

SHORE LEAVE

by:

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“It is upon the navy under the Providence of God that the safety, honour, and welfare of this realm do chiefly attend.” Charles II

“God help us all.” Anonymous

The human sailor’s fist smacked against the side of the Embrian’s head for the fifth time, making a loud and juicy sound. The noise seemed to please the sailor mightily; the Embrian, not so much.

“Keep it up, Noodles,” shouted a much taller sailor, also human, one dressed in much the same uniform as the other. “We’ll crack this coconut yet!”

The two sailors were part of the upstart human fleet from that far end of the galaxy into which most reputable races did not bother to venture. It was a fearsomely cluttered area, one filled with debris from the great space wars of the elder races, all of whom disappeared so long ago. The whole place abounded with black hole snares, meteor whirls, nebulae pits, all manner of mines and traps as well as system-wide sargassos of wrecked armadas just waiting for the chance to befoul modern travellers.

Of course, the Embrians being heelstomped in The Cold Bone Cellar--which by the way neither contained a particularly gelid temperature, nor found itself situated beneath the surface--did not care what race the sailors were, nor where they were from. They only wished for respite from the heelstomping and the continual thumping of their conga-like heads. Luckily for them, the unmistakable sound of approaching law

enforcement began to filter through the riotous din enveloping the tavern at that moment.

“Rocky,” cried out Noodles, he of the keener hearing, “sounds like the shore patrol.” Holding off his next punch for the moment, Chief Gunnery Officer Rockland Vespucci cupped a hand to his ear, confirmed his friend’s assertion, then shouted;

“Men of the Franklin--time for a strategic withdrawal!” To which Noodles, more officially known as Machinist First Mate Li Qui Kon, added most vocally;

“Run and live!”

Tossing the soldiers, sailors and officers from the other ships with whom they had been brawling into a central pile, the sailors in question assumed a semblance of a formation, heading for the back door on the run as they sang;

“Oh, we’re the boys of the Franklin,
We fly in outer space,
We wipe our asses with moonbeams,
We know how star dust tastes.

“The boys of the fighting Franklin,
The best ship in all the fleet,
Say a single word ag’in her,
And we’ll pound ya ‘til yer meat!”

When the military police did arrive they seemed in a particular lather, one not quite in line with a simple barroom bare-knuckler. The MPs were, as was standard at any port where different cultures docked together, a mix of the five great races of the Pan-Galactic League of Suns. That meant, of course, there were no humans among their numbers, which is why those warbling the thirty-some odd verses dedicated to the virtues of the Fighting Franklin were so quick to make their exit. And, with their usual precision, within only five blocks at top-speed exit, the group of some twenty-seven original roughhousers had split up into some eleven groups of two and three, all eleven striving mightily to pretend not to know one another and to walk in opposing directions.

Now calmly walking through the streets, Rocky and Noodles assumed the innocent pose of two guileless gobs out for a stroll in an exciting new port of call. And, to be fair, they were very good at doing so. Indeed, so shamelessly naive did they appear, the grifters, hoodwinks and typical bottom leeches one found in any such hub city allowed them passage, feeling it beneath their dignity as thieves to go after pigeons so utterly tender.

“I don’t think we should have run for it until we found out if that place validated parking.”

About to give out with a snappy rejoinder, Rocky suddenly noted that he and his partner were being followed by four rather large and singularly dangerous-looking Danierians--pasty, bulbous beings known far and wide for their quick tempers and all-around lack of social skills. Noting that they had been noted, the quartet began to pick up speed, not slowly, but switching from a quick walk to a supersonic lurch with one quick whoosh.

This motivated the sailors to take the opportunity to test their land-legs by cranking their own mobility up to the ultimate, racing down one oddly shaped back alley and then the next. By this point the Danierians could no longer actually be seen due to the great, bilious dust cloud their pursuit was raising. Availing himself of this advantage, Machinist First Mate Li rummaged through his pockets, examining one discovery after another until coming across a temporal spanner bar.

Setting it for what he imagined were the appropriate amount of seconds, he tossed it down in front of himself and Rocky, kept moving forward, then nodded with appreciation when he first heard the tool, normally used for re-aligning warp engines, “klik” back into standard reality, then heard the expansion field open just in time to trip up their pursuers. The welcome sounds of beings falling against one another and the somewhat harder surface of the street, as well as the unwelcome ozone-frying smell of

shots being fired, came to the sailors, bringing a laugh to their lips as well as added speed to their retreat.

Finally, several blocks and random turns later, the two slowed down, picking up their conversation where they left off. Assuming the Danierians were simply part of the house security for the house they had helped make so less secure, they put the creatures out of their minds as Rocky asked;

“So, Noodles, tell me, exactly what did you park that you wanted a validation for?”

“It’s the principle of the thing,” responded the machinist. “Storage of future information.”

“Where do you get these ideas,” asked Rocky. “I swear, you’re the kind of guy who proposes polkas for national anthems.”

