

## *Prelude: Of Heroes And Villains*

“Take that, you frak-ugly son of a bitch!” Dizzy cried through gritted teeth, and punched her enemy in the jaw with one robotically augmented fist. The metal gauntlets of the exoskeleton she’d designed—they were heavy, for each palm contained a dark-energy repulsivator—slammed into the stainless-steel helm of Professor Victor Arkenvalen . . . or rather, that of his lunatic alter-ego, Dr. Noonian Harkonnen. Naming things gave you power over them; it was an act of *magic*, or so Dizzy had read in a book on occultism that she had in no way stolen from the school library. Perhaps, subconsciously, Arkenvalen had been seeking some sort of power over the dark fires of insanity burning within him; a thousand perhapses, but none of them relevant to the fact that she was currently getting the ever-loving shit kicked out of her. Her ribs—and the rest of her bones, for that matter—were presently singing hymns to ancient gods of pain, and would most definitely *not* be singing *her* praises come morning . . . if, that was, she *lived* that long.

Harkonnen’s punches packed an extra wallop, thanks to the bioengineered serum flowing through his veins. Perfected by Arkenvalen and Dizzy’s father Walther some twenty years before, it was basically “evolution in a bottle,” and just by looking at him, Dizzy could see the horror that had resulted from twenty years of low-level exposure. (She was, however, fairly certain that he had always been frak-ugly and with an attitude to match.) He had beady emerald eyes and creases on his unnaturally pale neck—perhaps the beginning of gills? He had lost most of his hair, the way chemo-patients did, and his eyes burned with a fierce intelligence and a crazed determination, the split in his soul gleaming darkly there. His evil experiments in artificially advancing human evolution were funded, in part, by the local Mafia. Together, they had been terrorizing the city for years. And, even *before* Dizzy had first donned her exoskeletal armor and taken up the cause of crime fighting, Harkonnen had displayed an unhealthy fascination with *her*. Something to do with her father and that serum; she was sure of it. Her friend Misto had the answers, she knew, but he refused to open up about it for some reason. Time would tell, she supposed.

Dizzy hurriedly whisked a robotic gauntlet up in front of her face and caught Harkonnen’s fist in mid-swing, the arms of her exoskeleton whirring, moving with all the preternatural speed that one would expect from limbs powered by a wet-wired neural interface. The superconducting quantum-interferometry field-receptors were hidden in the lining of the motorcycle helmet that covered her blueberry-colored, bob-cut hairdo. Hey—one had to look stylish when out fighting crime, didn’t one? She wrenched Harkonnen’s fist aside and forcefully head-butted him with a loud, metallic CLANK! He reeled backward, floating on repulsivators of his own—he had stolen the blueprints for the exoskeleton years before, and had built what was mostly an inferior knockoff. He hit a dumpster, knocking it against the wall of the alley in which they fought; a Chinese restaurant and a Burlington Coat Factory sat on either side of them, their windows dark and silent. Dizzy wore a corset of flexible, motorized segments—perfect for taking gut-punches like the one he’d given her earlier—over a thin leather tunic for cushioning; clockwork adorned her gauntlets, which had retro-style ray-guns bolted onto the wrists. Curved, form-fitting armored segments interconnected by flywheels, guy-wires, and sprockets enclosed her legs. A mechanical tentacle snaked up her back, and power cables ran from that down to her boots. Harkonnen

was shorter than she was, and his exoskeleton was similar, though sleeker. His armor gleamed in the half-light, violence in ticking motion. He wore his tweed professor's outfit beneath, replete with a soft green bow tie, and on his head, he had donned a medieval spangenhelm lifted from a suit of armor—the one that had been on display in the Robinson building, back at Wenzel U—along with a breathing apparatus that had been fashioned from an old-timey gas-mask. His eyes—glistening with murder-bright hatred—glared at her from over the top of it.

“Come hither, you sniveling excuse for a scientist!” he snarled, his voice muffled by the mask but perfectly understandable, each word prim and articulate. He rocketed back toward her, aiming to tackle her. She tried to duck out of the way, but he succeeded in grabbing her around the waist and knocking her off both her balance and her repulsivator beams, and she fell. She hit the pavement with an “*Oof!*” and the wind went out of her, the vibration of the impact traveling through the metal of the exoskeleton and back into her limbs. He rose to his knees and knelt above her, straddling her, and proceeded to try and choke the living daylights out of her, the metal of his gauntlets tight against her throat. If he fired his palm-mounted repulsivators while he had hold of her . . . No! She refused to even imagine that. He apparently wasn't imagining it either, for instead of executing such a deathblow, he merely cackled and continued to choke her, moonlight and neon glinting off his spangenhelm and the teeth of his deranged smile, as the world began to blur and her brain screamed for oxygen. “Feel the pain, you *freak!* Feel the pain your father made *Victor* feel, you arrogant little *cockroach!*”

“Oh, *I'm* the freak. Right. That's rich!” She managed to choke out, and grabbed the wrists of his gauntlets in hers. She mentally activated the neodymium electromagnets in them, and felt her gauntlets magnetize to his. With the motors of both their exoskeletons whirring in protest, she pulled at his wrists for all she was worth. “Not today, Harkonnen!”

