

Chapter 2

What goes up...

Arbii's list of unfathomable things:

Making lists

Eating chocolate

****Aliens always wearing silver!***

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The General was a big, friendly, black-skinned Zumerian. He had a face that made him look like an alien boxer with large black eyes set under protruding eye ridges, a squashed nose, and heavysset cheeks. A rarity and an anomaly wrapped into a large, muscular body, he was respected by all and feared by many, and for a Zumerian male, this was highly unusual. Even Arbii's boss would generally try to appease him.

Quite how the General had managed to reach such exalted heights was almost as great a mystery as humans were. Still, the General liked him and that was important, especially seeing as he was Teimai's boss.

"How are things in headquarters?"

"Oh, okay, I guess," Arbii replied somewhat flatly. He had thought about trying to sound more enthusiastic, but he reasoned the General was probably wearing a mind-link.

"I thought so," the General remarked with a knowing smile that all but confirmed Arbii's suspicions. "Well, we're here to change all that."

"So, why exactly am I here?"

“Why indeed.” The General looked over to Teimai. “Follow me.” And, without any warning or ceremony, the dark alien in the baggy blue overalls started to climb swiftly up the pyramid’s stepped tiers.

“What? Wait!” Arbii shouted and he scanned the tall, glowing structure. There were no convenient steps on this stepped pyramid. What would have been a long set of stairs leading up to the pinnacle on any other Aztec pyramid were just long, flat strips. Arbii’s only option was to climb up each ledge.

He looked down at his attire, trying to follow suit in this suit wasn’t a suitable option at all. So he stopped at the base of the pyramid and made a few adjustments to the collar. His three-piece nano-suit unexpectedly morphed into a silver jumpsuit complete with silver platform boots.

Arbii jumped up in shock and he hastily played with the collar again and the nano-suit morphed into a black, synthetic rubber bodysuit with long, glowing, yellow power strips and matching platform boots. He looked up and caught Teimai grinning.

“Practicing holo-karaoke, are we?” Arbii could feel himself turning green. He turned away, bent his knees, and in a single hop, cleared the base step of the pyramid, and much like an alien pretending to be a rabbit, he quickly leaped up each of the remaining steps.

When he reached the summit, Arbii found the General sat at the very peak with his eyes closed. A dark alien guru seemingly at peace within the crazy world of the flight center. The General’s eyes opened.

“Now, how many flightships do you see?” Arbii looked at the city of spacecraft below. From this high vantage point, the size and scale of the cavern was breathtaking.

“Lots.”

“And how many do you think there are?”

“Whew, I have no idea!” Arbii declared with a big shrug. “The holo-walls are projecting more cavern and more ships. I honestly can’t tell where reality ends and the holo-walls begin.”

“And is that a problem?”

“Yes, I think I have enough trouble trying to understand what’s real and what’s not without holograms making matters worse.” The General chuckled.

“I thought a visual metaphor might help staff here appreciate the size of the problem. For every smuggler we catch, another two make it safely off-world.” Arbii gave a look which suggested there were perhaps better ways to make such a point, but he said nothing.

“I want you to count the number of ships in this cavern.”

“You want me to what?”

“Trouble with your hearing receptors?”

“No, no, no,” Arbii answered with a raised hand. He took a deep breath and scanned the cavern carefully.

There were so many spaceships, of so many various shapes, colors, and sizes that it felt more like a galactic carnival than a hanger. Spherical, hexagonal, octagonal, and tetrahedral shapes sat alongside more organically shaped vehicles full of bumps, lumps, and curves and whose shapes were much easier to gloss over.

Arbii stopped and gave up trying to do the impossible. He tapped the black rubber suit where one might expect the breast pocket to be and a pocket automatically formed. He then reached in and pulled out a small set of spectacles.

The glasses grew in size and Arbii put them on, tapped the side of the frame, and scanned the cavern again. Augmented graphical overlays appeared on the inside of the glass, highlighting every ship in different colors like a virtual marker pen. As each ship came into view, information about the type of craft, owner, and the number of occupants was conveniently displayed within. The glasses also neatly divided reality from hologram, causing Arbii to smile.

“All you need is the right set of glasses,” he said, echoing a popular alien saying. “At this very moment in time, there are one hundred and eighty-seven space vehicles, including this one, currently docked,” he then stated, trying not to sound too pleased with himself.

“Very good, though you might want to try implants next time, they make the job a whole lot easier,” the General remarked, and he stood up and without

missing a beat added, “Now I want you to personally inspect all the craft here.” Arbii looked at the General stunned.