“And you’re the kind of guy who steals miniature aliens when running out of a bar instead of a couple of spare bottles.” Needless to say, Rocky was indeed puzzled by his friend’s comment. Not that part about the bottles. No, the gunnery officer was certain Noodles had managed to palm two or three fifths on his way out the door. That would certainly explain the slight “klinking” sound emanating from his duffle.

Indeed, it was the part about stealing aliens--miniature or otherwise--which had him perplexed. Scratch his head as hard as he might, Rocky could not remember a single instance of doing such. Questioning Noodles on the subject only brought the equally inscrutable rejoinder;

“Don’t look at me, / certainly didn’t steal them.”

Rocky’s confusion only lasted another moment, however, mainly because at that point the gunnery officer followed the assumed trail leading from the end of Noodles’ directional finger to the objective being speared by such action, namely the nine small fry following behind the pair of sailors.

“You crazy git,” shouted Rocky. “I didn’t steal them. They’re followin’ us. And,” he added, after taking a closer look, “I don’t think they’re small aliens.”

“You think they’re human?”

“No, goddamnit--I don’t think they’re human. I mean, I don’t think they’re small aliens.” Scrutinizing the troop now standing still behind them, obviously ready to start moving once more as soon as the sailors did, Noodles said slowly;

“I don’t know ... they look small and they look like aliens to me.”

“I don’t mean they’re not small aliens, I mean yes, they’re small, and yes, they’re aliens, but I don’t think that’s all they are.”

“What else could they be?” Noodles looked the silent contingent over again, then asked, “Robots?”

“Not robots--why is everything robots to you machinists? No, I think they’re kids.”

“Who cares if they’re kids--why are they following us?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then, you should ask them.”

“Why me?”

“Because, I spotted them first, you’re closer to them, and I don’t like children or small aliens, unless of course they’re robots.” Against such thunderous logic, the gunnery officer found himself without choice. So surrendering, he dropped down on one knee and asked;

“All right, who’s the ring leader here? I want to know what you bunch are doing followin’ us. Com’on now ... speak up.”

One plump melon of a creature dressed for all the world in what seemed to be a scouring pad stepped forward and announced in the squeakiest voice either sailor had ever experienced;

“We grateful orphans. Follow you to happy safety. We know you kind kipkips. Not sell us to be chowder.”

After a painful amount of conversation with the alien, who did indeed turn out to be a child, the two sailors learned that the nine tykes, all of different species, were orphans purchased from a galactic state home for a Representative Brummellig'ic for the purpose of being turned into a type of outer rim gumbo. Somewhat suspicious, Noodles used his com to check what the orphan they nicknamed Melon had told them. When he looked up from his labors, Rocky threw an all-encompassing;

“Well?” at him to which Noodles replied;

“Like always, translation between Earth Basic 9.8 and Pan-Galactic's a bit rough, but the little zucchini might have something. There is a Representative Brummellig'ic on planet right now, and he's got enough power to keep all information about himself off the low class bands. The kid's right, though. I found a mention of him on some kind of society page--he is throwing a big party tonight.”

Rocky and Noodles looked suspiciously, then sternly, then helplessly at their new litter. Finding no recourse there, they walked away several paces, then looked at each other, lips pursed, eyes narrowing. As one they turned and stared down at their three-times-three tag-alongs, and then turned back to look at one another again--lips tighter, eyes down to slits. Finally, on the verge of choking and going blind, Noodles offered;

“This can't be happening to us ...”

“I know; we ain't had shore leave in sixteen months--”

“We don't know anything about taking care of kids ...”

“And this Brummellig'ic creep, he's certain to have a lot of muscle--”

“It's not like we can go to the authorities ...”

“No, no--even if there weren't no spotter cams in that bar we just helped redesign, they'll be lookin' for everything in blue and white to invite in for a chat--”

“MPs will only be worse ...”

“Even if we weren't in trouble, guy like this Brummellig'ic could have people bought off anywhere. If we was to even talk about this to anyone, if word got back to

him--" Rocky drew a finger across his throat, with an accompanying dreadful sound to get his point across. Rolling his eyes, mostly in fearful agreement, Noodles said;

"This is not fair ..."

"I know that," agreed Rocky. Turning his head, he stared as hard as he could at their nine new companions, trying to ignore their pathetic demeanors and large imploring eyes--those that had eyes, of course. Turning back to his friend, he whispered;

"Elvis Corkin' Presley, all I wanted was to drink and fight, dance some with beautiful girls, see a couple shows, do a little gamblin' ... not play nursemaid."

"You're absolutely right. This is not our responsibility. By Buddha's Mint Julep, for all we know, maybe they sell orphans all the time to make into bouillabaisse out here. We're not home, you know."

"And another important factor," added Rocky, his voice dropping to an even lower, more conspiratorial level, "we're a lot bigger than they are--"

"Our legs are longer ..."

"We could most assuredly run much, much faster than them--"

And then, the one that looked like Shirley Temple, if Shirley Temple had been the offspring of a seal and a geranium, started to cry. She had a beautiful crying voice, not--that is--one melodious to listen to, but one perfectly designed for fetching sympathy. So utterly loud, shrill and trembling was it that windows began to open, and even passing motorists started coming to a halt. With the speed of politicians placing blame, the pair of gobs emptied their pockets, searching desperately for something they might just happen to have on their persons which would placate a caterwauling alien five-year-old.

