dick Turpentine; I've met him you know. I'm glad that isn't the case, one run in with him is enough for a day." He nodded to the two strangers. "There is no telling how soon the bus will be along. So hop in, we are on our way to Donagar as well. So you can go with us all the way."

"Oh thank you ever so much!" cried the tall one, effusively. He then turned to the short one and ushered him into the backseat of the hovercar. "Come on Reeltu, let's go!"

"My name is Sthri Pio and this is my friend Reeltu Dahlogtu," said the tall man, once they were settled in and the hovercar was once again speeding along the highway.

"Oh nice to meet you, I'm sure." Normal looked back at the two people in the backseat and nodded. "I'm Normal Kint and this is Johnny Goolbhai. So tell me, how did you guys end up being stuck in the middle of nowhere?"

"Well, umm ... the fact of the matter is that we are droids." Sthri announced this in the tone of one who was issuing a challenge or making an apology and wasn't sure which one it was to be.

"Ah," said Normal nodding his head to indicate that it all made sense to him now.

Johnny however did not appear to share Normal's enlightenment. He turned a face creased in puzzlement towards Normal and asked, "Do they mean they are androids? I must confess I am a bit confused. I noticed the indentation made by their footprints on the ground when they got in to the hovercar. Their weight is not consistent with them being androids. In fact, my calculations indicate that they are human. So why are they claiming to be androids?"

"No, Johnny, no, no, no!" laughed Normal. "They are droids – not androids. They're a secret sect, at least they used to be. They're not so secret any longer because everything became so much more public after the aliens arrived. They say that the droids go

back a long way, back to the times before the wars. Some say that in those days the droids used whistling toes and sickly people. I have no idea what any of that mumbo jumbo means but if they had whistling toes, I'd think that they were pretty sickly people all right. At the least, they would have qualified as sideshow freaks. But then again, I don't think anybody really has any idea what they did in the old days, so they make up all these weird stories."

"Ahem, while the stories from the olden days that your friend mentions are indeed true - in as far as such wild legends do indeed exist - we are nothing like those droids in these modern times, Johnny," said Sthri breaking into the conversation. "We are much more enlightened. Our goal is to strive to explore the mysteries of science."

"Well, my dad used to say that the droids pored over the machinery from the Age of Chaos and beyond, trying to construct all sorts of machines in the old days. Most people thought of them as either wizards or dangerous lunatics. Of course, I guess calling oneself a scientist makes it sound a bit better, unless you're a technophobe. Most people still call them daft old men dancing in the moonlight," Normal smiled derisively, speaking to Johnny.

"We are right here and can hear everything you know," said Sthri in a reproachful voice.

"Hey, just trying to give Johnny here a more balanced view of things. As they say, there are always three sides to a story," said Normal, smiling unapologetically.

"Shouldn't that be two?"

"Nope three - yours, mine and the truth, which is somewhere in between," grinned Normal.

"Or as they say in Bifa, the man who can see both sides of an argument sees in three dimensions, the man who can see only one side, is blind in one eye," said Reeltu, joining the conversation.

"So it would appear that the droids and I do have something in common besides the identifying nomenclature - most humans do not like either of us," said Johnny, looking to the others for confirmation.

"Well, humans always fear what they can't understand. They certainly can't understand the intricacies of your machinery nor can they understand anybody wanting to dabble in machinery when the aliens are giving it all to us and are happy to provide us with more machinery to operate and maintain the machinery they gave us in the first place," replied Normal, answering Johnny's unvoiced question.

"Are we to understand that Johnny is an android?" broke in Sthri, looking interested.

"Indeed, I am."

"Fascinating! Would you be willing to show us your internal wiring sometime?" asked Sthri while both droids leaned forward expectantly.

"Come on guys, you've just been introduced. Shouldn't you wait at least till marriage?" chuckled Normal.

"Very amusing Mr. Kent, but we are scientists and you cannot restrain scientific curiosity," replied Sthri stiffly while Reeltu laughed aloud.

"It's, Kint not Kent. I guess I should set your mind at ease, I don't really care what your beliefs are and I won't leave you by the side of the road because I found out you guys were droids. I take it that's what happened to you back there?" asked Normal, the

memories of his own highway adventures still fresh on his mind.

"Yes, indeed. We are grateful for your kindness, Mr. Kint but I beg to differ about something, being a droid is not a religion - it's a vocation."

"Aren't all religions about having a club that excludes others?" asked Normal, relishing the chance for a debate. "You want to feel as if you belong and that means you have to have others who don't. If everybody belonged to the same club, who would you point fingers at and laugh about? Society works the same way, except in society, the religion is called accepted behaviour or the norm. In that sense, you droids are a religion as well, though to normal - and I use the term very loosely - society you appear as pagans."

"An interesting theory," said Sthri noncommittally. "We should discuss that more often sometime, Mr. Kint."

"Call me Normal."

"We would, if we knew what parameters defined normalcy," chimed in Reeltu with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Ah, I see you guys have a sense of humour after all, but you need some work on it," grinned Normal. "So where are you bound for anyway? All the way to Donagar?"

"Well, we are on a mission for our circle ..." began Reeltu. Normal noticed Sthri give Reeltu a nudge and a warning shake of his head in the rear-view mirror. He saw Reeltu hesitating as if unsure of how to continue.

"Ah, I get it. It's a secret mission and you'd have to neuter me if you told me?" asked Normal

helpfully. Reeltu appeared to be much more easygoing than the tall droid and Normal didn't want him being in any difficulties just because he tried to be civil.

"Something like that, yes," responded Sthri with a poker face.

Normal drove in silence for a while. "You know, I just remembered, there was a Father Pio ..."

"Yes, yes. My father, have you seen him? I've been searching for him for a long time!" responded Sthri sounding excited.

"No, no ... He was a FATHER," Normal tried to explain.

"Yes, my father!" said Sthri, jumping in again.

"No, I mean he was a father in the old Christian clergy. They have become almost as secretive as you droids these days."

"Why was he called father Pio, if he isn't my father?" asked Sthri, almost plaintively.

"You'll have to forgive Sthri, the subject of his father is a sore one," said Reeltu, breaking the silence. "He's been searching for his father for a long time and even the mention of a possibility of finding his father sets him off."

"The question that's baffled me has been why they are called fathers at all when, from all I've been able to discern, they have to remain celibate and can't father any offspring at all," interjected Johnny.

"They are probably called fathers because they've gone farther in the order than the other brothers of their order," responded Normal with a grin.

"Given the subject a lot of thought, have you?" countered Johnny with one of his rare smiles.

"Considering that you had actually been wondering why they were called fathers, shouldn't I be asking that question from you?" Normal shot back.

"Touché! I worked in a Christian monastery for a while." If it was possible for an android to look pensive, Johnny managed it. "One of the most peaceful periods of work that I ever had, incidentally."

"You're just full of surprises, aren't you Johnny?"

"Aren't all of us?" replied the android. "It's what keeps life interesting. Or at least, the act of experiencing existence given that I am not technically alive."

"Ah but what is life? Is it being able to breathe and eat and sleep? Or is it being able to experience all the little joys and pains of day to day existence and learning from it?"

"A weighty question indeed but I'm afraid that that's one which has many answers depending on who you're talking to ..." responded Sthri.

"Ah well, asking questions just wastes precious time that you've got to live, unless they are the right questions. Why not just live life and leave the questions be?"

"Because we're human and we can never leave anything alone?" asked Reeltu, smiling impishly.

"That, as I was explaining to Johnny over here before you guys joined us, is just the problem."

The four-sided discussion of humanity, life and all other such mysteries continued as the hovercar sped along the highway taking them onwards in their journey to Donagar.

Chapter 21 - The Alien Posse

"This is ridiculous! Shouldn't they have kept better track of our belongings? I thought they were supposed to have everything entered into their databanks! I needed that quadruped. It was very important!" spluttered Kerr. Or rather, he would have spluttered if he his mouth had been equipped with saliva-glands. Since it was not, he had to be content with noises of outrage and waving his eye-stalks around, instead.

"Stop worrying about your dog for a moment and smell the sweet smog filled air of a pre-industrial city that has had a sudden influx of technology. This, my fellow non-humans, is what they call the sweet smell of freedom in these parts!" grinned the Thulian, as Kerr and the rest of the recent inmates of the Kabul City jail filed out the door of the jail.

A fresh batch eager (or perhaps not so eager, judging from their expressions) to sample the hospitality of the city was already being manhandled through the doors by police officers as the aliens walked out. Counting the number of people being led in and the number of injured amongst them, it looked as if the procession of the Cult of the Dead Cows had been a raging success indeed. Or maybe they had just been cattle to the slaughter, mused Kerr. But there was no time to worry about such passing matters, he had to find that dog and then find Normal.

"OK, now that all of us are out, it's time to collect," said the Thulian snapping his fingers in glee.

"Are we still going to have to go through with that ridiculous wager?" snapped the scrawny man.

"Oh yes, you are! All of you promised and I hope a promise is something that you keep and not something you just say!" said the Thulian, wagging an eyebrow.

"Well, there are a lot of things that I can think of keeping, like keeping my foot on your posterior and giving you a good, hard kick," said the scrawny man with asperity.

"Now, now, my friends, I know that we Thulians are well-known for our little idiosyncrasies like picking on another in larger numbers but that doesn't mean you have to learn by our example, now does it? We are all people of the galaxies here. Why can't we just settle this like sentient beings? You all made a promise and now, as they say in the outer Dipus, it's time to pay the Pipers!" [They have a serious problem in the outer Dipus with the Jerboans – space pirates who swoop in every couple of planetary cycles to loot and pillage. The outer Dipus being a very lonely part of their system, they have to specially fly in security forces known as the Pipers. The only trouble was that once the Jerboans were driven away, the Pipers were known to be reluctant to leave till they'd been paid – a theme which seems to recur in many parts of the Fifty Galaxies.]

"Look, I'm in a hurry," snapped Kerr impatiently. "You are right. We made a promise and we, or at least I, will do what needs to be done. But could we get this over with quickly?"

"Hang on my friend. This has a lot to do with you. Since the police force of this fine city seem to have lost your little pet, or even better still, given him by mistake to the human alien who was released earlier, I thought we should all help you locate the

quadruped. That is the penalty for losing the wager," grinned the Thulian, snapping his fingers in glee again.

"Wait just a micro-moment, you want us to help the Gaddian, that's it?" asked the scrawny man suspiciously. "Why would a Thulian want to help anybody ... Oh, I see where this is heading. Typical Thulian!"

"You mean he just wants his own gang to jump the human-alien? Yes, I was beginning to suspect as much. You just want your bit of fun and want us to be your bodyguards don't you?" asked the burly man, giving the Thulian a hard stare.

"What do you think of humans? You think they're saints? Hah! They're foxy beasts! They say, 'We've got no tech, we've no food. We've got nothing!' But they have! They have everything! Dig under the floors! Or search their houses! You'll find plenty! They pose as poor, downtrodden saints but are full of lies! If they smell a fight, they hunt the defeated! They're nothing but stingy, greedy, blubbing, foxy and mean! In fact, now that I think about it, they sound just like the folk back home," said the Thulian, smiling at the others. "So what's wrong with a little bit of fun involving one of them? We can help the Gaddian, I can have a bit of fun and nobody would be the wiser since this human doesn't know the customs of the city or the language. He can't complain to anybody. Sounds perfect all around!"

"You would think that!" snapped the scrawny man. "No, we're not going along with that, being in a human jail once is enough for me, thank you!"

"Oh fine! I promise, I won't touch the human alien. Can we just go look for the Gaddian's

quadruped? You never know what you might find unless you go looking."

"Trouble is, what you most often find when you go looking, is trouble," responded the burly man, looking as if he'd like to introduce some trouble to the Thulian himself.

"You forget one thing, you made a promise!"

"It's not the kind any court would enforce," retorted the scrawny man.

"That's just the kind you've got to keep if you're to be worth anything my friend! Even I, a Thulian, know that."

"Fine, we will keep our promise," gritted out the scrawny man, looking around at the others for agreement. First one and then another and another and another nodded agreement, reluctance written plain on their faces. [Reluctance makes a great author since she can write on the faces of people. It's much cheaper than paying for all that paper and ink and publishing.]

"But one thing I can promise you is that we aren't going to be your gang or help you beat up the human. We'll help the Gaddian get his animal back and then we are done! That too is a promise, the kind that I intend to keep. Are we clear?" asked the scrawny man, looking at the Thulian intently.

"Agreed," nodded the other. "Now that we'll be spending some time together, shouldn't we at least introduce ourselves? I'm Heyachi and you already know that I'm a Thulian."

"Vin. Machian," replied the scrawny man.

"I'm Goro from Rigel" said the burly man who still appeared to carry the odours of half a city block, and not the clean half at that, with him.

"Well, you know where I'm from. I'm Kerr."

"I'm Bern," said the unsavoury looking character.
"And I'm a Larkian."

"And I'm Yoh and I'm from Borogove," said mop-head.

"Now that we've got the introductions out of the way, can we get going?" asked Kerr, eager to be on the hunt. "The human couldn't have gone too far. If we follow now, we might even catch him. Since he's as much a stranger here as us, we should be able to find him quickly if we hurry!"

"Kerr, if you plan to lead this bunch, you should first make plans. A good general always plans ahead," responded Heyachi the Thulian.

"In this city, the only thing one can plan on is the unexpected. So let's just go catch that human without wasting any more time!" snapped Kerr, setting off.

Grumbling in their own individual ways, the other five members of the Alien Posse fell into line and they set off in pursuit of the human. Either by design or subconscious accident, the other five aliens who looked like humans surrounded Kerr so that he was shielded from the view of most humans that the group encountered. This turned out to be the ideal way to travel since none of the humans spared a second glance at just another bunch of humans out and about on the streets.

The police station was situated in one of the seedier parts of town. Perhaps they had been taking a page from an old realtor's manual which said that the three most important things about a building was location, location, location. The point that they'd missed had been that when one was talking about a crime-ridden part of town, the best location for a

police station was as far away as possible - at least if one desired one's own permanent location not to be the nearest cemetery.

Having gotten this crucial bit of placement wrong, it wasn't surprising that it was downhill all the way from that point on for the police force as far as combating crime went. In fact, it was rumoured that most of the cops moonlighted as part of Chu's gang just so that they could give back what they got during the day. As anybody would have told them, it wasn't a fair trade.

The first problem that loomed large in front of the Alien Posse was deciding which direction to go in. There were many roads leading to the police station - some might even have said that they all led away, since nobody cared much for the hospitality of the police. The question was, which one would the human have taken? They stopped in a huddle to debate this important matter. Or at least, they tried to start a discussion but never got any further since Heyachi was still talking of strategy and the chain of command. Kerr's response was a crisp, "I lead, you follow. That's the chain of command. And we go this way. Why? Because I say so!"

"Sounds pretty much like any military that I've known, except for the bit about you leading and us following. Usually, they stay at the back and command, we have to go where they point," muttered Goro.

Like all military commanders down the ages, Kerr's next action was to retract his previous command and then dither about the actual course of action they should take. [All commanders except for

the brilliant ones that is, but then, you know what the brilliant ones did - they got you killed.]

"Well, perhaps not that way ..." said Kerr after taking a few steps.

"What?" said the rest of the gang in unison, struggling to stay afloat, and stationary, in the raging river of humanity that was Kabul City's streets. [It was almost impossible to carry out a confabulation in the middle of a crowded street of Kabul City even under normal circumstances. However the impossibility factor went up a notch when one of the confabulators was at a lower ear-level than the others.]

"I said ..." began Kerr.

"What?" came the chorus again.

"I said," screamed Kerr, struggling to raise his voice above the hubbub of the masses and convey it to a level where it would be comprehensible to his companions, "Perhaps we should try a different direction."

"Hey, you don't have to scream, we're not deaf," screamed back Heyachi, who was closest in height to the Gaddian.

"Why aren't we moving?" shouted Goro, pushing aside a couple of humans who seemed to be on a kamikaze run towards the little alien group.

"We should ask around and find out if somebody saw the human and the canine," responded Kerr at his highest vocal levels before his vocal chords finally gave up the struggle and threw the towel in. Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention. Sometimes disability has been known to play the role of step-mother to invention. This was one such instance. Having lost the ability to rise above the

general uproar around him, Kerr belatedly realized that they might not have to scream if they moved off the main thoroughfare to a slightly more quieter environ.

Of course, when one is unable to communicate and is stuck in the middle of a really loud plaza, it can be a bit of a trial to get yourself understood by your companions. But sign language has been known to overcome all barriers – except that of sight. Given that none of the members of the group were blind, it wasn't long before the gang was far enough away from the madding crowd to understand that Kerr wanted to inquire from those in the vicinity as to the whereabouts of the dog.

Being the focal point where many avenues, alleyways and byways met, there were plenty of people to inquire from. The trick was in getting an answer from the inquirees, at least an answer which wasn't a variation of "How much is it worth to you?", "Want to buy a watch?", "Bugger off!" and "Are you a cop?" With helpfulness being at an all time low - it was the old demand and supply rule at work again - the Alien Bunch might have ended up asking away till the local equivalent of milk providing multipeds came home. They would have, that is, if they hadn't run across the Joker.

The Jokers were a curious sect in a world full of curiosities (some would even go so far as to use the F word – freaks). So by definition, being surrounded by curiosities, they should have become mundane. But they hadn't. This too was a curiosity but not one that anyone cared to explore because everybody knew that being too curious, even in the land of the curious, wasn't good for one's health. The various fine,

upstanding citizens belonging to Chu's Chihuahuas had made sure to hammer this point home to all and sundry. [When one mentioned hammer and Chu's mob in the same breath, there was nothing figurative about the hammer.]

The Jokers believed that god was a great big practical joker and that the whole universe was a practical joke by god. [There was nothing in Joker doctrine about god living in a great big comedy club in the sky, though non-Jokers often were under the impression that this was the case.]

They also believed that everything that happened to each person was just a continuation of the eternal cosmic joke. Most day-to-day incidents should have convinced people that there might be some merit to this theory. But then again, most people were not as smart as they should be. So the Jokers were considered just another crackpot sect. Most people didn't even want to have anything to do with them due to the fact that it was difficult, if not impossible, to have any dealings with them without being the target of one of their jokes.

Imagine bidding somebody a good day and being smashed in the face with a cream pie – it was okay if you liked the flavour, otherwise that sort of thing tended to leave a bitter taste in your mouth. Even that wasn't as painful as having to endure their puns. Hardened military experts have written volumes upon volume on the efficacy of the Joker puns as a means of getting information out of a prisoner. The sad thing is that none of those prisoners survived the ordeal; they either went insane or killed themselves, sometimes both. Hence, the popular phrase 'Puns don't kill people - Jokers kill people'. [At least, that

was to have been the phrase till the Joker High Council decided to sue the hapless coiner of the phrase for defamation of character, citing the fact that they didn't actually kill anybody. The courts decided in favour of the Jokers and the author was ordered to amend his saying. He'd tried 'Puns don't kill people – but Jokers drive people to suicide by way of their puns' but that one never caught on.]

A little knowledge can be a very dangerous thing. This is never truer than when one doesn't know about Jokers and approaches one for directions. The Alien Posse, however, were blissful in their ignorance of this fact.

"Excuse us ..." began Vin.

"Sure, you're excused!" responded the Joker promptly.

"Uh ... we were actually wondering ..."

"Oh fine, don't let me detain ya then!" replied the Joker, waving his hand dismissively. "Wander around, but my Mammy used to say that these streets aren't made for walking."

"Well, they certainly weren't made for lying on and speaking of lying on, you are going to find yourself lying on your back with half your teeth scattered around in an interesting and perhaps mystic pattern if you don't stop messing around," said Heyachi, stepping forward, his head down as if to butt the Joker to the next city and his fists clenched.

"Oh, I would be lying indeed if I said that I would answer anything seriously. We Jokers never take things seriously. Haven't you realized by now that all of life is a joke?" The Joker was dead serious.

"Well, things suddenly look a lot more serious for you my friend! Me and my friends are gonna give you some attitude adj...."

"Maybe I should take over, Heyachi" interrupted Vin. "My friend here believes he leads in deals. Unfortunately, as you might have noticed, his social skills are a bit lacking. Forgive us. We are simply trying to locate a friend of ours who might have come this way. He probably had a dog on a leash?"

"Whether you lead in deals or deal in lead, somebody should tell him that you can lead a horse to water but not make him drink it," replied the Joker, obviously enjoying himself.

"I am sure that's very profound but we just wanted to find ..." began Vin, trying again.

"Ah but what good is a straight answer? Nothing earned, or learned, without effort is of little value. Unless of course, you stole it. Then it's worth as much as the fence would say it was."

"A talking fence? Wouldn't you want to sell that instead?" asked a bewildered Bern.

They say good fences make good neighbours and anybody who believed that in Kabul City was one very sleep deprived individual. All that coming and going at night, the whispering, the exchange of passwords and secret handshakes tends to be more disturbing than screams and howls of pain. But Bern, being from Lark, had been spared the experience of sharing a fence with a fence, or even knowing what one was, except for the non-living variety.

"Ah, I see you're trying hard!" as the blind beggar said to the crippled boy climbing the wall. Not quite up to Joker standards but one must commend the

attempt," said the Joker, smiling. "For that, I will point you in the right direction. So who wants to go?"

"Uhh ... go where?" Vin looked at the Joker in bewilderment.

"If I'm to point you in the right direction, 'Somebody's got to be pointed', as one pencil said to another. That's the point, you see? I guess we'll go with the little feller since I can't pick any of the rest of you up." So saying, the Joker picked Kerr up without much effort and pointed him headfirst towards one of the many streets leading away from the police station.

Mumbling thanks and forcibly dragging the reluctant Heyachi, who was muttering something about anal probes and the Joker, the Alien Posse set off in the direction that they'd been pointed in.

Chapter 22 - The Thirteenth Clone

"So tell me about this mysterious guy," prompted Jello.

"Are you sure you wanna know? It's all rather complicated," stalled Rlo, trying to collect his thoughts.

"How many times do I have to say that I sure do? You want it in writing perhaps?" responded Jello with a hint of irritation in her voice.

"OK, then you've got to listen to this first," said Rlo, producing a little gadget from his belt and pressing a button on it.

"There are those who believe that life here began out there. Far across the universe. With tribes of

beings who may have been the forefathers, and mothers, of the Egolans or the Toltic Totems or the Mayan Muskrats. That they may have been the architects of the Great Cloning vats or the lost civilizations of Lemmeatya or Atwantis. Some believe that there may yet be brothers, and sisters, of ours who even now fight to survive far, far away amongst the stars... "

"Whose is that strange voice?" asked Jello interrupting the recording and prompting Rlo to scabble for the pause button.

"Oh, that's Lone Greenger, one of our elders from back home. We recorded the story - and that's the short version of it since he kinda gets really long winded when he gets going - so that we can play it back to anybody who asks. You have no idea how many people want to know your business. It gets boring after a while repeating the same thing over and over again." Rlo saw the look on Jello's face in time to recover quickly, "Not that it is ever boring talking to you, mind you. I was talking about the others who ask us about our business all the time. I would love to tell you the story as many times as you want."