Gradually, she pried his hands away from her neck. He growled in frustration and effort and Dizzy grinned. She reversed the magnetic polarity and shot out from underneath him, then scrambled to her feet. She drove her knee into his chin. He fell over backwards, crying out in pain as his knees tried to bend the wrong way. His exoskeleton whirred as he got to his feet and drunkenly stumbled back. Gasping for breath, he raised his left gauntlet; there, on the wrist, sat a version of one of Dizzy's own inventions: the Romulanator, a plasma weapon capable of disrupting matter at the subatomic level.

“Oh dren,” she muttered, and dodged to the right just in time as a bolt of blue-white plasma shot past her head and slammed into the brick wall behind her, a small section of it disintegrating. Her exoskeleton didn't have force-fields—not *yet*; she was working on that—and thus, she had to rely on computer-enhanced reflexes instead. Harkonnen aimed and fired again, and she ducked just in time; the bolt slammed into the wall, and another chunk of it vanished. Dizzy shot forward and tackled him, knocking him to the ground with a clanking thud. She grabbed him by the collar and repeatedly punched him until blood stained the metal of her gauntlets. He laughed. And laughed. And laughed, even as she busted his lip in two places. With a left-right gut-punch, she pummeled him, then leapt up, and brought a metallic boot down upon his chest, and heard the satisfying crunch of bone breaking. He grabbed her leg and wrenched it around at the ankle. Dizzy cried out in surprise, and hit the pavement hard.

Harkonnen got to his feet. He stumbled toward her, and feigned a right-hook; she fell

for it, and he busted her nose with a lightning-quick jab from the left. A warm trickle of blood made its way down her face; it tasted warm and bitter. As the galaxy of colors cleared, Harkonnen clocked her in the jaw. Her skull rang and vibrated, and she felt a tooth wrench loose. Hopefully, it wasn't part of her infamous, lust-inducing smile. She spit blood, staggered, steadied herself, and saw him coming at her. She executed a drunken roundhouse and landed a lucky steel toe to the side of his helmet, sending him flailing to the side and crashing through a wooden crate. Dizzy stumbled toward him, woozy, but still managing to cock back a fist.

He caught her next blow mid-swing, and grinned a bloody grin at her, his eyes wild and manic. Quick as a viper, he put his Romulanator to her throat, but she spun out of the way just as he fired, her augmented reflexes a split-second faster than his. They faced one another—he with his weapon raised and trained, she with her fists clenched at her sides—the only sound their mutually-heavy breathing. “Put it down, Harkonnen. I don't want to have to *hurt* you.”

“You mean *kill* me, don't you?” He spat blood and snickered. “Because you certainly don't seem to have any problem with merely *hurting* me, my dear. But, that's where we differ. I have evolved *beyond* such tired conceptions of morality. Hence, you have a problem killing me, but I have *no* problem with killing you—and I *will*. Your father killed the only person who ever mattered to myself and Victor, doing *irreparable* damage to Victor's fragile, innocent psyche. . .”

“Well *that's* fairly frakkin' obvious.”

“*Silence!*” he yelled. “This isn't one of your *asinine sci-fi shows*; this is *reality!* Now, then—as you people over in the Physics Department might say . . . this is where your relativistic world-line *terminates*, Roentgen!”

In a flash, Dizzy had her own Romulanator raised and trained on him, though it irked her to no end that she had allowed it to come to this. They circled one another for a moment or two, arms raised, weapons poised to fire. Dizzy licked her lips, and said, “Come on, Harkonnen. *Arkenvalen*. Listen. I know you're in there. I know you can hear me. If you can, just . . . put down the Romulanator. Please. After all, the thing's name loses novelty-points each time we say it out loud.”

“Oh, I'm sorry, but Victor isn't *home* just now,” said Harkonnen. “I'm afraid you'll just have to deal with *me*.”

