

**BARKING  
DEATH  
SQUIRRELS**

**Sample - Chapter 1**



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DEATH  
SQUIRRELS**

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R A N D O M



S T A T I C

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This book is dedicated to my girls, Wendy, Tabitha, Jensen, and Samantha. In the long and tortured journey from notion to novel, their support never wavered.



# The Barking Death Squirrels

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It was at that moment that insight struck. As Constance stared at the heap of tools, scrap metal, and garbage piled in the back of the filthy utility tram Stan called a pickup, she realised that human languages continuously evolved because no man or woman, living or dead, had ever managed to find the words to completely capture just how much of an infuriating jackass your boss could be. Even on one of Stan's best, sanest, and least unpleasant days, there was no possible combination of sexual, scatological, and genealogical references available in any language that could possibly express the degree to which he was a chauvinistic pain in the ass.

Constance finally surrendered and asked, "Bring what?"

"The wrench." Stan rolled his eyes as if she were too stupid to see the obvious. "Bring the wrench."

"It's at least a metre and a half long," Constance growled.

"Yes it is. Very good." Stan started to walk away. "Bring it."

"What do you think you need that huge monkey wrench for?"

Stan sighed, turned slowly around to face Constance again, and spoke with exaggerated calm. "Monkey wrench is a slang term for a plumber's cinch wrench. That is a forty-seven-inch adjustable jaw wrench, nothing at all like a cinch wrench, and you don't need to know why I need it, just that I do."

"But we don't need that thing," Constance objected.

"We?" Stan scowled at her. "Since when did you matter enough for me to give a wet fart about what you think we need?"

"Stan." Constance hated the whiny sound in her voice, but sometimes it worked on him.

"Damn it So Crates, this better not be more of your 'my vagina makes me special' bullshit."

"Stan!"

"Shit, Fat Larry's got twice the tits you do and he never bitches about anything this simple."

Constance glowered at Stan, stomped, and made a show of planting her feet on the concrete loading pier. "I am not carrying that thing for you."

"Yes, you are," Stan said, with absolute certainty, crossing his wiry arms and smirking at her. Thin and well short of average height, Stan wasn't that much bigger than Constance, but, somehow, all his angles and edges,

scars and calluses, and his wicked tongue inflated him into something larger than life.

“That wrench must weigh 50 kilos.”

“It masses 48.5 kilos,” Stan said. “It weighs 47.”

“How do you know that?”

“When I bought it, the foundry manifest charged me for 48.5 kilos of steel. You sell steel by standard inertial mass. 48.5 kilos times .97 G means it weighs 47 kilos.” Stan pointed first at himself and then at Constance while saying, “Master, apprentice.”

Constance crossed her arms over her chest, and glared. In her own way, she could be as imposing and larger-than-life as Stan.

“I am not hauling that damn thing around all morning while you wander about retelling the same disgusting jokes to all of your blubbery buddies in the butt-cleavage union.”

“A man with a little cleavage over the back of his belt is a damn sight better than a flat-assed little girl with no prayer of any cleavage whatsoever.”

Colliding with that dreadful limitation on human languages yet again, Constance growled something incomprehensible – but definitely nasty and heartfelt – at Stan.

“I need that wrench,” Stan said with exaggerated tolerance.

“I do not have to haul that thing around for you.”

“You’re right. You. Are. Right. You don’t have to carry it,” Stan said, raising his hands as if surrendering. He turned and started to walk away from Constance. “You can quit any time you want.”

Constance slammed down the tailgate of the utility tram, lifted it, and slammed it down again.

Stan stopped, turned, and smiled at Constance, waiting to catch her eye and make sure she knew that he found her little tantrum to be amusing.

“When it comes to my apprentices I will give whatever job I want to whoever I want.”

“It’s whomever, you Neanderthal,” Constance hissed as she reached into the mess in the back of the pickup and pulled the wrench towards the tailgate. She could barely move it.

“Whatever you say, So Crates.”

“So Crates? Try Sock-Ra-Tees. If you’re going to try to piss me off with a sarcastic nickname, for God’s sake pronounce the damn thing correctly.”

“Whatever, So Crates.”

“Stan...”

“Bring it!” he barked.

“I can’t,” Constance yelled back. She looked at Stan and pleaded with her eyes, begging for some sort of relief from this task. She knew she had

to do whatever he asked to have any hope of getting through the apprenticeship and qualifying for her engineering tag, but for her to haul that wrench around was ludicrous. "It weighs more than I do."

"No it doesn't." Stan turned and looked through the chain link fence into a yard full of construction materials. "You weigh 47.858 kilos."

"You weighed me? Out to the gram?"

Stan shrugged. "Somebody had to settle the bets."

Constance knew better than to rise to that bait. She had no doubt that if she asked, Stan would tell her everything about all of the other bets. She also had no doubt that she didn't want to know what other kinds of bets Stan and his shop full of knuckle-dragging apprentices had made about her, and she really did not want to know what kinds of indignities she hadn't realised she'd been subjected to in the settlement of those bets.

"Of course, weighing you was easy." Stan tossed another lure out at her. "The only real challenge was sorting your weight from the panties, clothes, and jewellery and such."

Constance shifted tack and tried reasoning with the crusty old bastard. "Stan, there is no way I can carry this thing."

"The whole idea behind an apprenticeship is for you to develop the skills necessary to be a master of the trade, correct? Of course I'm correct. Don't be ridiculous, Stan. You're the master, how could you not be correct? One of the skills engineers use every day is reasoning and problem solving. Here is an unexpected problem, a challenge. Find a solution. Amazing how these opportunities present themselves, isn't it?"

With each word, Stan backed further and further away.

"Stan..."

"Oh, pull your hands out of your panties and quit your damn whining." Stan turned and walked down into the raw cut through the stone that would someday become the main tunnel to the new cluster of caverns.

Constance slid the wrench out of the battered utility tram and let the 48.5 kilograms of steel fall to the concrete loading pier, savouring the resounding clang. To hell with Stan's "your tools are your life" bullshit.

Fortunately, not quite all of the crap in Stan's pickup was rubbish. Constance had no hope of carrying the wrench, but with a short piece of rope tied to the back of a high-work safety harness, she could drag it around. Sort of like a mule pulling a plough. She didn't dare let any part of the precious wrench drag on the ground – Stan would shit his liver if he saw that – but a bit of wire and an improvised plastic skid block solved that problem.

It took her 20 minutes to catch up with Stan.

"You are a bastard, Stan," Constance hissed between deep huffing breaths. Her legs burned and she was slippery with sweat.

“And you’re a bastard’s apprentice, So Crates,” Stan said to her through the steam of his coffee. No one around them dared laugh, but there was a smirk on every grimy face within earshot.

“Let’s go.” Stan flipped his wrist and his coffee hit the ground under the edge of the trailer. A large stain was growing there from Stan’s daily purging of his coffee. Stan rarely drank more than a sip or two from any of the 347 cups of coffee he made his apprentices fetch on a typical day.

For another hour, Stan wandered around the yards, poking at everything and talking to everyone. Occasionally, for no apparent reason, he would stop, cross his arms, look at something someone was doing and nod approvingly. Stan grabbed sets of plans now and then and flipped them to and fro, looking at the reality they represented and then back at the plans before making comments and asking if one part or another could be done today or this week instead of when it was actually scheduled. Seldom did Stan actually have anything to contribute to the work being done, but he loved meddling and mimicking the trappings of being in charge.

“Stan, what exactly are we doing here?” Constance gasped during one of the few instances when Stan was stationary but not talking to someone.

“Just a little pre-emptive supply chain management.” Stan was distracted. He was thinking something through.

“Isn’t this supposed to be our day off?” Constance asked. “We’ll be back here again tomorrow morning, at least two hours before we’re actually scheduled to start work.”

“Last night after you ran off to the Knob to play crotch tickle with your little flock of wine and cheese sluts, a ship popped into the system, heavily damaged and headed straight here.” Stan frowned at a section of pre-fabbed steel stairs, glaring at it like it was a misbehaving child. “As soon as that thing starts sending parts orders ahead, every fab shop on this frozen pissball will forget we exist.”

“So we’re here to pester them?” Constance was having trouble putting the pieces together.

“Most of the pre-fabbed items for the new caverns come through these yards. So we’re here to let them know what we have to get out of here right now and what can wait. Pretty simple.”

“That makes sense,” Constance said, a bit surprised when she realised that it did. “Get the critical things on today’s schedule so we can keep working while they build for the ship.”

“A lot of our contractors will still probably have some down days when that gap in supply catches up with us,” Stan said. “But burning a day off now will save us weeks of overtime later.”

“I can live with that.”

“Glad to hear it,” Stan said caustically.

Stan led his petite little mule through another access tunnel and to the worksite in what would become the next residential cavern.

Modelled on a classical European town square, the cavern was halfway through its transformation from a barren bubble in the stone into a small neighbourhood of shops, apartments, and businesses, and it had reached that magical point where the exposed structure contrasted almost poetically with the finished parts. The three and four story façades of tumbled brick were complete, but behind the glassless windows, you could still see steel studs and stacks of building materials instead of furniture and all the other random artefacts of life. The broad walkways, the courtyard, and the water feature that ran through the park were little more than impressionistic art hewn out of raw concrete, but most of the big trees were showing the first signs of recovering from transplanting, and that helped make it feel like a real place.

The café helped too. With bare concrete for walls and a ceiling cluttered with exposed pipes, power conduits, and ventilation ducts, it looked more like a utility and mechanical room than a café, but there was something about the way it served the swarm of workers that buzzed around the site, something about the functionality of it all, something about the way that the battered, mismatched sprawl of tables and chairs spilled out the front and into what would become the street that added an indefinable comfort. It was more than just a hint of the life that would soon fill the dusty, sterile cavern. In an odd way, it made the cavern feel more real.

“Hey, Murphy,” Stan said as they walked up to the unremarkable man who had set up a seemingly permanent claim to a table covered with paper of every description and form. The notepads, books, memos, and rolls of blueprints were infected with a dozen different colours of sticky tabs, a plague that probably made some sense to him.

“Hey yourself.” Murphy looked expectantly towards Constance until it became clear that Stan wasn’t going to introduce her.