This bit of blatant blarney resulted in Jello bestowing a smile upon Rlo. She appeared to be lost in thought for a moment and then she said, "That's a great story, you guys are really good! And I see the humour of the situation. With all that rambling, I guess people are supposed to lose track of the original question before he actually gets to the point? Excellent writing, takes skill to make it sound so boring."

"Hey, it's not that bad!" said Rlo trying to defend the honour of his planet. He wondered what Jello

meant by all that stuff about writing and skill but decided not to push it right now. After all, he was just getting to know her. Maybe these human females had strange customs, most females anywhere had strange habits and customs, come to think of it. "Here, I'll skip the condensed three thousand year history and get to the part that's relevant."

"Really? You'd do that for me? Oh, how sweet!" Jello batted her eyelashes in a manner she probably thought was alluring.

"Our recorded history tells us that we are descended from a mother clone - one from a group of individuals that went out into space to create more clones. Those of us assembled here now represent the only known surviving clones - save one. He's out there somewhere on a dangerous quest to find a sister world, far out in the universe, remembered to us only through ancient writings ..."

"Ah, so you guys are from out there and this guy who looks like you is the missing clone? Wow! So, that makes it what ... thirteen of you that look alike?"

Rlo could see that Jello was impressed. He hadn't known that being a clone from space would help him with the members of the opposite sex. "Well, that's what we've been thinking. At least, I'm sure that all of us have thought that. He apparently looks like us and it's possible that it's actually Dar. We haven't seen him in a long, long time. He left on his mission before Sal joined the military ..."

Rlo could see that Jello was struggling with some inner problem that she didn't want to voice. It was as if she wasn't sure of something but didn't know how to ask the question. She appeared to be on the verge of doing so but then decided not to. Then she looked

as if she had decided to ask anyway and then again changed her mind. While he had not had much experience with human females, they didn't seem all that different from himself or his brothers. Except of course, for the fact that she was a *female* and that might be different enough he decided - females of any kind always behaved as if they were a different species altogether.

He wanted to ask her if anything was the matter but wasn't sure if he would be breaking some local taboo by doing so. He couldn't understand why he felt as if he wanted to protect her and to make her troubles vanish so that she would smile at him like she had earlier. Why was he feeling that way? Why was he thinking those thoughts anyway? He shook his head as if that would clear his mind somehow and chase away these strange thoughts.

"Why are you guys going over to Baker Street?" asked Jello, breaking the brief silence.

"Well, we've got some business over there, we have to see a guy about some stuff," replied Rlo vaguely. He had this compulsion to tell Jello everything about himself and their mission but he knew that would bring down the wrath of both Rod and Sal upon him.

"We're almost there now. Where exactly in Baker Street did you want to go to?"

"It's a place named Wylieworks. You know where it is?"

Rlo had heard the term double take before but had never before encountered an instance of it in real life. Not unless the situation with that Edact at the salad bar in Genome IV counted, he amended. Edacts were supposed to have eight stomachs and since they

also had four arms, the guy was doing a fair imitation of a double take at the bar, for sure. Alb had been very upset, he remembered. He'd had to explain all about double takes to Alb then. At least, what he thought was a double take. Now however, noticing Jello's reaction, he understood what a real double take was. Only thing was, he couldn't see a reason for her response. It wasn't as if he'd said anything unusual ...

"Wylieworks, huh? OK, well you got it!" Jello snapped, frigid anger radiating from her like cold from an open freezer. "It's that second building down the street with the huge sign showing a boy fishing for stars, you can't miss it. Want me to come up with you?"

Rlo had already begun signing to the others that the objective had been reached and which building it was. Now he turned back to Jello, slightly flustered. "Umm ... no, this is a rather personal matter. We'd rather do this on our own. Why don't I meet you ..."

"It's me isn't it? You don't think I'm any good! You want to complain to Wylie because I don't stay in character!"

"Err ... What?" gulped Rlo, confronted by a woman in full-blown rage, and having no clue as to what had just transpired.

Chapter 23 - Three beings and Normal

"These very comfortable rooms too. Not like other flea-bite motels you find all over the place. These even be having attack toilet!" said the owner of the motel with a proud smile on his face, showing

Normal, Johnny and the droids to their rooms. He was a small pudgy man with a luxurious moustache, whose smile looked as if it was permanently etched on his face. *He would need a smile etched on to be able to smile at all at the end of the day after having had to deal with all the whining and complaining he had to put up with daily*, Normal thought.

"Attack toilet? Is this like a personal training thing? Sort of a CRTU?" asked Normal, puzzled.

"Me see who?" asked the owner, in turn bewildered.

"I'm sorry. I meant a C-R-T-U ... a Combat Reflex Training Unit," replied Normal, enunciating each word clearly.

"Come bat training? Oh, you mean Cricket!" A smile appeared on the motel owner's face, heralding the dawn of comprehension. "Sorry, have not played cricket in long time! Open spaces very dangerous with all that radiation and stuff."

"No, not Cricket ..." began Normal when Johnny intervened.

"I believe he means *attached* toilet," he murmured.

"Yes, that's what I say, attack toilet. We are very up-to-date," said the owner beaming proudly.

"I am sure you are. These rooms look really nice!" said Normal glancing around at the room assigned to them. It was small – all motel rooms on the highway were usually small – but was free of dirt, grime, mildew and any signs of the previous occupants. The sheets appeared to be often used but clean. The pillowcases were pristine white. The room radiated a sense of scrubbed cleanliness, sort of like a little boy on his way to church.

"You call me if you need and I will be here immediately," promised the owner in parting, leaving the quartet in the room assigned to Normal and Johnny.

"You guys wanna turn in early or would you like to talk for a while?" asked Sthri breaking the silence.

"We probably should get going at the crack of dawn tomorrow, but it's still fairly early. I guess we can talk for a while. I must warn you though, I'm not too good at chit-chat," replied Normal, smiling. He motioned the others towards the three armchairs in the room and sat down on one of the beds himself.

"Well, if we can get to the stoned circles by end of day tomorrow, that should be just dandy with us," said Reeltu, taking a seat.

"The stoned circles? Aren't they like right outside Donagar? We can be there before the end of day tomorrow, don't worry!" Normal waved a dismissive hand. [The hand belonged to Normal, he had not taken up body snatching ... yet.]

"So what takes you to Donagar, Normal? And that, too, with an android?" asked Sthri. This was the sort of valiant attempt those who have no concept of chit-chat often engage in when they want to make smalltalk.

"Well, I didn't actually start out with Johnny here. That was kind of an impromptu meeting. In fact, this whole trip has been rather impromptu."

"Oh? Do tell," prompted Sthri, raising an eyebrow.

"It's kind of complicated," said Normal, groping for the right words. "My wife has ... had, I mean ... this mutt she's really fond of. I sold it to somebody when she was away visiting her mother. I'm sort of

going off to Donagar till she can cool down. She can get really mad, you haven't met her ..." Normal finished with a rather lame attempt at justifying his apparent cowardice.

"I would have considered that to be a rather drastic move myself, but I'd be the first to confess that I do not know enough about human behaviour," said Johnny, butting in.

"Oh this is drastic alright, even for humans!" spluttered Reeltu. "Come on Normal, you seem like a nice enough chap. Have you no care for your wife, man? She probably is frantic about you. Where did you leave that dog? Had you considered simply finding it and taking it back to your wife?"

"That's just it," said Normal, sighing. "I don't really know where to find the bombed mutt! It's probably dead by now anyway."

"Oh ..." Reeltu paused for a moment as if he wasn't sure of what to say next. "You can tell me to mind my own business, but this is what I think. You may run off to Donagar if you wish, but remember this, leave now and you walk away from your loving wife, your house, your job, leaving posterity with nothing but the legacy of a quitter, a coward, a miserable loser. Depart now and you forever separate yourself from the vital legacies of Romeo & Juliet, Saleem & Anarkali, Orpheus & Eurydice, Shah Jehan & Mumtaz, Slym & Redd, Antony & Cleopatra, Jack & Rose ..." the short droid paused to draw a breath. "Turn your back now and you snuff out the fragile candle of romance, of undying love. And when those flames flicker and expire, the light of the world is extinguished because the ardour which has moved mankind for uncounted and unknown millennia will

wither and die on the vine of abandonment and neglect. Do you want to be the cause of all of this?"

Normal did not know what his reply should be. He looked from one droid to the next and then to Johnny, as if seeking some sign, some hint as to what he should do next.

"The Sage Lee has said that with great power comes great responsibility. But have you ever thought about the fact, that great power is not necessary in order to have great responsibility?" added Sthri.

"Great! Hit me with Stan Lee, what makes you think that I am a follower?" asked Normal in a gloomy voice.

"That is something which has puzzled me greatly," interrupted Johnny. "I have learnt that there are two human factions - Leetists and Parkerites and that they both claim that their sage is the one who said 'With great power comes great responsibility' and that they have fought wars over which side is right. Shouldn't they have followed the advice of their own sages and not have indulged in warfare at all? After all, they did have the great power to start wars and so should they not have wielded the responsibility a bit more judiciously? They might as well have fought over the colour of a flower!"

"The vagaries of humanity are something that I'd be happy to discuss with you at any other time, Johnny. But I need to think right now," replied Normal, impatience bubbling in his voice.

"Ah yes of course!" nodded Johnny, looking thoughtful. "The suggestion by our new friends holds some merit. I can aid you with the search for the dog and it would indeed be better to face the music now,

as you humans put it, than to put it off till later and be hit with the full brass band."

"It's not the brass band that she's going to hit me with, more like everything but the kitchen sink. She'd probably throw the sink, too, if it wasn't bolted down!" replied Normal gloomily.

"Our android friend is right, my young chum. Putting off till tomorrow what can be done today just ends in more work for tomorrow. If you want people to help with the search, Sthri and I will volunteer."

"But you're on your way to Donagar. Besides, you hardly know me! There is no need for you to go all the way back to Kabul City," said Normal, looking at the droid's in surprise. "Plus, what about that appointment that you guys had at the stoned circle?"

"Ah the stones will keep. It's not as if they're going anywhere," said Reeltu airily. "Anyway, as fellow Leetists, it is our responsibility to help you."

"I am not actually a Leetist, you know," said Normal, eager to make a clean breast of things. "I admire Stan Lee's principles but I'm not strictly a follower. And I really cannot impose on your kind nature."

"Nonsense!" said Reeltu, waving a hand dismissively and smiling. "If you will not take us, old chap, we'd be forced to hitchhike back to Kabul City in order to follow you."

"If you insist, then I accept with thanks," smiled Normal. "If I can ever return the favour ..."

"Pshaw! Let's not discuss that!" said Reeltu, smiling in return. "But perhaps what we should discuss is how we are going to find this dog of yours."

"OK, has anybody got any ideas?" asked Normal hopefully. "I couldn't think of any way to track down the Martian, it's not as if he gave me a receipt ..."

"If I may make a suggestion, what if you got somebody involved who actually works with animals, or would be proficient in tracking them down?" asked Johnny trying to be helpful.

"Well there is the cat burglar of East-End," replied Normal, after a moment of thought.

"A common criminal who skulks around? I thought the Wiener-Nixon Act took care of that by instituting the reconstructed criminal program?" asked Sthri, mentioning the program instituted by a bureaucrat named Nixon who had read one too many psyche reports, or had become good subject material for one.

This unsung genius had come up with the theory that stealing was an addiction and that weaning thieves away from the urge to steal was a gradual process. He had sold [literally, he'd asked for some palm greasing action in return for a good campaign platform] the idea to a politician named Wiener who was looking for a good platform for his political campaign. [Nobody believed in the tired old myths of reduction of corruption, alleviation of poverty or gun control any longer. Even the politicians couldn't summon up enough enthusiasm to engage in that kind of necro-equine flagellation any longer.]

The love-child of this unholy matrimony between politician and bureaucrat had been the Wiener-Nixon Act.

Nowadays in Kabul City, nobody worked their way up the ranks of the criminal organizations. In large part, this was due to the fact that a majority of

them were already in the two P's - police or politics - and didn't need to go through all that skulking in alleys and casing of joints business. The unlucky few who could not make it into the two P's had latched on to the Wiener-Nixon act as a godsend, or, jokersend, depending on your beliefs. They simply turned themselves in as major criminals after a petty larceny like nicking a handbag from a little old lady. [Considering the armament that old ladies carried these days, you couldn't in all honesty blame them for understating their proficiency.]

As soon as they turned themselves in, they were able to enter the Reduced Acquisition of Tangibles program. Or, as it was more commonly known, the RAT program.

The RAT program gave them a license to steal, but there was a catch – wasn't there always one? They had to decrease the value of the items they stole at a steady rate, the idea being that eventually they would have to steal worthless items or stop stealing altogether.

However, nobody knew how successful the Wiener-Nixon act was due to the fact that most of the licensed criminals had acquired enough resources to become legitimate and run for public office before they reached the end of the program. Everybody knew how successful the Wiener-Nixon act alumni were though, due to the fact that they ended up having to elect said alumni to office.

"Well this one is different, he steals cats," explained Normal.

"Shouldn't he be called a catnapper then?"

"He had apparently petitioned for the moniker but it had already been taken by this guy down in the

mews who spends all his time up in the roofs, napping with the cats," said Normal, wondering what the fuss was about, any name was as good as another, wasn't it?

"Uh huh. What we really need is somebody who can work with dogs though, not cats," said Reeltu, looking thoughtful. "Don't tell me that there's a dog burglar - or should that be dognapper? - too?"

"Oh we don't call him that, we call him the Dog Boy," said Normal, before hastening to add, "He doesn't actually steal them you know, he kinda liberates them."

"Oh? Liberates them from their owners, sort of like a dachshund cavalier perhaps? Or is it more like a terrier terrorist?" grinned Reeltu.

"He liberates them from bad owners apparently. The ones who treat a dog like a dog," sniffed Normal.

"Well, they certainly can't treat them like cats, now can they? They'd get too skittish," chuckled the irrepressible Reeltu with a twinkle in his eyes. "But enough of this tomfoolery, you think this Dog Boy of yours can find us your dog ... what did you say his name was?"

"Ringo." Normal stared at Reeltu. "How'd you know it was a male?"

"Didn't you call it a he at some point or other?" asked Reeltu nonchalantly.

"Nope." Normal was emphatic. "I've never liked personifying pets, it's not as if they are people ... but to hear Katy talk sometimes you'd think the mutt understood every word she said."

"Funny. I must have just picked up on some non-verbal cue then," replied Reeltu looking a bit flustered. "Yeah, that must be it. But to get back to

what I was saying, do you think this Dog Boy can be of help?"

"Well, he might be able to help, if we can find him," said Normal, hesitating.

"How hard can it be in a place like Kabul City? Don't they call it the city of a million eyes and ears?" asked Sthri, with easy confidence.

"It's also the city of two million greased palms," replied Normal, who knew how Kabul City operated, the way only an inhabitant of the city could know.

"Those eyes and ears don't sprout tongues till they see the colour of your credits. I'm not sure we have the kind of credits that would be needed for a job like that."

"The best you can do is try and the worst you can do is fail," said Sthri, as if he was making a weighty pronouncement.

"I've never understood why such meaningful sounding phrases like the one you just came up with would actually inspire anybody. I can imagine a lot worse than failing. The only reason you can't is because you haven't seen my wife when she's mad," grinned Normal.

"Look at it like this, you still have only two choices when all is said and done - run or face it out. If you want to do the latter, Reeltu and I will help you as much as we can."

"Maybe the Jokers are right and it's all a big joke. I would not willingly accept either of those choices. Unfortunately, I guess this is what they mean when they say having to choose between sleeping on the floor or a hard place. Or then again, maybe they knew my wife when they came up with that particular

saying. Our bedroom's gonna be a mighty hard place to sleep in for a couple of weeks."

"If life with your wife is so unbearable, why'd you stick around for so long anyway?" asked Sthri in exasperation.

"Obviously, you aren't married," chuckled Normal. "Of course I complain about how hard it is to live with my wife! She complains about me to all of her friends. Doesn't mean that I don't love her or that she loves me any less, it's just something married people tend to do to while away the time." Normal paused for a moment and then said with a twinkle in his eyes, "Because after you've been married for a while, it does begin to seem like ages at times."

"Not that her anger isn't real mind you, she's got a really good throwing arm!" he hastened to add.

"And you still want to go back? You people are nuts!" exclaimed Sthri, looking as if he wanted to go find a straitjacket at once.

"Yeah, I guess we are," smiled Normal. "But then again, who's normal around here anyway? Except for me of course," said he chuckling.

"So does this mean you now want to go back?" asked Reeltu, studiously ignoring Normal's witticism. "If we are returning to Kabul City tomorrow, we had better get an early start. It's probably best that we get as much sleep as we can," he said getting up and walking towards the door.

"Shima, why wait till tomorrow? Let's go back now!" said Normal impulsively.

"Now?" asked Sthri, looking as if he wanted to revisit the notion of acquiring a straitjacket, for Normal. "There is doing the right thing and then there is doing the stupid thing"

"Ah, if I have to face the music, I might as well do it before I lose my nerve," responded Normal with conviction. "Johnny can drive since he doesn't need to sleep. The rest of us can grab some shut-eye in the car" He paused and looked at the two droids. "Of course, you guys don't have to feel obliged to come with us, the two of us can handle this by ourselves."

"No, no. We insist. If you're determined to go tonight, then by all means let's go. We're behind you all the way," responded Sthri.

Normal hoped that he hadn't just added his name to the hundred-stupidest-people-of-all-time list as they checked out, returned the keys to the confused motel manager and walked over to the carport. It sure felt as if his name just might end up topping the list.

Chapter 24 - The Posse in Bloomingdale

A city is like a person. It wakes up in the morning all bleary eyed and wiping the drool from the night before. It cleans itself up and goes through the working part of the day showing its businesslike facet to the world. Then towards evening, it kicks back, becomes more informal and relaxed, partying on till the wee hours and then end the cycle by going to sleep, to start all over again the next day.

Just as a person has many different facets, a city too has many different aspects – some known to all, but some not so well known. Depending on which part of the city you frequent, you get to experience one aspect. But move a few blocks this way or that way, and your experience might be the exact opposite

of the previous one. [Many a midnight reveller waking up in a strange gutter in an unknown part of the city can attest to this fact with conviction.] The Alien Posse was discovering this fact in spades.

They were in the section of the city known as Bloomingdale. Some say the name came into being when some long forgotten explorer had arrived upon the spot after a long trek [explorers always seem to like long treks. There is some speculation in scientific circles that perhaps explorers were allergic to short treks], had seen a field of beautiful flowers and had exclaimed, "This is a veritable blooming dale!" [That's another thing about explorers, they always have to get wordy. Instead of saying, "What a nice bunch of flowers!" like any other normal, sane human being, they have to say stuff like "What a magnificent glade!" or "The beauty of yonder dale dazzles me!" Pretentious gits, all of them.]

Others say that there had been a great building at that very spot named Bloomingdale, long before the Ages of Chaos. [One of the more insane theories is that it was a church of a now extinct religion devoted to worshipping the god of commercialism.]

Whatever the origins of its name, and whatever it might have been in the past, the Bloomingdale of today wasn't about flowers or meadows. There were flowers once in a long while, but they were flowers left at the site of the latest murder that took place in Bloomingdale. Even these flowers were quite often nicked from another part of the city where flowers actually grew. Nothing much grew in Bloomingdale, except for the crime rate and unemployment.

This was in fact, the seedy underbelly of the city that most writers talked about. Here, the bright lights

of the rest of the city served merely as the source for the shadows.

Bloomington by day was bad enough when you could see it in all its glory, the all pervasive poverty and the dirt. Here and there a few houses struggled to look respectable despite the fact that they'd lost the battle long ago, stuck amidst bunches of others who had given up all pretences of being respectable and had crossed over to the other side of the street of respectability.

Long rows of houses jostled each other like children at an ice cream cart, on both sides of narrow streets laid out with great care on the site of what some claimed was an old abattoir. Then again, there were others said that it had been the site of an ancient pagan religion.

Nobody cared one way or another nowadays. They had enough bloodshed to deal with on a day-to-day basis. The inhabitants of Bloomington tried to eke out a living during the day by doing whatever they could. Some begged. Not in Bloomington, nobody would have given them a centavo. Others plied various trades - some legitimate, others not so legitimate. Come dusk, these honest folk - or at least, mostly honest folk with flexible consciences and morality [they were honest as long as temptation did not come their way to make things complicated. Most of them believed that temptation needed to be laid to rest as soon as it showed its face, by giving into it. Within limits, of course.] - went inside and locked the doors, because that was when the real predators came out in Bloomington.

Just as the city as a whole changed its facade as night approached, Bloomington changed too. But

not for the better. The poor, trying-to-make-his-way-in-the-world Joe Schmoe was replaced by the just as poor, trying-to-make-his-mark[and quite often as not, this involved some sharp-edged weapon and one of the aforementioned Joe Schmoes]-on-the-world Joe Gore. And if you weren't wise enough to stay indoors, gore was what you got. Most of the time your own, dribbling down between your fingers while you tried to keep as much of it in as possible.

At their core, the nocturnal inhabitants of Bloomingdale's streets and their diurnal counterparts were both just people trying to eke a living in a harsh world. The difference lay in their methods in achieving their goals. The mugs mined the salt all their lives while the thugs lay back and salted the mines, or even assaulted the miners, all for the sake of making a living.

The short version is that nobody came out on the streets of Bloomingdale after dusk unless they were thugs, or conducted business at night, or suicidal. Or, aliens. This might explain why the Alien Posse found itself following their quarry into Bloomingdale as dusk fell.

"Hey, how come there's hardly any people around?" asked Heyachi, looking around at deserted streets.

"Oh, who cares? It's much easier for us to find our quarry with less people around anyway," replied Vin. "Shall we ask somebody again if they've seen the human?"

"I hope it won't be a Joker. Being pointed once is enough for me, thank you!" said Kerr shortly, while Heyachi sniggered.

"That was rather funny the way he man-, or rather alien-, handled you," chuckled Goro.

"I'm sure it looks funnier from the other end. It sure wasn't funny from mine!" snapped Kerr.

The aliens looked up and down the deserted street. Not a soul was in sight. Dirty pieces of scrap paper fluttered by, caught in a whispering wind which ran through the streets as if the invisible denizens of Bloomingdale were engaged in a game.

"Pssst! Want a good deal on used microchips? They fell off the back of a hovertruck," whispered a voice from an alleyway.

"Nope, but we sure can use some information," replied Vin, staring suspiciously at the dark alley.

"Is there money in it or are you looking for freebies?" whispered the voice.

"We were just released from jail. How many credits do you think we have on us?"

"Ah yes, I see how that can be a problem," said the hidden speaker sadly. Then his voice got sharper, more excited. "Oh, I say, is that an alien with you?"