“You want me to inspect all of these ships!” His arms spread wide trying to take in the enormity of the task in hand.

“Yes, plus the thirty-two flightships in the other three hangers. Oh, and the twelve spacecraft in the holding area below. Now don’t forget to do a thorough inventory of all the contents of each vehicle.”

“But, but, isn't that your job? Can’t you just get the ship AI’s to do all that?”

The General appeared to ignore Arbii as he tapped the data-pad on his wrist. With a deft flick of the screen, long lines of gold alien text suddenly transferred into the air. The General then inspected the words with apparent meticulous care, scrolling through and announcing.

“According to er, hum, section seventeen, article 9, subsection C, paragraph 18 of the Charter of Conduct on Alien Worlds. And I quote.

“All space-worthy vehicles,” the floating words dutifully lit up as he quoted them, “must be periodically inspected and their contents independently verified by a member of the Science and Cultural Commission.’

“That’s you,” the General observed without actually taking his eyes off the text. “And you know how much your boss is a stickler for the rules.”

The little alien’s world collapsed, his happiness crumbled, and his body slumped in resignation.

“Oh, and you’ve got five days,” the General added with a smile.

Arbii did not wait around to hear any more; instead, he pocketed his spectacles, lowered his head, and made his way down the pyramid in short, unenthusiastic jumps, oblivious to the world around him. He felt so bad that he did not even respond to Teimai’s smile or her words as she waited for him at the bottom of the pyramid.

His thoughts were about his boss, about how she had, once again, made his stay here on Earth even more unbearable. Not content with making him edit a library of antiquated Earthling encyclopedias and forcing him to go through the digital trash of other races on Earth as compulsory overtime. She now had

him inspecting 233 vehicles over five days and worse, they were Earth days. That worked out at forty-six flightships a day!

With a sigh so deep it resonated within the bowels of the Earth and a face so close to tears that it pained one to see it, Arbii resigned himself to the task ahead. He began by looking for his data-pad, only to find that he no longer possessed it.

I must have dropped it, he thought to himself. Could my day get any worse? He sighed again and started retracing his steps, looking for his computer.

The General bounded down his ship with a big smile on his face, the smile then backed up and turned tail as it met the full might of Teimai's glare, and the two aliens began hurriedly running after their friend.

Arbii stopped when he heard his name being called. He turned and tried to be as pleasant as he could.

"Look, I'm sorry but I have to find my—" he began.

"Your data-pad, I know," the General interrupted with a smile despite Teimai's annoyed stare, and he pulled out the tablet computer from a back pocket of his blue overalls and handed it to Arbii.

"But how did—"

"I obtain your computer? Oh, I teleported it from your pocket just before you arrived. You know, you really should enable the anti-theft features or just wear it on your wrist like everyone else."

"And you should get an AI installed," Teimai chimed in with a concerned smile. Arbii grabbed his computer and a curious look came over his eyes.

"But why did you—"

"Steal your computer? To put all the information you required on it, of course. You didn't honestly think I would make you do all that work by yourself, now did you?" The General fixed him with a look of mock surprise. "I got the AI's in each ship to do it all, just like you said."

Arbii tapped the left forearm of his suit. A pocket formed and he slid the small computer into the pocket, which then resealed leaving no trace of either pocket or computer.

“So then why—”

“Did I arrange for all this in the first place?” the General said, clearly enjoying interrupting.

“It was the only way we could think of to get your boss to send you here,” Teimai explained. “We had to come up with the worst possible job imaginable for her to agree to it.”

There was a pause, a rather long pause, a pregnant pause that was fast on its way to giving birth to a whole litter of even more pronounced pauses before Arbii finally let out a grin.

The General smiled, nodded his head, and tapped his wrist computer. Volumes of alien text launched into the air in front of them.

“Now just sign at the bottom.”

Arbii scrolled through the text and pressed his thumb into the thumbprint marker, and the floating holographic text instantly collapsed into the wrist computer.

“Great! You’ve just earned yourself five days of freedom.”

“And we’re going to make sure you enjoy it.” Teimai clasped her arm around Arbii and led him back the way they had come.

“Where are we going?”

“You and I are going for a little ride,” the General said. “Of course, I could have asked the Overseer to send you over as a favor to me. But she is definitely not the kind you want to be owing favors to,” he divulged with a frown as they walked back to his flightship.

They stopped at the foot of the glowing, stepped pyramid, and a large block at the flightship’s base formed into a rectangular entrance before them.