Stan grunted at Constance and nodded her towards a chair at another table as he sat across from Murphy and asked about some scheduling detail in the latest revision of the cavern plans.

Refusing to sigh with the relief that washed through her, Constance didn’t waste a second before she loosened the harness and shrugged it off her aching shoulders.

That was a mistake.

As the weight of the wrench dropped, Constance felt a slight but sharp tug on the collar of her coveralls and she realised a moment too late that during all the squirming and struggling to drag the wrench around, one

of the buckles from the harness had dug into her shoulder enough to snag an edge under her bra strap. The twist of sweat-soaked coveralls that was caught between the two entangled straps resisted the falling weight of the wrench for a second, but the result was inevitable. The rip started over her left collarbone and shot straight for her navel as the shoulder of her coveralls was yanked down past her elbow.

Her tool belt stopped the rip before it reached her crotch and she managed to grab the cup of her bra before embarrassing crossed the line to indecent, but she had no hope for salvaging anything even remotely resembling dignity; and then she made it worse.

When she dropped down to take the weight of the wrench off the harness, Constance unexpectedly found herself stuck in a stripper pose. She was squatting, leaning back with one leg stretched out awkwardly to the side, and both of her hands were trapped. One was planted firmly on the ground, giving her barely enough leverage to keep her balance, and the other was clamped over her breast, committed to keeping that bit of modesty under the bra where it belonged.

She hesitated for a moment. For some reason she expected someone to help, and if Stan hadn't been there, Murphy probably would have. Murphy was leaning forward, his foot planted like he was about to dart over to assist her, but just as he was about to rise, Stan spat out a cackling, barking snort of laughter, and Murphy froze. He flashed Constance the briefest, slightest hint of a sympathetic grimace as he settled back in his chair, but he knew better than to step between the old bastard and one of his apprentices.

Unable to easily free either hand from its assigned duty, Constance had little choice but to dance as the stripper theme demanded, squirming and twisting, trying to get her feet under her enough so she could lift her hand off the ground and untangle the knot of bra strap, harness, and torn coveralls.

Stan thought it was hilarious. He clapped a slow but steady rhythm while loudly humming a bump-and-grind tune to accompany her dance.

Eventually Constance did manage to get everything untangled and escape from the safety harness.

"I don't know why you bother wearing those damn little girl bras anyway." Stan snorted between gasping laughs.

Constance knew what was coming, or at least she thought she did. She thought she had catalogued every possible way that Stan could make crass observations about her figure, or lack thereof, but in that worst of moments, the jackass had to go and pull out something new.

"An engineering apprentice is supposed to know enough about design to realise when structural support just isn't needed."

Structural engineering opened up a whole new world of abusive comments for the jackass to exploit.

"Ten says the knickers match the bra," Murphy said.

Constance almost snapped at Murphy, but she looked up just in time to catch the wink he tossed at her, It was far more playful than mean.

"No bet." Stan stood and wiped the hint of tears from the corners of his eyes. "A haughty, whining little princess with a rich daddy... the panties will always match the bra."

Constance didn't even bother to scowl.

"Is the door on Jimmy's crapper still busted?" Stan asked Murphy.

"Yep." Murphy answered Stan, but his eyes, swimming with a mixture of playfulness and sympathy, didn't leave Constance. "You have to prop something heavy up against it or it swings open on you."

"That's why I brought this wrench." Stan's smile bordered on the obscene as he grabbed the cord she had been using to pull the wrench around. "Woman. Fetch me some coffee."

Pulling the sleeve of her coverall back up onto her shoulder, Constance held the rip closed with one hand as she stood, took several deep breaths, and tried to imagine she still had some hint of dignity left in some forgotten and dusty corner of her soul.

"I said coffee, So Crates," Stan grumped at her before disappearing into the toilet with his precious wrench.

Sighing, Constance walked up to the counter to fetch the jackass his coffee, wondering if the combination of Stan's morning constitutional and his meeting with Murphy would give her enough time to drink something of her own. She knew the answer was probably no. If Stan saw her with a cup of something he would rush the meeting or find some reason to cut it short.

Jimmy, a man so enormous he challenged the physical laws regulating mass and volume, took six rocking steps to turn his mountain of flesh around as she entered.

"Well I'll be dipped in shit." Jimmy shook his head and frowned at Constance's chest.

"What?" Constance snarled, glancing down and adjusting her hold on the front of her coveralls.

"Never would'a thought Stan'd actually apprentice a girl. I mean Fat Larry kept say'n stuff about a girl, but whose gonna believe him about nothin'."

"Jimmy, I'm in here damn near every day."

Jimmy made a vague gesture at her, somehow conveying a thousand little details about the boyishness that had haunted Constance since the day she realised that puberty was going leave her deeply disappointed.

“Quit thinking with your ovaries, little girl.” Constance imitated Stan’s snarl. “Woman, go breed me a real engineer. Woman, fetch me lunch. Woman, fetch me coffee.”

Jimmy shrugged, sending a ripple down through his mountain of flesh. “He calls all his scrawny and prissy apprentices girls.”

“Jimmy, Stan called me his apprentice vagina for so long that half the engineering crews in the warren think my given name actually is Vagina.”

Jimmy shrugged again and nodded at the bra she was unsuccessfully trying to hide. “Words is words. Proof is proof.”

Turning from the counter with a huff, Constance pulled off her tool belt and flipped it onto a table with a well-practised snap of her wrist. As it flopped open, she thought about Stan’s patronising “it’s all about problem solving” bullshit excuse for torturing her and decided to tackle the problem head on. Thumbing quickly through the survival essentials she kept in the inside pockets – small tools, glues, commonly used connectors, and a scattering of random fasteners – she thought briefly about using the spot welder, but that was a bit too severe and far too blatant. Glue, good old-fashioned cyanoacrylate glue would do. Epoxy was far stronger, a little more flexible, and better at bridging gaps, but the bathroom door opened in and Stan would be pulling on it. He would have no leverage, no way to throw his weight against the glue joint.

Biting the cap off one of the tubes of adhesive, Constance squeezed the whole thing into the gap between the painted steel door and its frame, running a bead for a half-metre above and below the door handle. With a quick spritz of activator, the glue cured instantly. The tensile strength was limited by the adhesion of the paint to the door and its frame, but with all that surface area, it should be more than enough to cage the beast. She would now have plenty of time for a nice, relaxed, and quiet cup of tea.

Repacking her belt, Constance turned back to Jimmy’s counter only to see Murphy standing there with a trio of steaming cups.

“You knew I wanted tea.” Constance took the awkward third cup from Murphy and walked with him back out to the table he had claimed.

“I saw the way you looked at the tea selection at the counter.” Murphy shrugged as he sat.

“So you are admitting you’re a voyeur,” she teased.

“It’s a very pretty bra.” Murphy smiled.

Constance had given up trying to hold her coveralls together, but Murphy hadn’t looked down at her chest, not even a peek at the bra in question. Still, looking into his eyes she could sense it was just a demonstration of self-restraint. He wanted to look.

Constance smiled back at Murphy.

“How did you know I would like this tea?” Constance asked. “There were a couple dozen different kinds there.”

“Honestly?” Murphy asked, hesitant.

Constance nodded.

“Your bra told me,” he said with absolute sincerity.

“Of course, my magical talking bra.” Constance frowned at him and sighed, wondering if there was any male thought that did not pass through the testicles before it stumbled out of the mouth.

“Silk,” Murphy said. “Real silk and no seams in the cup.”

Constance raised an eyebrow.

“Silk doesn’t stretch.” Murphy had her attention and he knew it. “Even when your bra was all tangled up in the harness and you were grabbing at it and the wrench was pulling it down, the material didn’t stretch. Synthetics stretch, especially when the material is that thin, so I knew it was silk.”

Constance methodically measured and stirred a spoonful of sugar into her tea, refusing to cross her arms over her chest, refusing to give in to the sudden surge of self-consciousness triggered by the way Murphy had stumbled over mentioning how thin the material of her bra was.

“Silk in and of itself is something precious.” Murphy was still looking her in the eye. “It’s is one of the more common things that people take with them when they jump into the walls of a ship, but it still isn’t cheap and it’s damn difficult to get. But the seamless cup, a cup that fits perfectly, that was the real clue.”

Constance raised an eyebrow.

“Bra cups are wonderfully three-dimensional,” Murphy said. “Cloth is flat, and since silk doesn’t stretch, the only way you can get a seamless silk bra cup is to weave the material over a three-dimensional form that matches the shape you want. Out here, in a small, isolated warren, that’s the sort of thing that you simply cannot buy in a shop.”

“What might that have to do with tea?” Constance asked.

“Luxury,” Murphy said. “A silk bra with a custom woven and fitted cup. The fact that you wear something like that under coveralls tells me that you appreciate little touches of comfort and take whatever little bits of luxury you can find. Tea, real tea, has never adapted well to agricultural tunnels or orbiting bubbles, so it’s hard to grow and it’s a luxury. Herbal, mint, and fruit teas that aren’t really tea aren’t luxuries, so your choice has to be a real tea and that blend there is the best available in the warren.”

Constance held her cup up in a mock toast. Murphy chuckled and then replied in kind, reaching across the table to clink his cup against hers. The moment the two cups touched, however, Murphy’s shattered, dumping coffee all over his papers.

“Shit.” Murphy sounded more resigned and disappointed than angry. He didn’t even seem surprised. Yanking the tablecloth off the neighbouring table, he used it to first contain and then clean up the spill.

Something about Murphy’s logical, analytical assessment of her bra, the way he had every detail of the garment imprinted in his memory combined with the conscious effort he was making to... to what? Respect her modesty? Not much of that to be salvaged at the moment. Something about all of that stirred pleasantly inside of Constance. She both loved and hated, mostly hated, men thinking of her like that, but on those rare moments when it was on her terms... her mind was racing to nowhere. How much willpower did Murphy have?

It was between morning coffee and lunch. There were plenty of people working around the cavern, but they were all busy. She and Murphy were the only two anywhere near the café.

Constance unzipped the remnants of her coveralls and slipped her other shoulder out. Nothing exciting about seeing the other half of a bra, but he might take her abandonment of that bit of coverage as an invitation to look.

No.