"If we answer that question, will you answer ours?" responded Bern, pouncing on the opportunity.

"Ah, clever! Or was that supposed to be funny? Since you're just out of the slammer, I'm sure that our dutiful police-force has already unburdened you of any unnecessary weight in the form of credits. So, given the circumstances, I guess one must do the best one can," sighed the stranger rather theatrically, like an over-enthusiastic Juliet on opening day. "I don't really need an answer to my question 'cos I *know* he's an alien. However, I will answer your question if you'd let me talk to him for just a moment."

The aliens looked at each other in puzzlement, wondering what this latest development was. Upon a slight nod of assent from Kerr however, they drew back and allowed the speaker from the shadows access to the Gaddian. A young man with a round face topped by a head of short, curly hair stepped out of the shadows. He had an impish look on his face as if he was thinking something wicked about you but wasn't yet ready to share. He drew close to Kerr and began talking to him in a low tone in perfect Galactic.

"Now I don't know what you're doing with this stupid bunch of humans but I can help you escape them. Have you got a ship? I need to get off this planet quickly. It's a ..."

"You know, we take exception to being called stupid. And human," interrupted Yoh in Galactic. The stranger jumped back as if he'd been stung and scabbled desperately, trying to back out through the solid brickwork of the wall behind him. Once he realized the futility of trying to phase through solid matter, he turned a bug-eyed look upon the amused aliens and stammered out, "W-W-W-What? W-W-Who said that? How do you know Galactic? And how come you speak it so well? You didn't butcher even one word let alone the whole sentence!"

"Of course not, that's because we aren't humans. Don't judge a disc by its case!" retorted Heyachi.

"Not human?" The stranger looked puzzled for a moment and then smiled knowingly. "Oh I get it, you're using human exoshells!"

"Clever lad," said Vin, smiling. "Now why don't you tell us your story? I take it that you're not human either, eh? Perhaps a humanoid race?"

"Yeah, I'm a Sciclone. My name's Dar."

"But don't you lot clone everybody? What happened to the rest of you?" asked Heyachi, looking up at the stranger half in belligerence and half inquiry.

"It's a rather complicated story that should be saved for some other time," replied Dar shortly. He then bent forward and spoke in an urgent, low voice. "Listen, I have some people on my tail, some really nasty characters. I need to get off planet quickly. You think perhaps you can help?"

"What's it worth to us? We don't do freebies, you know," countered Heyachi.

"Ah come on, you're killing me, literally! What about the eternal brotherhood between the wanderers amongst the stars? What about doing a good deed for the sake of the deed itself? What about waking up in the morning and being able to face yourself?"

"I think that last one is more of a problem for you clones than for us," chuckled Bern. "Besides, you should've considered all those when you tried to barter information with us!"

"Ah, but I thought you were human, and humans are fair game, aren't they?" asked Dar, giving everybody an ingenuous smile. "OK, tell you what, I'll answer your questions for you if you will please consider getting me off-planet? I can even pay you, once you get me back to Sciclone."

"Ah yes, the old 'I'll gladly pay you tomorrow for a free ride today proposal'," scoffed Heyachi.

"I'm not asking for a free ride!" snapped Dar, looking offended. "The council on Sciclone will pay you well for the information that I carry."

"Enough of this bickering, the human is getting away from us as we dawdle. Let's go!" snapped Kerr.

He pointed to Dar. "You, if you can help us find this human we're looking for, I promise you that I will personally take you off-planet."

"You want to find a human, in a city full of humans? By Bacu, you don't come up with easy tasks, do you?"

"It's not as tough a job as you might think. He was seen coming this way and he has a dog in tow, or maybe the dog has him in tow."

"Why didn't you say so? I assume he came this way recently? Then we'd better hurry, or he'll be eaten alive in here. You realize that most humans don't like coming to this area for a reason, right?" asked Dar, scanning the streets carefully.

"If speed's of the essence, let's hurry instead of gabbing here for even longer," said Kerr, motioning that Dar should take the lead.

While Dar might be on the run from whatever it was that he wanted to escape, he did appear to have stopped long enough in this part of Kabul City to know it well. He'd pause for a word with a couple of human females standing under a streetlight or with a lurker in an alley and would come back with word that the human they were after had gone this way or that way. The hunt continued in this fashion for a while before Dar held up his hand and stopped them at an intersection.

"Listen, can you hear that?" he asked in a low voice.

"Hear what?" responded Heyachi.

"You know, most people hear the rain outside and say 'Oh, it's raining outside'. But there are a few who would say 'That's raindrops pitter-pattering on the branches, that's rain on the neighbour's roof and

that's rain on that no good critter I killed the other day'. It's all in how you listen, don't listen to the music, listen to the notes."

"Are you done Professor Henry Talkalot? Now will you just tell us what you mean by all that babbling?" interrupted Heyachi.

"Umm ... I was just saying that it might not be a good idea to go that way."

"Why not? Didn't you just say that the human had been heading in this direction?" asked Kerr, impatient to continue the hunt.

"Yeah, but you guys really don't listen, do you?" asked Dar, shaking his head like a disappointed teacher confronting a bunch of lazy students. "Listen a bit and you will hear the music of this place, the music which tells you where it's safe to go and where it's not."

The posse craned their necks, extended various internal sensors and listened for a few moments. Now they heard what Dar had already picked up - the sound of men's raucous laughter overlaid by an arrangement consisting of the strident voice of a female screeching at somebody, the barking of an excited dog and the whimpering of somebody in pain.

"That is the theme song of this place, and those guys are real good conductors, they've had practice making people sing," said Dar, looking utterly serious.

"But that sounds like a dog," said Kerr. "In fact, it sounds a lot like the dog I'm after. It had been barking at me long enough that I can almost recognize its bark."

"Yeah, very touching, I'm sure," said Dar, sounding not at all touched. "But if we go disturb

those guys at their fun, we might be the ones who will have to face the music next."

"What exactly is going on there?" inquired Yoh.

"Those are boss Chu's boys. Well, at least the one's who are laughing. They're having their usual bit of fun at the expense of somebody or other, might even be the human that you're looking for if you're right about that being the same dog. People here, they are like people everywhere, just trying to get by somehow. And they get picked on every night by Chu's Chihuahuas," said Dar bitterly, looking angry and helpless at the same time.

"If I wasn't a hardened cynic, I'da thought that you actually cared about these people," scoffed Heyahchi.

Dar gave Heyahchi the kind of look somebody would give a stinking bag of white, writhing worms. "I've lived in Bloomingdale for a while now. They're good people here. They have been kind to me when nobody would help me. They hate Chu's boys because they give this place an even worse reputation than it already has. Earlier, everybody looked down upon this place because it was the poorest part of the city. But since it became the Chihuahuas' playground, everybody wants to move out, but there is nowhere else for them to go. When you're at the bottom of the ladder and people are pushing you down, all you do is get squished."

"They could always gang up on these Chihuahuas. That always worked for us on Thule. There can't be that many of these thugs as compared to the people who live here?" asked Heyahchi, looking slightly abashed.

"Oh yeah, you think it's that easy? These people have lived all their lives at the bottom of the heap. You think they are going to buck things now?"

"Well, I really don't care whether they do or not, but we certainly are going to buck things if necessary. I want that dog!" said Kerr, starting out in the direction of the altercation.

The other aliens looked at each other, uncertain of what to do or where to go. Dar looked from the other aliens to the departing Kerr, uncertain what to do. Finally, he asked, "Shouldn't we follow him?"

"Umm ... perhaps that might not be such a good idea," replied Vin, the Machian. He turned to the other aliens, "Fine, we kept our promise, we've helped the Gaddian to find the animal. I think Kerr's on his own if he wants to take on these thugs."

"Oh come on, *I* say when the promise is fulfilled and I don't think we're done yet!" burst out Heyachi. "How tough can they be? There are seven of us and at least five of us have exoshells which have the strength of like five or ten humans. Are we going to help the Gaddian or not?"

"You just want to beat up on humans, Heyachi!" replied Vin, accusingly.

"Sure I do," grinned Heyachi. "But you lot promised to get his quadruped back and we haven't done that yet. So on we go!"

Since Kerr was his ticket off planet, Dar set off in pursuit of the Gaddian at this point and the others followed him, some with more eagerness than others, in a straggling line down the road.

Chapter 25 - The Raiders raid Wylie's office

It was hot and muggy in the Wylieworks offices. Wylie didn't believe in spending needless credits on frivolities such as air-conditioning. As far as Wylie was concerned, all such frippery was not necessary for running a good business. "Enterprises are built on sweat, not by avoiding it" was his rejoinder whenever a client complained about the heat.

Kathryn was listening to the buzz of voices from the waiting room outside while she doodled on her notepad. The graffiti glitterati had gotten into the habit of using the waiting room as their usual gathering place, even if Wylie wasn't around. They seemed to like the idea of getting off the streets and congregating somewhere where they had an actual roof over their heads. The heat and the general humidity didn't appear to bother them at all. Out of the general buzz of conversation, Kathryn picked up one thread that was getting louder in degrees.

"I've come up with an idea for a time travel book!" said one voice.

"What? You have a book that has a button which when pressed sends the book back in time?" asked a second voice.

"No you idiot! I meant a story for a time travel book."

"Oh you mean you'll tell somebody that you've invented a book that can go back in time and then tell them that they can send the book back to themselves with instructions on how to get rich and that you'd let them have the book for a cut throat rate?" asked the second voice, sounding totally lost.

"Aaarrrgh! No, no! I meant a plot for a time travel book!" Kathryn could almost see the first speaker turning purple in the face.

"I get it!" answered the second voice brightly. "You mean you are planning to steal a book that can travel back in time so that you can sell it to somebody, eh?"

Kathryn didn't get a chance to hear the response of the first person (if he didn't burst all the blood vessels in his body out of sheer infuriation first) because a new set of voices first intruded upon, and then drowned out, the conversation that she'd been idly listening to.

"Why can't you just say it is me? Be honest with me! I know it's me that you wanna talk to Wylie about!" said a shrill female voice. There was something familiar about that voice but Kathryn couldn't quite place who it might be.

"Shh ... Rlo, can't you keep her quiet?" said a male voice that Kathryn was sure that she'd never heard before.

"Look Jello, this has nothing to do with you. I don't even know what you're talking about. We just have some business here at this place. Why won't you understand?" said a second male voice which sounded remarkably like the first male voice but Kathryn wasn't paying attention to the male voices since she'd just realized that the female voice belonged to Jello. *What was she doing here? She was supposed to be meeting a client at the Drum!*

"Because I know what your business is!" That was Jello's voice again. She sounded very angry too! "I thought you and I were getting along so well too! At least, I did till I learnt that you wanna fire me.

Why can't you be a man about it and tell me to my face?"

"Fire you? But ..."

There was a crash as if a bunch of hooligans had kicked open the door to the offices (or a very irate woman had slammed it shut) and all chatter in the waiting room came to a sudden stop. There were sounds of footsteps, of many, many feet. Then the door to the inner offices burst open and Kathryn was at last able to see the players of the little drama to which she'd only been privy as a listener till that point.

For a moment, Kathryn wondered if perhaps the street glitterati were enacting one of their Real-life Adventures right there in the Wylieworks offices. There was, not one, but ten or more of the same person in the room. Given the fact that Jello was arguing with one of the duplicates, it did indeed look as if it was a glitteratti drama. But what was Jello doing here?

Kathryn wondered if perhaps the heat had gotten too much for her after all? Had she fallen asleep and was dreaming all of this? Or worse yet, hallucinating? Jello's ear-piercing shriek however, did not sound like anything out of a dream that Kathryn might want to have. One of her nightmares perhaps, but certainly not a dream.

"Err ... Jello? What is going on? Who are these people?" asked Kathryn, trying to make sense of it all.

"What do you mean who are these people?" If somebody could look angry, irritated and surprised at the same time, Jello managed it. "They're the clients for the gig you had set up for me today! Remember,

they were supposed to meet me at the Drum? I even asked them if they were there for the gig and they said they were." She frowned and turned to Rlo, "You are the clients, aren't you?"

"But these aren't the clients. I've never seen them before in my life!" said Kathryn before anybody else could answer.

"Well, one of them told me they were there for the job!" She turned back to Rlo and said accusingly, "It was you, wasn't it?" And then paused as if recollection tackled her right at the goalposts. "No, you talked to me after the other guy walked away. Bomb it! You all look alike! Which one of you said that you were there for the job?" asked Jello, looking menacingly at each of the Raiders in turn.

Sal looked as if he'd rather not be the one to confront Jello right now. However, since she was giving all of the Raiders her patented, angry-woman-on-the-prowl look, he perhaps decided that it was time to step once more into the breach lest she fill the room with dead Raiders.

"Umm ... 'twas I who responded in the affirmative fair maiden. But forsooth, I mistook thee to mean our mission, not thine," he quavered, it was evident that Sal's language troubles got worse when he was nervous.

"You can drop the playacting!" snarled Jello. "What are you bunch anyway? Some kind of gang from the other side of town that wants to bust up our gigs? And you ..." she turned to Rlo giving him her you-have-wounded-me-to-the-core-and-I-am-ready-to-keel-over-and-die-clutching-my-broken-heart look, "I trusted you! I thought we had a connection! I was even gonna ask you to look me up after this gig ... not

that I ever hook-up with clients after jobs normally mind you," she added quickly.

"But, but ... I thought that we connected at some level too!" responded Rlo rather plaintively. "And what do you mean by a gig? I thought we just met you at a bar and you were helping us with our mission because you were nice?"

"Hold it, hold it!" Kathryn shouted above the hubbub of confused glitterati babble in the waiting room outside, the muttering of the Raiders amongst themselves and the ceaseless high-pitched imprecations of Jello. "Obviously, a mistake has been made. But will somebody please explain to me what you lot are doing here?" asked Kathryn looking from one person to another in the crowded office.

"They wanted to come here," said Jello, turning on a 1000 megawatt accusatory glare on the collective Raiders as if the mere fact that they were here, was their fault. Which when you think about it, it was. "Will you explain to me how you came here, of all places, if you knew nothing about my gig? Huh? Huh?"

"Milady, 'tis god's honest truth that we be on an important mission. We were told to come to two-B-naught-two-B Baker Street and meet one John Wylie ..." began Sal with all the patience he could muster.

"Wylie? You are here to meet John? Why didn't you say so!" interrupted Kathryn, a glimmer of understanding bursting through the clouds of confusion at last.

"If we'da been allowed to talk before, I'm sure we'da mentioned it. Who are you?" asked Tre, looking Kathryn up and down.

Kathryn stared at Tre for a moment as if she was hoping that her gaze might just cause him to clutch his stomach and drop to the floor, writing in agony. Seeing as that wasn't working, she responded. "How rude can you be? 'Who are you?' I know you have better manners than that! Is there anybody in charge that I can talk to or are you just a bunch of thugs?"

"I am in charge," responded Rod. "Now who the hell are you, ma'am?"

Kathryn's response, which judging from her look, was a death-ray calculated to reduce Rod to a pile of ashes on the spot, was never delivered since Jello jumped back into the fray.

"You mean to tell me, that you came here to meet Wylie and all that stuff you told me about being from another planet and the missing clone and all that was true? I thought that was a script! It sounded kinda lame but hey, I've seen both good and bad scripts in this business, who am I to judge? You lied to me!" Jello said, looking at Rlo and pointing an accusing finger. [The accusing finger, a device almost as deadly as the death-ray from eyes, is used a lot as an offensive weapon by teachers, mothers, wives and girlfriends. It has been known to reduce grown men to blubbering idiots. Of course, most of these men didn't need any help getting there, to begin with, at least as far as the idiot part was concerned.]

"I lied to you? How can I have lied to you when I told you nothing but the truth?" asked a totally bewildered Rlo, his jaw dropping in surprise.

"Oh yeah, you lied to me alright! You should have made it clear to me from the start that you were an alien! I wouldn't have thought of ... well never

mind that. I'm getting out of here!" Jello turned and flounced off towards the door.

"Jello! Wait! Let me talk to you!" Rlo hurried after her, stumbling over himself and his words, trying to explain things to Jello as she walked out of the office, nose upturned and obviously listening to every word that Rlo uttered.

While the confrontation between Jello and Rlo had been taking place, Rod and Sal had been trying to make some sense of the whole situation. Given that they had a waiting room full of chattering street glitterati, Kathryn continually asking them their business, Jello and Rlo arguing about who had lied to whom and the rest of the Raiders all talking at once, sense was noticeable only by the sheer fact of its absence.

Having had no luck with talking to the others and getting anything coherent out of them, Rod at last resorted to the crowd control method used by lots of people [all of whom happened to be characters in one trivid show or another] - shooting into the air. This did result in a lessening of the uproar but not the way he'd intended. Under normal circumstances, shooting into the air with a non-projectile weapon might be a good way to get people's attention. But as luck would have it [in the case of the Raiders, they had plenty of luck but their luck was like expired milk, mostly bad], this just wasn't one of those instances.

What Rod had not counted on was the fact that the ceiling of the building might not be able to take a plasma bolt with impunity. The uproar in the office came to a sudden halt when Rod's aptitude with firearms brought the ceiling down, literally. For a while, everybody was too busy scrabbling under

tables or running out of the room to escape from falling debris to do any shouting. When the dust cleared, Rod found himself confronted by the accusing eyes of Kathryn Kint.

"You! Did you even think for a second before doing something as harebrained as shooting at the ceiling? You could have killed somebody!" she almost screamed at Rod.

"Well, it did clear the room and calm everybody down now, didn't it? So can we get back to what were talking about? This is John Wylies office?" Rod was trying to be calm and rational and businesslike.

"Yes it is! And I want you to get your carbon copies and get out of here before I call the cops! I don't know what you lot are up to, but this kind of behaviour is just unacceptable. We are trying to run a business here." Kathryn was reaching the end of her tether. The events of the past few days, Wylie's disappearance and now this! She wasn't sure that she could hold up much longer without snapping.

"Well, so are we lady!" snapped Rod, all thoughts of good customer relations forgotten. "It was supposed to be a simple mission. We were supposed to meet Wylie, collect something and deliver it. Simple. So why don't you stop giving us the run-around and simply tell us where Wylie is?"

"He's out on business and won't be back for a couple of days!" said Kathry, doing a perfect imitation of an unhelpful receptionist.

"But he's supposed to be here! We were told that he'd be here waiting for us. Now what are we going to do?" moaned Rod.

"Well something came up and he had to go off to attend to business. Why don't you just come back in a

couple of days when he's back?" asked Kathryn, stonily unhelpful. Then she recalled Wylie's parting words. "Hold on, you wouldn't know you-know-who, would you?"

"Err ... who?" Rod was confused, but then again, that was never a difficult task.

"No, not who, you-know-who!" snapped Kathryn, angry at these strange carbon copies, Normal and even Wylie for putting her in this position.

"I don't know who!"

"Rod, I believe she means *you-know-who*," interrupted Sal, grabbing Rod's arm and squeezing it tight.

"Oh, why didn't you say so?" said Rob, his frown disappearing. "Sure, we know you-know-who! So what about you-know-who?"

"Well, John said to call you-know-who if you know them. I guess they know what this is all about 'cos I sure don't!"

"Ah well, thank you so much for your assistance! And we're sorry about the mess," said Rod, ruefully looking around at what had once been the slightly crowded, yet businesslike, offices of Wylieworks. Kathryn just stood there, her arms crossed glowering at them. She knew she was going to have to deal with cleaning up this mess. What else could go wrong, she wondered.

Without further ado, the Raiders turned around and trooped out. All that is, except for Jello and Rlo, since they'd already gone out. Kathryn could hear one of the men ask the other:

"So I guess this you-know-who is the employer?"

"Of course it is! Who'd you think it was?" responded the other.

Kathryn found herself alone, surrounded by shambles, wondering whether this had anything to do with Wylie's mission to find her poor baby and if Ringo was all right. She did spare a tiny fraction of her concern for her husband and worry about the continued absence of Normal. But then again, she was sure that Normal could take care of himself, not like her ittle-bitty-widdy-lambkins Ringo ...

Chapter 26 - Alien Posse takes on the Chihuahuas

"Leave him alone, you big bully!" A thin young woman with dark curly hair was screaming at the laughing thugs as Kerr walked up. The young woman was trying to rescue the human alien that Kerr and the others had been in search of. The one the police officer had called John Doe. The whimpers of pain that they had heard earlier were emanating from Doe, who was rolled into a ball on the ground as if he'd been trying to defend himself as much as possible. It looked as if the thugs had decided to test how effective this method of protection was because they kept walking around the curled up human and kicking him every once in a while.

"Excuse me ..." began Kerr.

"Oh look, it's a Marty! What do you want Marty? Wanna join the fun?" asked one of the thugs, a big hulking brute with a scar down the left side of his face.

"Actually, I was wondering if I could have"

He was interrupted by the next member of the posse, who happened to be Heyachi. "OK you big

ugly galoots, put 'em up! It's time for you to face the music and I'm betting you won't like the tune that we're gonna play. It's blubbering time!"

On Thule, they have a saying that some are born fighting, some have fights thrust upon them but that there are others who can find a fight no matter where they are. Heyachi was a candidate for the last category, as long as he had his support system in place. Once he'd issued the challenge, Heyachi looked behind him to make sure that he did indeed have his support system in place. He appeared ready to blubber himself as he realized that the only people around - except for the glowering thugs who were eyeing him like a dog eyes a new chew-toy - were Kerr and himself.

Bereft of his support network (or as they called them in Thule, the buddies-who-held-the-other-guy-down), Heyachi appeared ready to take to his heels. Not to kick, but to run. However, the necessity for such an ignominious retreat disappeared at the sight of the rest of the Alien Seven making their way towards them at a leisured pace. They had gotten delayed by another would be watch-seller who looked determined to make a sale. The reinforcements apparently brought Heyachi's courage with them because the Thulian turned back to the thugs with a new swagger.

It looked as if this particular cadre of Chu's Chihuahua's were frozen in shock. Or, trying to figure out what their next move should be. Given that their collective IQ would have made a kindergarten dropout feel superior, figuring things out wasn't a feat that they attempted under normal circumstances.

Never, in all the time that they'd been masters of Kabul City, had they ever been challenged. Challenged, at that, by a tiny alien and a medium sized human who looked as if he had trouble just walking, let alone do any fighting. They looked at each other and then back at their two "attackers" as if wondering if this was some kind of trick that their fellow mobsters were playing on them or if this was indeed a threat that needed to be taken seriously. Or, at least, as seriously as the laughter racking their bodies would allow them to.

"Run away little guy, and take your Marty friend with you. This is where the big boys play and you're liable to get hurt if you play with us," said one of the thugs, showing a gap-toothed smile which would have turned anybody off from smiling for the rest of their lives.

"Yeah, go find your own ball to play with, little man!" snickered one of the others.