“Teimai, look after this place while I am gone,” the General said to his number two and they briefly tapped cuffs. Suddenly, the General’s silver emblems and insignia of office on his blue overall’s shoulders, upper arms, and chest transferred over to Teimai’s blue boiler suit.

“Have fun out there.”

“Don’t worry, we will.” And before Teimai or Arbii could do or say anything more, the General busily pushed Arbii along the spaceship’s corridor.

The passageway was made of the same glowing brick as the rest of the pyramid, and Arbii felt as if he was in a magical tomb rather than a spaceship.

The passage opened up into a large area where the columns, floor, and ceiling were made up of glass behind which swirls of ink-colored currents mixed and played with one another in a very deliberate and purposeful way. It was quite an eerie sight if you had never seen intelligent water before.

And within the water, a multitude of phosphorescent light blue waves sparked into existence with every footstep they took and every sound they made.

It was almost like being inside a living aquarium. Actually, that was exactly what it was like, for it reminded Arbii of something that he had seen on the zoo planet of Atodia Prime. A planet where the water itself was alive and intelligent and the animals that lived within it were just its playthings.

“I like the water,” Arbii remarked as he watched the long ribbons of ink dance and play within glowing waves that cascaded into life with every word he spoke.

“Ah, yes. A tribute to my friend Sue the narmi.”

“Sue the narmi. How can water be male or female?”

“Good point. I have no idea, but she was quite the wild water by all accounts. She rained down upon some of the biggest parades and parties. Old Sue got booted out of several systems for turning water into illegal foods and drinks. It’s been suggested that she might have done similar things here on Earth,” the General disclosed with a mischievous grin.

“But her greatest achievement was getting every single aquatic life-form on the planet of Gulbuba 7 drunk all at the same time, a feat which to this day has never been equaled.”

“What happened to...her?”

“She got vaporized by a rogue meteor, which just seemed to appear out of nowhere, all very suspicious.”

Arbii was about to voice one or two suspicions of his own when a gentle female voice interrupted the proceedings and more cavalcades of fluorescent ripples exploded into life.

“Welcome Awanan, what style would you like this time?”

“I’m in the mood for something classical. How about Earth history, Greco-Roman period?”

“Hmm, interesting choice.”

In moments, the water walls, floor, ceiling, and columns hurriedly solidified, turning into white marble decor. Consoles covered with ivory and lined with gold-etched angular tops burst up from the floor. The seats fashioned themselves into smooth satin and silk cushioned thrones and planted themselves behind Arbii and the General. Along the walls, a selection of statues and mosaics formed depicting Greek Gods and Roman Emperors appeared, and as a finishing touch, the AI itself emerged as a tall human woman with long, blonde hair tied up with gold hair combs. She wore a white flowing dress, and she looked perfect.

“Meet my AI, Miteri,” the General said with an extended arm. Miteri briefly nodded her head. The General then removed something from a panel within a mosaic depicting a bull on the wall.

“Here, put this on.” He handed Arbii a gleaming chest plate and back plate held together with a set of harnesses and straps.

“It’s a holo-suit.”

“Standard precaution when in flight over alien worlds,” Miteri added in a tone that was eerily reminiscent of how a tired Earth mother sounded when explaining something simple to a young child.

Arbii took the holo-suit and strapped it over his black and yellow nano-suit. Neither suit suited him so he made some adjustments to the collar until the holo-suit and nano-suit melded into a single outfit. He now wore an off-white spacesuit with protective armor pads and blue glowing lines around the edges.

The General nodded in approval and pulled another holo-suit from the compartment and strapped it on. He then signaled for his compatriot to sit.

“Well, now that we’re all set, let’s see what’s out there.”

“It’ll take a few moments to get flight clearance, what are we looking for this time?”

‘Oh, the usual, probes,’ the General said in a voice that did little to hide his disgust.

Of all alien interferences that a life-bearing planet has to endure, it is the humble probe that is the least welcomed. Small, frequently shape-shifting and undeniably shifty to boot, these little critters are to be found everywhere and in astonishing numbers too. Which is ironic, as they are also notoriously difficult to find and even harder to catch.

Some probes are relatively unobtrusive, merely take readings as they pass by a planet’s surface. However, most typically get deep down and very dirty, taking samples of anything and everything a planet has to offer, and if by chance, they find something of worth, thousands of more probes are often dispatched as it is cheaper and less dangerous to send probes to do the backbreaking work for you.

In fact, the phrase, ‘Why don’t you get your probes to do your dirty work!’ is one of the most common expressions in the galaxy with almost every known race having their version of this time-honored expletive.