“You know a hell of a lot about women’s underwear.” Constance stood, took her tool belt back off, and flipped it open on the table so she could get at the assortment of glues in the inside pockets.

“Not really,” Murphy reacted. He blinked, and Constance could see thoughts dancing behind curious, intrigued, tempted grey eyes, eyes in a strong-featured face that didn’t seem nearly as unremarkable as she had first thought, but he still didn’t glance below her chin. Clearing his throat he said, “Just a few details still rattling around from a very expensive present bought for a woman who didn’t deserve it.”

Constance leaned over the table as she selected some tubes from her assortment of epoxies.

Murphy was still holding out, although, to be fair, Constance knew that she didn’t have the right kind of womanly assets to make the leaning over the table pose a real challenge for him.

“That’s also how I knew your knickers would match.” Murphy smirked, playfully, nothing at all like the way Stan’s smirks made Constance fantasise about antiseptics. “The price of the matching knickers is nothing in comparison to the cost of the bra.”

Murphy was right. Constance’s panties matched the bra right down to the fancy little squiggles in the stitching. In fact, for each of her good bras, she had bought a set of three matching panties, one comfortable, one sexy, and one downright naughty, but she wasn’t about to admit that.

“The bra can’t match what I’m not wearing.” Constance smirked back at Murphy as she sat back down.

That got him. Every man she had ever dated, befriended, talked to, met, or walked past on the street was a sucker for the idea of a woman who preemptively abandoned that last thin line of defence. Murphy blinked once, then his eyes dropped and his attention lingered for a long second on a pink silk bra that was too sheer to hide any detail.

Murphy cleared his throat, forcing himself to turn his head away and look out over the relatively quiet and empty courtyard. “This cavern is amazing.”

“It’s not a bad design for such a tough space.” Constance set to work on her torn coveralls. “The floor of this cavern has too much of a slope and the whole thing is too narrow and too long for anything really interesting, but running Ag Cavern 23’s water supply through it to create the stream will make it really nice.”

Constance ran a thin bead of epoxy resin on one side of the rip and a matching bead of hardener on the back of the cloth on the other side. Overlapping the two, she rubbed them together enough to mix the two parts of the adhesive and clamped them together with her hands. There was a surge of heat from the chemical magic of the fast-set catalyst in the hardener, but it didn’t quite get hot enough to burn, and after 90 seconds the bond was strong enough for her to start work on the next section.

“I mean the whole feel of this place,” Murphy said. “I’ve been in and out of this cavern since we finished melting the ice out, and all of a sudden, I get here today and it feels like a real place instead of just another hole in the rock. I just can’t figure what made the difference. It looks exactly the same as a few days ago.”

“It’s the sky.” Constance glanced up just in time to catch Murphy sneaking another peek at her chest. Ducking down slightly to catch the focus of his eyes, she used a nod of her head and a flick of her eyes to direct his attention up to the ceiling. His interest in her chest didn’t bother her, the price to pay for her little game, but Murphy didn’t know that. He blushed and turned a little farther away, physically moving his chair 90 degrees to the right to help him resist the temptation of glancing at her.

“The sky went in months ago,” Murphy said.

“But we just brought the acoustic systems on line yesterday.”

“Acoustics?” Murphy pointedly kept his full attention on the image of clouds and their almost imperceptible movement against the blue sky above his head.

“Real skies don’t reflect sounds,” Constance explained. “No matter how perfect the sky might look, the instant you hear noise bouncing off the ceiling you feel enclosed even if you don’t consciously notice it.”

"I'll be damned," Murphy said.

"The looks are important, perspective, the movement of the apparent source of light from east to west across the sky during the day, keeping the edges and horizons hidden behind building tops to create the illusion of an unseen horizon, all of that is fundamental, but for outdoor spaces like this, the sounds you don't hear are the key."

Constance slipped her arms back into the coveralls and gently zipped them up, careful not to pull her repair apart. In ten minutes the glue would be stronger than the cloth, but epoxy needed time to cure. "It's safe now."

Murphy turned his chair back to face the table.

"Better?" she asked, looking down at the ugly but effective repair.

Murphy looked at her chest and said, with mock sadness, "Technically it's more appropriate, maybe, but certainly not better."

Constance pulled the zipper down far enough to expose the lace between the cups of her bra. "Better?"

Murphy chuckled.

"It's pretty mundane technology," Constance said.

"The bra?"

"The ceiling panels," Constance corrected him, smiling. "The light cells that make up the ceiling array are usually placed on a two-centimetre grid, but the light cells themselves are only a few millimetres across. Replace the passive refracting material you usually put between the lights with piezo-electric tubes that act as both sensors and acoustical drivers and you have the workings of an active acoustic dampening system."

Murphy watched her, actually listening to her, his eyes curious enough to push her into more detail.

"The leading edge of the tube senses the oscillations in air pressure, and the body of the tube is squeezed to generate an inverse pulse that completely cancels out the sound by the time the sound wave would have exited the tube," she explained. "That leaves no sound coming out the other end to reflect off the rock behind the panel."

"It may be mundane technology, but the effect is remarkable," Murphy said. "Stan came up with using it like that?"

Constance nodded.

"I've been through a lot of warrens on a lot of systems and the outdoor spaces here are something else. The bastard's a genius."

"You don't really think I'd put up with all of Stan's chauvinistic bullshit if he wasn't, do you?" Constance asked.

Murphy looked at her, intently, studying her for several seconds before he said, "No. You wouldn't."

"I've been working on taking it a step further," Constance said. "I want

to program the arrays to generate and project sounds out into this space. I want to add some rustling of leaves, the subsonics of a soft breeze; little, natural feeling sounds. Can you imagine how this place would feel at night with the faint sound of ocean waves in the distance? Something to make us all feel skyborn?"

"At the very least, the projected sounds would give you some cover for whatever imperfections there might be in the dampening." Murphy had caught the idea perfectly. "But programming an array of billions of sound generating elements sounds like a nightmare."

"Not really." Constance paused for a sip from her cup of tea before explaining. The tea had cooled just a bit too much already. "The array is old, mundane technology, after all, and there's plenty of old programming floating around that can be adapted. Medical sonic arrays are essentially the same thing."

"But those are just for sensing—"

"Kidney stones," Constance interrupted his objection. "The medical sonic arrays were originally developed to project focused sounds, to use ultrasonic bursts to break up kidney and gallstones."

Murphy gave her a puzzled, inquisitive look.

"The original tech was actually an interesting combination of sensing and projection. Wrap an array of ultrasonic sensors and drivers around a patient's body and send a pulse into it to reflect off the kidney stone. Each element in the array senses a tiny piece of the reflection off the stone. That tiny bit of sound has been distorted by the organs, bones and such that the sound travelled through, but those distortions actually represent a record of the path the sound followed. So, if you send back the exact inverse of the sound that was reflected off the stone, amplified a few thousand times, those sonic pulses follow the exact same path back and all the distortions are reversed on the way. The sound pulses converge on the surface of the kidney stone simultaneously, and bam, the stone is crushed to powder. You don't even have to calculate the timing for the different elements in the array, just invert the timing in the reception of that reflected pulse. Take that same idea and play the recording of a birdsong in a tree, record it with the array, and with a little bit of waveform manipulation you can project that sound back into the tree. Add some refinements that allow you to go beyond sensing and returning reflections and it should be possible to adapt an array like this to project just about any sound you want."

Constance noticed the enthusiasm in her voice and suddenly recognised her monologue of technical babble for what it was. Coughing, she took a quick sip of her tea and finished softly, almost meekly. "In theory you can make it feel like the sound originated anywhere you want."

“Imagine in a theatre.” Murphy smiled, forgiving her excess enthusiasm.

Constance smiled back and nodded. She had never thought of a theatre or any other entertainment applications.

For several minutes they sat quietly, comfortably.

Murphy eventually said, “I am going to have to go free the beast. We do have some things to get done.” Standing, he added, “Is there anything special I need for that glue of yours? Magic words? Sacrifice a chicken?”

“Cyanoacrylate, high tensile strength but brittle,” Constance said. “Give the bottom of the door a good kick. The shock and the leverage against the glue joint should pop it loose and leave no obvious evidence.”

“You could prove it was God’s own handiwork and Stan would still be pissed at you,” Murphy said. “You want me to send you running off to some emergency repair before...”

Constance shook her head no.

“You’ll be sitting in the line of fire.”

She shook her head again, firmly. Without constant ventilation, the acidic fury that oozed from Stan’s withered remnant of a soul fermented, bred, and multiplied exponentially. It would just be so much worse later.

As Constance watched Murphy walk into the café to free the prisoner, her mind zipped, danced, and raced. She sifted through the recollection of their tea and stashed away details from those few stolen minutes, trying to capture the ethereal bits that made it an experience instead of an event. Details, the looks, the connections with feelings, the things unsaid, the light in his eyes, she wallowed in her recollection of it all.

As she drifted almost dreamily through her memories, savouring them, she tripped over a detail, and an unwanted realisation brought her crashing back to the reality of an abused apprentice.

Murphy hadn’t asked her name.

The experience evaporated. All those precious minutiae darted out of her grasp. All of the things she had pushed from her mind stamped their way back to conquer all the strategic high ground in her head. The flirting, the teasing, the game of darts thrown at the deepest animal in each other’s being, it all lost its magic when pulled out of the shadow of the future. Even if there was no real intent, the hint that he fancied that possibility of what could be, that was what powered the underlying fantasy. Murphy didn’t even know her name, and by not asking he had shown, in no uncertain terms, that he had no interest in anything beyond the end of their stolen minutes over tea. Constance was just an embarrassed apprentice flashing him a few tempting details under a

pink silk bra. The conversation was probably little more than an act of charity.

Pulling the zipper of her coveralls up to her chin, Constance braced herself for a miserable afternoon.

Constance had committed two mortal sins. The first was trying to leave Stan and his pack of cackling, primeval, knuckle-dragging apprentices behind for an evening. It was the first time in weeks that she had escaped their domain early enough to actually see an evening with a day off to follow, probably the only true day off she would see that month, and she wanted an actual day off. She wanted a day away. She wanted a few hours to try to remember the concept of a normal, human life. She had left her com, her reader, her pager, her emergency pager, and every other communication device she owned sitting on the counter of her tiny kitchenette. She had even gone to the extreme of picking up a semi-illicit anonymous credit chip to make sure there was no way the jackass could track her down through the beer she bought. She had done everything possible to find a way to keep him from intruding on her evening. All that effort to hide from Stan was an unforgivable stain on her cosmological permanent record. She knew this because the disembodied voice that occasionally found her ear – the voice claiming to be God – told her so, quite insistently.