"I think I already have!" responded Heyachi, lashing out with his foot, connecting with a solid meaty thump with the groin of the thug who'd just spoken. The thug had not expected such a kamikaze tactic on the part of what he thought to be harmless lunatic, and so was not prepared to defend himself. He also wasn't prepared for the explosion of pain which followed in the wake of the kick. He went down like a thug kicked in the testicles, all in a heap, whimpering in pain. That instant was a frozen tableau which lasted for a few seconds.

The shock on the faces of the goons, the surprise on the face of the young woman at the sudden turn of events, the wondering look on the face of John Doe who all of a sudden had himself a companion at

ground-level, the clinical expression on Heyachi's face as he inspected his handiwork, and the horror on the face of his team-mates while they considered the fact that they had just declared war on the collective gangs of Bloomingdale; it was as they say, one for the books. What wasn't known at that moment was whether it was one for the history books, the record books at the morgue or the more mundane books kept by the bookies.

"Somebody's liable to get hurt, are they? I bet somebody will get hurt alright, and it's going to be you!" yelled Heyachi, breaking the spell, kicking out with glee, again. His clinical assessments of a moment before paid off in spades since this time, instead of a whimper, he got an agonized scream of pure, undiluted pain out of his victim. It was so loud that it drowned out the whimpering of John Doe. The screaming went on and on and on, perhaps because the hapless hunter-turned-prey thought it might deter further agony.

Chu's Chihuahuas stared at the Alien Posse over the two bodies on the ground, neither faction sure of how to proceed now that all-out war had been declared.

Chapter 27 - Rlo and Jello

"Jello, please wait! Give me a chance to explain," pleaded Rlo, in hot pursuit of Jello who had stormed out of the Wylieworks offices and was now marching up Baker Street like death and his combined brethren on the day of the prepolypse.

"There is nothing to talk about!" she snapped, not looking at Rlo. "You lied to me and that is all there is

to it. This is the end, not that there was anything to begin with. I hope you don't think there was. I hate you!"

"But ... but ... I wasn't lying to you! And if you look at it, you could say you were lying too because you didn't tell us the truth either. You pretended to be helping us," said Rlo desperately, trying to use logic.

Jello turned on Rlo, as swift as a policeman's hand reaching for a bribe. "You want to talk about lying? You have the gall to say that *I* lied? Well let *me* tell you something, unlike some of the other glitterati, I have standards. I took this job because Wylie assured me that they only wanted the best for this drama. He told me that they wanted somebody who could keep it natural, and I did! I didn't change my name, all the stuff I told you was true! Why, to think that you and your brothers put my life in danger with Chu's men. You had no regard at all for my safety and now you accuse me of lying? How could you?" Jello gave Rlo the extended my-heart-broken-to-a-thousand-pieces look.

"No, no ... I didn't say that you were lying. I just said that it might *seem* as if you were lying ..." said Rlo, back-peddalling in desperation as he saw the chasm yawning beneath his metaphoric feet.

"No, you did say I lied! You did! Don't deny it now!"

Rlo knew when he was beaten. Sometimes there was no point in beating your head against a brick wall. But this sure looked like one of those times where bashing your brains out might be preferable to the alternative. He knew that he had to placate Jello somehow. As unreasonable as her claims were, he still got this funny feeling in his chest when he

thought of not seeing her again and so he realized he had to do whatever it took to calm her down.

"I'm sorry. I apologize," he said with as much contrition as he could muster – being a male, that sure wasn't much. "Maybe I said some stuff that I didn't really mean. Look, I really didn't intend to deceive you. If I did, it was unintentional."

"So you agree that you lied to me?" asked Jello in a slightly mollified voice, stopping her furious march up Baker Street to stand with her arms akimbo, treating Rlo again to her patented angry-woman-ready-to-explode stare.

"Yes, and it will never happen again!" promised Rlo with every intention of keeping that promise. [People often make promises that they have every intention of keeping ... right up till the moment they break them. Politicians, whom you should never count as people, on the other hand, have no intention of keeping any of the promises they make.] "Look, Jello. I don't know what it is about you, but something draws me to you. I feel as if I've known you a lifetime and as if I'd like to spend another lifetime with you. I've never felt like this before."

"First you lie to me and now you try to sweet talk me? Men!" huffed Jello, anger oozing from every pore of her being, again. She gave Rlo a look that said that he was the lowest, dirtiest, most insignificant microbe that ever lived and that she hoped that he never evolved beyond that point because he just wasn't worth it. Then, turning away from Rlo, she began marching up Baker Street, even faster than before. Rlo stared after her, wondering if he should continue to try to appease her or just give

up since it didn't look as if she was ever going to come around.

"Hey Rlo, wait up!"

It was the rest of the Raiders coming out of Wylieworks. Rlo was in no mood to talk to them or to inquire as to the status of the mission. All he could think of was Jello, and she was drawing further away from him with each step she took. He turned around to meet Alb who had called out to him.

"Alb, she's mad at me. She says I lied to her. What should I do?"

"Stay out of her way till she's cooled down and get something to eat while you wait?" suggested Alb, trying hard to be helpful but treading unknown waters since he'd never had to deal with relationship issues before.

"But she's walking away and if I wait, I might lose her forever!" moaned Rlo, glancing back and forth between the departing Jello and Alb.

"Don't you think it's better to lose sight of her for now and hope to placate her later, than to try to talk to her now and lose your sight because she clawed your eyes out?"

"You may joke if you want but I think she's my soul mate and I don't want to lose her!" replied Rlo, half turning back as if to run after Jello.

"Ah, soul mates, it's extremely rare, but I'm told it exists. It's sort of like twin souls tuned into each other." Alb hastened to explain further before he got the inevitable how-do-you-know-all-this look from Rlo. "I just read that somewhere, okay? I think it was at the back of a menu or a restaurant guide ... So let's say she's your soul mate. What do you wanna do about it?"

"I want to go after her and make her understand how I feel about her."

"So you want to talk to her, but she doesn't want to. What do you think she'll say to you if you ran after her to talk?" asked Cal who'd just joined them.

"Probably something like 'Goodbye! I talked, there! Have I made your day?'" answered Rlo with a mournful sigh.

"You've got that right, brother! Which is why, instead of asking her to talk to you, you talk to her. Wear her down," said Cal brightly. "Keep telling her how much you want to be with her and maybe she'll come around. If not, then you'll just have to let her go and hope she comes back."

"Yeah, probably with a weapon," muttered Alb under his breath.

"Thanks for the advice guys! It helped, I think," said Rlo over his shoulder as he sprinted after Jello.

Baker Street was in the not so affluent business districts of Kabul City. Most of the buildings on both sides of the street were businesses and most of them were closed for the day since it was late evening by now. A few, like Wylieworks, which kept unusual hours, had light streaming out of their windows on to the darkened streets. The street lights were on as well but none of these managed to completely dispel the encroaching darkness which reached out with black fingers to envelope the whole city in a blanket of darkness.

"Jello, please wait," Rlo called out after the retreating figure of Jello but she kept walking with no concern for his entreaties, as if she didn't hear them, or didn't care.

"OK, fine, don't wait. But at least, listen to me. I don't want to lose you. I know I've just met you, but what I've felt for you since I met you is no lie," he panted, running to catch up.

Jello stopped dead on her tracks and turned to meet Rlo, waiting for him to catch up. "Are you saying what I think you are? But you're an alien, Rlo! You just got done telling me that you are not human. There can never be anything between us. Or were you lying to me about being an alien?" she asked, frowning again.

Rlo looked at Jello, wondering how he could put into words all that he felt. "You say that I'm not of your race, but then why do I feel like you feel? Why do I feel pain when you feel pain? Why do I feel upset when you are mad at me? Why do I feel utterly and totally alone when you walk away from me? Why am I like you if I am not of your race? What makes me different? The fact that I was born on a different planet? The fact that I speak a different language? Do these actually measure what makes us alike or not? I want to be with you, to spend the rest of my life with you. Doesn't that count for something?" he asked passionately, gazing deep into Jello's eyes.

"Oh Rlo, did you know I'm a sucker for mushy, romantic speeches like that?" asked Jello, a tender smile breaking out from behind the dark frowning cloud on her face.

"I can honestly say that I didn't, and that's no lie," he said, smiling. "I really do feel that way about you and I am willing to do whatever it takes to make this thing between us work."

"Oh, Rlo, if only it could be so!" Jello sighed.
"But you know it can't be, it just can't! I'm human and you are ...umm ... whatever you are. Do you at least look like us? Or is that some sort of disguise?"

"No, we look just the way you see us. There have been other instances where similar looking species were able to cohabit. Maybe it'll work for us too," said Rlo, looking hopeful. "Aren't you ready to at least give it a try? You said earlier that you'd felt a connection with me"

"Cohabit? What sort of girl do you take me for? If you want to even have a chance of making this work Rlo, we've got to do it properly!" replied Jello, reprimand and shocked morality fighting for dominance in her voice.

"Kill two Drinthian boars and offer them to the council of elders and ask them to pray to the gods so that I don't get killed during the matrimonial season?" asked Rlo, ready to spring into action.

"Much worse - though I have no idea what Drinthian boars are, and I'll have to ask you some other time about the getting killed bit - you'll have to talk to my father."

"Talk to your father? About what? The weather? The price of rocket fuel?" asked Rlo, bewildered. Especially since he distinctly remembered Jello telling him earlier in the day that she had no family at all. But he decided not to push his luck by pursuing that particular avenue of enquiry.

"No silly, you have to talk to my father and ask him for permission to marry me!"

"Why would I do that? I'm not marrying him, I'm marrying you." Rlo was discovering that the whole mating ritual was a maze that he wasn't equipped to

traverse. Then he thought of something. "How do marriages work here? Does the couple go their separate ways after the mating season? I don't want that, not with you ..."

"What? What sort of marriage is that?" Jello looked scandalized. "I might not look it, but I'm a well brought up girl, I am. I don't want that kind of marriage! I want a proper one ... What happens the next time when mating season comes around?" she asked interested despite herself.

"It's all up to the lottery," replied Rlo, shrugging his shoulders. "You might get the same person or it might be somebody different. Actually, most of the time it is somebody quite different. They say it keeps thing interesting, variety spices up life and all that ..."

"So what was all that stuff you said earlier about wanting to be with me always?" sniffed Jello. "How would that work with a marriage like they have on your planet?"

"Oh, where I come from, companionship is different from marriage, it's not the same thing at all!" said Rlo, brightly.

"Yeah, it's not the same thing here either but they have a different name for it here, and you have to pay for it," responded Jello, an ominous tone in her voice. "Well, you can forget about *companionship*" she pronounced the word as if it left a bad taste in her mouth. "I want a real marriage, the way it's done here. If you want to give this a shot - and I have no idea why I'm agreeing to this, I must be crazy - then you've got to do it our way."

"Fine, anything to be with you! I'll even take on the Drinthian boars," smiled Rlo. "So where do I find your father?"

"About that ..." began Jello.

"Yeah?"

"Well, my father and I don't actually talk to each other," replied Jello, hesitantly, as if she didn't really want to go into details.

"Why not?" probed Rlo.

"I don't approve of him, or rather, the company he keeps," sniffed Jello, as if she was thinking of something distasteful.

"Fallen in with the wrong crowd has he?"

"Yeah, the worst - politicians!"

"Ah, I guess that is one thing you and I agree on about both our worlds," Rlo nodded, grimacing at the thought of politicians. "But I guess I will still have to talk to him, eh? Don't you think it's kind of funny that you won't talk to your father but you want me to ask him for permission to get married to you?"

"Not really," said Jello, shrugging. "Just because I don't approve of my father doesn't mean that he should be denied the chance to approve who marries me. It's a child's duty to their parents to get their approval on their choice of partner," she continued, looking earnest and serious.

"Duty?" Rlo was trying to wrap his head around this new concept. "Where we come from, children owed no duties towards their parents. In fact, we had no parents to begin with since we were all cloned."

"That must be so sad! I can't imagine what life must be like, not knowing the love of parents. Not that I was ever loved by my father," she grimaced. "He only loves two things - his work and this city. But I did have my mother and I can't imagine life without her."

"Ah, but that's the difference between us. I can't imagine a life with parents. Being told what to do, what to say, how to say it - all that because of an accident of birth. Then there are all the bad habits you pick up from them, just because they believe that's the way things should be done and that their way is the only one. I prefer our method, a group of elders care for each set of clones and with all those adults around, we learn to figure out what's right and what's wrong on our own."

"Guess they didn't do too good a job then since you've turned out to be a bombed liar." Jello's smile was supposed to take the sting out of the remark but the tightening around her mouth was enough for Rlo to know that perhaps this was one of those battles where it was wisest to surrender, in order to win the war.

"But I am certain there are good points to having parents too. It's just that I've never had 'em, so I wouldn't know about it. But perhaps I can learn what it is like through your parents?" Rlo asked, trying to nip this next possible storm in the bud.

"Well, you won't know unless you ask my father, now will you?" responded Jello tartly.

"So where do I find your father?"

"Him? You can find him ..."

Jello's cartographical revelations were cut short by a blood-curdling scream which came from somewhere ahead of them. The Debian Raiders, after having taken a micro-second to consider what they should do, demonstrated once again why they were supremely unqualified for the job of the propagation of their species. Instead of running away from the scream, they all ran towards it. All, that is, except for

Rlo, who was torn between following his brothers and staying with Jello, who appeared to be in no hurry to go running headlong into danger again, even more so than before since she now knew that the danger would be real. Eros won out over philos in Rlo's mental tug of war and Rlo found himself staring agape at his love, waiting for her next words, while his brothers rushed into possible danger. [Many a male of every different species in the universe has found himself in just such a situation – waiting mutely for his love to speak. Not that hanging back while your brothers ran into danger was any less common, but that at least could be attributed to common sense, or cowardice, depending on the point of view - basically, whether the point of view was yours or anybody else's.]

Chapter 28 - The showdown in the abattoir

The two combatant parties were still eyeing each other like two hungry dogs circling a bone when the Debian Raiders came running into Bloomingdale from Baker Street, behind the Chihuahuas. Noting the combat situation, their instincts of self-preservation, which had been taking a nap till then, kicked in to full gear and they fell into one of the battle formations that Sal had made them practice for hours on end and began approaching the confrontation with caution.

While the Debian Raiders were moving in, hostilities, as the trivid newscaster were so fond of saying, were escalating. This particular pack of Chihuahua's seemed to have decided that resistance

had to be put down and put down hard. They had apparently shrugged off their comrade being taken down with such effectiveness in the blink of an eye as just a fluke and had decided that the best strategy was to rush their opponents and overwhelm them in one decisive attack. [This kind of tactic is well-known to battle historians; they call it the suicidal-rush-towards-the-enemy-disregarding-all-warnings-to-the-contrary.]

Their logic probably depended on the fact that even if the enemy turned out to be better fighters, they had numbers on their side. They outnumbered their adversaries three or four to one and those were good odds, as any bookie would tell you, and one thing that the Chihuahua's knew was bookies. [The other things were the three important "tings" of a thug's life – eating, beating and collecting.]

However, as the self-same bookies would have told them, there is always the possibility of a dark horse turning up and today had come up in the cosmic lottery as the day that they were to meet their own dark horse. Whether they were to survive the encounter with this particular ebon equine unscathed, was a matter on which the books were as yet open.

The fatal flaw in the Chihuahua's strategy had been in thinking that their opponents were human. They discovered this fact almost as soon as the enemy had been engaged, to use military parlance. In fact, the fact stared a couple of them in the face when they were picked up bodily by Vin, brought up to eye-level with no effort whatsoever, and then had their heads knocked together as if they were rag-dolls. Then, as if he was a toddler who was tired of his dolls, Vin cast them aside with the selfsame ease.

Though taken aback at this super-human display of strength, the Chihuahua's had no option but to press their attack since they were aware of the reception awaiting them back at their headquarters were they to run away from a fight. Chu did not take kindly to opposition and his motto was "Beat them, kill them, crush them but don't come home running 'cos what I'd do to you would be worse!"

It might even have been an even battle, the superior numbers of the Chihuahua's against the superior-strength of the Alien Posse, but then one of the Debian raiders spied Dar. He, without the aid of the super-strength of the exoshell worn by the other aliens, was being beaten, and not just in the figurative sense, to the ground by a couple of the Chihuahuas. The Debian Raiders rushed to the aid of their long-lost brother. Given the two-prong attack, the fight was over faster than a snowstorm in July in Hades.

Looking around at the shambles surrounding them, Sal said, "Well, it seems to be all over except for the overweight female engaging in vocal callisthenics, as they say here."

"They do? I've been here for a while and the funny thing is, I've never heard that, " replied Dar. [They do say that in a certain place in Kabul City, but not when the overweight lady is around since she is sensitive about her callisthenics. Apparently, she believes that they are not up to the standards of other people.]

The once mighty Chihuahuas lay on the ground groaning, at least, the ones who were conscious and were able to move their jawbones were groaning. The Debian Raiders had gotten the worst of it due to the fact that they'd had to engage in unarmed combat, as

opposed to the Alien Posse who had engaged in armed combat, albeit using the arms of their exoshells. They were still helping to pick each other up and trying to talk to Dar at the same time, the usual kind of talk that long-lost brothers engage in after they meet up - asking him how he'd been, what he'd been up to, how come he never put away the tools before he left and why he couldn't be bothered to contact them after every ten solar systems or so, etc. The Alien Posse on the other hand, was ready to kick some more butt; in this case, that of Heyachi. All of these activities came to a gradual halt as all of them became aware, bit by bit, of a change in their surroundings.

The first one to notice the change was Kerr, who realized that it had become much less darker in the streets. He looked around to notice that all the dark shuttered windows of the houses around them were opening one by one and that the light from the windows was streaming out into the streets and driving away the darkness in its wake like a flash flood in the mountains drives everything before it.

Open doors soon followed the open windows, and one by one, the denizens of Bloomingdale were stepping out on to the streets. Something that they'd not done after dusk had fallen for as long as most of them could remember. The first to step out were a few of the braver teenagers, who were eager to see the terrors of Bloomingdale laid low. Their parents, urging them to get back inside right now, followed them. On seeing the once mighty Chihuahas moaning on the ground though, both parties had but one reaction – to just stand there and gaze in awe at the Raiders and the six aliens. [Not so much because they

were the David to the Chihuahuas' Goliath, but because it was thirteen people who looked the same, an alien and a bunch of people who appeared to be getting ready to beat up one of their own.]

It was evident that they knew what had been happening - that there had been some sort of a confrontation and that Chu's Chihuahuas (or at least the bunch that was in Bloomingdale at this moment) had not fared well. Kerr reflected that they wouldn't have ventured outside if they thought that the Chihuahuas were lucid enough, or mobile enough, to pick on them as their next target.

It was also evident that they had a means of communicating between the different houses in the neighbourhood since everybody around appeared to be aware of what had been happening, not just the few houses around the square where the fight had taken place. Maybe they had some of the newer comm technology which had been coming in since the Gaddians had first found the planet, Kerr mused. But then again, that might not be the case since these people were too poor to even afford to live in a better-class neighbourhood let alone buy comm sets.

The thing was, Kerr continued to reflect, most species had been adapting to their environments since the beginning of time and the people of Bloomingdale had in all probability adapted to the presence of the Chihuahuas. Since they couldn't leave their houses after dark, and since you couldn't send Mrs. Grummel a cup of sugar or the two eggs she needed to bake a cake via a comm set, they might have created their own secret pathways to move between houses. And of course, to share the hottest gossip. Everybody wanted to know the latest news

after all, even when cooped up indoors so that you didn't become the latest news. Kerr could almost imagine them skulking behind the houses, crawling under the fences or walking across the roofs. People always found a way to get around an inconvenient situation.

The number of Bloomies staring at the thugs on the ground was growing at an exponential rate and by now, all of the victors were aware of their audience as well. They looked at the gathering crowd as if wondering if the crowd was going to turn out to be friend or foe. The two parties continued to stare at each other wordlessly, neither side willing to break the silence till a little girl with pigtails and a rag-doll clutched in her arms ran out of the gathering crowd and grabbed Heyachi's hand. The Thulian tensed as if expecting another attack, but the little girl smiled an angelic smile up at him and said, "Ooooh you put the bad guys to sleep. Now I can play outside for much longer, yay!"

Heyachi, who knew the battle-cries of five hundred odd planets (and some of them were very odd indeed), couldn't seem to be able to come up with any response at all. He mumbled something incoherent while the girl beamed up at Heyachi. However, the little girl's action opened up the floodgates and the rest of the crowd now moved towards the victorious group, all talking at once.

"Thank you!"

"You are our saviours, we will give you the key to Bloomingdale ... Ken go get our old key from Rebecca ..."

"Would you marry me? I am a good cook!"

"No me, she's an ugly hag and has hairy legs!"

"Hurrah, no more Chu's goons! We are free, free at last, thank God, we are free!"

There appeared to be some hesitation on the part of the Bloomies in including Kerr in the congratulations at first. But on seeing that the Gaddian was a part of the group that had taken down the Chihuahuas, bit by bit he too was included in their joyous chatter.

Amidst all the celebration, the shouting, the passing on of news, the children singing and playing, and the groaning of the Chihuahuas who were trying to creep away as best they could, a silvery-haired old man, with a wrinkly face which looked like a very old, dried-up prune, approached the liberators of Bloomingdale.

"My name is Armando and this one is my granddaughter, Anita," he said pointing to the thin young woman who had been screaming at the thugs when the posse had first come upon them. "She went out against my advice to get Hernando. That is Hernando, her cousin," continued the old man, pointing at the human alien that they'd known till then as John Doe.

"He is new to the city," the old man explained. "And gets lost all the time. I told Anita not to go out. Not when those ruffians roam the streets. But she wouldn't listen. If you hadn't come along ... I don't know what would have happened. But it wasn't just my granddaughter that you saved tonight. You have saved all of us. You have given us back our freedom. Our children can now play in the streets at night. We can sit out and enjoy the evening breeze. It's all thanks to you!"

"But we didn't ..." began Vin, but the old man waved him aside.

"I know what you are going to say, you will say that it's nothing. Yes, perhaps for great warriors like you, it was nothing. But you have given us back everything! We know that they will be back tomorrow and we'll lose what we've gained if we don't do something about it. I've been thinking about this from the moment you appeared from nowhere to save my granddaughter. Would you consider staying here to protect us? Please think about it a bit before you say no. We are not asking for charity. We'll collect everything we have of value and pay you."

Rod, ever on the lookout for new ways to bring in the credits, decided to step in at this point. "We've never been paid a lot in our line of work. In fact, we usually get paid hardly anything at all. Now you say you'll pay us everything? We've certainly never been paid everything before. Show me the credits and we just might have a deal!"

"Whatever we have, we will give you. Our freedom is worth it," said Antonio, looking earnestly at Rod. "I am the president of our neighbourhood society. I am sure all the others from Bloomingdale would agree to pay you whatever we have if you agree to protect us."

Rod was nodding his head in affirmation when Rlo and Jello joined the group. The two lovers had missed the whole fight, or rather, the bloodbath-in-Bloomingdale as it was going to be known forevermore.