Dirty probes that fly from one planet to another have been both praised and scorned in equal amounts, as their frequent cross-contamination of planets has led to the ruinous extinction of life on some worlds and paradoxically the creation of life on others. And whilst no planet is safe from these marauding hordes, it is the quarantined worlds that seem to be their favorite haunts.

Teimai looked up at the glowing pyramid hovering in mid-air. She watched as it transformed into a rotating circular structure that had an exterior made up of layers containing columns and arches. It took her a few moments to recognize the Coliseum.

“Okay, you have clearance to leave. Have a good time out there.”

And before the flightship disappeared she grabbed the small ring in her pocket and sent a psychic message.

[Arbii, you’re in for the ride of your life.] she thought and she couldn’t have known just how right she was.

Arbii smiled when he received the message, but before he had time to respond, they had jumped. Something was different. He could feel it, although

he didn't know exactly what it was. The walls, floor, and ceiling sensed his confusion and ably obliged by turning themselves into transparent windows.

Suddenly he found himself floating amongst large clouds and a light blue sky. He was instantly struck with a condition that felt rather like someone putting his stomach through a blender. He closed his eyes to fight off the spinning, spiraling nausea, he could feel his body sway and the contents of his stomach rise upwards, and then...and then...

...he was fine.

He opened his eyes and turned to see the General stood beside him. He had obviously administered some sort of drug, probably through their suits. Either that or he had a wonderful side career as a healer.

"I'm sorry, how foolish of me. I should have checked to see if you suffered from vertigo."

"Not anymore."

"Good." The General's dark eyes examined Arbii closely while the floor and walls quietly returned to depicting ancient Roman and Greek décor. "I take it this is your first time in the Earth stratosphere?" Arbii nodded his head.

"Great, I hope you enjoy it. You know, we are quite privileged to be here. Most of the flightships on Earth just jump from deep space straight to their bases or vice-versa, completely skipping the planet's atmosphere. You know, there is a very limited quota of ships that can operate in the stratosphere and then only under a strict set of protocols," the General droned on, starting to sound like his AI. Inevitable I suppose, if you spend so much time together, thought Arbii.

Miteri stared at him, a muse who was most definitely not amused, and Arbii once again cursed mind-links. He could not even have a thought to himself these days, without someone, somewhere, reading them. Not that the General seemed to notice as he carried on talking regardless.

"Today we are hunting probes. If you don't catch them early, they can become an infestation. Sly little pests. Once they find something of interest, it's a battle to stop them arriving en mass," he grumbled with rising anger in his voice.

“The really smart ones monitor the planet first and then mimic the damage that they find, so you get forests being stripped bare, only for it to be blamed on loggers and marine life culled only for it to be blamed on fishermen and now their activities are being blamed on the climate change. Oh, they’re so sneaky!” The General visibly calmed himself down before continuing.

“They are not quite as bad or as devious as the smugglers here, but then it is often the same groups of aliens that hire the smugglers and send out the probes.”

“I thought probes had to return to their flightships to offload what they have gathered?” Arbii said, not realizing how foolish he was going to appear.

“Of course not, don’t be silly! Why even your oldest and cheapest probe will have a bulk material surface-to-ship teleporter built-in as standard, not to mention primary and secondary invisibility fields covering your basic chameleon textured nano-tech skin and they are just the outer layers, while inside you’ve got...”

It was at this point that Arbii started to lose interest. Once the General started talking tech, there was no stopping him. Watching an Earthling drama with aliens looking and acting like baby humans was fast becoming more interesting.

“...and then there are the triple sunheart multi-cored energy plants, little pieces of ingenuity they are, as they ensure that your average probe will...”

Arbii’s interest continued to flag. He wanted to say something, but even though he considered the General a friend, he was still very much his superior and this was his ship, so Arbii remained quiet. He contented himself with a quick examination of the ship’s furnishings. Everything certainly appeared to be historically accurate. The mosaics and statues were copies of originals that had been discovered back on Earth, and they were all produced within the same century. Arbii pointed at each item and mentally recited the name of each of the artifacts and where they had been discovered.

Miteri fixed him a curious stare. He stopped and smiled awkwardly back. She looked and behaved so much like a human that he began to feel nervous in her presence. He could not quite figure out why. Maybe it was something in her movements or in her responses or that glint of vast intelligence behind her blue eyes. Whatever it was, Arbii found her captivating.

“Excuse me, General, but have you ever actually met a human?”

The General stopped, glanced over at his blonde companion, nodded his head and smiled.

“Once.”