Constance sipped at her stale beer and thought about just going home. If it weren't for the fact that it would have looked like she was surrendering to the latest demands of the voice, Constance would have left the park, she would have left the lame and dying excuse for a party an hour earlier. She doubted if anyone except Johnny would notice her departure, and it was debatable how long he might care; probably just until he found another skirt to warm his hands under, not that that would take long. Johnny was busy ignoring Constance, regaling the busty redhead on his right with bold tales full of excruciating details from his management apprenticeship.

Constance sighed. At least Johnny wasn't trying to trade up to Sarah. He was watching her, completely and utterly failing in his attempt to be sly or subtle in the way he lusted after her voluptuous curves, but at least he hadn't pursued the hints that she might entertain his attentions. In fact, he seemed to find her long distance hints at flirtation almost annoying. Constance suspected that his reaction to Sarah had more to do with his recent history than with any kind of consideration for Constance. If Johnny had spent any time at all sharing the company of Sarah and her friends, it was almost certain that the princess of the Knob had at one time or another taunted, tormented, and tortured the gawky and brash

young man. Still, no matter the reason, Johnny's reaction to Sarah was a bit of consolation for a night that had devolved into the realms of the barely tolerable.

"Ah, would the gentle woman care to select from our fine assortment of very special vegetables?" asked Dale, an acquaintance who used to be one of her closest friends. "We have blue radishes, little bitty red carrots, pink chives, and a few sprigs left of the ever popular glowing basil."

"Those are growing in dirt." Constance grimaced, extremely wary of anything Dale would offer at a party and downright frightened of the comic-book-coloured vegetables. "I didn't know you knew how to grow anything in real dirt."

"These would probably grow better in the tanks, especially if we could get them up to one of the bubbles and get them a little bit of real sun, but we certainly wouldn't want one of Nan's idiot harvesting machines sending these babies off to some salad bar on the Knob."

Sarah danced up behind Dale, reached around to grab his crotch with one hand and rubbed his shaven head with the other. She grinned wickedly at over his shoulder, taunting Constance with her familiarity with Dale. "Don't eat the radishes. Don't ever eat one of Dale's radishes."

Constance swallowed the anger rising up through her and gave Dale a half-hearted smile of maternal disapproval. "I take it there's more to these things than just the garish colours."

"Plant genes are a wonderful thing," Dale said. "Anybody can increase crop yields a bit, but these are a work of art. Try one of the chives. I made them especially for Sarah, but I think there are enough to go around."

"Just for me, huh?" Sarah reached in under Dale's arm and yanked a couple of florescent pink chives out of the tray. "Are these better than the snow peas?"

"Oh, I think so." Dale laughed and lifted the seed tray full of little vegetable plants a little closer to Constance as if to coax her, but Constance shook her head politely and held up her half-empty bottle of beer as explanation. She didn't need Sarah's warning or the nagging voice of God in her ear to make that call. There was a little too much mischief and far too much pride in Dale's smile. Besides, a few years earlier, Constance would have been the one warning Sarah about Dale's veggies. Sarah ate the chives, hardly bothering to rub the dirt off them first. She stood there for a few minutes, as if waiting for the world to come tumbling down around her, shrugged, and reached out for more. Dale pulled the tray away.

"Good things come to those who wait." Dale shook a finger at Sarah.

"But good kids share," she whined.

"Okay." Dale took the chives off of his serving tray and handed the rest

of the gaudy vegetables to Sarah. “But no more chives for a while. They’re new and I don’t know how strong they are.”

Sarah stuck her tongue out at Dale, grabbed the tray, and sauntered over to the rest of the gang where she played Santa Claus, handing out Dale’s treats to the good little girls and boys. However, the things she counted as good reflected the value she placed upon certain kinds of bad, and none of it bore any resemblance to any rendition of St. Nick that Constance had ever heard of.

Constance slid a few centimetres to her left, gaining just enough separation from Johnny to get a cold shift of air across her hip and thigh, but the space didn’t last long. Johnny was nothing if not persistent. She had fought the fight for a while, but she had been forced to concede territory to get an armistice. She had surrendered the hemline of her little black dress, but she still held the critical border along the top of her panties. Fortunately, she had decided against wearing the seriously naughty pair that went with that bra. The reasonably sexy ones were low cut enough to tempt, but far from scandalous, and Johnny’s hand under the back of her dress had – so far – respected the boundary along that top edge. In fact, Johnny seemed to like the border. He kept running his fingers gently along the edge of the lace. That felt kind of nice. Too bad. Constance knew the truce wouldn’t last. She had suffered through far too many history lectures not to know that appeasement never satisfied the conqueror.

Dale sat on the other side of Constance, giving the short lace sleeve of her black silk dress a playful tug as he settled down to sit on the concrete retaining wall. Constance slapped his hand away a little too hard to be playful, then laid her head on his shoulder in lieu of an apology.

“Serious wrapper,” Dale whispered to her. “Out looking for something tonight?”

Constance remembered Dale’s shoulder as comfortable. She remembered all the times when it had been the only cure for a teenage girl’s world gone to shit, and she couldn’t count the number of times that the torments of Stan and his apprentices had driven her to the point where she could think of nothing but finding that warm, firm, muscular pillow, but he didn’t seem to fit her any more. Leaning her cheek against his shoulder bent her neck at an awkward, uncomfortable angle, and his shoulder was far harder than she remembered. It felt like stone against the side of her face. Even the slightly musky smell of the man – a scent that had always sent an intoxicatingly warm swirl of memories through her – somehow had changed during the absence imposed by the overwhelming demands of her apprenticeship. It was still just the slightest hint of a man’s scent, but somehow it was unpleasant, sharper, almost biting.

"I know what Johnny wants." She leaned her head a little further onto Dale's shoulder and matched his whisper. "It seems like he's all hands, but maybe I'm just getting old. I used to like that game."

"I think he just wants the wrapper." Dale was still whispering even though Johnny was completely oblivious to anything but the girl he was trying to trade up to. "Sarah says that he usually chases the silk panty girls over in the Knob."

Constance knew that once upon a time Dale would have included her in that reference to the girls from the Knob, and she wondered when he had decided she no longer belonged with them.

"Dale," Sarah shouted from the little footbridge that decorated the park's small pond. Holding the rail for balance, she closed her eyes, shifting her hips slowly back and forth as she bit her lower lip. "Damn you do good work."

Dale grinned and offered Constance another chance at the pink chives. "Okay, we know it works on Sarah. Now if it works on you, then I know it will work on anyone and I'll be fucking rich. Literally."

The voice claiming to be God returned, offering some extremely crude and graphic comments.

Constance shook her head, both shaking the voice of God from her ear and declining Dale's offer.

"Are you sure you don't want to try the chives?" he asked again.

Constance scowled at Dale, but he didn't push the issue or even try to tease her about what he used to refer to as pathological bouts of prudishness. He just smiled and looked a bit disappointed as he wandered away to offer his magic chives to the other girls still milling about the party.

Constance sighed, took another sip of her beer, and thought again about heading home and getting some sleep.

Johnny's fingers stopped their soft scratching along the hem of her panties and Constance prepared herself for his next assault, but instead of another attempt to storm the walls of her intimate defences, his hand shot out from under her dress, nearly taking the back of the skirt off in the process. Looking at her with haunted eyes, he leapt off the short concrete wall they had been sitting on, moving like it was biting his ass. Horrified, he stumbled into and over the redhead on his other side, tripping all over himself in his rush to get away from Constance.

The voice of God found her ear again, laughing, with barking, snorting cackles.

Constance stood up and screamed. The first of Constance's mortal sins was trying to spend an evening with people who used to be friends, but the second was far worse. Her second sin was letting Stan find her work

on monitoring and projecting sounds with the acoustic array in the ceiling panels.

“OK, you win, you crusty old bastard!” Constance shouted upwards as she stomped her way through the remnants of the party. “I’ll go get your damn computer core. Are you happy?”

All of the people within earshot, even the nearly indecent couples wrestling in the grass, even Sarah and the two guys she was warming up, stopped everything to stare at the insane girl shouting at the darkened sky.

“God will be pleased.” The array caught up with Constance’s movements and projected a distorted, tinny version of Stan’s voice to a spot just outside of her right ear.

“As if I would believe that God would call me tiny silk tits,” Constance shouted back, not caring about what anyone around her thought.

“Your little love monkey definitely heard God,” Stan cackled proudly. “Did you see him move?”

“What in the hell did you say to him?” Constance demanded as she stomped her way out of the park and across the cobblestones of the courtyard.

“Enough to get his hands off your ass,” Stan gloated, then added, “permanently.”

“Stan,” Constance growled.

“Just hurry and get me that computer core.” Stan’s tone dropped to dead serious. “No more fucking around.”

“There has got to be a spare downstairs,” Constance shot back.

“Quite likely, but that’s not what I asked you to get, now is it?”

Constance bit back her fury until she was well into the access tunnel and certain she was out of range of the cavern’s array. Then she made a concerted effort to find the impossible combination of words she needed to describe her feelings for Stan. She screamed until her throat hurt, but still found no way to express just how much of a jackass he could be.

Twenty minutes of stomping, and two caverns over, she ducked into a small room full of computers, located the appropriate panel, and pulled out that one computer core that Stan just had to have.

With every single step of her trip to the jackass’s training shop, kilometres worth of trudging through tunnels and caverns to get to the other side of the warren, Constance contemplated the coincidence that the computer core had the perfect heft for smacking Stan upside the head. It even had a handle in the right location for swinging it like a squat, square club. She played the imagined sound over and over in her mind, savouring the hollow “thunk” every time she imagined it hitting his skull.

“Here’s your damn computer core,” Constance shouted when she finally stormed her way into Stan’s lair.

Stan looked up from behind the rat’s nest of miscellaneous parts, wires, and tools that completely covered what everyone assumed was some kind of workbench.