Luckily, Noodles just happened to be in possession of a 9/10s galvanized securing bolt which caught little Shirley's eye. Throwing out a purple tendril, she snagged the five-point-eighteen ounces of steel and happily began chewing. Wiping perspiration from their now freely beading heads, Rocky with the edge of his

tallywacker, Noodles with his bucket cap, the two shrank against the closest wall as the oppressive reality of their situation began to dawn on them.

“You know,” said Noodles, his eyes now constantly scanning for authority in all its varied guises, “we’re in trouble.”

“Oh, ya think? Listen, Edison, we gotta start cogitatin’ on what we’re gonna do here.” With that statement, Rocky turned to look over the kids. Noticing they were near a type of public park, he rounded up their reluctantly-accepted charges and got them all off the street and out of the main public view. Finding an alcove large enough to house them all, and discreet enough that they could talk freely, he posted Noodles at the leafy entrance to keep watch, positioned the children on the ground, then sat down in front of them and asked;

“All right, let’s figure some stuff out. First off, how many of you understand what I’m saying?”

Melon screeched out a reply detailing that he, Shirley and three others whom the gobs immediately nick-named Curly, Snip and Poodle could understand basic humanspeak. The others, whom they designated Bubbles, Fork, Creepie and Poindexter, did not speak anything close to Earth 9.8, but Snip could apparently translate for Bubbles and Creepie, Creepie could then straighten out Fork, and Poodle could get across enough to Poindexter to keep him in the loop. With this established, Rocky immediately explained the buddy system, telling the group that if things were going to work at all, everyone was going to have to help everyone else. And at that point, Shirley asked the question that sent our boys from merely falling over a cliff to rocketing over it.

“What things are going to work?”

Her question could be taken in any of a hundred ways, and both swabbies felt the twisting knife of each possible one. Cutting through the selfishness of their desire to throw away their paychecks on dice, dames and drinks, her query focused the small

fries' plight perfectly--abandoned by Rocky and Noodles, the nine of them were bound for a soup pot. Boiled alive with celery and onions to feed the decadent rich.

"Noodles," said Rocky of a sudden, "if you'd like to take off now, and go back out to have some fun, I'd be real understandin' of such an action."

"What," responded the machinist, "and let a loose propeller like you get our kids baked up into won tons? No way I'm going anywhere, you crazy wop."

The gunnery officer smiled. All right then, he thought, it was settled. They would help the kids. But, the back of his mind questioned, help them to do what?

A quick interrogation gave the gobs the following facts. The kids had all come from the orphanage. None of them had anyone on the outside to whom they could turn. The beings who were going to sell them to be soup were to meet those wishing to make them into soup at the Cold Bone Cellar. The merry disruption caused by Rocky, Noodles and their shipmates had rendered the kids' sellers unconscious, giving them the opportunity to escape along with the still conscious combatants. The buyers had been the ones they eluded outside the tavern.

"All right," declared Rocky. "We gotta get off the street, and back to the ship. We get these kids to the captain and he'll make sure they're taken care of." Melon and the other English speakers looked a little worried, but Noodles added;

"No, the captain's a good egg. Honest. He'll protect you all. But," the machinist indicated with several complicated eye movements both the idea of direction and extreme distance as he added, "it's a hell of a long way back to the ship. You got any ideas on how we're going to get there?"

"Actually," answered Rocky, his face rearranging itself into a mask of lopsided smugness, "I think I do."

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"This is ridiculous," muttered Noodles. "This is something they only do in cartoons."

“And tell me what part of today hasn’t been a damn cartoon, would you--please?”

Looking over the pair’s three new companions, the gunnery officer added;

“Besides, I think they look pretty good.”

It had to be admitted, for a totally outlandish and completely improbable kind of stunt, their nine charges did look “pretty good.” To shorten a frenzied search through numerous clothing stores, plus a great deal of pushing, guessing, prodding, a bit of cutting and sewing and some emergency work with baling wire and extra strength duct tape, what the sailors had done was stand the kids one atop the other, taking into account their different shapes and abilities, then dressed them as adults. The results made them--especially when attempting to walk--appear more like drunken zombies, but they looked far less like children, and for the moment, that was good enough for the boys.

“So now,” whispered the machinist to his partner-in-absurdity, “what do we do next?”

“We get inside somewhere where we can find some guys we trust. Then, with some help on our side, we get back to the ship, get the kids placed somewheres where they won’t get fricasseed or barbecued, and then we try to get back to enjoying ourselves.”

“And where exactly would we be able to do that?” Staring across the street at a garishly lit nightclub, one promising gambling, female companionship and beers from across the galaxy, Rocky pulled at his chin and answered;

“Yeah, where indeed?”