"What are all these people doing out? I've never seen so many people out after dark in Bloomingdale!" said Jello, sounding surprised. Then she caught sight

of the last of the Chihuahuas limping away. "Is that one of my ... I mean Chu's men? What did you bunch do?" She turned on the Raiders, who were beginning to realize that it might not be all praise-and-glory after all, and fixed them with the kind of stare that a little kid might give a fly just before he tears its wings off.

"What did you do?" she asked again. "Isn't it enough that you've got this brother of yours who's stolen from Chu ..."

"Speaking of which, meet Dar," said Sal brightly. Jello simply impaled that individual with a stare which seemed to promise much grief for him later and just plowed on with, "We've already had a run in with Chu's thugs once already. Now you want to go beating up his men? Are you guys just suicidal? Rlo, at this rate, it's your funeral that I'll be seeing you at, not our wedding!"

"If she is going to interfere in our business deals, then there certainly are going to be funerals," muttered Rod to Rlo.

"What'd you just say?" asked Jello, bristling. "You might be Rlo's brother, but if he's going to marry me, he just might have to give up this mercenary business ... I want him to live with me in peace, not be torn to pieces by Chu's thugs!"

"If I may interrupt ..." said Armando who'd been listening to the exchange between Jello and the others from the sidelines. "We of Bloomingdale have long suffered because of Chu's men. We didn't come out at night because of our fears. Today, these men have given us hope; they have given us back our freedom. Isn't that worth something? They are not simply mercenaries as you might believe, miss. They are our

liberators! Our saviours! Tomorrow, once again we can walk the streets of Bloomingdale with pride. "

The other Bloomies gathered around nodded their collective agreement to this sentiment. Jello treated all of them to an incredulous stare which said quite plainly, 'you're all stark, raving, bonkers!' before exploding with "Are you insane? Chu is not going to have his men beaten up just like that! He's going to send more men over tomorrow and he'll want them to make sure that something like this never happens again!"

"That's why we've been asking these brave gentlemen ... and alien, to protect us from Chu when he sends more of his goons," responded the old man, looking serenely confident.

"No, no, no! Rlo, you're not going to be part of this crazy scheme even if your brothers are, are you?" pleaded Jello. Rlo looked in misery from Jello to his brothers to Armando. He was beginning to realize that love, as wonderful as it was, wasn't without its own drawbacks.

The old man appeared to realize that diplomacy was called for in the face of Jello's adamant refusal. "Well, why don't you think about our offer tonight and let us know tomorrow? I will talk to some of our own people about this in the meantime. It looks as if we are going to have a bonfire night in celebration of our freedom. Its time to enjoy and have some fun!" he said glancing at a couple of bonfires which had already been set up and the people laughing and chatting around them. He waved at the fires and the laughing and chattering people, the children screaming and playing on the streets. "See all this happiness? You made that possible. You are our

guests tonight. Will you please join us in our celebrations?"

"Well, we have nowhere to stay in the city and so we want to get back to ..." began Sal.

"Nonsense, our houses are your houses! You can stay with us tonight, let us just enjoy life and freedom tonight and tomorrow we can talk business," said Armando, leading the Raiders and the still protesting Jello away to the nearest bonfire.

The Alien Posse, bewildered by the rapidity with which events had progressed, held back, excusing themselves. They wanted to discuss how they were going to handle the latest development. Heyachi was all for staying back to "kick some human booty", as he put it, but only if the others stayed. He explained that he wasn't comfortable with being alone amongst humans but the others knew that his real reason was that he didn't want to be alone in a fight.

Kerr wasn't too concerned with other matters right now since he had gotten Ringo back. Hernando had been happy enough to hand the dog over to Kerr when matters were explained to him, via an interpreter. All Kerr wanted to do was to get back on Normal's trail again, but since the others had helped him, he was reluctant to leave them and go off if they were going to be in danger. Besides, it was dark by now and there wasn't much he could do about finding Normal tonight.

Goro, it turned out, was a xenologist and wanted to stay. He wanted to study a facet of human culture that was unique since there was no other place quiet like Bloomingdale in Kabul City, or for that matter, in any of the other cities of the planet or the rest of the Fifty Galaxies. Vin had voted to stay

because he just felt like it and Yoh the Borogovian wanted to tag along for the ride. Given that a majority wanted to spend a little more time in Bloomingdale, the rest of the Alien Posse had decided to go with the majority rule.

An unvoiced factor in tipping the scales in favour of this decision was the fact that none of them were entirely sanguine that Chu's rampallions would not come back with reinforcements. So it came to be, that a bunch of aliens were the guests of honour at a celebration in Bloomingdale where humans rejoiced over gaining their freedom from the tyranny of other humans.

Chapter 29 - Normal and company seek help

They had driven all night. Or rather, Johnny had driven while Normal and the droids slept through it all. Johnny wasn't of a mind to complain. He'd enjoyed the peace and quiet and the opportunity to contemplate all the changes that had befallen him in less than a day's time.

Now, parked outside the city walls, they were waiting for the gates to open so that they could enter the city. The habits of several lifetimes, as well as the lessons learned during those lifetimes, had ensured that the people of Kabul City continued to lock down the city at nightfall. [Those lessons had certainly had an impact upon those who'd given their lives in learning them because they'd learnt that certain things could kill you when you least expected them.

Of course, some things, like death, could kill you when you most expected them too.]

Not that Kabul City was alone in this practice, many other city states around the continent, not to mention the world, apparently did the same thing.

Of course, there were places where they didn't need walls. Johnny had heard of the island state of Sri Lanka which was no bigger than Kabul City itself and since it was an island, they didn't need any walls, at least not to protect the city. *But then again, it was a safe bet that not many people left the place at night either, not unless they were really fond of swimming,* Johnny mused.

Normal and the droids were still sleeping the peaceful slumber of babes and angels. Johnny wondered if he should perhaps wake Normal, but since he'd not been given any specific instructions on what he must do, he decided to let them sleep a bit longer and so, put off a decision on his next course of action for the moment. But he didn't have to decide after all, as Normal yawned, stretched and opened one bleary eye to gaze upon the world. He seemed ready to go back to sleep but then his eyes fell upon Johnny, who was giving him an inquiring look.

"Are we there already?" he asked, apparently still groggy from his slumbers.

"Yes, we are indeed outside Kabul City. The gates haven't opened yet though. It appears we will have to wait till they do."

"Yeah, Chu's boys run the gates and they are probably sleeping it off after a night about on the town. Every day's a party for them, what do they have to worry about?" asked Normal, a hint of bitterness in his voice.

"Worry not about worrying so early in the morning my young friend," said Reeltu, who had been woken up by the conversation. "In fact, I suggest that instead of worrying us with your conversation so early in the morning, you go back to sleep till the gates open," he added.

"Well, the main gates might not be open, but I bet we can get in via one of the side gates if we walk over. The smaller side gates are usually open even during the night, they aren't as worried about security nowadays as they used to be," said Normal, apparently eager to get started on the hunt now that they were back at Kabul City.

"Why would we want to do that?" asked Reeltu in peeved tones. "We can get some sleep now that we are finally stationary; I've never been able to sleep soundly in a moving vehicle. Besides, why would we want to leave your hovercar here?"

"Well, for one thing it's not my hovercar. We ... err.. kind of appropriated it at the rest station. Didn't I tell you that?" asked Normal, not looking Reeltu in the eye.

He received a look which stated as loudly as if Reeltu had been sitting in his ear canal and screaming, shouting and jumping up and down, that he had forgotten to mention this vital bit of information. Normal hastened to continue lest the look turn into words. "Oh well, guess that one slipped my mind. So in case they've sent out any sort of message back to Kabul City about the hovercar, it might be a good idea to ditch it."

"You think?" responded Reeltu, acid dripping from his every word. He then proceeded to shake his colleague by the shoulder to wake him up. Sthri

appeared to be a sound sleeper and it took some effort to even get him to the stage where he was ready to consider waking up; but with some judicious application of pressure, shouting as loud as they dared, and some pushing and pulling by Normal, Johnny and Reeltu, they managed to get Sthri awake enough to get him out of the car.

"Boy he really goes out when he goes out doesn't he?" panted Normal.

"You have no idea!" said Reeltu, huffing like a train going up a steep hill. "There was the time during the great fire of Bloomingdale ... But never mind the chatter, some more pushing on that side might be of more use."

"Wassat? Why're we shtanding by the shide of the road?" mumbled Sthri.

"Oh, that's a funny story, it is," replied Reeltu, sounding not in the least bit amused. "Our friend Normal apparently borrowed this hovercar from some people. Since its 'nuclear', as they say on the streets, we've decided to distance ourselves from the conveyance for the moment. Better be on foot than in jail, I always say."

"Really? Coulda shworn I've never heard you shay that before," mumbled his companion.

"If you don't wake up soon and walk under your own power, what you will hear me say might not be fit for polite company!" snapped Reeltu.

"I wash having shuch a nische dream too. I dreamt that I found my father ..."

"You always dream that you've found your father. Then he says, 'Sthri, I am not your father!' and turns into some guy wearing a dark mask doing some really heavy breathing and you wake up screaming.

Been there, seen the train go by and heard it toot, too," said Reeltu, with not a trace of sympathy for his companion's paternal problems.

"Ugh, you had to bring that up! Now how's that for a dash of cold water in the face! Woke me right up."

"I thought it might," replied Reeltu with a smug little smile before turning to Normal, who appeared to be on the verge of asking a question. "Don't ask. There are so many things about him and his eternal search for his father that you really wouldn't want to know."

"Actually, I was trying to ask Sthri if he'd mind walking on his own now that he's awake. Sheesh, for such a skinny guy he sure weighs a ton!"

They were now at the looming city walls. The still shut city gates were obdurate in their refusal to allow entrance to all and sundry. There were several other vehicles parked by the gates; produce vendors bringing in their wares for sale, farmers bringing in milk, eggs and poultry from outlying areas, people with all sorts of knickknacks and gewgaws coming to make a quick credit in the city. Some of the vehicle owners were gathered around a guy who was rolling a pair of dice while there was another group sitting around laughing loudly at something somebody had said. It appeared that they were used to this tardiness on the part of the city's gatekeepers.

Normal, who seemed to be familiar with the environs of the walls, led the little procession beyond the gathered vehicles and groups of people, to the right of the gates. Close to the gates, there were open stalls on both sides of the road where people would set up their wares for sale. Beyond the stalls, they

could see hundreds and hundreds of tiny shacks clustered around the base of the walls like tiny puppies gathered around their mother for warmth. They could now see that there was a chaotic network of pathways running through the shacks, which joined the major artery of a path which ran close to the shadow of the wall. Normal was leading them towards this path.

"We've been in and out of Kabul City for years now, but we never knew about these paths, or about these shanties for that matter, till now. You must know the city pretty well, Normal."

"Most people don't want to know about this part of the city. They prefer not to know and so, they don't actually notice it even when they see it," said Normal with a wry smile.

"So how is it that you know about this part of the city then? Don't tell me that you wanted to know about this place on purpose?" inquired Reeltu.

"I grew up here," replied Normal. "Before the Martians came, when Kabul City was nothing but a huge fortress and all the different cities were at war with each other, I grew up here. They've got it good nowadays compared to how things were then, but then again, you probably remember those times better than I do. Any time one of the other cities attacked, we were the ones who had to face the flak. Not that I ever actually witnessed a war myself, mind you, but my father used to talk about how it used to be when he was a boy. I knew every corner of the city walls and all the ins and outs from the city. Those were good days in their own way," he continued with a wistful smile.

"It's always good in the past because you don't have to live there," responded Sthri.

"Don't be too sure my friend. There's many who still live in the past as if they belonged there," flung back his friend.

"Let us at least make amends then by living in the here and now. So tell me friend Normal, where are you taking us?"

"This path runs all the way around the city walls, though it does disappear at some places since the shanties don't go all the way around the city. So we can pick where we want to enter the city. I figured that you wouldn't want to do too much walking anyway ..."

"You got that right!" agreed Sthri emphatically, nodding his head vigorously.

"So I decided we might as well enter the city from the closest side-gate. As luck would have it, it's not too far from that gate to where the Dog Boy normally hangs out."

"And you're sure that this Dog Boy of yours will know where to find your dog?" inquired Reeltu, not looking quite convinced.

"I never said that the Dog Boy could find Ringo for sure," demurred Normal. "But if anybody could, he's probably the guy. He's apparently half dog himself. They say that he talks to them, not that I believe all these tales mind you. But I know a friend of a friend who actually saw him find out where a lost girl was by talking to one of the street dogs."

"Right" disbelief congealed in Sthri's voice.

"Believe it or not, that's up to you. This is what I heard. And here we are," said Normal pointing to a tiny little slit in the wall which was just wide enough

for a grown man to slip through sideways. The others looked a bit hesitant to step off in to the darkness with no idea as to where they were going. Normal took the lead while the two droids followed with Johnny bringing up the rear. They were back out in the weak sunlight of the morning soon enough. The surroundings weren't that much different inside the city walls than they'd been outside. There was a wee bit more room and the pathway around the wall was wider, perhaps because soldiers had used it in bygone days. But the same aura of poverty and despair, twins to what they'd seen outside, hung around the same old shanties.

"In or out, this close to the walls it really doesn't make much of a difference," said Normal, as if divining their thoughts.

They walked on in silence for a while, each engrossed in their own thoughts. There were a few people out and about and they glanced in curiosity at this strange group which obviously did not belong here. But nobody appeared to be of a mind to ask questions and the party just kept walking on through the shanty and to the deserted streets beyond.

Normal seemed to be looking for something but it was apparent that he wasn't successful in locating whatever that he was looking for. At last, he stopped to comment, "You know, it might not be so easy to find the Dog Boy this early in the morning."

"Now you tell us!" responded Sthri, irritation apparent in his voice. "Have you ever even seen this Dog Boy or are we chasing an urban legend?"

"No, I've seen him before and he sure does exist. But it's not as if he's got a home to go to, you know. He hangs around on the streets. There is no saying

where he might be on a given day. Maybe we should ask around," said Normal, looking around.

"Oh, so now we have to find somebody to find the guy who's going to find your dog?" snapped Sthri.

"Hey, I didn't ask you to tag along, now did I?" asked Normal, irritation flaring in his voice. "Johnny and I can do this by ourselves."

"Oh, ignore him. He just gets testy in the mornings when he's had to wake up before he's well and ready," said Reeltu.

"This early on there aren't that many people to ask from anyway. How about that Joker?" asked Normal, pointing.

Jokers, wherever they went, were unmistakable due to the garish costume that they all wore. It was made from rags of various colours. Now, most of those colours were progressing in slow degrees towards that uniform grey hue that you get after months without a wash. It was said that the Joker costume was made of pieces of clothing obtained by a Joker each time life played a joke on them. [They say that the piece of cloth was supposed to remind the Joker of that particular joke played by life and by wearing it, he made it a part of himself. This just goes to show that carrying your mistakes around with you doesn't make the chances of making another one any less.]

Judging by the attire of this particular Joker, he must have had a pretty mirthful life indeed.

The Joker that Normal had pointed to was leaning against the city wall and was either muttering something incomprehensible to himself or talking to somebody that he alone could see. He was an ageless looking individual with a slight build. It was always

difficult to tell Jokers apart. They somehow managed to look uniform. People blamed it on their costume. They said that the colours blinded you and that you never really saw the wearer. Then again, people say a lot of stupid things.

Reeltu looked at Normal as if he'd taken leave of his senses. "Are you really sure you want to ask a Joker for help?" He said 'Joker' as if the very word left an unpleasant taste in his mouth. Perhaps, in his case it did, since it was well-known that the droids and the Jokers didn't get along too well. Nobody remembered the reason for this animosity any longer. As such things tend to do, the actual reason was lost in the mists of time. However, people never needed a reason to hate other people and the members of the two orders continued to perpetuate the feud on principle.

"When you make a deal with the devil, all you lose is your soul. But when you make a deal with a Joker ..." Reeltu trailed off as if he couldn't even bear to verbalize the consequences.

"So what do you lose if you deal with the Jokers?" asked Normal, egging the droid on.

"You'd probably end up losing your soul, both soles of your feet and if you were eating any fish, your sole too!" responded Reeltu, his tart tone matching the sour smile on his face.

"Are you sure you aren't a Joker-in-training?" asked Normal, smiling.

"If you must seek counsel from Teller's spawn, go ahead and do it, but I'll thank you not to call me a Joker!" responded Reeltu showing a touch of ire.

"Fine, fine," replied Normal, throwing his hands up defensively. "Sheesh, you'd think you guys could

stop fighting after all these years. Why don't you stay here and Johnny and I will go talk to the Joker?"

"No, we'll come along. As long as we don't have to actually fraternize with the bombed creature, or have to talk to him, we will endure what must be done," responded Sthri.

"Well, let's go beard the Joker then," said Normal, taking the lead.

Chapter 30 - The Day after

Despite the previous night's carousing, or perhaps, due to the fact that there had been very little drinking and too much talking and laughing by the bonfires, the Alien Posse was up early. They had crept out of the various houses that they had been staying in for the night and were now discussing how they should proceed. Part of the group was of the opinion that it was time to go their own separate ways since they had kept their promise to help Kerr find the dog. However, some of the others, Heyachi being the most vocal, argued that they should stay together as a group for a while longer and that they should perhaps even try to protect the humans.

"Come on guys, you know that we don't stick out like the quills on a Hystridian when we are together as a group. The reason that we got into trouble in the first place was because we didn't know enough, as individuals, about the strange customs of these human to blend in. With all of us working together, one of us is bound to know something that the others didn't know," Heyachi said. He turned to Kerr and said coaxingly, "Besides, you promised the

Sciclonian that you'd get him off planet and so we'll at least have to wait till he wakes up."

"The Sciclonian has his brothers to help him now. Even if that wasn't the case, I was the one who promised to take him off-planet and I can do that on my own. We've all got other matters to attend to and no time for this foolishness," responded Kerr.

"Oh, you're a hard one, you are. Even for a Gaddian," said Heyachi, looking hurt.

"Thank you, I do try," responded Kerr with an outward twist of two of his arms, the equivalent of a dry smile for a Gaddian.

"Hello, hello. Everybody here then? Ready for another big adventure? Or have we have had enough by now of taking on gangsters who run the city?" asked Dar, joining them. He gave a cheery smile and a wave that took in the whole group.

"I thought you wouldn't be up for a couple of hours at least. Everybody else appears to be sleeping like ... well ... people who aren't ready to wake up yet," remarked Goro.

"Don't you believe it," said Dar in a stage whisper. "I'd guess that there are more people awake right now here in Bloomingdale than in all of the rest of Kabul City. It's like a freaking galactic convention or something. I could hear one of my brothers arguing with that girl who was tagging along with them. Then quite a few of the Bloomies are up and about. There's a lot of whispering going on, that much I can tell you."

"Whispering? That sounds a little foreboding, don't you think?" asked Bern, looking all around as if he could perhaps hear the whispers if he but knew where to look.

"Who knows?" shrugged Dar. "Maybe they're just trying to figure out how they are going to come up with the credits to hire us." Dar looked around at the others with that air of forced casualness which attempts to say, 'Hey, I don't care either way, just asking, you know'. [Unless you are a master of the fake-casualness, the attempt always ends up in broadcasting the following however: 'I really, really, really care what you think and my future, my bank balance and my next step in life all depends on what you say'.] "Speaking of hiring, none of you were thinking of leaving quiet-like, now were you? Even if you were perhaps considering that, you weren't thinking of leaving me behind, I hope?"

"You have your brothers, you don't need us to get you off-planet," answered Vin evading the main issue.

"You don't know my brothers too well, do you? Rod's always saying 'show me the credits,' and if you are ever stupid enough to do that, good luck to you. He sticks around till he's gotten the last stinking credit out of you or you're so sick and tired of him, that you end up throwing all your credits at him in the hope that he goes away. "

"And?" asked Heyachi in the careful tone of one who wasn't sure which way the wind blew.

"Well, the Bloomies are ready to pay them and so the Debian Raiders, that's my brothers in case you're wondering, will take on the job even if you guys decide to leave. Without your exoshell powered muscles, they won't last long with all the human-powered muscle that Chu will throw at them. He's got plenty of muscle, Chu has. Not much in the way of brains, but muscle, he's got oodles to throw around."

"And when your brothers go down, you don't wanna be around. Is that it?" smirked Heyachi.

"When Chu's thugs start making examples of people for what happened last night, I don't want to be around." He glanced at each member of the Alien Posse, an earnest look on his face. "And that brings me to the other thing I wanted to say ... you guys can't leave the Bloomies in this mess and leave."

"Say what?" asked Vin. "We've got other business to take care of and most of us want go back to our normal lives, except for Heyachi and Goro that is."

"You don't get it, do you?" Dar was looking frustrated and angry. "These Bloomies wouldn't be where they are now if it hadn't been for you. It's your fault! You are the ones who attacked Chu's goons, but they are the ones who will be blamed for it. You have no idea what Chu is capable of doing when people cross him."

"Why would he blame them? We are the ones who beat up his men ... well, your brothers and us," replied Kerr.

"Because nobody, and I mean nobody, stands up to Chu!" said Dar with some vehemence. "I grant you that the Bloomies didn't in fact do any standing up, but the fact that they came out and celebrated afterwards and that they hired us to protect them would be enough for Chu."

"How would Chu know that they hired us anyway?" queried Heyachi, looking puzzled.

"Because Chu has got people in here who are his eyes and ears. He's got people all over the city who keep him informed of what is going on."

"Blab against their own? Have these people no sense of honour?" asked Yoh, who'd been silent till then.

"Everybody's got to get by and in this city, the living's better when you are on the side of the big boys ... and the dying is less painful," replied Dar with bitter twist of his mouth.

"So what do we do?" asked Heyachi.

"You will have to see this through. You can still walk away if you want, but if you do, at least now you'll know what your action will result in. No, scratch that, I don't think you have any idea what Chu's retaliation would be like. But at least, you'd know that you are leaving these people unprotected," said Dar, crossing his arms. He'd said his piece and it was up to the others to decide.

"So there is no option but to fight?" asked Kerr, as if hoping for some other alternative.

"Do you see one?" asked Dar, bitterly. "Chu's not going to sit on this one for too long anyway. When those hoods that we beat up yesterday report to the NightBastard, it won't take long for the news to reach Chu ... or the Man. And what do you think Chu's gonna do when he hears that somebody defied him in his own city?"

"NightBastard? The Man? Would you mind speaking a language that we all understand?" snapped Goro.

"Sorry, I forgot that you guys aren't as familiar with this place as I am," said Dar with an apologetic smile. "Chu has two bosses who control his thugs, one for the night shift and the other for the day - the NightBastard and the DayBastard. As for the Man ... that's a bit tougher to answer. He's what you'd call

Chu's second-in-command, his right hand. But the weird thing is that nobody's sure if Chu controls the Man or if it's the other way around ..."