“As yourself?” Arbii pressed, eager to know more.

“Of course not! No, I was dressed up in a holographic suit. The woman thought she was just meeting another human. It was a very interesting experience all the same.”

“Excuse me, General. I do apologize, but it appears that we have found a probe.”

“Really, where?”

A series of screens depicting an area under the ocean sprang into the air, a small green object was targeted and its trajectory mapped. The General grinned like a manic youngster and clapped his hands together.

“Wonderful. You, my friend, are in for the ride of your life!” he remarked gleefully.

And for the second time that day, two aliens had made the same, very apt, and remarkably accurate prediction about future proceedings. Warning bells rang in Arbii’s subconscious mind, only they were not ringing loud enough.

The flightship made an instantaneous jump, and as quick as a thought, it was suddenly deep underwater chasing a giant squid which, according to all the displays, was clearly not a giant squid, but was, nevertheless, doing a very good impression of being one.

The class V ultimate infiltrator series, explorer scout vehicle, was, for its part, doing what any good scout vessel (probes never use that ‘p’ word themselves) should do when discovered; get back to being undiscovered and fast. It morphed into a missile and shot out of the water and high into the air.

A second, larger missile-shaped flightship sprang from the water a few moments later. It needn't have been cloaked as it moved so fast that anyone who could have seen it would've only noticed a blur. The invisible blur slammed to a halt, high in the air.

"Where is it?" Miteri scrutinized the screens and the windows. The only thing visible was a large human passenger aircraft flying close by.

"Don't worry, they can't see us," the General confided with a knowing look.

"I wish they could."

"Hmm, I wonder," the General muttered to himself. He moved closer to the window and inspected the aircraft. "Miteri, would you...?"

"Certainly," the AI replied, reading the General's mind.

A holographic display appeared on the window. The display split into several zoomed in and then split into several separate tiles each showing parts of the aircraft in minute, almost microscopic, detail.

"It is, as you suspected, a clever facsimile of a human aviation vehicle."

"You mean, it's not a plane," Arbii quipped. Miteri gave him a mildly irritated glare.

The aircraft instantaneously transformed into an explosion of bright orange light. Arbii, the General, and even the ship's AI were all temporarily blinded, and when the light disappeared so had the probe.

"Wow, that was fun," Arbii remarked sarcastically as he rubbed his eyes.

"Fun, my friend is a Thunderhawk T46 Obliviator," the General proclaimed and with a simple nod to his AI, the flightship transformed into a sleek and elegant fighter craft. It was now army gray with a long-snout and elongated curved wings that arched over the body in a series of overlapping lattices. This new, military-upgraded, flightship bristled and pulsed with venomous energy.

The Roman décor was replaced with thick, reinforced walls, ceiling, and floor. Advanced terminals and an array of floating information screens covered the room. Some showed schematics of the new flightship's design along with its weaponry deployment and tactical offenses and defenses. Crash seats grabbed Arbii and the General and strapped them in tight. Miteri and the General's attire got into the act, transforming into dark, military battle suits

that matched the surroundings and mood. Everyone and everything was finally getting serious.

Arbii felt himself getting caught up in all the excitement. He had never been in a military flightship before, the look and feel of everything exuded power and strength. He could feel his excitement rising. Clouds whisked by and the sky shuddered as the upgraded flightship tore through the skies in pursuit.

It wasn't long before the sensors, constantly buzzing and humming in the background, detected the probe. The Thunderhawk heralded its arrival by coming to a dead stop, leaving Arbii briefly winded. He gave Miteri a look to ask if all the theatrics were really necessary. The AI briefly raised her eyebrows, cocked her head ever so slightly, and grinned.

They could see the probe hovering less than 200 feet from a passenger jet, this time a real passenger jet. The probe was now shaped like a classic, stereotypical flying saucer, though it still retained an invisibility cloak.

"No, no, you can't!" the General shouted. The Thunderhawk remained stationary. The General dared not endanger the humans on the passenger aircraft, so he kept his distance.

"You wouldn't!" he pleaded. The invisibility cloak surrounding the probe weakened.

"No, no, no, you don't want to—"

But the probe evidently did want to, and the saucer suddenly became visible for all the humans to see.

"Why you cheeky little..." the General cried out angrily, and the flightship darted in closer and projected an invisibility blanket over the area.

The probe shimmered and glimmered and then blinked out of existence and was... gone.

The screens frantically flashed up reams of information as the flightship scoured the planet. But the probe had simply vanished out of thin air. The General took it all pretty hard and pounded his hand on top of one of the consoles. Arbii had to refrain from smiling. He had found the whole series of events quite amusing. Who knew probes had a sense of humor?