Instead of firing—or giving him time to fire—she flicked a mental switch, and went rocketing toward him on repulsivator power, tackling him once again. He fired, but the shot went awry just as she closed half the distance. They collided, metal clanking against metal as they hit the ground, with Dizzy on top. She drew back to punch him, but then she heard a familiar sound from the mouth of the alleyway: The wail and whoop of police sirens. Red and blue flashing lights suddenly painted the alleyway with a garish luminescence, and a voice cried through a megaphone: “You there, *FREEZE!*”

“Gods-frakkin-*dammit!*” she muttered. “Why do they always show up at *this* point in the fight?” She sighed. “C'mon, Noonian. I'm gettin' us outta here, before we *both* wind up in the hoosegow. It's Finals Week, and it just wouldn't do for one of Wenzel U's best and brightest to be doin' time in the pokey. Nor you, for that matter.” She shook her head.

Almost to herself, she said, “For all your crimes, Harkonnen, your *other* half is innocent. Lucky you. We’ll finish this some other day.”

She punched him, her final blow hard enough to make his eyes cross. His head lolled back as he went unconscious. She grabbed him around the neck and pudgy waist, the motors of her exoskeleton whirring, and rocketed upward on repulsivator beams as gunshots rang out below. It was just as well, anyway. This encounter had gone on a little too long for her taste, and that ending . . . whew! *Way* too close for comfort. Indeed. Besides, she had a sci-fi convention to attend. RetCon XVIII was the biggest of the local cons, and she wasn’t about to miss it on account of Arkenvalen and Harkonnen’s schizophrenic supervillain shenanigans.

*Hey*—she thought as she deposited Harkonnen on a nearby rooftop and quickly levitated away—*it ain’t all bad, right? I mean, at least I’m already in costume.*

## **Chapter 1: These Rich Fantasy Lives**

### **1 - A Dark Visitor Cometh**

*The physiology of these primitive, ape-like creatures had been exceedingly easy to grasp, their minds equally trivial to hack into and control. Adapting the dimensional matter-shifter, to allow members of the Brood to shrink down so they could crawl inside the apes, and thus operate them like puppets, had been a far trickier enterprise . . . but it had been accomplished, because the Queen had wanted it accomplished. When the Queen commanded, all the Brood obeyed, especially her loyal scientists . . . such as the Visitor.*

*For his part, he was beginning to have doubts about the Mission. The Eidolon never lied. Never. All the same . . . how far could they be trusted? They had long ago abandoned the physical universe, aeons before he and the rest of the Brood had first crawled out of the slime, and now existed as pure consciousness, and lived on a dimensional membrane perpendicular to that of the known universe. They came in friendship—or at least said they did—and had appeared to various members of the Brood throughout history, to deliver the wisdom of their foreknowledge to leaders and others whom they felt had “earned, through superiority, the right to a glimpse of what is possible.” What they showed was not “the” future—they claimed such a thing was not possible—but instead, only the “most likely” future.*

*And what they had shown the Queen had been terrifying: If events were to run their course, the Eidolon said, then most likely, the ape-like inhabitants of this small blue world would one day leave their tiny marble of dirt and ocean and head out into space. They would spread across the galaxy like wildfire . . . colonizing world after world, and growing into a mighty empire. And when that empire finally met the Brood, the apes’ natural inclination toward xenophobia and prejudice—and the Visitor had certainly learned that much about them, if nothing else—would ensure the Brood’s utter destruction. The “humans”—such a strange word, that—would reach out into the stars with their mighty, five-fingered “hands” and would erase his kind from the map, forever. The Brood would burn in the slow fires of extinction, and it would be human “hands” that lit the blaze.*

*The Queen had commanded that something be done. She had ordered their planet—“Earth,” they called it—be invaded, conquered, now, while the apes were still young and had not yet had the chance to*

venture out into the stars. And so they had sent out scouts. The planet's atmosphere was rich in nitrogen and oxygen . . . toxic to his kind. (The Visitor and the others had been chemically, surgically, and technologically altered so that they could not only breathe human air, but could even expose their skin to it for short periods). Next, they had abducted a few stray humans, and had conducted extensive experiments on them . . . and had made some remarkable discoveries.

For one, humans could be reanimated. Once they had died, if the proper chemicals were applied to their nervous system—chemicals secreted naturally by the tentacles of the Brood, as remarkable as that was—they could be brought right back to life. Also, unlike the Brood, who communicated almost exclusively through telepathy, the humans still used crude verbal communications . . . but, were one of the Brood to wrap a portion of its feelers around a human spinal cord, then the mind of that human—their living consciousness—became an open book. It was through this kind of hardwire-telepathy that they had learned much of human language, culture, society . . . after interfacing with a few dozen subjects, one could be a veritable expert on their world. Further, it was discovered that once one had successfully interfaced with their nervous system, one could **control** them . . . and not just their bodies; one could control their thoughts, their feelings, their entire consciousness; it was as easy as connecting to a robot.