“It’s about goddamn time, woman,” he said.

“You know that the cross-warren trams quit running hours ago,” she shouted. “And you damn well know that I don’t have the kind of money it takes to hire a private one.”

The slight arch of Stan’s eyebrow and a brief glance at the clock were the only indications that he hadn’t intended to make her walk.

Constance was about to shout again, but it suddenly hit her. Something was wrong in the shop, very wrong. None of the apprentices had followed Stan’s lead. Not one of them had had tried to win points with Stan by adding a taunt or nasty comment.

“This is a hell of a time for one of your stupid little games.” Constance glared around the shop, uncertain but unwilling to abandon the fury she had worked up.

Stan kept his apprentices consistently terrified, but the unease that filled the shop was well beyond the norm. She could actually smell the fear, a biting stench of stale onion, fresh sweat, and soured vomit. It cut through the industrial tang of plasma welders, grinders, and machine oil.

“I don’t play games, So Crates,” Stan said, indignantly.

“No, of course not. A man who thinks he can speak for God wouldn’t play games.” Without bothering to sit, Constance pulled up the spare parts inventory on her computer terminal. “There are a half-dozen computer cores exactly like this one sitting downstairs in the storage crib.”

A glance from Karl caught her eye. He was closest thing to a human being to be found in Stan’s pack of baboons, and the warning for her in that glance, the very real fear in his eyes, knocked the last of the fury out of her. “What’s so almighty important about this one that you had to screw up the one civilised evening I’ve had in a month?”

“You think getting pawed by a chimp trying to set up a threesome is civilised?” Stan sneered.

Nervous snickers from around the shop. There were a lot of people there. Just about all the apprentices, and even a few journeymen were present.

“That isn’t for you to care.” Constance was back to shouting. “So there sure as hell better be a good excuse for needing this goddamn core.”

Stan took the core, placed it lovingly in the pile of crap covering his workbench, picked it up, adjusted its location again, then set his cup of coffee on it. “You tell me.”

Constance was ready for that. In his own twisted way, Stan treated absolutely everything as a learning experience or a test for his apprentices, and she knew his ego wouldn't let him stop, no matter what was going on.

"Since you wanted this specific core and not one of the identical spares, I would guess that it isn't the core itself that's important, but what it was doing," she said.

Stan nodded.

"But that is where it really gets confusing," Constance continued. "The maintenance administration computer doesn't do much of anything. It basically serves as a communication and data node for all of the different maintenance systems. It tracks equipment and tools checked out, work orders, maintenance schedules, and all that crap."

"It also serves as the central administration hub for all the environmental subsystems," Stan said.

"So?" Constance snarled.

Stan raised an eyebrow at her and twisted his lip into a sneer.

Constance glared back. "This place was designed with multiple redundancies, and you've worked your apprentices to death for the last twenty years turning that into ridiculous over-redundancies. Every cavern in the warren has its own independently powered environmental system, plus back ups of all key components, and a complete emergency back up of every back up system. The only thing the administrative computer does is keep everything coordinated. It keeps the atmospheric pressure and mix consistent. It keeps the image of the sun shining down at the same angle and from the same direction in all the caverns. It makes all the weather patterns in the clouds match, but even that has a back up system."

Stan pointed at a wall of computers, one of which had an access panel removed and its core pulled out.

"And the back up has a back up. There's a program for manually controlling the environmental units if both the primary and the backup computer cores should somehow simultaneously fail, and even if absolutely every piece of computer equipment in the universe fails, all the damn systems will keep running on standard settings until their power supplies die."

"That they will," Stan said, smiling almost wickedly. "But it's the manual control program for the atmospheric subsystems that's important right now, and the safeties in that system won't let it kick in without all kinds of alarms and hassles unless both of the administrative computers are offline."

"But why would you want it to kick in at all?" Constance was as mentally exhausted as she was physically tired. "Other than the perverse joy you find in driving me nuts and the sick pleasure you get from making all of

your apprentices work through the middle of the night, what's the point? What's going on?"

"Yes, what is going on, Stan?" a familiar voice asked from the main door to the shop.

Constance turned to see Murphy standing wearily in the doorway, his grey eyes blurry and his indistinctly brownish hair a mess.

"Constance," he said, perking up a bit.

"You know my name." Constance smiled, warmly, realising too late the ammunition she had just given Stan.

"Easy compared to figuring out what kind of tea you like." Murphy smiled back as he looked her over, appreciative but not predatory. His eyes paused at the hem of her little black dress, loitered at the slight curve of her hips, and lingered on her breasts for a very long moment. When his eyes dropped back to her hips, Constance knew exactly what he was wondering. Of course, so did Stan, or at least Stan thought he did.

"Yes, the little bitch's panties match. The princess's panties always match her fancy little training bras."

"What's going on, Stan?" Murphy asked again, much more awake and alert than a minute ago.

"Took you long enough to get here," Stan huffed.

"The tram I hired freaked out, took me the wrong way and tried to make me get out in the new cavern on the far edge of the warren, and when I finally managed to convince it to turn around, it broke down and the door wouldn't open." Murphy shrugged as if it were a normal kind of thing. "Now what in the hell is so important that it couldn't wait until after breakfast?"

"Four hours ago they blew right past the last reasonable opportunity to manoeuvre into a parking orbit," Stan said.

It took Murphy a long minute to sort that through his head. "The incoming ship?"

"The first of the incoming ships," Stan corrected him, emphasising the plural. "The second popped in about fifty hours after the first, but further away. They're about two weeks apart. You're supposed to be in charge of knowing all that kind of shit."

"I know there are two goddamn ships coming in." Murphy rolled his eyes at Stan and sighed. "You know that I know there are two ships."

"The second is right now correcting its trajectory to follow the first," Stan said. "The problem is that neither has tried to send an order ahead, and the first hasn't made a manoeuvre to catch a parking orbit."

"Using us for a slingshot towards the Twins?" Murphy asked.

Constance slipped into her seat and started pulling up data, starting with the current location of the Twins. The Twins were the system's

almost identical three-G greenhouse worlds, three solar orbits inward. Their tight orbit around each other created a near perfect jumping off point for the FTL ships of the aliens who ruled the galaxy, and in one way or another, everything the aliens did in the system worked backwards from that point.

“That’s what I was going to ask you.” Stan nodded at a computer display that looked like an unravelling ball of yarn. “It might be nothing. I hope it’s nothing, but their trajectory just isn’t right, and just in case it’s something ugly, I tried to get my team together without causing a panic.”

“How’d you get all this?” Murphy reached past Constance, brushing against her as he erased the public access information that she had grabbed and brought up his detailed orbital data on her monitor.

“You know I always keep snoops running on anything important,” Stan said softly.

“I told you to stay the fuck out of my systems,” Murphy snapped at Stan.

The words struck Constance. They struck every apprentice in the room like a physical blow. Flinging words like that at the jackass should have touched off a screeching clash of arm-flailing alpha primates, but instead of beating his chest, leaping onto a table, and reciprocating Murphy’s challenge for dominance, Stan calmly said, “I didn’t touch your shit.”

Murphy scowled and raised an eyebrow.

“It’s your feed into Mother’s system.” Stan sounded almost pained that his assertion wouldn’t be taken as God’s own truth. “Outside of your system. Fair game.”

“Goddamn technicality,” Murphy huffed, but accepted the explanation, and much to the relief of all the apprentices who would have gotten caught in the crossfire or the aftermath, Murphy’s huff seemed to end the threat of wild-monkey violence.

Constance sat perfectly still in her seat, half stunned, half amazed by what she had just witnessed. In nearly two years as Stan’s apprentice, including the most recent six months in which it seemed like she could never escape the displeasure of the bastard’s company, she had occasionally seen someone snap at Stan, but she had never seen anyone escape unscathed from any kind of confrontation with the man.

“I think it’s something,” Murphy eventually said. “There’s no way that could be a slingshot manoeuvre. The only way it makes sense is if it’s a landing approach, straight in, steep, and right on top of us.” He looked at the screen again, shook his head, checked a few other things, and shook his head again. “There’s no way that approach is anything else.” Murphy looked back at Stan, both of them thinking about something, some bit of shared history they would both rather forget or ignore. “They’re landing that thing right on our doorstep.”

Stan nodded. It was a confirmation of what he already knew.

"When?" Stan asked.

"We're the only thing down here," Murphy said. "And we're under a full G. Why would they want anything to do with us?"

"When?" Stan insisted.

"It depends on how hard they can decelerate on the way down," Murphy said. "But even if they have to tip-toe in at a hair over a single G, they'll land in the crater in a couple hours, three at the most."

Stan nodded again.

"Do we have anything we could call weapons?" Murphy asked.

"Some mining explosives are already in place in the tunnels connecting the industrial cavern to Downtown and the Knob." Stan glanced at a table where terrified apprentices were working on a second batch of makeshift bombs. "And I've taken manual control of the atmospheric systems so we can use that to screw with them a bit, but that isn't much more than playing with the thermostat or maybe putting an irritant in the air."

"No," Murphy said. "I mean outside. A missile or an old shuttle we could fly up into their path or something else we could use to convince them not to land."

"Not a thing," Stan said. "We've got all the shuttles locked down for maintenance so they'll be ready to fly full and fast hauling crap up to the uglies, and like you said, we're under a full G. We never thought there would be a need to try to keep them from coming down here."

"Can we keep them outside?" Murphy asked. "Didn't we set up anything to fend off something like this?"

"We're under a full G." Stan grumped. "But even if we could have imagined that any of the uglies would come down here, there wouldn't be a hell of a lot we could do. You've seen them fighting against each other. You know that we couldn't do shit against them. They're all predators, pure predators, their beings, societies, and technologies are all evolved to hunt and kill."

Murphy pounded a fist on Constance's workbench, causing her and everything on the desk to jump several centimetres up into the air.

"All we have is a few things to annoy them if they come busting in," Stan said.

"Find us something more," Murphy pleaded. "You've got to find us more."

Stan just frowned.

"We're at the bottom of a full G." Murphy was still pleading, but not to Stan. "That's supposed to be enough."

"Apparently not this time," Stan said.

"Even if some of the uglies wanted to subject themselves to the bottom

of this deep of a well, why would any of them give a damn about us?" Murphy asked.