Moments later, the five were crossing the street, three of the quintet bouncing and rocking as if they were in a quake zone, the other two attempting to hold them together while talking loudly about how ashamed they were of their friends for drinking to excess. This continued up the stairs of the entrance to Ping’s Dingled Showplace, through the doors, and down the stairs into the main ballroom. Following a waiter to a

table for five, the oddly moving party waddled along as best they could, all of them gratefully collapsing into their chairs.

Instantly Snip began wailing because, as best the gobs could figure out, either Poodle was standing on his face, or Creepie had farted and the duct tape holding the two of them together had begun to melt. As quickly as it could be managed discreetly, the sailors got the kids as comfortably arranged as possible, ordered two pitchers of Gullyfoyle Malt Liquor, three of SweetSweet BugJuice, and then sat back to peruse their surroundings.

Ping's, at least at first glance, seemed a perfect place for the swabbies and their charges to try and get their bearings. If nothing else, every table received a complimentary revolving platter of treats, one with enough variety that it held something all the kids could ingest. The fact that the club was dark enough no one at the other tables would notice the extra hands, tentacles, flippers, claws and so forth extruding from the three non-humans at their table was certainly a bonus.

Beyond that, it seemed like the kind of place where people were only interested in those at their table, or what was going on up on stage, which at that moment was an act labeled as Tina Dillfieb and her Titanic Tower of Terriers. Feeling somewhat secure for the first time in some forty-nine Earth Standard Minutes, the swabbies began to relax. And, after finishing their first pitcher, Rocky and Noodles found themselves as relaxed as house cats on a hot day. Finding the kids content with their BugJuice, assorted treats and the ever-toppling tower of dogs on-stage, they were just about to begin planning a strategy when suddenly the already dark interior went positively ebony.

The darkness lasted but a moment, and then a bright orange spot focused on the center stage. In that brief moment Tina and her hounds were removed along with all of their props and one embarrassing accident, and replaced with startling efficiency by a Golblacian Master of Ceremonies. Drumming up a more-than-deserved round of applause for the departed Dillfieb and associates, the creature best described as a

seven foot blue/green penguin then dropped its voice to a lower, throatier range, and said;

“Now, gentlebeings, all you flippers and floggers, you squasheads and bipeds, everything out there with the strength, enthusiasm and moral turpitude to do so, let me get you to make some deep, loving tribal noise for the seductive, the lovely, the incomparable, Miss Beezle Uvi!”

A pink shot of butterfly lights were sent dancing through the white spot framing center stage. All the orphans made appropriate “ouuuuuhhhhhhhh” sounds, except, of course, for those stuck in the middle of their costumes. At least, for that moment. Responding to the appreciative sounds of their fellow tureen escapees, those in the mid- and bottom sections of the costumes abandoned their stations to congregate around the center pole of their party’s table and peek out from under the tablecloth.

As they did so, the curtains began to part and the orchestra began to warble, all of it timed to both the movement of the lights, and the entrance of a creature so entrancing, so curvaceously shimmering, so delightful in movement and gesture that Rocky would have fallen out of his chair and out onto the main floor if Noodles had not fallen over at the same moment, the two of them smacking into each other, then propping each other up as their insides dissolved into jelly. The darkness hid their antics, of course, as it was meant to do, keeping all eyes focused on the approaching Uvi.

Strolling calmly toward her spot, the singer moved her charmingly antique voice amplifier to what apparently served as her mouth, and in a slow, sultry voice began to release the lead-in lines of her song to the already raptured audience.

“When intelligent beings first went into space,
And met creatures from another race,
It was, of course, one of those great, historic finds.

“The galaxy didn’t worry so much about war,
Intolerance wasn’t even brought to the floor,

But ...
There *was* one ...
Burning question ...
On allllllll ... inquiring minds...

And then, the house lights blazed up, whites becoming yellows, pinks becoming reds; the band shifted from a quiet respectful background accompaniment to a raucous blast of hot horns and sibilant strings, and Uvi hit her mark, threw back her head, and in a voice higher, louder, stronger, and twice as shot through with promise as before, belted out;

“What is that, and where does it go?
Should it be inserted, fast or slow?”

“Does it like to be licked?
Does it like to be grabbed?
Does it like to be twirled?
Does it like to be stabbed?”

“Oh, just *what* is that, and *where* does it go?”

Bouncing off each other, their heads banging together like empty spittoons, Noodles and Rocky at first found themselves instinctively trying to cover the ears of their many charges. They gave off on this futile endeavor for, first off, they had far too few hands, second, they did not have the slightest idea where most of the orphans’ audio organs were positioned, and third, to be perfectly honest, the childish tittering coming from all their charges, except well, of course, for Poindexter, cued them that they were far too late to protect this particular interstellar nine from the facts of life.

That being established, the swabbies looked at each other helplessly for a moment, then simply surrendered to the obvious and went back to enjoying the show. All of this happening within a handful of seconds, they had their chins firmly placed within the palms of their hands, their elbows on the table, and the sappiest of grins plastered on their faces as Uvi hit the second go-round, belting out;

“Oh, what is that, and what does it do?”

Is it there for both of us, or just for you?