In fact, Chu had wanted to organize his gangs along military lines. So he'd created two positions for his lieutenants who handled the day and night shifts - Night Master and Day Master. Some wag, upon hearing about the two new positions, had commented, "What? Those two bastards? Who'd call them master, they'll always be bastards and be called nothing but bastards." The saying had stuck [but not quite as well as the wag, who'd been found with his grey matter stuck to the city wall. That's just the way life always was, some things just stuck much better than others.] and so their titles had passed into common usage in the new form.

"Intrigue, skulduggery, blood and tears, bosses and hoods ... and to think they said that romance was dead and I shouldn't go out to space," commented Yoh.

"Well, it sure isn't romantic, unless you think a blade in your gut or a boot in your face is romantic. It's just life. They fight hard and live even harder here," replied Dar, looking serious.

"Yeah, and it looks as if we're going to have to take a leaf from their book. But when it comes to fighting, we Thulians wrote the book!"

"The one you guys wrote about fighting isn't the same one that the rest of the Fifty Galaxies has read," muttered Vin.

Heyachi made a rude noise and would have countered with a comment of his own if they hadn't seen Armando, the self-proclaimed leader of the Bloomies, approaching them. It did indeed look as if

everybody in Bloomingdale was up early but if the demeanour of the old man was any indication, everyone in Bloomingdale wasn't as happy this morning as last night's celebrations would have warranted. In fact, one could have said that Armando looked sheepish if one wasn't afraid of giving offence to any sheep which might have decided to wander by.

He greeted the little group in a warm and hearty manner, but there was a tad too much heartiness in it, like how people talk in a loud voice when they are embarrassed. After the usual greetings, inquiries into how everyone had slept, commentaries on the celebrations last night and so on though, the old man seemed to run out of steam and be at a loss for words. Dar, who had had more experience in dealing with humans, recognized the signs long before the others caught on.

"So what's going on?" Dar asked Armando, his manner rather casual as he gazed at the early morning foot traffic on Baker Street.

"Well, you see ... umm ... I don't know where to begin ..." stammered the old man.

"Just pick an end and start from there and keep going till you hit the other end. That should do it," said Dar, giving him an encouraging smile.

"You see, I know we, or rather I, asked you to protect us against Chu's thugs ..." began Armando.

"And you wanna bargain about the price now?" barked Heyachi, pricking his ears up at the prospect of a good haggle.

"Well, no. It's just that we were all so overjoyed to be free of those ruffians that we sort of lost our heads, or at least, I did. I was thinking about freedom, and how things could change, and that perhaps our

children could grow up in a better environment. But I lost sight of one important point."

"And that being?" It was Heyachi again, lost now that the conversation had wandered away from the well-known path of haggling and had meandered over to strange territory.

"You can't change things through force and violence," replied Armando, looking at each of his listeners in turn. "Sure, we could hire you to protect us but how long can that last? Could you protect us all the time, every single second of every day? If we want a change in Bloomingdale, we should work towards making that happen on our own. But the problem is, everybody here is either too intimidated or too apathetic to do anything. So I'm afraid that all we can do for the moment is to hope for a day when the people of Bloomingdale start seeing things in a new light." [The trouble with that sentiment is that when people start seeing things in a new light, it's usually the light of burning fires. As has been seen in our own world, people saw a new light during the French Revolution, the American Revolution, several World Wars and a few other conflicts. But it's doubtful whether those who died in these conflicts saw things in the same light.]

Armando paused, as if to catch his breath, and then rushed on. "I know we said that we'd pay you, and I don't want you to think that we're going back on our word. We might be spineless here in Bloomingdale, but we still have our pride. I'll still pay you what I can, it just won't be as much."

The aliens stared at the old man, each thinking this through in his own way. They'd expected a lot of things when Armando had approached them but not

one of them had expected this. Kerr was the first one to break the silence.

"What made you change your mind?"

"We had a meeting today early in the morning and as we discussed hiring you, it became clear that you were just going to be a crutch for us to lean on. We would come to depend on you more and more and would have lost sight of the fact that nobody can really protect us from our own failings but ourselves," said the old man, shaking his head sadly. "By going down that road, we will simply be denying our children the right to learn that lesson sooner. Actually, the others are all for hiring you. But after thinking a bit more about it, I don't think that hiring you would be in our best interests in the long run. So I wanted to ask you, or if you prefer, beg you, not to take this job. Please make some excuse and tell them that you can't do it. I'll pay you whatever I can scrounge up if you would do that."

"So let me get this straight," said Heyach, struggling to make sense of it all. "You want us to not do the job for less pay than what we'd get if we did the job?"

"Yes."

"Humans, they sure are crazy!" commented Goro. "You think you have them figured out and they come up with something that throws you for a loop all over again."

If Armando thought anything about an apparent human talking about humans being crazy, he didn't comment upon it. Heyachi however, seemed to be on the verge of adding his own comment, but Kerr waved him to silence. "This is not the time for games," he said to Heyachi and then turned to the old

man. "You humans might have potential after all, if you can have this much insight about yourselves. However, have you considered the fact that Chu will blame you for what happened here last night?"

"Yes, I did consider that. But what can Chu do to us that is worse than what we have to endure everyday?" asked Armando, waving his arm to encompass all of Bloomingdale. "They'll terrorize us a bit more than usual and try to make examples of some of us so that nobody else will dare go against them. But eventually, things will return to the old order."

At this point, a new voice interrupted. "Well, well ... isn't this a cosy sight?"

Chapter 31 - Wylie on the hunt

John Wylie was not a happy man. That wasn't to say that as a general rule, he was a happy man. However, he was even more unhappy than usual at the current moment. When he'd moved to this planet and had set up Wylieworks as a front for his intergalactic detective agency, he had been hoping for some peace and quiet. Things had gotten way too hot on Deneb V due to his business activities and he'd had to get out of there fast. [Things were normally hot on Deneb V to begin with due to how close the planet was to the sun. But as they say, if you can't take the heat, you had to get out of Deneb V.]

That's why he'd picked this backwater hick planet – so that he'd be out of the thick of things for a while and have time to slowly build up his business again. He'd been surprised at the rate successes had come,

not with his detective agency but with the fake business he'd set up as a facade, the talent agency.

With everything going so well, he'd been thinking of taking things easy and perhaps even cutting back on the detective practice a bit after this last job. Of course, this job was changing everything that he'd been setting up with such care. He'd thought that it would be worth it when he'd first taken the job on, but now, he wasn't so sure.

Bounty hunters, detectives, retrieval specialists, mercenaries and others of that ilk had been tossing this particular job back and forth on the galactic bulletin boards for ages. Nobody knew where the artefact was. So, none of the agencies and none of the bounty hunters had had a clue as to where to start looking. In fact, most people thought of it as a myth or a bit of galactic legend, like the story about the master race which had seeded the Fifty Galaxies with life.

He'd never dreamed that he'd ever find himself on this particular job since he hadn't believed that the relic existed. Wylie had been surprised indeed to find that not only did it exist, but that it was located on this primitive planet. That was nothing compared to his surprise when he'd discovered that the clients who'd hired him for the job were on the same planet as well.

He hadn't wanted to mix his two businesses - he'd wanted the detective agency to be limited to off-planet clients and the talent agency to be restricted to on-planet gigs. He should have known it wouldn't stay that way; things always had a habit of working out the way that you didn't want them to. He'd decided to make an exception because of the size of

the job. It would have made his agency so famous that he could have had the pick of the jobs from this sector. Now, however, he was beginning to wonder if perhaps he'd made a mistake.

It was all this running around which was making him have second thoughts, he realized. Sure, as a detective, or even a talent agent, he expected a certain amount of running about and investigating. That he could accept. But it was all this blind running back and forth that he wasn't so keen on. [Blind running always resulted in injury to somebody. Most often as not, that somebody turned out to be you.]

When that insufferable idiotic ignoramus Normal had gone missing with the dog, he knew he'd have to hunt him down. That, after all, was part and parcel of the job. But to find himself half-way to Donagar and then be told by his clients that they'd take care of it and that he should go back to Kabul City and contact their representatives, that was what stuck in his craw. The customer might be king, queen or even galactic emperor, but they still should realize that you couldn't order a trained professional around as if they were a common android without giving any logical reasons. Of course, he hadn't said any of this to the client. He'd just agreed to their request and set back for Kabul City. [Wylie had discovered that the secret to a successful business was good communication. Not communicating certain things to the client was as important as communicating what the client needed to know. A good balance of the two kept a client happy and the credits flowing.]

The bus had gotten back in the wee hours of the morning. As usual, they'd had to wait while the ungracious, uncouth and ungainly underlings who

were the city's guardians lolled around wasting time, before deigning to open the city gates at long last. That hadn't done anything to improve his already flaring temper after the pointless trip halfway to Donagar and the just as pointless return to baby-sit a bunch of mealy-mouthed maggots making-believe that they were mercenaries.

Then he'd contacted Katy - dragged her out of bed early in the morning, if the truth be told - and she'd told him that the damn dumb, dull, dimwitted dunderheads had walked off without telling her where they were going. She'd said something about calling you-know-who but he'd been too angry to pay too much attention to what she was saying at that point.

Thinking over all that again, he did have a vague recollection of asking her to tell whoever came looking for him to contact you-know-who. So maybe those harebrained, half-witted henchmen of the clients had made contact after all. That thought provided slight comfort though. He had not been able to contact the clients since yesterday. Their comm unit appeared to be turned off. Maybe they were off implementing whatever strategy they had to get the dog back. He was out of leads and out of ideas. This wasn't going well at all. He considered just chucking the job and calling it quits. If they wanted to run things while keeping him in the dark, he couldn't be expected to do a good job, now could he?

He'd been wandering the streets with no particular destination in mind, thinking about what he should do next. He was so lost in his thoughts that he hadn't been paying any attention to where he was or what was going on around him. A few overheard words from a conversation between a couple of

strangers that he passed managed to penetrate his cloud of thought though.

"They say that an army of twins took over Bloomingdale last night and gave Chu's thugs the beating of their lives ..."

Twins? It wouldn't be the mercenaries now would it? Katy had told him that they had all looked alike. Perhaps clones, they did say that clones made the best mercenaries. And now that he thought of it, Baker Street did lead into Bloomingdale. But what would possess those anthropologically addled, adamantine-pated, addle-wits to go take on Chu's hoodlums? If that's what had happened, things might be going a lot worse than he'd thought at first. Oh, demented damnations and diabolically dastard destinies! Why'd it always have to be him? He hoped that he wouldn't have to pull up stakes and leave this planet too. Wylie hurried towards Bloomingdale as fast as his short strides could take him, needing to find out what had happened.

Chapter 32 - Four men and a Joker

"Err ... Hello," said Normal, trying to keep things as innocuous as possible given the Joker tendency to take whatever you said and use it as ammunition against you. In fact, if they'd had Jokers as soldiers in the army and they could do with bullets what they could do with words, no living army would have been able to face them and survive. [Or for that matter, even a dead army. The dead are as prone to gabble as the living, never believe what they say about the

silence of death. In fact, you can always ask a good medium about the amount of chatter the dead generate. They make their living off it after all – the medium, not the dead. The dead don't need to make a living since they are dead.]

The Joker was a sharp faced individual with a shock of wild black hair that was in bad need of a trim. He was dressed in the universal Joker attire of a suit made of swatches of clothing of all hues of the rainbow. [And some colours not even on the rainbow since they'd been out when the rainbow had come calling for volunteers to join his merry rainbow band.]

The Joker looked Normal up and down in that exaggerated fashion that schoolteachers and policemen adopt with such effortless ease as a part of their dread arsenal. He then proceeded to look all around with just as much exaggerated care as if he was looking for somebody who'd been there just a second ago but had disappeared all of a sudden. He then turned back to Normal and his companions.

"You've got the wrong person, I'm not Ur. He must be around here somewhere though," said the Joker with a deadpan expression.

"No, I actually wanted your help," Normal tried to explain.

"Funny way to ask for help, if you ask me. Not that you did, but then again, maybe that's what you wanted help with?" asked the Joker, looking Normal up and down. He was obviously enjoying himself. But then again, they always did when they found a hapless victim.

"You *know* that wasn't what I meant. You Jokers have to find some way to turn everything upside down, don't you?" asked Normal accusingly.

The Joker was unrepentant. "So now I'm a mind-reader? Who knows what you meant? And even if what you say is true, isn't it more interesting to turn things topsy-turvy than to live the same old, bland life?"

"Some of us actually have had too much of the topsy-turvy and not enough of the blandness," muttered Normal.

"I assume you mean *you* when you say *some of us*?"

"Isn't there something about assumptions making asses of umpteen millions?" asked Normal, grinning.

"Trying too hard there, young feller, me lad. Don't force the jokes, let 'em come to you. The joke is or is not, there is no middle ground," replied the Joker, going all Zen.

"Yes master, I am but a humble grasshopper at your feet," smirked Normal.

"Yeah, yeah. So they all say but usually they turn out to be narrow fellows in the grass, not hoppers," grimaced the Joker. "Be that as maybe, what would make you approach a Joker so early in the morning? Not sleeping well, have marital problems, thinking of taking your own life, perhaps?"

"Yeah, a little bit of all of that actually, but I thought that's what life was all about?"

"Life's all about jokes. Hundreds of thousands of little tiny jokes adding up to one big gigantic cosmic joke," said the Joker, making an all-encompassing gesture which seemed to say that the whole city was Joke.

"Heard the punch line yet?"

"Not yet. It is said that the world ends the day the final punch line is revealed."

"Just this world or the whole universe?" inquired Johnny, who had been an avid but silent observer of the back and forth exchange between Normal and the Joker, like a neighbour at a marital dispute. Before the Joker could reply however, Sthri made an impatient noise and said, "Enough of this tomfoolery. Shouldn't you ask this, this ... person what you wanted to ask? We don't have all day you know."

"*This person?* There are only two types of people who refer to us in that particular tone and manner, old ladies and droids. In your case, I'm not sure which one you are," said the Joker, bestowing an angelic smile on the seething droid.

Sthri began spluttering like a beached whale. Normal decided to intervene in case the hostilities escalated to the point of blows. He knew that blows were not too far away when Jokers and droids had identified each other. "Please, would you be able to tell us where the Dog Boy might be? I have to find him urgently, it a matter of life and death ... mine."

"Yes, I might be able to tell you, but considering the company you keep, I don't know if I should."

"Oh, Teller take you all!" Normal threw his arms up in despair and frustration. "Can't you all get over this ridiculous feud of yours? None of you even remember what it's all about! Both you lots lay some claim to being philosophers and thinkers, but none of you actually think about why you are still throwing fits at the mere sight or mention of the other, when nobody can remember the reason for such behaviour."

"Oh, we remember what it was about alright. The droids might have forgotten, but we Jokers have different traditions. We have long memories and short sticks to beat up those that we remember as doing wrong by us," scowled the Joker.

"You Jokers are a bunch of clowns! You've certainly gotten the short end of the stick with regards to those long memories of yours if you still believe that we wronged you," responded Reeltu, his usual cool and smiling demeanour evaporating in the heat of anger.

"Ah, who cares?" interjected Normal.

"Everybody remembers things differently and everybody believes that they are the injured party. But I am in a hurry and I can't lose any more time with this stupidity." He pointed to the droids, "You, I appreciate all your help so far but if you insist on coming with me, I need you to shut up and let me deal with this." Then he turned to the Joker. "As for you, I'd appreciate your help in finding the Dog Boy but if you persist in playing games, then good day to you, sir! I'll find somebody else who can help me."

"Woah, Nellie! Back that high-horse up a bit," said the Joker raising his hands, palms outwards and making warding off motions. "I never said that I wouldn't help you. Can't a guy have a little fun and help somebody at the same time?" asked he plaintively. "Now the problem is, I might be able to tell you where the Dog Boy might be but there is no guarantee that you will find him there, if you see what I mean. So as a sign of good faith, and to extend a helping hand to even the enemy, why don't I take you along to the Dog Boy myself?"

Normal could sense the droids beginning to shake their heads, even without looking at them. However, he also realized that the Joker was their best chance at the moment given that they had no idea where the Dog Boy might be and that there was nobody else around who might be able to help. He considered all the factors and could see nothing too bad coming out of getting the Joker's help. Sure, he might lead them astray or just take them on a merry chase around the city, but they could always verify facts with somebody else that they were sure to meet. So for the moment, it seemed better to follow the Joker on the off-chance that he intended to help than wander around with no idea where they were going. Besides, he told himself, if you believe good of people, you'll always get goodness back. [The only flaw in this philosophy is that good is a subjective term – as they said in the garden state of Jardim, what might be good for the gorse might not be good for the gardenia.]

"Thank you! We will take you up on your kind offer. Lead us to the Dog Boy and I'll be forever in your debt," said Normal, ignoring the murmurs of protest from the droids. He looked at them for a moment as if daring them to come up with a different solution or to walk away. He half expected the droids to take the latter course of action, so bitter was the usual enmity between Jokers and droids. But surprisingly, the droids stayed put after treating him to the kind of reproachful look that he hadn't had since his grandmother passed away, the kind which said that they were hurt by what you did but were willing to put up with every slight and injury for your sake.

"Forever is a long time my not-so-good friend, as any married man will tell you. Of course, in the case of a married man, it just seems like forever to them. So keep your promises short and the timeframe even shorter and you'll be a happy man," said the Joker, leading the little party off into one of the narrow streets that led away from city walls.

Chapter 33 - Confrontations and convolutions

"Oh, hello, Abdul. Fancy running in to you here," said Dar with a casual wave, after he had turned and seen who the new speaker was.

"It's 'im! It's 'im, Abdul! There's no mistakin' 'im," said Mario, who turned out to be part of the crew accompanying Abdul, pointing at Dar with palpable excitement and jumping up and down.

"Wasn't that what you said the last time, too, Mario?" scoffed Lisa.

"But there's only one of 'em now and I'm pretty sure it's 'im ... well, almost-pretty-absolutely sure. And how'd 'e know it was Abdul if 'e wasn't the one, then?"

"Well, for one thing, all the others heard you when you screamed out Abdul's name the last time we met 'em," said Lisa, looking as if she was getting ready to make a list. "For that matter, I bet everybody in the whole bombed city heard you. It's a good thing we don't have to go through all that masked-bandit business any longer. Otherwise we'd have to kill you to keep our identities secret. Shima, why don't we just

kill him anyway and put us out of our misery, Abdul?"

"She's pickin' on me again Abdul ..."

"Will you two let me get a word in edgewise? I've got business to attend to, not listen to you two yappin' like two kids. You might as well be married the way you go on." Abdul glowered at his two belligerent cohorts. He then turned back to Dar. "I don't know who you are. You sure look like the feller Boss Chu's lookin' for, but then, so did all the others. But let's forget about that for a moment. What do you know about what happened here last night? I'm a gamblin' man and I have a feelin' that you had somethin' to do with last night's ruckus."

"I guess you finally got off that losing streak Abdul, 'cos baby, you hit the jackpot!" grinned Dar.

"Oooh, it's 'im alright, Abdul! 'e knows about your ..." began Mario but subsided on receiving a withering glare from Abdul.

"You won't be so cocky, young feller me lad, once Boss Chu gets through with you."

"And who's gonna take him ... or us, if you feel so inclined, to Boss Chu? You?" asked Heyachi stepping forward, thrusting his chest forward in an aggressive stance.

"Aren't you the cocky little bantam?" asked Abdul bending his neck to look down upon the belligerent Thulian. "Sure, before you start using Mario's line about which army, yes, we are the ones who'll take you in. You know the drill, you can either do this the easy way or the hard way."

"Tsk, ts. I'm disappointed in you Abdul, I thought you might offer something with a highway

option," responded Dar, grinning carelessly at the Chihuahuas.

"If you are really keen on the highway that much, you can see it at close range as we drag you through the streets like a dog," replied Abdul, a nasty grin contorting his already uncouth features.

"That's the best you can come up with? I grew up in Hades! My grandmother has more attitude than you!" said a new voice from outside the circle created by the two parties glaring at each other. Everybody turned around and saw that it was Sax. He was favouring Abdul and company with a rather evil smile.

Now, there are smiles and then there are smiles, as those knowledgeable in these matters would tell you. There is your standard mother-smiling-at-her-baby smile or the shy-guy-smiling-at-the-beautiful-girl-next-door smile or the quick, covert smile that you flash at a stranger you see on the street - the one where you are ready to scowl at them in case they don't return your smile. These are all ordinary smiles. But then there is the smile that the Cheese gives a felon, who wasn't part of the RAT program, climbing out of somebody else's window. Or, the smile that Dick Turpentine gives anybody who was unlucky enough to have their vehicle breakdown on a deserted stretch of the highway. These are not, in all truth, actual smiles. They are the very antithesis of a smile dressed in a smile's clothing but showing their claws. This kind of smile is effective at sending those of a paranoid nature into seizures - you don't have to do anything but flash them the anti-smile, they tie themselves up in knots trying to determine where the attack might come from.

When you are a criminal, you always have to be paranoid. It's one of those unwritten laws of nature. Given this fact, it was inevitable that Abdul's paranoia would kick in to high gear upon seeing Sax's smile. "What? What are you grinning about?" he inquired, his paranoia coming awake, fangs bared and ready to pounce.

"You bunch never learn do you?" asked Rod stepping up next to Sax. "You've gone up against us twice so far and each time you've had the worst of it. You'd imagine that you'd think twice about tempting fate a third time but nooo. Here you prance in as if you owned the place and don't even post any sentries to cover your rear."

"Don't you worry about us covering our rears but instead worry about your asses since they are going to be ..." began Abdul.

"Umm ... Abdul" interrupted Mario.

"Not now Mario, whatever Lisa's done now, it'll have to keep till later!"

"That's not it ..."

"Bomb it! Didn't I tell you not now?"

"Well, you'd better take a look over there before you tell 'em anything which you might ...you know ... regret or somethin'."

Abdul glanced in the direction his companion had pointed. He could not see anything much and was turning back with a sharp rejoinder when he noticed something. It was the glint off a metal object on a building top, which just might have been a plasma rifle, where the rays of the early morning sun struck it. Then he noticed the shadow of a crouched form hidden behind another building, and the hum of a

photon cannon charging up from somewhere else. All of this was behind them.

Abdul's brain went into hyperdrive as he began counting heads and doing calculations. There had been at least a dozen of them the last time, he remembered. There were just three of those darn twins or triplets or whatever, in sight. So it was a good bet that a good number of them were covering his group from buildings behind him.

Then, there were all these other guys who were facing them. The night crew had said that their opponents had been stronger than they'd looked. Some of them had babbled stuff about people being picked up and thrown about like rag dolls. Not that Abdul believed them, but there never was much of a percentage in taking on this kind of odds seeing as how they were surrounded.

Reports had also indicated that the Bloomies were in on this too. No telling how many of those Bloomies there might be and he knew that at least some of them remembered him well from previous encounters. He had the uncomfortable feeling that they were itching for some payback. It looked as if there were going to be broken bones ahead. The unfortunate thing was, that this time, they were going to be his own.