“I’m sure it’ll turn up,” he said, trying to make his friend feel happier. The General sighed and managed a grim smile.

For a while, the flightship continued to scout the area in the vain hope that it might find the unwanted visitor but as their hopes faded, so did the flightship’s battle mode.

The screens slowly disappeared one by one. The walls, ceiling, and floor gradually remodeled themselves, until, over time, the room took on the appearance of a palace. In a swift final flutter, colorful murals and columns with tall arches sprang up around the room. Gold leaf tapestries depicting gods and deities aligned the walls and sitar music gently played in the background. Miteri then twirled around and wrapped herself in a light blue silk sari.

“India?” Arbii turned and stared at the General in surprise.

“I figured you’d probably like this more than hunting probes.” Arbii smiled.

“Launch the virtual drone,” the General commanded and Miteri shook her head in a sideways motion.

Arbii watched through the observation screens as the view descended through the lower clouds toward a city with rivers and streets. The view continued to descend until Arbii found he could make out the building rooftops and vehicles below. It moved down closer still, and for a brief moment, he felt as if it was going to crash into the street, but the view suddenly leveled off, to rest in the middle of a Mumbai street.

It was hot and noisy and all-around crowds of people were walking to-and-fro. Colorful umbrellas protected the street vendors from the sun and cars and auto-rickshaws drove along the dusty road.

Arbii found himself instinctively coughing. He was flanked left and right by tall, uneven apartment blocks with noisy outdoor air conditioners and bright clothes hanging on lines and flags which swayed in the warm breeze.

“This is amazing!” Arbii exclaimed in awe. “And they are real, these are real people. Not holograms or... oh, no offense,” he said to Miteri.

“That’s okay,” she replied with a warm smile.

“Are you sure they can’t see me?” The General chuckled.

“You’re completely safe. This virtual drone is completely undetectable. These are what we use when we want to check on or in the Earth’s surface. Would you like a try?”

“Oh, would I,” Arbii said, unable to contain his excitement and he watched as small joysticks grew from the ends of the chair’s armrests. Arbii stared at the joysticks and then at the General.

“I know how you love old retro things. I thought you would appreciate them.” Arbii eagerly grabbed the sticks and began controlling the probe.

“But be careful as...” The view went through a couple of humans and Arbii caught a brief glimpse of their insides.

“Ah,” he uttered with a mild look of shock, surprise, and wonder.

“It’s a virtual drone. It effectively doesn’t exist, which means it can go through walls, people, the ground, anything. The range is a bit short though, just two hundred and fifty miles.” Arbii looked impressed but his gaze stayed rooted to the screen.

“I can see anything and everything!”

And with that, Arbii went wild. He snaked through the dusty streets, swam through the Poisar River and climbed up and over the buildings. He marveled at the Gateway to India and snuck into the Bollywood studios to watch the actors rehearsing their dances and songs.

“You can observe humans, wherever and whenever you like. The novelty wears off after a while. Humans can be quite boring. They are very habitual. I see them doing the same things over and over again, no matter the culture. Give me a good probe or smuggler hunt any day.”

But Arbii wasn’t listening as he made his way to Mumbai’s largest museum to revel at the antiquities in a way that only a historian could. Later he observed an Indian wedding with hundreds of guests and costumes full of bright, garish colors. It made him feel felt touched and humbled.

“This is why I came here,” he said, turning to the General and Miteri.

“I know, your boss has got a lot to answer for.” A roguish smile spread across his face. “You know it was here, in India, where I met my first and only human.”

“Really? Show me.”

The flightship flitted across the sky, and the scenery around them abruptly changed. They were in a wooded area that was part of a valley surrounded by a range of white, snow-topped mountains. The flightship descended to hover just a few feet from the ground.

“Here?”

“Yes, I was in a small scout flightship and my navigation systems were totally fried. So I landed in that wood.” the General pointed to the dense set of trees close by, “and I took on the form of a mountain climber, found the first human I could find, and I asked her which one of these mountains was the Saser Kangri Mountain.” Arbii looked skeptical.

“Yeah, right, this is just another one of your jokes.”

“No, honestly, the mothership had landed on that particular mountain and I had no way of contacting them. Look, can you tell which mountain is which?” The General gestured to the wide mountain range beyond. Arbii stared back through narrowed, disbelieving eyes.

“I am telling you the truth.” Arbii turned to Miteri, who nodded her head and gave a look suggesting that she had only reluctantly come to believe it herself.