“Does it get much bigger?
Does it reach out and scratch?
Does it remain a solo, or
Can you grow a batch?”

“Baby, *what* is that, and *what* does it do?”

At this point, alarms were going off back aboard the gobs' ship in the medical bay, alerting the dreadnaught's physician-on-call that two shore-leavers were close to coronary arrest. With the flip of a few switches and the studying of the resulting readouts, however, the doctor ascertained the two were merely comfortably seated, staring at a choice piece of stimuli. Yearning to be fifty years younger, he mentally wished them both luck and cancelled the alert. All in all, a good thing, for the meter readings were only going to get worse.

As that stanza ended, the Dingled Showplace Dancers joined the club's star on stage, backing her up for a repeat of the chorus, making all the appropriately rude gestures of licking, grabbing, twirling and stabbing, while Uvi kicked up different sets of heels, mesmerizing the crowd with the way she could move her many and varied appendages with such flawless synchronization, all of her coming together just in time for her to re-enter the center spot and warble;

“Tell me, what is that, and how does it feel?
Like the mushroom we first saw, or some eventual eel?”

“When our races met,
I thought it was just another find.
Now all I can think of is,
Your place or mine?”

“Oh lover, just *what* is that, and *how* does it feel?”

Noodles set about “shushing” the orphans, whose giggling had attracted the attention of more than one waiter. Rocky, in the meantime, could offer no assistance. Alien in every way as the singer was, he simply could not tear his eyes from her--the

green parts or the purple. And, it had to be said that his utter intoxication with the singer had little to do with the woes of Earth navies of elder times. His ship was one of the most modern in the fleet; its compliment was completely integrated with members of both sexes.

No, Rocky's problem had nothing to do with not having seen any females for too long a time. The particular sailor's problem was that he had never seen anyone like Beezle Uvi--anywhere, ever--except in certain dreams, the dates of which he still marked the anniversaries of with a boyishly wistful fondness. Thus he did not even notice when Noodles slipped from his seat and fell to the floor with the kids, his eyes locking with Uvi's as she sang;

"The cosmos is shrinking,
The boundaries are changing,
And I think my pelvis is in ...
For a slight ... *rearranging!*

"And so I challenge ...
Our greatest scientific minds ...
To somehow find an answer ...
To that *one* burning question ...
That I I I I I I I I ...
Just *have* to know ...

"Oh, just *what* is that ., ,
And where, oh *where* does it goooooooooooooooooooooo?"

The full regular house lights went up then, and applause thundered from the audience with a power so overwhelming some of the chorus girls were forced to take a backward step, or slither, or whatever. Rocky's own hands were contributing a massive amount of the audible appreciation, as were Noodles'. Melon, Poodle and Curly were in for a round as well, Bubbles, Snip, Fork and Creepie were all wrestling over the last items on the appetizer tray; Shirley, having finished her bolt was working on a corner of the table, and Poindexter, well ... you know.

What startled Rocky, Noodles, their menagerie and most of the occupants of Ping's Dingled Showplace, however, was what happened next--an event so unexpected, so unprecedented, that the Galaxy Today reporter permanently stationed in the club would have written it up and sent it across the waves immediately if the shock of it had not sent her stumbling backward into an unfortunately extremely large and heavy ice sculpture. What stole the breath, ability to speak, and common sense from those gathered was the fact that, defying precedent, good taste, and well, common sense again, Beezle Uvi had left the stage and was walking for Rocky and Noodles' table.

"L-Little buddy," stuttered the finest gunnery officer in the fleet, "I-I-I d-do believe she's ... comin' this way."

"You might be right," agreed Noodles. Ducking his head under the table, he hissed quick orders to the orphans, getting them to reassemble into their pretend persons before the singer could reach them. Doing his best to help, Rocky stared forward, attempting to keep his eyes from falling out of his head, rolling around on the table and growing their own tongues with which to blast wolf whistles.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Geezzzz," asked Rocky seriously, "do I look that foolish?" Uvi giggled, an undulating action that made several seemingly unconnected body parts shimmy. Signalling her favorite waiter to bring her a Cosmic Laugh, she turned and focused her attention on Rocky. After he introduced Noodles, she pointed a finger, moving it from one of them to the other, asking;

"You're human, aren't you?"

"Ah, well," Rocky answered honestly, "yeah--last time I looked."

"I've read about humans," she admitted. "Heard a lot of good things."

"Gosh, I don't know what to say," responded Rocky. "I don't even know what species you are. Not that that matters or nothin'."

"I was impressed by that attitude," Uvi admitted. "You stare with such charming hunger. Tell me, are you myopic, or were you just enjoying the show?"

"I don't want to seem forward or nothin'," the gunnery officer said, "the show was okay and everything, it's just, there's somethin' about you, ma'am, somethin' ... and I know this must sound crazy, but it's like I'm fallin' in--"

"Ix-nay on the ov-lay alk-tay," hissed Noodles, poking his pal hard in the ribs. Rocky turned, mightily disturbed for having been interrupted at that particular moment, but then, he saw what the machinist had noticed. All around the club, police officers and MPs had begun to take up positions. Worse yet, the quartet of Danierians they thought they had left in temporal disruption had somehow gotten themselves undisrupted.