"We build and sell parts to any of the beasties that are willing to trade with us," Stan growled. "All the battle damage we've been seeing. There's probably a decent sized war going on out there. Maybe we helped repair some of the wrong ships. Maybe we sold some parts that didn't fit. Maybe we drove too hard a bargain. Maybe they're just bored and have decided it would be fun to clear the vermin out of this system. It's not like it matters why."

Murphy swore, growling a grumbling curse that slowly escalated into demonstration of his truly impressive command of the dynamics and nuances of profanity. The cold intense fury, the frustration and anger boiling in Murphy was almost as frightening as the thought of one of the galaxy's so called civilised species landing outside their door, and no one, not even Stan, dared to interrupt it. Eventually, it burned itself out.

"Maybe they won't come inside," Murphy suggested, asking Stan to help him find some hope. The plea in Murphy's voice and the tremble in the hand he laid on Constance's shoulder terrified her.

"Then why would they land on our doorstep?" Stan asked. "That's a deep space jump ship. Once it's down here, it's going to be hell for them to get it back up into orbit. They certainly wouldn't bring it down if it was just about parts or spares or volatiles or any of the other things they might want from us, and if they just wanted to be the first of the big uglies to drop down and play on a heavy world, they have the whole surface of this moon for their picnic. They could land anywhere, but they're landing in our crater. The only reason they would land that bastard in our landing crater is to so they can puke troops all over us."

"But why?"

"It doesn't goddamn matter why," Stan shouted, knocking Murphy into silence. "Troops on the ground... this warren is the only thing here that they could want."

"We need to tell Mother," Murphy eventually said.

"Grandma Love Muffin would just dance out to the loading bay and try to hug the peace into them," Stan snorted. "Of course, once they ate that crazy old bitch, they might think twice before thinking of the rest of us like livestock. She'd be such a stringy, gamy--"

"She's the warren commander," Murphy interrupted. "We have to tell her."

"If you insist. You're her warren manager." Stan initiated the call and handed his com to Murphy.

A few minutes later claxons sounded, jumping randomly from one kind of alert to another. Chemical, fire, radiation, atmosphere breach – there

was no signal set aside for invasion by man-eating monsters.

“Mother’s setting off the alarms,” Stan said unnecessarily, almost chatty. He was scared.

A few minutes later, the voice of Mother, the base commander, the queen of the base, began explaining the situation and ordering an evacuation of the caverns near the main entrance. She took over every means of communication and her voice drifted into every corner of the warren, a soft, low, mystical whisper.

Constance tried not to notice the terror that permeated the room, she tried to shut it all out, she tried to just think of something else. She tried to concentrate on finding something magical in the Byzantine bowels of the computer, but she couldn’t focus on anything. The terror assaulted her every sense and it overwhelmed her, stretching every minute out to an eternity.

It wasn’t until some several hours later, when the not quite inaudible subsonic whoomp of a distant explosion cut in under the noise of the shop, that Constance managed to shake the paralysing grip of the terror. She punched up a couple of video feeds from the outer hangar. The hangar was empty. There were papers and sheets of plastic flying about, stirred up by the air that had rushed out through the service tunnel that connected it to the adjacent loading bay, but they were already starting to settle out. The emergency air dam had deployed exactly as it was supposed to, sealing off the end of the tunnel and keeping the hangar pressurised. There was no one in the hangar, but as someone who spent a lot of her time working out there, Constance found it reassuring to see the emergency system work and work properly. Distracted by how inappropriate that sense of reassurance felt in the circumstances, she didn’t realise that she had instinctively sent the administrative command to close the thick metal doors at either end of the service tunnel until she went to put it in Stan’s activity log.

The cameras out in the landing crater confirmed that the hangar was secure. All of the doors were closed and undamaged, and for a moment, as she panned the main camera past the fractured veins of stone in the stretch of crater wall that separated the hangar doors from the loading bay, that sense of reassurance seemed to find purchase within her. Then she saw the outer doors of the loading bay. They were torn, wrinkled and peeled back like they were made of nothing more than a sheet of the black metal foil that was the latest fad for wrapping gifts. The rings of metal and adjustable gasketry that formed the seal when the shuttles were backed into the bay were twisted and knotted like perverse abstractions of bows, and one of the tractors that the service crews used to move

the shuttles around the landing pads, bays, and hangars had somehow been tossed up and partially wrapped up in the remains of one of the doors.

Scores of beasts, huge and uglier than she could have imagined, creatures beyond her worst possible nightmares, poured in through the warped and twisted remains of the external door to the loading bay.

Constance switched to the bay's internal cameras, unconsciously flipping through feeds and noting the condition of the loading bay and all of its equipment. Stan had ground those habits into her soul. But the focus of her attention was the horde of aliens.

They were absolutely the ugliest and most inhuman things she had ever seen. Ranging from something close to the size of the utility tram that Stan called a pickup to something a fair bit larger than huge, the invaders looked roughly like a cross between double-ended squids and gnarled old trees. They had three long tentacles growing out of both ends of what looked like a thick tree trunk, but they were not trilaterally symmetric. The tentacles on the two ends of the trunk were offset by a sixth of a rotation and the bases of the tentacles interlocked with the ones from the other side to form a roughly hexagonal body. On the bigger creatures, where the trunks were a good two metres thick and at least three times that long, dozens of small, whip-like tentacles sprouted at random locations along their main bodies.

Constance couldn't cajole her mind into accepting the reality of such bizarre beasts. Intellectually, she knew that there were creatures like this out there. She knew that a menagerie of huge monsters existed; they ruled a fair portion of the galaxy. But to see that reality placed in a familiar setting, a setting that should have been safe under the protection of a full G, a place she had always thought was absolutely secure, that was something that would not settle in her mind.

The beasts moved slowly, awkwardly, struggling under a gravitational pull that was far greater than the one they had evolved to dominate, but even with that handicap it was clear that they were killing machines. They had not strayed all that far from the predatory animal within. Some of them carried devices that looked like they might be weapons, but they held them indifferently, and she could almost feel the way they wanted to pounce physically on a foe.

For a moment their clumsiness and their difficulty moving under a full G gave Constance a hint of hope, but once the creatures found the opportunity to get up and off the floor, they moved with impressive grace. Climbing, swinging, and even leaping through the overhead cranes and gantries of the loading bay, they moved quickly, easily, methodically. In minutes they had secured the open area behind the outer pressure doors,

moving through the vacuum without pressure suits or any apparent air supplies.

"They can take a vacuum," Constance announced, coldly, matter of fact. Her mind was churning but focused. Absorbing every detail she could find, she frantically but methodically searched her computer while watching the monsters on the monitors. She was looking for anything that might help. It was obvious that they preferred to use their tentacles to climb and swing, but even with the extra gravity, they could cross flat surfaces at what looked like a slow jogging pace. The smallest and fastest of the invaders could fold two of their tentacles on one end, rise up on them like legs and run bipedally, using the third tentacle on that end for balance, like a tail. The larger and more gnarled monsters used all three tentacles on both ends to move across flat surfaces, rolling themselves from place to place like self-propelled logs.

"Swatara," Murphy cursed. "Damn it all to hell. It had to be the Douchebags. It couldn't be someone we know how to deal with. Hell, we can hardly manage to barter with the damn things."

"How long do you think they can survive in vacuum?" Constance asked as she thought through a few different ways the monsters might be delayed before they made it through the big airlock and into the industrial cavern.

"Don't know. Won't matter," Stan grumped. "There isn't any real way we can lock any of the airlocks at the back of the loading bay, and even if we could, the Douchebags wouldn't push themselves to anywhere near their limit. They'd just go back to their ship and gas back up."

"There has to be something," Murphy said, determined. "What do we know about the Swatara, other than all that horror story bullshit?"

"They're big and ugly predators." Stan shrugged. "We know about as much about them as we know about most of the big uglies."

Murphy leaned over Constance, rested a hand on her shoulder, and studied her video feeds. He may have donned the persona of a driven but calm and confident commander of men, but he was only trying to play the role expected of the warren manager in a crisis. Constance could feel the tremble in his hand.

The Swatara were quickly through the airlocks and spreading into the huge industrial cavern that served as the entrance to the warren itself. The beasts were cautious and methodical, but they met no resistance. There had been only the smallest handful of people out in those parts of the warren during the middle of the night, security mostly, and they had evacuated long ago. Unfortunately, any reprieve that fleeing offered was likely to be brief. It was a small warren, and there was only so far for the humans to run.

Two tunnels connected the big industrial cavern to the two other original caverns of the warren, Downtown, with its six story buildings and wide parkways, and the Knob, with all its apartments, shops, cafés, and bars. Several tunnels, some of them quite long, fanned out from Downtown and the Knob to connect with the smaller newer caverns. The exact sizes, shapes, and locations of the caverns were defined by the veins of ice and other volatiles that had so far been mined out of the rock, but it all added up to a very small home. It was only a handful of kilometres from the loading bay to the last dead end at the very back of the warren's maze of thirty-six caverns and associated tunnels.

"They're going for Downtown first," Constance announced.

The explosives are at the entrance to the Downtown cavern, right?" Stan asked his apprentices even though he knew the answer. "Just inside the ends of the access tunnels."

"They'll probably use the end of the access tunnel for cover while they check for threats in the cavern," Murphy whispered to Constance as he gave her shoulder the slightest squeeze. "That's when Stan will set off the explosives. You kill the lights in Downtown the minute the explosives go off."

Constance wasn't sure when she had been put in charge of the cavern's array, but it seemed right. Even with a bit less than two years in her apprenticeship, she had already done more work with all aspects of the array than any of the other apprentices in the shop. She pulled up the manual control program for the array as well as the programs for a few of the other utilities. She knew every detail of the system and its controls. Still, she double-checked everything to make absolutely certain she was ready.

An explosion flashed silently across one of her screens. Without a moment's hesitation, Constance sent the command to kill the lights in the array. She cut all the power to Downtown, and for good measure, she sent the volatile gas alarm into the cavern. The volatile gas alarm would make sure anything that could create a spark, including all of the battery-powered emergency lights, stayed switched off. It worked exactly as she intended, plunging the cavern into the kind of absolute darkness that could only be found deep underground.