“So this stranger appears out of the woods, dressed as a mountain climber, and says ‘Excuse me, you couldn’t help me find my mountain could you?’” Arbii burst out laughing. The General chuckled.

“Well, we all have our off days.”

“Excuse me General, but we have a message.”

“What, you’ve lost another mountain have you?” Arbii quipped and the flightship echoed to sounds of laughter.

“Erm, you are going to want to hear this,” Miteri said, wiping a tear from her eye.

The General nodded his head and the screens were filled with an indescribably ornate craft. It was made up of a long series of rotating interconnected spheres around which spun several blades that appeared to not be attached to the bulk of the craft. Another thing that was not attached to the

ship was the unmistakable saucer trapped in an energy bubble by its side. Arbii thought the General would be pleased, but the dark alien did little to conceal his disappointment.

“Serenti,” he muttered with quiet loathing. “Why did it have to be Serenti?”

Of all the eight races that currently inhabit the Earth, none are more despised than the Serenti. They are universally hated by almost every known sentient species in the galaxy. Even the hideous Mumutans, who colonized a thousand worlds and taxed them all to submission, are regarded in higher esteem. Even the pyromaniac Nudakai Fire Devils who blew up suns and destroyed countless planets just for fun are less reviled than the Serenti.

Their crime is simply that they are *perfect*, in their actions, in their deeds, even in their thoughts, in everything. They are just too brilliant in whatever it is they wish to be. Take a game, any game, let’s say poker, a few minutes to learn and a lifetime to master. Not with the Serenti. In an afternoon, they will be playing as good as the greatest players that have ever lived. By the end of the day, they will be teaching them.

The following day, they will have bested the best AI croupiers and players available, and by that evening, they will have bankrupted the entire casino, and within a week, every other casino in the area. Give them any longer than that and the entire planet is in financial peril. That is just how truly exceptional they are.

This has led them to be vilified and hated by every species out there. The Serenti, for their part, do not mean to make every other race feel inferior. Perhaps their unique circumstance would be more tolerable if the Serenti themselves displayed a superiority complex to go along with their amazing abilities. This at least would give other races justification for hating the Serenti. But no. What is truly and inconsolably loathsome about these gifted beings is that they are so unremittingly nice and worse, they are always willing to please.

Imagine losing all your money, your entire life savings, your house, your wife, and all your worldly possessions in a poker game to a Serenti (who had just picked up the game a few hours previously). Only the Serenti would give

you the name of one of the galaxy's five best tailors (for your missing shirt), hook you up with a great divorce lawyer, and place you under the supervision of the galaxy's most prestigious gambling addiction clinic. And then just to make you feel even worse, give you a quarter of your losses back at 50% interest, plus two free tickets to the opera. It is this intense likable and affable nature that they possess, combined with their being the best at everything, which makes just being in their presence so utterly intolerable and infuriating for all but other Serenti.

Quite why they are here on Earth, where humans are, it is commonly accepted, some of the most imperfect beings that you would ever care to meet remains somewhat of a mystery.

Arbii got out of the chair, ready to meet their guest, and moments later, a hologram of an alien appeared in front of them, tall, regal, proud, with a long neck. The Serenti looked a little like a gazelle with a somewhat enlarged cranium standing upright on its hind legs.

A beefed-up gazelle with waxy green and yellow skin, yellow horns, long fingers, and a rather nice line in glowing battle-tech armor suits.

"I do apologize for being so forthcoming; I hope you don't mind me dropping in like this."

"No, not at all," gushed Miteri. Surprised eyes turned to the woman and Arbii was amazed to see her blushing.

"What is it with Serenti and AIs?" the General muttered under his breath in a tone that sounded like a cuss.

The Serenti hologram turned its attention back to the General. "It's just that we captured this scout vehi...er probe, yes probe, hiding behind the moon and since you initiated the chase, we wondered if you wanted to claim your prize."

"You captured it, so it's your prize."

"Are you sure? Why that's very kind of you."

The General gestured 'no problem' when in reality his gestures were screaming 'now get out of here!'

"You see, we have recently begun capturing and repurposing probes so we can then send them back out into the wild to apprehend and destroy other

probes. It has been quite a success. We estimate that the number of active probes on Earth has dropped by at least 30% over the past two months.

“Perhaps you have noticed.”

“No, I haven’t,” the General lied through gritted teeth.