"Great jumpin' jackasses," blurted Rocky. "How could they *all* have found us--at the same time?"

"A good question," replied Noodles. "Rhetorical, I'm hoping?"

"The cops," asked Uvi, "those Danierian creeps? They're *all* looking for you?" When two forlorn nods were given her as answer, the interstellar diva asked the galaxy's most popular one-word question;

"Why?"

The swabbies took turns filling Uvi in on what had happened to them since leaving the Cold Bone Cellar, one explaining this or that section while the other looked to the orphans, seeing if there was any way possible they might be able to get all nine of them out of the boiling pan and away from the fire once more. Hearing everything the pair had to say, the singer asked;

"So all you want to do is get these kids to your captain to help you protect them?" When the boys nodded sincerely, Rocky tying Poodle's shoe for the fifth time, Noodles wiping what he hoped was Creepie's nose, Uvi's facial area seemed to melt with genuine affection. She was just about to speak when a whistle was blown from

somewhere in the back. Leaping to his feet, praying there were more sailors within earshot than he could see, Rocky bellowed;

“Pie fight--Franklin style!”

And at that moment, chaos exploded throughout Ping’s Dinged Showplace. From twenty different spots, pastries, dinner plates, flower pots, beer mugs, chairs and anything else not nailed down was seen flying through the air, most of the flight plans registering an authority figure’s head as its destination. As per standard Franklin tactics, the second fusillade was launched at the lights. Clutching Rocky’s wrist, Uvi shouted;

“Grab the kids and follow me.”

The sailors did as ordered, scooping up their charges and following the singer onto the stage. As their fellow sailors, and quite a number of innocent patrons, fell into a pitched battle with the police and MPs, Noodles noticed that the Danierians were still heading straight toward them. Reaching the up-stage side of the curtains, Uvi pointed out her dressing room, telling the others to meet her there. When Rocky protested, she hissed;

“This is my world; I can deal with them--go!” Then, turning to the chorus line of Dinged Showplace Dancers, she shouted;

“Rubes rushing the stage, girls--make them sorry!”

Giggling, the chorus girls waved Uvi on, then prepared for battle. Dropping the curtain on the heads of the Danierians, they then wandered from lump to lump, flattening them with heavy objects to what looked like heads and kicks to what looked like groins. In her dressing room, Uvi held out bundles of clothing to both Noodles and Rocky ordering them to get into them immediately. The pair protested, but she shouted back that they had no time to argue, and unless they had a better plan than hers, that they should simply shut up and do as they were told. Pulling his jersey off over his head, Noodles mumbled;

“I think she may be related to the lieutenant.” To which Rocky responded;

“Awwww, just shut up and help me adjust my bra.”

“Is that what that is?”

“I think so--for like maybe, three?”

Pulling, pushing, and experimenting, the two managed to get themselves dressed in only a handful of minutes. Checking themselves over in the room’s full length mirror, they did make better females than the kids had made adults, but not by much. In the meantime, Uvi and her wardrobe assistant had removed the last remaining scraps of the kids’ disguises and replaced them with new ones. Having cut apart several throw rugs and her own fur coat, the orphans had all been converted into what could pass for dogs if the inspection was not too strenuous. Looking again in the mirror, down at the kids, back to the mirror, and back to the kids, realization hit Noodles’ mind.

“I get it,” he exclaimed. “We’re supposed to be Tina Dillfrieb and her Titanic Tower of Terriers.”

“Machinists are so smart,” cooed Uvi. “I’ll bet you know about robots and everything.” Noodles beamed at the mention of his favorite topic, barely noticing the sour look Rocky was throwing his way. Getting in front of the pair of gobs before anything could come of it, either, Uvi said;

“All right, now we’re going to just march out there right past them all, just a big happy bunch of girls and canines, right everybody?”

Rocky and Noodles agreed, as did Melon, Shirley and the others as translation spread through the pack. With the last pseudo-terrier nod, Uvi opened the door and the lot of them poured out into the hallway. The diva led the way, throwing her ample self in front of the first curious eyes of authority they met. A slight chill ran through her as she saw the enormous extent to which curiosity was running that day.

Flipping the “flirt” switch within her head, the singer sauntered, doing the best she could to attract all license-to-hurt attention to herself. Rocky and Noodles, doing their best to herd the orphans along, trying at the same time to maintain a light and breezy

falsetto chatter, followed behind, keeping their all-too-stubby faces averted from the police, military and otherwise, filling the hallway. As they approached the exit, they found two disagreeable officers arguing with one another.

“I don’t understand the problem,” growled the one. “We know they’re from an Earth ship--the Franklin. You should have the bio-reads of everyone from that tub by now.”