The situation was tense. It teetered on the edge of violence or rout, like a hungry dog with a bone faced by a pack of almost as ravenous mutts. Nobody was inclined to make the first move in case it turned out to be his or her last. It was then that Kerr stepped forward into the circle formed by the two opposing sides. Everybody stared at him as if they'd seen a Martian. Which, come to think of it, they had.

"Oh come now, there is no need for this violence," Kerr said, looking at everybody in turn. He turned to Abdul. "I am sure we can settle this amicably. As you are no doubt aware, you are at a slight tactical disadvantage at the moment. But life being what it is, we all know that while we might win this round, we won't always have the upper hand."

"Speak for yourself! We can always beat this buncha clowns!" interrupted Heyachi. Kerr waved him to silence before continuing.

"As I was saying, sooner or later you will catch us with our pants down ..."

"But you don't wear any," interrupted Mario, who was rewarded for his astute powers of observation by a slap on the head by Abdul and a succinct, "Shut up!"

"Thank you," said Kerr snapping his three arms at Abdul by way of thanks. That individual flinched, expecting an attack, and then relaxed when he saw none coming. Kerr continued with, "There is no way that we can hold out against you on the long run. But at this particular moment, a miggles [Miggles are known in several sectors of the Fifty Galaxies for their habit of creeping into rocket tubes and building colonies in there. When the spaceships took off, people had what they called 'miggles from heaven'. It was supposed to be delicious.] in a rocket tube would have a better chance of survival than you would, if you were to go against us. So why don't we try to settle this without resorting to violence?"

"Sounds like a good idea," said Abdul, nodding his head judiciously as if he'd given this careful consideration and saw some merits to the notion. Only the hastiness of his agreement betrayed the fact

that he might not have taken the time to consider things thoroughly. This was understandable given that his mind was already occupied with considering what that photon cannon aimed at them might do to him and his cronies.

"So why don't you all put down your weapons and come peaceable-like with us to see Boss Chu? I'm sure we can clear up this misunderstandin' right quick," Abdul continued.

"Uh uh. You lot must think we are fresh off a ship! You know that we won't last longer than it takes for you to turn the tables on us if we were to put our weapons down," replied Dar.

"What, you don't trust my word?" Abdul looked hurt.

"Does your mother trust your word?" countered Dar.

"Yeah, you've got a point there. She never did forgive me for not comin' over for dinner on her birthday ..." said Abdul, a touch of shame on his face.

"We are perfectly willing to come see Boss Chu ..." began Kerr.

There was a chorus of voices responding to this announcement - all of them from Kerr's own group. There were noises of surprise, anger, negation and joy, this last from Heyachi, who was looking forward to another butt-kicking-fest. The loudest was Dar who said, "Hold on just one second, are you out of your mind?" He leaned close to Kerr and said, "Look, can we discuss this for a moment in private?"

"Certainly," responded Kerr. He then turned back to the waiting Chihuahuas, "If you gentlemen would excuse us? My associate and I have some conferring to do."

After they had moved a little distance away from Chu's men, Kerr looked at Dar as if to say, "Well, we're here. Now what?"

"It's all very well for you to agree to walk into Chu's den just like that. But have you any idea what he would do to me?" whispered Dar fiercely, looking at Kerr as if wondering if the Gaddian had lost his mind. "For Bacu's sake, he's been looking for me all over and he doesn't care whether he finds me barely alive or half-dead, as long as he can get what he wants from me. And if you think he's going to let all of you go after you took down some of his men, you really are as crazy as these humans!"

"I believe that it won't come to that, trust me," said Kerr with strange calmness.

"Trust you? Why in the Fifty Galaxies should I trust you of all people? It's not as if you have an exoshell like the others, you'll be just as vulnerable as my brothers or I."

"Because I know what I'm doing and I know how to get us all through this without somebody getting killed," said Kerr with absolute certainty in his voice. "As for you, think about it, do you think Chu is going to figure out it was you when you are surrounded by your brothers? All of you look so alike that he wouldn't know which one stole from him. Isn't it logical that he'll have to first figure out which one of you is the real culprit? By that time, I would have had time to put my plan into action."

"Logical?" exploded Dar. "Have you ever known these humans to be logical or rational? They are crazy! It would be just like Chu to kill half my brothers saying that he has a fifty-fifty chance of getting the culprit."

"It won't come to that, I promise you."

"A promise is only good if both parties are alive to stick to it," sighed Dar.

"Let me handle this and I promise that I will sort out your little situation with Chu as well."

"You know, you really appear confident that you have a handle on the situation," said Dar, musingly. He appeared to think deep for a moment and then sighed, "Ah what the hell, I'll go along with you, but if you get me killed, I'm gonna kill you!"

"And that's a promise you intend to keep, is it?" asked Kerr giving him a solemn look. Dar shook his head as if wondering what had possessed him to agree to whatever crazy scheme the Gaddian might have up his non-existent sleeves.

"Alright, this is how we'll do this," said Kerr going back to the centre of the circle and talking to Abdul. "You will leave the people of Bloomingdale alone, they had nothing at all to do with any of the events of last night. We'll keep our weapons. Some of us will accompany you. The others, the ones with the big guns, in case you're wondering, will follow behind. That way, we can ensure that there are no accidents, if you know what I mean?"

"Not to argue with somebody holding a gun to me head, but what if one of your people were to have a wee bit of an accident? They might, totally by accident mind you, shoot one of us, or even all of us, because their finger got stuck on the trigger?" asked Abdul, not quite sanguine about this particular plan.

"As I've told you, we can't fight all of Boss Chu's people. Even if we got rid of you, there'd be more."

"Yeah, but we'd still be dead," muttered Mario.

"We just want to talk to Boss Chu and clear up this whole unfortunate misunderstanding. So can we get going?" asked Kerr with a hint of impatience.

Abdul tried to think things through, but thinking had never been one of his strong suits. He was more of a rely-on-instincts kind of guy. He realized that there was nothing to be gained by arguing, except perhaps a shot in the back. He wasn't quite in the mood for being shot in the back, or the front for that matter, he decided. Of course, if they walked in under the guns of these guys, there was no telling what Boss Chu might do to him either. Better the known wrath of Chu than an unknown death, he decided.

"You've got a deal, let's go meet the boss," said he, nodding. The Chihuahuas set off first with the Alien Posse falling into place beside. The Raiders followed behind – forming a straggling column. Armando stood there alone, watching the saviours of Bloomingdale departing. He probably was wondering if he'd ever see them alive again.

Chapter 34 - Follow the leader

Wylie was falling over himself getting to Bloomingdale, quite literally. His short legs could not keep up with the forward momentum generated by his body in his urgency to get to his destination. He had to watch himself and slow down often lest he fall flat on his face.

His mind was running through a hundred different scenarios as to what might have taken place in Bloomingdale. None of them turned out in a way that was good for himself or his business. He blamed himself a hundred times each passing moment for

having gotten into this mess in the first place. He vowed to himself a thousand times that he'd never get into such a situation if he ever got out of this one with his hide and his business intact.

He was hurrying so fast that he almost ran into the little cavalcade which came marching out of Bloomingdale just as he reached it. Sometimes though, being short has its advantages. This turned out to be one of them. He had been struggling to get past two mothers pushing their babies in carriages and gossiping about what the couple next door had done this time and so, due to his height, or rather lack of it, he was covered from the sight of Abdul and the others.

Wylie did not know Abdul on a personal basis. However, everybody in Kabul City, at least those who had a desire to live, learned to know Chu's thugs by sight - if at least to help them keep out of sight of the Chihuahua's when they came calling. He had seen this particular ruffian several times and knew who he was as soon as he saw Abdul.

This by itself wouldn't have stopped Wylie under the present circumstances. Maybe slowed him down a bit but that's about it. What made him stand stock still and take cover behind the still chattering mothers, however, was the sight of somebody else who was not exactly a person. It was the dog! He had been chasing the bloody dog all over the place and here it was walking out of Bloomingdale, led by a Gaddian, no less! They ate dogs, didn't they? Wylie could almost feel himself breaking out into a sweat, even though in fact, his race didn't perspire. He had to get that dog. But how was he to go about it?

Wylie sidled away from the two mothers and their offspring to take cover in a nearby alley. This way, he could continue to keep an eye on what was going on and figure out his next move. If the appearance of the dog had been a surprise, the next set of participants in the cavalcade which was coming out of Bloomingdale was an even greater surprise for Wylie. It was what appeared to be a bunch of clones and a girl, and they were covering the Chihuahuas with their weapons.

These had to be the clones that Katy had talked about. The ones sent by the clients. Billions of blue blistered blankets of beryllium beads! Had the world gone mad? Did those interminably idiotic, ignorant and ingenuous imbeciles even know that you didn't survive too long if you threatened Chu's men in this city? More importantly, that anybody associated with them, such as Wylie himself for instance, would not find life easy in Kabul City after this either? Not that they'd live long enough to find life easy, Wylie reflected, his anger flaming up to hitherto unrecorded levels. He tried to calm himself and think clearly.

Why were they leading Chu's people out of Bloomingdale anyway? Where were they going? Perhaps they intended to make a run for it and were holding the mobsters hostage till they got to their ship? Wylie decided that the best course of action would be to follow the little procession and see where they went. He could perhaps try to grab the dog if an opportunity presented itself. He hugged the wall as he began shadowing the motley band to their destination.

Chapter 35 - Round and round they go

They'd been following the Joker for a while now. Even Normal was beginning to wonder if they were ever going to get anywhere or if the Joker was just leading them around in circles, playing another one of his pointless jokes. [The Jokers believed that each and every joke they played had a point, just that people didn't get it because they weren't enlightened enough. In another place and time, this would have been called a delusion.] They had not met anybody at all during all this time and Normal considered the possibility of something strange and dramatic happening during the night and everybody in Kabul City disappearing but for them. [A lot of people have this something-strange-happened-in-the-middle-of-the-night feeling. Only wives express it though. They simply ask their husbands to get up and go check on it.]

The illusion of being the last people on the planet, or at least in Kabul City, was shattered when they heard the indistinct sound of voices, footsteps and other noises indicative of a large group of people walking towards them. The Joker cocked his head to a side like a huge, multi-coloured bird. He seemed to be listening to something that the others couldn't hear.

"Quick, behind that shack! Come on, move!" said the Joker in an urgent tone.

"What? Why?" asked Sthri, giving the Joker a suspicious and none-too friendly stare.

"Move now, ask questions later. Or stay here and face the consequences," said the Joker, heading for

the shack that he'd pointed to earlier. The others followed him, dragging their heels in reluctance, since there appeared to be no other alternative except to stay where they were. And nobody wanted to take the chance that there was something coming along that they might not want to meet.

"So what gives?" asked Sthri in a whisper once they were all in the shack.

"There's a large bunch of people coming along the road. This early in the morning, that's not good news. They're either the Cheese or one of Chu's gangs returning to their base. Or it could even be one of Chu's gangs going to a police station to start the day shift, the way things are these days. The Cheese and the RATs, they are the same. Now how's that for a cosmic joke?" muttered the Joker, almost to himself.

"You wouldn't be trying to keep us from talking to other people now, would you?" asked Sthri, glaring at the Joker.

"You wanna talk to other people? Go right ahead. Do you really wanna meet the Cheese early in the morning when they're still figuring out how to fill their quota?" The Joker probably saw the answer to that written on Sthri's face, for he grinned and said, "I thought not! So let's just stay here quietly till they have passed by and then go on our way shall we?"

This is exactly what they would have done if Normal had not spotted a tiny figure in the vanguard of the troop that swept by. He had to stop himself from shouting out and simply stood their eyes goggling, while he fought for control. Then he turned towards the others, excitement bubbling out from every pore of his being.

"Look! Look there! That's Ringo and that's the Martian I sold him to. At least, it looks a lot like him, all these aliens look alike, you know. Wonder where he's going with Ringo and all those others. Looks like some of Chu's crew. You think we should just go talk to them?"

"Are you crazy?" whispered back the Joker. "You never get close to Chu's goons unless there is a very good reason, like your leg is broken and you can't run away. Or, you are trapped under a ton of rubble and can't scabble out fast enough. Otherwise, you stay away from them as if they were the bomb. That's good advice and that's about the only thing you'll get for free in this place."

"But they've got my dog!" whispered back Normal fiercely. Then he paused and considered, "OK maybe not exactly my dog, but it's my wife's dog. It's the reason we were looking for the Dog Boy in the first ... what the bloody blooming mushroom cloud?"

"What?" asked Reeltu while the others craned their necks to see what Normal was staring at. It was Wylie. He was still following the gangsters, keeping a good distance behind them and sticking to the walls. [Denebian's cannot literally stick to stuff and in this instance it would have been a trifle inconvenient as well since it would have made progress a bit difficult. However, there are several other races in the Fifty Galaxies which do on occasion stick to things, including walls.] He was doing what a good detective does best - going on the prowl.

"That's Kathryn's boss, Wylie. Kathryn's my wife," Normal said as an aside to nobody in

particular. "What is he doing following them? This is getting downright strange. I think we should follow him and see where they all go."

"Why do we not talk to your wife's employer? Wouldn't that be the more logical course of action? Pool resources and knowledge?" inquired Johnny.

"Not till I know what's going on. I don't know what he's doing here and till we find out, we're doing this on our own."

"Suits us," said Sthri looking at his partner, who nodded.

"Thank you for your help, I think we can take it from here now," said Normal turning to the Joker.

"I think I'll tag along. This has the potential to be quite amusing and one should never pass up a good joke," responded the Joker. It looked as if the droids might argue this point. Normal agreed before they could say a word in order to forestall another debate and further delays.

"Suit yourself. Let's just follow Wylie and see where they all end up," said Normal taking to the shadows in pursuit of Wylie. So the ragtag band of shadowees and shadowers wound their way in and out of the shadows, wending their way towards Chu's stronghold.

Chapter 36 - They all meet Chu

The arrival of Abdul with his "guests" at Chu's stronghold went almost without comment at first. Many were the people brought in for a "nice, quiet chat" by Chu's people at any given day in Kabul City. The chats were nice enough for sure, if you were an executioner or a butcher or a medical student who

was really interested in how the human body was put together ... and taken apart. Quiet however, was not often a part of the bargain though. Apparently, most people find it quite hard to keep quiet when they have their fingernails pulled out with exquisite care while Chu, or one of his men, tried to have that aforementioned chat with you. They say a dance with the devil lasts forever. That's the way most of these poor souls felt about the chats with Chu as well, at least, the ones who stayed conscious long enough to remember anything about the chat.

Chu's base of operations did not look like your typical mob lair. In fact, at first it looked like a sleek, high-tech modern office. There was the futuristic furniture - all lines and curves and cushions; looking as if it never even touched the floor because it was just too good to be touching the plebeian ground. Then there was all the computer equipment and the communications gizmos and all the young techie types sitting at the terminals typing away or chattering into headsets. It looked just the way a busy nerve centre for running a city like Kabul City, should look.

Then you passed beyond those stylish offices filled with vacant faces with glazed eyes red from too many hours of staring at monitors and readouts. The doors became thicker and the locks more complicated. The very look of the surroundings changed. The walls were not the smooth uniformity of the new alien supplied polymers. These walls were made of the old style materials - bricks, mortar, cement - and had rough plaster covering them. The only decorations on these walls were old water stains. At least, you hoped they were water stains and looked

away quickly in case you found yourself proven wrong. This was the real heart of Chu's empire, where he sat like a big old spider at the centre of his web and ran the entire city.

By the time they'd gotten beyond the glassy-eyed technoserfs who just did not notice anything much beyond what was on their monitors, the presence of the armed escort behind Abdul and his little vanguard had started drawing attention. It wasn't that they were armed that was the point of consternation. Everybody went armed here. It was that they were armed and nobody recognized them. Heads were beginning to turn and hands were reaching for weapons. Everybody knew how this sequence ran. Next, heads would roll. The problem was that one of them might be their own.

Abdul motioned to the guards to stand down probably praying that nobody would be stupid enough to start shooting in these enclosed corridors, not when you had a photon cannon as part of the equation. While nobody would have dreamed of giving any awards for the Chihuahua's IQ [unless of course, it was an award for survival under extreme disability and hardship], Abdul and his cohorts were fortunate in that nobody was in a questioning mood today. Thus it was, that they reached Chu's inner sanctum without any confrontations.

There are those people who are satisfied with their lot. They perhaps follow the teachings of the golden-age philosopher Micawbar the Thrifty, who said that if you make 20 credits and spend 19 credits and 50 centavos, you'll be happy and that if you spend 20 credits and 50 centavos you'll be unhappy. [Of course, there are those individuals who believe

that the extra 50 centavos makes the difference and that they could buy happiness with it. Most often in a bottle. They are the ones who eventually end up in Chu's clutches and realize just how much unhappiness 50 centavos could cause.]

But those satisfied with their lot are a tiny minority compared to all those in Kabul City who want something better. They want what the other man has because they believe that the other guy has it better than themselves. Most of these however, do not try to do anything about changing their lot. They just keep on thinking that they should have a better life and darn it, it had better happen soon! But they would not make the effort to change their lives because that was too much work. Why would you have to work when you were entitled to a better life and it's just supposed fall into your lap, like a ripe, red apple all ready to be eaten?

However, there are a few individuals who are determined to grasp that better life and make it theirs. Some do it by sheer dint of hard work while others just grasp the better life they want (which happens to be somebody else's life, most often as not) and make it theirs. Chu was one of the latter. He had made a living out of better lives. He was in the process of bettering - some said it was more like battering than bettering but that it was close enough - his latest guest's life when Abdul and his party arrived. Abdul signalled to the others that they should wait till the great man was ready to receive them.

"Ah, so you won't do that tiny little favour for us? That's not being very friendly, now is it? Friends don't do that to each other. You'll recall that I never

refused you when you wanted a loan," Chu was saying.

"What loan? I never took a loan from you in my life!" answered the unfortunate recipient of Chu's hospitality, a fair-haired young man who somehow looked too young to be even out and about in the city, let alone conversing with a person with a reputation like Chu's. [There was nothing wrong with Chu's reputation. That was the problem. When your reputation is too clean, people argue that it might be because it had been washed hard and washed often. They go further to say that if it needed washing, then there must have been something that needed to be washed off. People get the strangest notions.]

"Indeed! And a very short life it might be too," said Chu in a conversational tone of voice. "But I'm talking about the loan you're going to take ..."

"Why would I want to take a loan from you? I don't need any credits!"

"I would think you'd need credits to fix your hover-cruiser after the accident. But perhaps you don't care as much about your hover-cruiser as I thought you did," replied Chu, a tinge of sadness in his voice, like an uncle who'd been told by his favourite nephew that he already had the new Ultron robot that his uncle had got him as a gift.

"What accident ..." began the young man, then paused and stared. One could almost see the light go on inside his brainpan. [Since friction causes heat and heat causes light, all the exertion that his mental machinery was being put through could have been responsible for the appearance of the light.] "Oh, no! Not my hover-cruiser! Not my baby! I have it listed in the races tomorrow!" he wailed.

"Well, seeing as how you're going to do us a favour and all, I am certain we can make sure nothing happens to your hover-cruiser. Then you won't need that loan now would you?" asked Chu as if it all made perfect sense.

It was at this point that Jello stormed over to the middle of the room. The Raiders had been doing their own reconnaissance and had already realized why Abdul had allowed himself to be brought here at gun point. The room was a veritable shooting range and they were the sitting ducks. There were both automatic guns and sharp shooters placed at strategic points all around the room. It appeared that Chu wasn't taking any chances with his safety while he had his little chats.

They might be able to get Chu, but nobody who walked into that room would come back out - at least, not alive - if Chu didn't want them to. Considering the delicacy of the situation, Rlo tried to hold Jello back, but she appeared to be beyond the point of caring and simply brushed past him. She stalked to the center of the room to stand right in front of Chu, her face inches from his, seething with anger.

"You just haven't changed at all, have you?" she asked Chu, the fury emanating from her a palpable thing, kind of like the aroma from certain cheeses or really old unwashed socks. The reactions to her action were manifold and not quite what one would have expected under the circumstances.

"What? Where'd she come from?" muttered Abdul, looking at his sidekicks as if it was their fault. They in turn looked at each other as if trying to find somebody to blame, as long as it was somebody else and not them.

The aliens tensed as if expecting Chu to lash out in anger. The Raiders looked upwards wondering where the shots would come from that would take them all out in one terrific blast of energy weapons. Kerr was the only one who appeared to be unaffected by any of it, he looked on, the epitome of calmness and serenity, as if the unfolding events were the most natural thing in the world.

The effect on Chu was the most surprising of all. He looked at Jello with his mouth open for almost a whole minute before snapping his mouth shut. Then he opened it again to bellow, "Who brought her here? Why didn't somebody let me know she was coming? Don't I have anybody with any brains working for me?"

"That's it? That's all you have to say to me? Your own flesh and blood? Hello to you, too, dad!" responded Jello.

"Dad?" said a few of the Raiders together while their mouths dropped open in a perfect imitation of Chu.

"You sly dog ... ahem, dog owner!" whispered Dar, looking at Kerr in admiration. "You knew this all along didn't you? That's why you wanted to see Chu. How'd you know?"

"It was rather obvious based on some of the things that she said, as well as other things that she left out, last night. Besides, did you know that Chu has a last name? Everybody in the city calls him Chu and so most people have forgotten his last name. But guess what it is?" the Gaddian seemed to be enjoying this to the fullest. "Give up? It's Lo. What do you think her name is?" asked Kerr, looking smug, if an

alien who looked like a pin cushion with sticky bits poking out could ever hope to look smug.

"Jello!" said Dar automatically. And then the light of comprehension dawned across the landscape of his face. "Ohhhh ... Jei Lo or Jel Lo! I see what you're getting at. But you couldn't have deduced all this based on just her name and whatever she didn't say. I don't say a lot of stuff but you haven't figured anything out about me."

"It's what you stop yourself from saying that's more interesting ... And the fact that she took great pains not to be seen by any of Chu's men when they came to Bloomingdale. Life is a mystery only to those who don't pay attention," replied Kerr, giving his best little-green-cute-alien-with-vast-mental-powers imitation. [This didn't have quite the expected effect since Kerr got only the little alien bits right.]

"Oh? And I bet everything in life can be a lesson, if you'd just learn from it?" If Dar had tried to stuff more sarcasm into his voice, there would have been sarcasm splattered all over.

"I see you've been reading the tomes of Shaman Mao."

"Nope, found that one in a fortune cookie."

While this little interchange took place between Kerr and Dar, the reunion of Chu and his daughter had progressed from recriminations to anger to guilt tripping, and then back to recriminations. In short, a typical meeting between a parent and their offspring after a considerable lapse of time. Things were settling down to a steady rhythm of thrusts by way of recriminations from Jello and parries in the form of a string of excuses and denials from Chu.

This might have lasted till the inevitable conclusion when Chu threw up his hands and said, "I give up! I don't know what do with you. I don't understand your generation!" except for an interruption from an unexpected source. The fair-haired young man that Chu had been "chatting" with, had been looking back and forth between Jello and Chu as they had their verbal duel all this while. Now he raised his arm hesitantly like a student asking to go to the little boys' (or girls') room. When Chu, still engrossed in defending himself, paid no attention, he began waving his arm wildly like somebody who had to go now or have to clean up the mess afterwards.