“Oh, well, no... er, problem. We also notice that your ship’s proximity sensors have been damaged, most likely during your chase. If you would like, we would be only too happy to repair them for you,” the Serenti offered most politely, his willingness to please now becoming somewhat cloying, even for Arbii.

“That would be great!” Miteri responded, sounding for all the world like a love-struck teenager. The General took a deep breath and turned to his guest and attempted to be equally as agreeable and regal.

“That won’t be necessary but thank you for the kind offer, if that is all?” The Serenti hologram promptly smiled, bowed, and disappeared.

The General waited patiently with a fixed smile for the Serenti ship to leave. Once it had jumped out into space, his smile fell away and he let out a huge sigh and turned and frowned at his AI.

“You and I are going to need to have a few words, my dear.”

“Yes, well, they’ll have to wait,” Miteri answered her demeanor now suddenly quite defiant, bordering on petulant. “I have just received a distress signal from the other side of the Earth!” And in an instant, the ship and its occupants jumped halfway around the world.

“What kind of distress signal?”

“One that wasn’t meant for our ears. The signal was very faint, hard to detect, perhaps smugglers?” The General moved close to Arbii.

“Two in one day, you are very lucky.”

“I had hoped to see more humans.”

“Well, our allotted time here is almost at an end. But tomorrow I plan to take you on a visit of all the hidden wonders humans have yet to discover on their world.” Arbii’s face instantly brightened. “For now, just sit back and enjoy.”

The flightship switched into stealth mode, the internal lights dimmed, and the flightship's skin took on a deadly shade of night. It descended slowly and silently to the world below, hovering so low that Arbii could almost make out the individual colors of the cars as they buzzed through the brightly lit city below. The flightship abruptly altered course and bolted skyward into the clouds. The movement was so quick Arbii's body felt as though it were still beneath the clouds. He looked to the General for some kind of explanation. The ship's captain and his ship's AI paid him no attention as they were absorbed in the task of filtering through all the information on the floating display screens.

"Can I help?" There was no reply. "Well, if you change your mind," he offered, affably and then chided himself for sounding like a Serenti.

The silent treatment lasted for a good ten minutes with the General and his AI going over a multitude of information screens. They listened to conversations, watched live camera feeds, and scanned text pages all at the same time, which meant they had little time to be sociable. Not that Arbii minded as he was—

Just then, something hard slammed into their flightship and the world shuddered and vibrated. The metal groaned and made sickening crunching sounds that sounded almost as if it were in pain. Then things got markedly worse.

The flightship lurched heavily to one side. The General and Arbii crashed into the rounded sides at the back end of the vessel whilst Miteri remained rooted to the spot, standing at an impossible angle.

"What's happened?" the General shouted in a rather muffled fashion as half his face was squashed against a screen.

"We have been hit by something. Artificial gravity is down," Miteri replied, sounding increasingly flustered, strands of her once perfectly set hair fell upon her face.

"How can that happen? Aren't you supposed to—"

"Damaged proximity sensors, remember! If you hadn't have been so proud to take up the Serenti's offer, then—"

“Get help from a Serenti, never! How could you suggest such a thing!”

Arbii could not believe they were arguing, now of all times! The craft leveled off and the pair of aliens rolled along the floor and stood up rather shakily.

“I think I have regained full control but you should get into those chairs and strap yourselves in, just in case,” Miteri suggested, pulling her wayward strands of hair back in place.

‘Just in case,’ turned out to be some thirteen-point-four Earth seconds later, for, at that precise moment, the spacecraft was struck by another missile.

A huge, deafening roar ripped through the ship and intense vibrations grew all around them as everything inside and outside shuddered and shook and groaned and screamed. The flightship dived down and barrel-rolled several times to the left before leveling out and flying up.

It was at this point, Arbii’s head spun, and amidst the confusion and the noise, his old foe returned, back from a spell of retirement, all the way from the bottom of his stomach, he gave a not-so-warm welcome to vertigo.

The invisible craft, hidden from the world by stealth and night, swiftly dove high up into the sky and banked right. It swooped down and made some tight rolls to the right as a missile followed its every twist and turn.

And amongst all this Arbii was choking and gagging and trying desperately hard not to throw up as vertigo was going for the kill. He barely acknowledged the third giant impact, the manic vibrations or the way the flightship just seemed to plummet from the sky. The last thing Arbii could remember was the intense pounding thud that almost pulled him through the safety harnesses and the tumbling and rolling that seemed to last an eternity and then everything coming to an abrupt and nasty halt.

As his breathing slowed and his consciousness faded, he had time for some final thoughts. Oh good, we have finally crashed. I guess that really was the ride of my life.