The darkness had little, if any, effect on the invaders.

Even while the security cameras were switching through imaging modes to find one that produced a decent picture in the smoky darkness of Downtown, it was clear that killing the lights didn't bother the Swatara in the slightest. The explosions at the end of the access tunnel scattered them, injured some, but the darkness didn't bother them. The Swatara used no lights of their own as they rushed in to secure the cavern, yet

they seemed to be moving easily past, over, and around obstacles. They were even flinging themselves across some of the narrower gaps between rooftops.

“Are they using IR?” Murphy asked.

“Not much contrast.” Constance flipped a camera over to IR mode for a second. “Those lampposts, benches, and awnings they’re dancing around are all close to the same background temperature.”

“Must be some kind of built in light amplification,” Stan stated authoritatively.

Without asking, Constance turned off one of the redundant sets of circuit breakers on the cavern’s light array. Then she keyed in a sequence of ridiculous and contradictory commands before she reengaged the circuit breaker.

Despite Stan’s supposedly perfect system of failsafes, she managed to dump a huge power surge into the lighting array, and the resulting flash burned out the light amplification modes in all the security cameras. The flash was probably intense enough to temporarily blind any people who were stupid enough to still be hanging about Downtown, but when Constance flipped the cameras over to IR mode, the faint shadow images of the Swatara were still steadily advancing through the city centre, just as before. The beasts seemed unfazed. There was no evidence that they had even noticed the flash.

Stan stepped up next to Constance, looked at what she’d just done, reached past her and recalled the sequence of commands so he could review exactly how she had done it. Constance expected fury. She had just destroyed an array worth millions. Instead, Stan gave her a grim twitch of his face, perhaps his version of a smile, and said, “Put the tech details of that design flaw in the book, today, before you leave.”

“This is so damn typical.” Murphy gritted his teeth and growled softly, “I finally get a decent job. I finally manage to get my ass down to the bottom of a nice deep well, and it’s the one deep well in the universe that the uglies decide to invade.”

Stan grunted.

“Why the hell are they doing this?” Murphy hissed.

“Does it really matter?” Stan huffed back.

Murphy didn’t answer.

“They’re headed for the Knob,” Constance said, directing Murphy’s attention to a feed from the industrial cavern.

“Have we gotten everyone out of there?” Murphy asked.

The industrial cavern and Downtown didn’t have many people in them in the middle of the night, but the Knob – the oldest, grandest, and biggest of the residential caverns – was almost five square kilometres stuffed full

of apartments and all the people who go with them. A few hours simply couldn't have been enough time to evacuate them all.

Constance pulled up video feeds from the Knob. In addition to all of the people who were probably still asleep or ignoring the warnings, there were at least a couple in every image of every street, and few if any of them seemed to appreciate the threat that loomed just outside the cavern.

"Shit," Murphy said. "Can we delay the Douchebags or make any more time?"

"Don't bother trying," Stan said. "All the tunnels out of the Knob are clear. If they wanted to get out, they could."

"But..."

"Those dipshits had plenty of warning and they've already pissed away four hours," Stan interrupted Murphy's protest. "If they aren't smart enough to already be somewhere else, a few more minutes won't do one goddamn bit of good."

Murphy scowled, but said nothing.

The Swatara began moving into the long cross tunnel that connected the industrial cavern to the Knob. This time, however, the invaders were more cautious. A small team of the smallest monsters ranged ahead, and despite the absence of any obvious sensory organs – the Swatara had absolutely nothing that looked like eyes, ears, noses, whiskers, antenna, or anything that might have served any of those purposes – they had no problem spotting the explosives in that tunnel, and somehow setting them off from a safe distance. Minutes later, the beasts were pouring into the Knob, swarming up onto the buildings and inflicting what appeared to be the first human casualties. Three tough looking guys hanging out on a street corner were dead in the blink of an eye, shredded by a flick of alien tentacles flashing down from the edge of the rooftop.

The Swatara moved and struck unerringly, swiftly. With brutal efficiency they eliminated the laggard humans from their path. At least a dozen people were dead in a minute. The closest anyone came to fighting back was a flinch.

Constance shut off the lights in the Knob, but it did no good. The Swatara moved like ghosts in the darkness.

"Turn the lights back on," Murphy said. "You're only making it harder for the people to see."

"How can they do that?" Constance asked. "How in the hell can those things see anything in the dark? It's not visual, not IR, not ambient light amplification, what's left?"

"Radar?" Murphy shook his head. He didn't know

"Sonar," Stan said softly. "Try sonar."

"The explosions would have blinded sonar, just like the flash would

have blinded eyes," Murphy said. "And sonar wouldn't have worked in the vacuum on the landing bay."

"You have ears and eyes. Dolphins have eyes and sonar," Stan shot back. "Sonar with a bit of IR perception is a hell of a lot more likely than voodoo space magic."

"Look for sonar," Murphy said to Constance. "Use your thing with the ceiling array to see if you can find sonar blips."

Constance dove into her personal software files, but the routines she had kludged together for manipulating the acoustic arrays weren't there. It took her a minute to find them sitting out in the main partition. Stan had moved them. He had left her name on them, and by doing so he had given her official credit for creating them, but he had put them and all their flaws out where everyone in the shop could get to them.

Constance knew that she should be able to find a way to detect sonar. It should be simple. She worked at it a bit, but her mishmash of programming wasn't at all sophisticated. She had a routine that would record audio from a location. She had used that for the initial programming of sounds into an array. And that recording subroutine was connected to a triangulation subroutine that could be linked with the projection subroutine. She had managed to get those bits of software to cooperate enough so Stan could use them to play God. She could even get the routine to follow a source or a receiver if it moved slowly and there wasn't too much background noise, but she had no idea how to find sonar.

"Stick to the ultrasonics," Murphy suggested. "We haven't picked up anything in our range, and subsonics wouldn't give sonar very good resolution."

"Kill the whole location routine," Stan said without any hint of his typical nasty or sarcastic cruelty. "Just use the sensors in the array as a straight microphone."

Constance hesitated, but Murphy gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

"Graph the microphone output and look for short buzzing pulses or steady peaks cutting through the background noise," Murphy said calmly. "Most of the natural forms of sonar we know of are active, and they broadcast pings or some kind of steady signal."

It took Constance some time, but that was because she was looking for a single frequency or a single spike. It wasn't until Murphy thought to compare the feed from the Knob to one from a cavern empty of Swatara that they realised that the fuzz they were seeing in the ultrasonic range consisted of pings spread across a band of frequencies.

"Each of them has a private frequency," Constance concluded.

"Makes sense for a primary sensory organ in a social species," Murphy

said. "Otherwise a crowd would be hell"

"That's probably also why the explosion didn't bother them," Stan said. "You would have to have some kind of very tight pass filter to sort out your own ping in a crowd. If it is a physical filter, most of the noise of an explosion would be shunted aside."

"I could wash that band with noise," Constance offered.

Both Murphy and Stan nodded. The other apprentices were still busy trying to fashion weapons of some sort, but their attention was riveted on the one small woman they usually tortured.

The noise did no good. The Swatara just shifted the bands they were using, probably unconsciously. Constance spread the band to cover, but they just shifted their pings again. She spread the band further, but that reduced the power enough so they could ping over the noise.

"I might be able to overload the acoustic array like I did with the lights," Constance offered. "It would be harder to create a cascade. Those circuit breakers don't use a capacitor delay, but—"

"No," Stan said. "Even if you could get sound out of the overload, it would come out all over the spectrum. Like an explosion, but maybe with peaks related to the harmonics of the piezo-electric tube length. And it would be unfocused. Probably no more power in the key wavelengths than you're getting now."

"Some kind of focused burst," Constance said. "Targeted."

"Your targeting routine is shit," Stan said, sternly but not accusingly. "And against an extremely narrow pass filter, a filter that is shifting dynamically to locations of minimum noise across a very broad band of wavelengths, even if you could get the array to focus a pulse on one of those buggers, how would you know its personal frequency at that particular moment?"

"You have to focus it on an individual and punch a burst through right on the wavelength it's using to ping," Murphy said softly, distracted, distant. "You would have to hit them hard, hard enough to stun or deafen them."

"No chance," Stan said. "They're changing frequency and they're physically moving. That's like hitting a moving target on a moving target using a gun that explodes in your face. Even if you had..."

"Kidney stones," Murphy whispered in Constance's ear as Stan continued to rattle off a nervous monologue of technical chatter.

Murphy's words were a catalyst, crystallising the chaos of ideas, concepts, fears, and random thoughts. The murky soup was suddenly a clear matrix of nodes, facets, and planes of refraction, complex but ordered.

"Pinging, active pinging," Constance said. "They're broadcasting the targeting information we need."

“They’re broadcasting both location and the wavelength that gets in,” Murphy said. “However their damn pass filter works, it has to let the reflections from the ping pass back into their ears. Whatever an individual sends out, it has to also receive.”

“An amplified reflection broadcast from the array will converge on the source,” Constance said. “Just like the kidney stone.”

“Is the software still in there?” Murphy asked.

“Not really,” Constance said. “Yes and no. The array is a distributed system. The difference between active dampening and amplified reflection would just be in the parameters each of the individual cells in the array uses for reacting to the sound wave.”

“Can you do it?” Murphy asked.

“Yes she can,” Stan said.

Both Constance and Murphy turned to look at Stan, stunned by the unhesitant statement of confidence in his most abused apprentice.

“You don’t think I’d put up with a minute of her whining ‘I’ve got a vagina’ bullshit if she wasn’t the best, do you?” Stan scowled at them and waved them back to the computer terminal as he turned and started barking orders at the others. “Karl, get into Murphy’s system. Remote terminal password is ‘powermower’. From there you can get into the barter system and that will connect you with Bruce Billings’ language files. Plunder whatever he has for the Douchebags.”

“What?” Karl said.

“Just get into the Swatara language files,” Stan ordered waiving away Murphy’s glare. “There has to be at least a dictionary in Bruce’s files, in case the business trolls need to negotiate with Douchebag ships needing parts. Marcus, get ready to connect those language files with So Crates’ sound projection routine. If we can get any kind of effect with the array, maybe we can negotiate something to stop them, buy some time, or get them to only eat the people that piss me off or something.”