“But sir,” answered the other, “I keep trying to tell you--we checked every registry in port. There’s no ship, Earther or otherwise, called the Franklin in dock. The closest name is the Felkinsku, but that’s a Saurian wine merchant freighter, methane breathers.” As Rocky and Noodles smiled to one another, the superior of the two officers growled;

“And what do you, ah ... ladies, find so funny?” Trusting his chances at making female sounds better than Rocky’s, Noodles cocked his wrist limply and tittered;

“Ohhh, you big, strong man, you--I knew there was someone out here just dying to take me to dinner. Rocklina, be a dear and take the puppies out on your own. The general here has eyes for me.”

Taking a good look at the eye batting, lip pursing Noodles, the officer blanched, practically knocking his underling over in his haste to clear a path to the door. Sticking his nose in the air with as offended an attitude as possible, Noodles sniffed appropriately, then followed the others out the door. Once outside, Rocky laughed;

“Didn’t know you made such a good dame, little buddy. I’ll have to keep that in mind for those lonely nights once were back out in the black.” As Uvi hailed a passing cab, Noodles glared at Rocky through his eye makeup and snarled;

“And I’ll be certain to let everyone on board know this new fact about you. There are more than a few members of the crew with enough ‘alternate’ wardrobe choices to keep you happy for years, I suspect.”

“Bet they’re all machinists, too.”

The pair were about to contemplate taking things a step beyond the playful when a cab willing to risk nine hounds stopped for them. Piling inside, the kids all giggling with glee as they threw themselves onto the floor, doing their collective best to bark in their nine different accents, Uvi gave the driver a destination then turned to the boys. Settling her various appendages around her, she asked;

“Not that I’m not grateful, but why is it those two at the door couldn’t find your ship?”

The swabbies smiled once more. As Rocky’s laughter attracted Fork and Bubbles who both piled into his lap, soon followed by most of the others as he started tickling and growling at the first pair, Noodles explained;

“Our ship is really The Roosevelt. But, those what named her never said which Roosevelt she was named for. You see, back on our planet, there were two great men, Franklin and Theodore Roosevelt. On ship, there’s those of us that say she was named for Teddy, and others who insist it was Frank. So, whenever we hit a new port, we Teddies cause as much trouble as we can pretending to be Franks, and then they do it to us.” The machinist laughed shortly, then added;

“I guess it sounds a little stupid.”

“Whether it is or isn’t, it saved your bacon back there.”

“They got bacon on this planet,” asked Rocky with the mention of his favorite dessert. About to answer, Uvi suddenly went silent as her eyes caught sight of something out of the back of the cab. Squinting to make certain of what she had seen, she turned around to the driver, shouting;

“Triple the meter if you can outrun what’s coming.”

“What you are seeing and I am seeing,” the driver asked, his fingers already implementing a speed shift, “this thing we are seeing, it is coming for you?”

"It's coming for 'us,' darling, and it's probably coming with the idea of shooting first and talking about it later. So unless you were thinking of jumping out at the next corner ..."

"Your meaning is clear, good lady."

Turning around as one, Rocky and Noodles got a gander at what Uvi and the driver had already seen. As the cab blasted forward, nearly doubling its speed, Noodles offered;

"Make that quadruple--I've got money, too."

"Me, three--and I want to live to spend it," added Rocky. "By the blessed blue suede shoes of the King, what's goin' on around here?" Looking down at their charges, Noodles mused;

"Must be one damn good soup they were going to make." Rocky glared at his partner, who shrugged his shoulders, protesting;

"What? I'm just saying ..."

Further talk was obscured as the first of the Antagonizers let loose a shot which tore large sections of street up behind their cab. The ships were a matched pair of Danierian design, a fact not lost on anyone in the cab. After a few more shots were fired, each barely missing their vehicle, the driver said;

"Luckily these are some very bad shots, yes?" Shaking her head, Uvi replied;

"No such luck--they're herding us."

Rocky and Noodles looked at each other grimly. Both the machinist and the gunnery officer knew she was correct. Rolling up the crushed silk sleeve of his blouse until the tattoo of an anchor on his upper arm showed, Rocky said;

"Well, little buddy, I'm thinkin' this is it."

"We all have to go sometime." The pair nodded one to another, touched fists, then Rocky shouted to the driver;

“Great ready to slow enough to let us jump out. We’re gonna try and stop those mugs.” Uvi started to protest. The orphans all started to squeal. The driver hit the brakes.

“I didn’t mean for you to come to a complete stop, ya boob!”

“No sir, I am certain you did not,” answered the driver. “But, I am thinking that they did.”

Following the directional path of the cabby’s pointing digit, the swabbies found their path blocked by more firepower than that possessed by many small planets. The Antagonizers rounded the same corner, saw what awaited them, and attempted to break off pursuit. One was vaporized, the other was sent crashing into a billboard advertising the great deals to be had at Lapine’s Luxury Liquors. Poking his head out of his hound disguise, Melon asked;

“Is this where you jump out to save us, Rocky?” Staring forward into the oncoming armada, the gunnery officer asked;

“Noodles, can we improvise some weapons here?”

“What were you thinking,” asked the machinist. “Wet towels? Pictures of their ex-wives?”