"What?" snarled Chu, probably glad to have an excuse to snap at somebody.

"Umm ... can I go now?" asked the young man hesitantly, not quite looking at Chu as if he was scared to do so.

Chu looked at Abdul and his cohorts as if this had all been their fault. "What's he still doing here?" he snapped. "Doesn't anybody know how to do things around here? Do I have to do everything? Take him away, take him away!"

"So I'm free to go?" It was the young man again.

"Go? No, no. We have a little bit of unfinished business. So why don't you go with these people and relax a bit and we'll continue our conversation later?" said Chu motioning to a couple of his men to lead the dejected young man out of the room.

Jello probably would have launched into a new tirade against Chu at this point but for the entrance of a new player into this little family drama. Jello stopped in the midst of opening her mouth, glanced at the newcomer for a moment and then gave a shrill

scream and flung herself at him. Several of the onlookers were convinced that she had decided to attack the new entrant for some reason. They were getting ready to separate attacker and the attacked when it dawned on them that it hadn't been a scream of rage, that she'd said, "Uncle Irving!"

"Who's that?" asked Rlo in a whisper, from Dar.

"Oh, that's the Man. I guess he'd be her uncle if Chu's her Dad."

The Man was Chu's second-in-command and had been Chu's lieutenant for as long as anybody could remember. There is somebody like the Man behind the head of most governments and organizations. Of course, it's when you have more than one such person behind the head that they make a right royal mess of things. [It's the old proverb about too many cooks in the kitchen getting everybody in the soup. People never have been too good at following orders from multiple people at the same time. This incidentally, is the main reason why polygamy has never worked.]

Since the dawn of time - some say even before that and point to scripture from various religions - there have been many forms of government. At least some of them, were based on the "one man, one vote" theory. Sometimes, somebody would take it into their heads that *they* were the man and that they had the vote. They would take over things and run things in their own merry fashion for a while before a band of others decided that they all wanted to have a vote each. [This was when things usually got bloody – for a lot of people. Even ones who didn't really want a vote. Usually it remains bloody till it only one man remained who has the vote and then it goes back to the way it used to be.]

Things had continued to see-saw back and forth, at least on this planet, till people had settled on the current system, which wasn't new by any means. What it had going for it was the fact that it had been tested quite well and quite often before.

It went like this. Everybody had a vote at given time intervals so that they would feel good about themselves and feel as if they were in control. Then, the lot that was in fact in control, would come in and exercise their vote. Of course, everything being a microcosm of everything else, even this lot had somebody over them who exercised his vote on them and so on till you got to that one single man with the vote. But in this instance, there was a man behind the man with the vote and he was the Man. Or to put it more simply, Chu held the reins to the city and they said – though nobody said it out loud, not if they wanted to be able to continue to speak - that the Man held Chu's strings.

No matter who held what, it was evident that Jello held the Man in high regard. She was going on, with a lot more enthusiasm and animation than she'd shown towards her father, about her job and her recent adventures and Rlo, to the Man, when there was an interruption in the form of some new arrivals. Chu, who'd been sidelined while his daughter ignored him and talked to the Man, turned to them in irritation, venting his anger upon them. "What is it this time? Somebody give another bunch of you lip in Marytheswot Street? The city's falling apart around us, this kind of thing just didn't happen in the old days!"

"Err, no boss ..."

"I've told you not to call me boss! We are respectable now!"

"But boss, you are the City Boss ..."

"Oh yeah, I keep forgetting." Chu gave a sheepish grin. "So what's this all about, then?"

"We found this guy casing this building ..."

"And we found these guys following them!"

interrupted another company of Chu's stalwarts who'd just followed the first lot in. Chu's audience chamber, where the walls heard the screams and nobody else did, was becoming rather crowded by this point.

The Debian Raiders looked at Wylie; Wylie stared at Normal, Johnny, the Droids and the Joker; the Joker beamed at everybody as if this was very amusing indeed. The Raiders waved at the Droids, who nodded in return while Normal gave Wylie the kind of look which would be called promising – promising death and mayhem, that is. Generally, there was much looking and popping of eyes, gnashing of teeth and various exclamations of surprise. In fact, the room was so full of tension that if somebody had tried to cut it with a knife, the mere sight of the knife would have caused bloody mayhem on a scale that would have surpassed anything seen in that room before.

The Man took in each and every minute reaction, gasp, grimace, frown and stare as if he was a tracker reading sign. Every little smile, twitch and glance said something to him, even if that something was that here was a bunch of people who had a lot going on. He then leaned over and whispered something in Chu's ear and Chu nodded in agreement before turning back to the crowded room.

"So we have the guy who stole from me and a bunch of others who look like him starting a rebellion against me in Bloomingdale, we have my daughter mixed up in all of this, we have an alien and a bunch of other guys tagging along and others casing my own headquarters," said Chu, looking at the motley assembly. "I'm betting that all of this is somehow connected and somebody had better start talking soon. If you don't, I'm going to be angry, very angry and you wouldn't like me when I'm angry."

"Why? Does he think he's going to turn into some grey-green leviathan and smash us to bits?" muttered Normal under his breath. Chu looked at him as if asking "Are you talking to me?", and remembering the old adage that he who keeps his mouth shut does not lose any teeth, Normal subsided.

"Well? Anybody?" inquired Chu, an ominous tone in his voice. All of a sudden, as it happens more often in life than you'd believe, everybody began talking at once.

"Woah, Nellie!" shouted Chu. "Let's do this in a way so that we can actually find out what the Shima's going on, shall we?"

It took a little while to get matters sorted out as to the chronological order of events and then even longer to get the whole story out in some coherent and cohesive fashion. Bit by bit, the story took shape from Normal running off to Kabul City to the present gathering in the audience room, as different individuals narrated their part in the events.

Chapter 37 - Chu's blessings

"And that's how we ended up following Wylie," concluded Normal ending the narrative relay that had included almost everybody in the room. "We were waiting to see what Wylie would do after your men and the Martian went in with Ringo. Then some of your men stumbled upon us and dragged us in here. The rest you know ..."

"So all this running around and hoopla was about a dog?" inquired Chu, looking bemused.

"Well, not all of it. As you may recall, one of them stole from you," the Man pointed in the direction of the Raiders. "That certainly had nothing to do with the dog."

"Unlce Irving! How could you bring that up at this moment? You know I love Rlo and if you and Dad are going to persecute one of his family, I'd never forgive you," said Jello glaring at both the Man and her father in the manner of one who hopes that they won't disappoint her but knows in the depths of her heart that they will.

"Well, since we are all family ... or going to be family, I'm sure we can sort it amongst ourselves," said the Man, looking in enquiry at Chu. That individual nodded vigorously, eager to get back into his daughter's good graces.

"Oh, no!" said Jell, shaking her head. "I know exactly how you settle things in the family. No, we sort this out now. Here in front of everybody and that's the last this will ever be mentioned."

"She sure is your daughter, Chu. Knows how to make an offer that you dare not refuse," chuckled the Man.

"Well?" asked Jello, not letting up on her glare. In fact, if that had been possible, it seemed to go up a few notches in intensity.

"OK, fine," responded Chu, wilting under her glare like a lily under the heat of the sun. "If the item is returned to me, we'll forget that this incident ever happened."

"The item? Why are you being so cryptic? Why can't you just say what it was?"

"Umm ... because we don't know what it is," replied Chu with a hint of shamefacedness.

"What? You don't know what it is and you are hounding somebody over it?"

"Well, they say it's an old artefact, very valuable. Anyway, it's mine and nobody steals from me!"

Dar decided that this was as good a time to come forward as any. In fact, it looked better than most times since Jello might not be around the next time he had to face Chu. "Actually, I was the one who took the hexadecarom from you."

"You? You" Chu half got out of his seat as if he intended to get to grips with the situation - perhaps rather close grips, with his hands around Dar's neck - but upon seeing Jello giving him her patented are-you-going-to-start-that-again stare, he subsided and sat back down. "You seem to know what it is called. So how much is it worth?" asked Chu, obviously trying to keep the snarl out of his voice.

"I don't know. I didn't steal it because of its value," replied Dar, deciding that honesty at times was the best policy. [But the time has to be picked carefully. For instance, a sudden bout of honesty while an enraged husband confronts you with a loaded weapon, is not usually recommended.]

"Then why'd you steal it?"

"That's an artefact belonging to our race. It's an ancient recording device which probably has some clue as to where we originally came from," Dar paused as if unsure whether to proceed further or not. Then he appeared to make up his mind. "Actually, based on all that I've been able to discover so far, we might even have come from this very planet."

This elicited a whole gamut of reactions - gasps from the other Raiders, a look of surprise from Jello, indifference from most of the other aliens and Chu's men and a look of interest from the Man. "You mean to say that you might be human too?" he asked.

"Or all of you Sciclones who have forgotten how to clone," replied Dar. "I was asked by our council of elders to find our original home planet and this is the first clue that I've found after years of searching. That's why I took the hexadecarom. So that I could take it back to my planet and have it decoded."

"You could have just asked for it ..." began Chu and then appeared to consider what he was saying and waved his hands as if asking everybody to forget that he'd uttered those words.

"You see dad, it belongs to them. So you're not going to make anymore trouble for Rlo or his brothers are you?" asked Jello, all sweetness and smiles now.

"No. I guess not," answered her father, glad not to be the subject of her glare any longer.

"You can even call it an early wedding present if you want," she smiled, all sweetness and light. Then she turned to Rlo to say, "There, now you don't even have to ask him. Isn't that nice?"

Before Rlo could answer and Chu erupt again in fury, the Man intervened smoothly. "Since this is personal business, why don't we just break up this meeting, go somewhere else and discuss family matters at leisure?"

"But first we have to deal with this whole Bloomingdale business," reminded Chu, still glowering at the Debian Raiders generally and Rlo in particular.

"You don't really want to alienate the aliens, now do you?" asked the Man lowering his voice. "Shima, most of the trade in this city comes through them. Their tech is in every aspect of our lives. If we make them mad and they go away, how do you think the other cities are going to feel about us?"

"Hmm ..." said Chu as if he hadn't considered this aspect of the matter too much, which wasn't too surprising since he hadn't. "So you say we do nothing? Then what happens when those Bloomies take that as a sign of weakness and stop paying protection money? Next they'll decide that we are so weak that they can come right in here and slap you or me in the face ..."

"There is a time to make examples and a time to make grand gestures. This time, make some sort of a grand gesture. Say that because of your daughter's marriage, you are overlooking their infractions. That'll make them feel happy but if you word it right, it'll also make them wonder about when you'll decide to come down on them. Better the dread in anticipation of an event than the even itself ..."

"Heh, heh," chuckled Chu. "I like how you think."

"Yeah, that's why you always take my advice," commented the Man dryly. He then nodded towards Kerr and continued, "And you don't want to annoy the Martians either. So you might want to offer the Martian something like a contract to be official dog catcher. Dogs are overrunning the city anyway; they'll soon blame it on you and say that the city's going to the dogs. You know how those news rags are. This way, you'll get the dog problem sorted out in no time, the people will think you're a good leader and the Martians will feel well disposed towards you too."

"Details, details. Things to do and things to get done. Don't bother me with details, just tell me when you're done," said Chu, waving his hands as if to indicate that the details bored him. "Do you know who said that?"

"The King of Siam? The philosopher Dickson? Some great man whose knowledge has been lost in the mists of time except for that insightful fragment of thought?"

"Hah, nope. It was me! Now get to it while I go talk to my daughter and this ... this guy she wants to marry. I'm going cross-eyed just trying to tell them apart. She always has to be difficult. Children, I tell you ..."

"Sure, sure. You go on with Jello, her young man and his brothers. I'll talk to the Martian and the other aliens and smooth out everything and send the others off," replied the Man, ever diligent in soothing the fevered brow that wears the crown.

Chapter 38 - Endings and beginnings

Normal and his comrades had found themselves dismissed in a rather summary fashion. Normal had just had enough time to talk to Kerr and get Ringo back, and promise to return the alien his credits, before the Man had hustled off the alien and his companions to a different room. The Debian Raiders were filing out of the room with Jello and Chu. It looked as if the party was over and Normal found Wylie walking beside him as he left Chu's audience chamber.

"Well, it's over," said Wylie echoing his thoughts.

"It isn't over till the Fat Man drops, I still have some questions for you," said Normal tight-lipped. He could see one of the Debian Raiders whip around and look at him as if he'd just said something profound. "See? I told you that it was a common saying here," he could hear the Raider tell one of his brothers. The Raider who was addressed replied with "You said it's all over except for the overweight lady doing something or other ... you didn't say anything about a fat man or a little boy or a prancing girl ..." and then they were out of earshot and Normal couldn't hear the rest of the conversation.

The group walked out of Chu's headquarters in silence. Normal half-expected the Joker to walk away once they were out of the building, but for some strange reason, he seemed content enough to walk along with them. Given all that they'd been through up to that point, Normal didn't feel like asking the Joker why he was still tagging along. Instead, he turned his furies upon a different target.

"Now that we're out of there, you had better have a good explanation for how you got involved in this," he said, anger making his voice louder than he'd intended.

"Me? What about me?" inquired Wylie, radiating innocence.

"Don't get coy with me now. Why were you so keen on finding Ringo? I know it wasn't because of Kathryn so don't try any of that hot dust on me."

"Oh fine, there is no point in keeping things quiet any longer anyway. First of all, that's not Ringo. Secondly, instead of asking me, why don't you ask your new friends?" asked Wylie, nodding at the droids.

"What?" said Normal, looking totally bewildered.

"This wasn't supposed to have anything to do with you ..." began Sthri.

"Yes, it wasn't supposed to involve you at all, but then you had to go give the dog away," butted in Reeltu. "That's what started this whole chain of actions and counter-actions. Life sometimes becomes a weird series of coincidences ..."

"Or a comedy of errors," interrupted Sthri, cutting off Reeltu in mid-sentence. Reeltu picked up from where his partner left off without missing a beat.

"Yes, a comedy of errors. I suppose we should begin at the very beginning."

"That'd take way too long. You'd have to go back to when this planet came into existence or the human race evolved from ... umm, whatever it was that they evolved from, slime probably. Why don't you give him the short version?" said Wylie.

"Okay, Okay," replied Reeltu, glaring at Wylie. "Well, there was this ancient artefact that we'd all

heard a lot about in various ancient droidian texts and inscriptions. It was supposed to have arrived on this planet when our race was still young."

"Another artefact? I'm beginning to think that there are way too many ancient artefacts floating around recently! What was this one supposed to do? Reveal the location of Hotbeard's Treasure?"

"None of the texts were very clear about that," replied Reeltu, not quite answering the question. "Some say one thing and others say something completely different. You know how it is with those old texts."

"Well, actually I don't. I never had much to do with old texts," replied Normal.

"Of course, of course. But the important thing is that we, I mean the droids, not us specifically, had been searching for this artefact for centuries. What with all this new technology coming in since the aliens arrived, we thought perhaps we should get some outside help with our search. So we sent out some feelers, made some discrete inquiries and so on. What we learnt was that we needed a galactic detective." Here Reeltu turned aside and spoke to Wylie, "They should shorten that to Galactive or something ... or in your case, defective detective would fit better."

Wylie looked as if he had a response to Reeltu's barb but it involved his foot and Reeltu's posterior. Normal intervened fast in case there was an explosion from Wylie – either verbal or apoplectic. "I take it that Wylie moonlights as a galactic detective?"

"Yeah, imagine our surprise when we learnt there was one right here in our backyard, so to speak."

Wylie broke in at this point with, "For your information, I don't moonlight as a detective, thank you very much! The talent agency thing is just a front, something to throw the people of this planet off the scent. Not that anybody would be looking for me but it never hurts to be careful," he hurried to add. "My main business is off-planet and yes, I'm an alien." Wylie said the last bit as if he was a magician who was drawing aside the curtain to reveal the empty box.

"Oh, I've always known that," replied Normal with the same grin that the boy who burst other kids' balloons had.

"You have?" asked Wylie in surprise. "But how? I've always tried to maintain appearances ..."

"It's true that dwarfism does sometime result in perfectly proportioned people, but still, your skeletal structure was somehow wrong. It was too symmetrical. Then there were the little things - like how you walked, as if you were used to a slightly higher gravity and so were making a conscious effort to avoid walking as you normally would ..."

"Very observant," said Wylie, nodding his head grudgingly. "You sure you wouldn't want a job as an operative for me?" asked Wylie.

"I might be interested," said Normal, pausing a moment for visions of galactic adventures to flit through his mind. "But we'll have to discuss that later. First I want to know about what's been going on here."

"Oh, dear. You don't give up easy, do you? Well, if I may continue ... " said Reeltu. "We contacted Mr. Wylie here and it turns out that he'd known about this artefact for a long time. Apparently, it's pretty well-

known in intergalactic circles. Of course, he didn't know where to find it, just knew a lot more about it than we did. So when we pooled our resources, it was a fairly easy task for him to locate it."

"Okay, so you found it. How does that involve me? And if that's ..." Normal looked down and then looked again, all around. "Where did Ringo go? It was here just a second ago. I had it on its leash ..."

"Where's the Joker?" was Sthri's first question, as soon as he realized what had happened.

"He's gone too! How could he disappear just like that? There is no cover around here at all and nowhere that he could have hidden. And what am I going to tell Kathryn? The bombed dog's lost again!"

Wylie began swearing. It wasn't just plain cursing somehow, it was swearing with attitude. Based on what Normal understood, it looked as if Wylie was using the worst possible epithets from many different languages mixed in with common words to come up with a concoction which was somehow innocuous and yet lethal. He went on and on and on for some time while Normal and the droids stood there, wondering if they should close their ears in case the oaths ended up turning their blood to water, and yet, afraid to miss a word out of morbid fascination - sort of like how you feel when you see a hovercar wreck.

Wylie wound down at last, took a deep breath and then said dejectedly, "The dog you sold to the Martian is not Ringo. He's Pete. Ringo's safe elsewhere. I'll get him for you. You don't have to worry about explaining things to Katy."

"So all that trouble I went through was for nothing?"

"Call it the cost of a lesson learnt. If you hadn't tried to give Katy's dog away, the rest of this stuff wouldn't have happened."

"But it wasn't Kathryn's dog! It was Pete or whatever you called it."

"See? All the more reason for you not to go giving away strange dogs. It wasn't even yours," responded Wylie.

"How did Ringo get switched with this other one? Where is Ringo? And how could we lose the dog right here out in the open?" asked Normal, trying to make sense of it all.

"Oh my, what a lot of questions you have, grandma!" replied Wylie. "To answer your last question, it looks as if the Joker took the dog and you don't have to look far to figure out his reason for doing so," said Wylie, nodding at the droids.

"Come on! That old feud again?" exploded Normal. "Anyway, how could he have stolen the dog from right under our noses? I keep asking that and nobody seems to find it the least bit strange that the Joker disappeared like that?"

"We are more upset by this than you, believe us." replied Sthri. "We're not blaming the Joker just because he had motive. He also had the means to do it."

"What? Disappear into thin air?"

"No, not into thin air but into the basement of the universe. At least, that's what they call it."

"The basement of the universe? What in Teller's name is that?" asked Normal, looking at Sthri as if he had gone insane. "You're trying to sprinkle hot dust again, aren't you? I've never heard of anything like that!"

"That's because it's a Joker secret," replied Sthri, speaking slowly as if explaining things to rather backward child. "From what we've been able to uncover, the Jokers have this theory that this universe is like a house and that there is a basement underneath the universe. Apparently, there are cracks in the floor of the universe and they know how to use these cracks to get to the basement of the universe."

"And what do they do once they are there? Clean out the sub-basement?" asked Normal, sarcasm not just oozing but fairly gushing from every pore of his being.

"Bombed if we know. Everything we know has been pieced together based on hints dropped by the Jokers. There are many accounts of them disappearing suddenly and then appearing somewhere else. You can call it trickery or you can accept their explanation. We still have nothing to prove or disprove their story."

"And Ringo? Why would the Joker take it?" asked Normal. Then comprehension dawned upon him in a rush like an 800-pound gorilla jumping upon him from the highest building around. "The artefact's hidden somewhere on Ringo, isn't it? That's why the Joker took the mutt!"

"As I said before, the Joker took Pete," jumped in Wylie, apparently trying to be as patient as possible. "We used to call him Pete Best because he was the best of his batch. He's sort of an experiment. And yes, the artefact was hidden in Pete."

"In the dog?" exclaimed Normal. "What'd you do, feed the artefact to it? Here I was thinking that the artefact was a mini-universe hanging by its collar or a

microchip hidden on a fake flea on its body or something ..."

"We didn't actually have to feed the artifact to Pete. You see, Pete's a SynthPet. It's a new line that another client of mine is trying out at the moment. They are vat grown pets. You can customize them to look like anything you want and they don't eat, don't defecate all over the place, don't get moody and don't die. In fact, the perfect pets," beamed Wylie.

"Sure sounds like it. Maybe I should have taken Pete and given Ringo to the Joker," said Normal, musingly.

"Too late now. You've at least got the real dog, so count yourself lucky."

"So you found the artefact and needed a good hiding place?" asked Normal, going back on the offensive. "And your solution was to duplicate Ringo and hide it in the duplicate because nobody would find it?"

"I've always thought you were pretty quick on the uptake," said Wylie, beaming at Normal like a teacher at his prize student. "Yeah, that's about the size of it. You have no idea how many people would kill to get their hands on this artefact. I just needed it hidden away safely for a couple of days till I could hand it over to the retrieval team. That's what those bunch of clones were supposed to do, if you hadn't guessed already."

"Yeah, I figured that one out. So what exactly is this mysterious artefact?" asked Normal, looking from the droids to Wylie and back. Neither party answered for a moment.

"You've got Ringo back. Now you can go back to Katy and pretend nothing happened at all. The

artefact's gone. As is my fee ..." said Wylie, glancing at the droids, for hope springs eternal even in an alien breast. The droids however were nodding their heads in vigorous agreement of Wylie's assessment that he could kiss his fee good-bye as it disappeared through the cracks of the universe into the basement.

"Ah well, a fella can always hope," sighed Wylie and then turned his attention back to Normal. "What's the point of wondering about the artefact? It's gone, at least for the moment. If it ever reappears, well, that's another story. But now it's time for all of us to get on with our lives since none of us can get to this basement of the universe."

"That's good advice, I suppose," replied Normal as the five of them walked along the street. Johnny was discussing the theory behind the basement of the universe with the droids and Wylie appeared to be contemplating his lost fee and was probably trying to figure out a way to recoup his losses. Normal realized that he had to decide where he went from here. Home to Kathryn seemed to be the best bet, even if she was going to get mad at him ... but maybe she wouldn't. Hope is a grand thing, Normal thought as they walked on towards their individual destinations.

THE END

(Or the beginning of another tale ...)

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