“Everybody pisses you off,” Constance muttered as she worked frantically. In concept, implementing the idea should have been simple. In practice, it was impossibly complex. It involved far more than changing the sign in an equation in the cancellation routine or something simple like that. Constance also had to consider all the mathematical differences between cancelling the sound wave passing through the array versus creating an amplified and inverse reflected wave.

Murphy finished glaring at Stan and started massaging Constance’s shoulders, more for the benefit of his nervous fingers and churning mind than to relax her.

“That doesn’t look right,” Murphy whispered.

“I know.” Constance tried to sound like she appreciated that he was

trying to help. "It shouldn't be this hard."

"Others have already done this," Murphy said. "Centuries ago. They already solved the problem. You said it was the first thing they did with this kind of array."

The words hit Constance as criticism and, for an instant, she felt like ripping out the left half of Murphy's spleen, but then she realised what he meant.

Constance searched the library files for the original algorithm that had been used in those ancient ultrasonic medical arrays. It was completely different from the dampening routine. It was far, far simpler. Different premise. It didn't care what the waveform was. Each element in the array simply had to record the sound for a set amount of time and then play that recording backwards through the driver. The recording itself captured both the timing and waveform information. When played in reverse, the last element to receive would be first to broadcast, and all of the sounds from the array elements would converge on the source simultaneously. The only difficult part of adapting it to the array was to make sure the entire array began recording and playback at the same instant, but that wouldn't be too hard. Acoustics didn't have to be light-speed perfect.

"Ready," Constance announced a few minutes later.

"Then go," Stan said.

Constance uploaded the new parameters and reset the ceiling array in the Knob. The Swatara had already spread well beyond that cavern, but it was where most of them still were.

"Hey," Murphy said. "You got something."

"Tell me they're falling down dead," she said.

"No," Murphy said. "But they flinched. Can you give it some more?"

"I can pulse it. Hit them every couple seconds or so."

"Go," Murphy said.

The instant Constance turned on the pulses, the Swatara reacted. They all hesitated, uncertain, like people in very dim light.

"Stan, we've got an effect," Murphy said.

Stan came over, stared hard at the images on the screen, and grunted, ignoring Constance but congratulating Murphy with a slap on the shoulder.

"See if you can slow down their spread through the warren with the noise thing while we get this language shit figured out," Stan ordered Constance. "Maybe they'll think twice about going into a cavern full of really irritating noise."

Constance had already finished uploading the same acoustic parameters to the other cavern arrays. With Stan's demand, she was ready to respond instantly.

“Shit,” Murphy said, pointing to her monitor. “Knocked that bugger flat. Look at the Douchebag stagger.”

“It’s the same routine,” Constance said. “In fact the array in that cavern is a lot smaller and less powerful than the one in the Knob.”

“Only a couple dozen of the Swatara in there,” Murphy said. “Less overall energy, but what power there is, is focused on fewer targets – more is hitting each target.”

Murphy squeezed Constance’s shoulders, massaged her muscles a bit. Constance could feel something from him, something silently communicated through the nuances of his touch, first distracted thoughts, hands acting of their own accord, releasing nervous energy as his mind puzzled away, then excitement. Without warning, Murphy pulled her back, leaned around and kissed her, passionately.

“Can you get any more power into the arrays?” Murphy whispered as their lips parted.

“Some.” It took every bit of self control that Constance had to hide how flustered and embarrassed she was. “But it will be beyond the power capacity of the array. I can’t pulse it like that more than a couple times without risking a burnout.”

“And limit the pulse to reflecting sounds in the ultrasonic range that they’ve been using for pings,” Stan added, loudly, glaring at them as if to remind them they were still in a room full of people. “No use wasting power on anything else.”

“Perfect,” Murphy said, almost dancing. “Absolutely perfect. Get it ready.”

Murphy then turned to Karl and Marcus and demanded, “You guys ready with the Swatara language files?”

“Yup,” Marcus said.

“We’re going to want one word – ‘retreat’ – broadcast into the caverns on my command,” Murphy said.

“Uh,” Karl said.

“What?” Stan shouted.

“We don’t have a word for retreat in the Swatara dictionary,” Karl said. “I don’t see anything close.”

“We need Bruce. I told you dumbasses to call Bruce Billings, hours ago.” Stan looked around the shop as if Bruce might be hiding behind a workbench. “Where the fuck is Bruce?”

“The Knob,” Murphy said. “He lives right in the middle of the Knob.”

“Somebody figure out where the fuck Bruce Billings is and get him here,” Stan shouted at the shop, setting off a scramble.

“I need that language crap now,” Murphy snapped at Stan. “We don’t have time to look for Bruce.”

It took Stan a long moment to take that on board.

"Then what do we have?" Stan demanded as he turned to glare at Karl and Marcus.

"Lots of technical crap for ordering parts and stuff for bartering," Karl said. "Lots of words for killing and death, and lots of weird stuff like barking squirrels, pyjamas, and a gourmet list of cheeses. And it's just toddler vocabulary, nouns and verbs. No hint of grammar."

"Barking Squirrels?" Constance whispered to Murphy.

"Slang for humans," Stan snapped at her. Apparently, Constance hadn't whispered as quietly as she thought. "It's supposed to be an insult."

"Barking Squirrels was some crap computer's translation of 'noisy vermin that live in tunnels,'" Murphy whispered quietly enough to avoid Stan's wrath. "If we live through this, look up prairie dogs."

"Really?" Constance whispered back even as her attention was locked on images and data dancing across her computer terminal.

"That's the story I usually hear," Murphy conveyed the idea of a shrug through a light squeeze on her shoulder. "Just an insult for us half-domesticated rodents."

Suddenly, with a sense of energy radiating out of him, Murphy turned to Karl and Marcus and asked, "Is the Swatara term for barking squirrels one or two words?"

Marcus played the Swatara term for barking squirrels, a goat kicked in the testicles followed by a psychotic chicken revving a diesel chainsaw, clearly two separate words.

"Put the term for death between those two noises and use the arrays in Downtown and the Knob to broadcast the words repeatedly," Murphy ordered, a wicked smile on his face.

"But we have no idea what the grammatical—"

"It doesn't matter." Murphy cut off Karl's objection. "One is a noun, the other is a modifier. It may not be proper grammar, but if we put death as a second modifier between the two words it will almost certainly make sense. Get that going. Get 'barking death squirrels' booming into the three big caverns with a big godly voice. Really shake the dust out of the rafters. Then I want you set up to broadcast the terms for 'stop' and 'death,' on my signal, into whatever cavern I say."

"Got it," Marcus said. "Barking death squirrels' going. Give us a second on the other."

Stan said nothing about Murphy seizing the throne of his little fiefdom. The jackass just stood in the centre of the shop with his arms crossed, surveying his domain, ready to jump in if one of his minions should falter. Another hint of some kind of shared history there.

"Will they understand?" Stan sounded frayed, distressed.

“We’re going to teach the ugly fuckers to understand, teach them to fear us,” Murphy said. “We’re going to broadcast ‘stop’ as they approach the next cavern they haven’t touched yet. Then we’re going to zap the living shit out of the first one to go in. Then we broadcast ‘death.’”

“Negative reinforcement,” Constance muttered to herself. “Behaviour modification.”

“Send ‘stop’ to Cavern 7,” Murphy ordered Marcus. Three seconds later he softly said, “Now,” to Constance.

The lone Swatara that had ventured into Cavern 7 dropped like a god had wished its bones away. No hesitation, no falling over, no death knell or last hint of a struggle for life, it just collapsed into a flaccid sack of oozing meat. Fluid leaked from it, a dark, spreading web defined by the crevices between the cobblestones.

“Send ‘death’ to Cavern 7.” Murphy made no effort to hide the fact that he was absolutely stunned. “When the next one goes in send ‘stop’ immediately and give it three seconds before you kill it.”

“You think we killed it?” Constance asked.

“The way that thing dropped...” Murphy let the statement trail off, nodding his head.

“Primary perception and communication centres in almost all advanced animals are intimately connected with the brain,” Stan said, authoritatively. “A burst of ultrasound from that big of an array, concentrated on one small target inside the animal, probably at or near the brain, it would be devastating. The vaporising flesh would explode like a grenade.”

Two more Swatara ventured into Cavern 7, quickly joining the body of the first on the cobblestones. The others gathered at the tunnel entrance began backing away from Cavern 7.

“I think we have them stopped at Cavern 7,” Murphy said to Stan, effectively handing command of the crew back to the jackass.

“Let’s get all the other caverns they haven’t touched yet monitored and protected,” Stan jumped in, relieved to be back in charge. “Murphy, take a look at the vocabulary we have and see what we can do in terms of convincing them to retreat from some of the other caverns. So Crates, turn off your noise thing in the Knob and Downtown. Let’s give them someplace free of the noise to retreat to, see if they take the hint.”

“We won?” Constance asked.

“We bought some time,” Murphy said as he gave Constance’s shoulder one last squeeze. “There is a second ship coming, probably more Douchebags, probably reinforcements. I doubt if it will take these monsters long to figure out what we did and find a way to counter it, but I think we have won few days to figure something out.”

“So Crates,” Stan barked as a wadded up pair of coveralls hit her in the back of her head and landed on her shoulder. “Go put some real clothes over all that fancy goddamn underwear. That ‘somebody please fuck me’ dress you’re almost wearing is distracting my boys.”

Constance pulled the coveralls off her shoulder, furious at how quickly and how enthusiastically Stan leapt back into his role as jackass extraordinaire. Turning, she scowled at Stan, summoning the most withering glare she could summon.

When she was forced to admit that her glare was having no effect, she huffed and gave the coveralls a shake to untangle the legs. Locking Stan’s eyes with hers, she stepped one foot then the other into the coveralls and pulled them up, zipping them just enough so they would rest on her hips. With a couple careful tugs, she freed the bottom of her little black dress from the coveralls and pulled it off over her head. Casually, she tossed the dress on her workstation, a tiny little dribble of black silk puddling on the only neat, clean, and tidy desk in the shop. The slight curves under her black silk bra held every eye in the room, but no one in the shop, not even Stan, said a word as she slipped one arm, then the other into the sleeves of the coveralls and finished zipping them up.



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