And then, the approaching ships came to a halt, the lead cruiser actually dropping to the street. As all in the cab watched, a panel slid open in the side of the personal dreadnought, and a figure in a business suit came out onto the extender reaching for the ground below, one surrounded by more than a score of heavily armed soldiers.

“Kids,” said Noodles. “You go on and make a run for it. We’ll hold them as long as we can.”

“Yeah,” added Rocky sourly. “That should give you two, maybe three seconds.”

“If they’re lucky,” said Noodles with a grin. Smiling back at his partner, Rocky nodded, and then the two reached for the door handles, ready to do their best, when Melon suddenly shouted;

“Daddy!”

* *** *

It was some time later when everything had finally been straightened out. Sitting in the offices which had been given over to representative Brummellig’ic and his staff, Rocky and Noodles, finally back in regulation dress, sat quietly at attention as their captain, Caldo Bippdi, the mayor of the port town, and the representative tried to hash out all the particulars.

“So,” said the captain, hoping to nail the whole thing down, “if I have this correct, you, Mr. Brummellig’ic, slipped on-planet quietly for an inspection, looking for signs of Danierian mischief.” When the big alien nodded, the captain continued, saying;

“But, unknown to you, the Danierians, having discovered your plan, kidnapped your son’s class while on field trip. They were attempting to force you to turn a blind eye to their chicanery, when my boys here caused a diversion that allowed the kids to escape their captors.”

“A diversion?” Mayor Bippdi began turning an array of exotic colors, several which drew appreciative “ahs” and “ohs” from the former orphans. Before he could continue, however, representative Brummellig’ic cut him off with a wave of his hand, saying;

“Yes, captain, you are correct on all counts. And, please, Mayor, all damages will be taken care of by my office.”

Noodles and Rocky smiled at each other upon hearing the representative’s pronouncement. Still sketchy on some of the facts, however, Rocky asked;

“You’ll forgive me, gentlemen, and all, but I was wonderin’, Melon,” he called out to the ringleader sitting on his father’s desk, “why’d you give us that story about orphans and soup and all?”

“An idea of one of my officers,” answered Brummellig’ic. “The children have been taught this cover story. You see, most species in the galaxy would sell their own mothers for a box of mints. We’ve found that whenever someone is lost, if they claim to be running away from us, most anyone who finds them will turn them into whomever they say they’re running away from expecting a reward.”

“Yes, Mr. Vespucci, Mr. Kon; it seems you two have done great things for the human race, intergalactic relations-wise. Wouldn’t you agree, representative?”

“It’s rare we of the inner circle of the Pan-Galactic League of Suns get such an opportunity to measure a race’s true worth,” said Brummellig’ic to the captain. Turning to the gobs, he said, “You two might turn out to be fine examples of humanity, or tremendous exceptions, but you have given the league something to think about.”

There was more chatter back and forth after that, but it was the usual circular palaver of politicians. Finally, even that was cut short as the rest of the high-powered parents of the supposed orphans forced their way into the meeting to reclaim their youngsters, and to shower Rocky and Noodles with praise, well-wishes and gifts. Seeing Uvi waiting in the outer office, Rocky left Noodles to soak up any remaining goodies, hurrying out to the diva.

“So,” he said, a trifle nervous, “they kept you here, too?”

“No, you silly,” she said, her voice still delightfully in full possession of all the gunnery officer’s faculties. “I was waiting for you.” Rocky blinked hard, barely able to believe his ears. Smiling as wide as humanly possible, he answered;

“Oh my, I know I’m just a mutt, and I don’t know how we could, er, I mean, what we’ll have to, ummmm ... I’m just sayin’ I don’t care about nothin’, not so long as I can be with you.”

“Oh,” said Uvi in response, her voice a thing filled with apologetic surprise. “I’m sorry--I get so comfortable in this thing I forget I have it on.”

And, so saying, office Beezle Uvi of Earth Intelligence slipped out of her bio-infiltration suit, revealing all one hundred and fifteen pounds of green eyed, red-headed, well-proportioned loveliness which was the real her. Quickly explaining that she had been placed onworld in preparation for representative Brummellig’ic’s inspection, she explained that she had spotted Melon in Rocky’s care, and had moved in to recover him.

“Everyone was on alert. Normally I would have just stunned you and Noodles, taken the children into protective custody, and you two would have been taken away, but ...”

“Yes,” grinned Rocky, “but what?”

“Well, you do have such nice eyes ...”

And then, the two came even closer together. Eyes closing, they were just about to kiss when suddenly, the door slammed open and a Embrian came in at a run, shouting;

“Mayor, mayor, big trouble! There are human sailors tearing up another tavern. Much fighting, much damage!”

“What ship are these from,” growled the mayor, to which his aide answered;

“The Theodore.”

“Oh well,” sighed the captain. “There goes all that good will.”

Representative Brummellig’ic scowled, but then Melon laughed, and his father laughed back. The other parents went back to hugging their children; Noodles asked the mayor if he had ever thought of using robot police; Uvi and Rocky finally kissed.

And outside, the port sirens shrieked in glorious futility as the boys of the “Theodore” continued their mayhem.