It had been then that one of their scientists—a colleague of the Visitor, in fact—had come up with an idea: The invasion would take place in two stages. The first stage would consist of a select force of several thousand Brood—chosen from the Soldier caste, the Visitor's own caste—who would land on the apes' world in secret, and would infiltrate their highest levels of government and society by hiding inside both high-ranking officials and ordinary citizens—using the dimensional matter-shifter to shrink them down so they would fit—and then controlling their every thought and move, the goal being to retard the apes' technological progress until it was at a standstill. Once that was done and it was assured that the apes no longer posed a threat . . . then the invasion-proper would begin, and the human race would become slaves of the Brood, and would **remain** their slaves, for all time.

For his part, the Visitor found the innards of the apes messy and uncomfortable. Getting inside them was a disgusting and smelly procedure, a gruesome undertaking . . . not to mention meticulous, as one needed to be careful when one made the entry-incision along the base of the spine, and careful when closing it so no scar would be visible. Disgusting creatures. The first time the Visitor had done it, he had been amazed at how brutally primitive the apes' thoughts were, how terribly dark and violent . . . and how raucously undisciplined. They were a mass of quivering impulses and contradictory emotions, their logic fraught with fallacy; they ferociously maintained false beliefs, and were stubborn as **ka'atchras**.

But, that only made them easier to control. One could hide inside the guts of an ape and direct their every move, could “inspire” them to feel or think whatever one wanted, as well as could feel what they felt, know what they knew . . . but, the Visitor thought, though one might know the what an ape was thinking, who could ever **truly** understand such primitive thoughts? After all, at this point in their development, the apes ranked far below the Brood on the evolutionary ladder. Thus, they would make a perfect slave-race . . . depending, of course, on how much of a fight they put up. (Which, if he and the others were successful, wouldn't be much of a fight at all.) And even if they did . . . the combined forces of all the Brood had defeated greater enemies than **these** pathetic bipeds.

The Visitor's orders were simple, if not very appealing: Hide within as many apes as needed. Learn their reproductive habits, rituals, and practices; collect samples of their secretions; analyze the results, and report back to the High Command. Once the ape-creatures' sexuality and breeding habits were fully understood, the High Command could institute a selective breeding program . . . one that would ensure **billions** of healthy servants, miners, laborers, and farmers . . . why, none of the Brood would ever have to lift a finger again! They could then devote themselves to higher, nobler pursuits—such as figuring out how

*the Eidolon transcended flesh and blood, and became creatures of light—and to mastery of the universe, as was their birthright.*

*The Visitor found the apes' methods of breeding disgustingly . . . well, alien. Why couldn't they hatch from eggs, like regular, sensible beings did? No matter . . . he had his orders, and had chosen a new landing site . . . the top of a structure where a large gathering of ape-creatures had commenced . . . some kind of ritualistic celebration, it seemed; the apes were all wearing fanciful costumes, some in the guise of what the apes obviously thought "extraterrestrials" looked like. How naive. He could read their language well-enough, as he'd tapped into more than a few of their simplistic minds . . . the sign above the building read, WELCOME TO RETCON XVIII, 2012! Whatever its purpose, this gathering would make for good cover, as well as would be an excellent research opportunity. Disgusting though it might be, he would complete his mission. The Queen commanded; he had no choice but to obey.*

*And so the Visitor landed his ship on the roof of the tall building near the saucer-ship, setting down softly and engaging the cloaking device, so that the ship would not be detected. He felt the landing pods touch down upon the paved rooftop, and touched a tentacle to the control console, putting the ship into standby mode, and activating the security system—just in case any of the apes discovered it and got curious.*

*And then, he set to work.*

## 2 - Welcome to RetCon

Thunder rumbled, competing with the rock 'n roll and filk music blasting from the balconies of the Executive East Inn, where the three-day, twenty-four-hour party of RetCon XVIII—a phantasmagorical bacchanal of debauchery and imagination—raged like a gamma-irradiated scientist. Starry-eyed Wonder Women made out with drunken Spidermen, and short-skirted Sailor Moons dangled their legs off balconies as Starfleet-cadets tried to feel them up. The windows were alive with the silhouettes of toga-partiers and the photon-ghosts of Browncoats. Bartenders at room-parties served alchemical concoctions—maybe one part Mountain Dew, perhaps five parts Tullamore Don't—as Kryptonian scientists and Time Lords alike imbibed. The whole hotel hummed with a psychic current, the mystic energy of the place a palpable, tangible thing, like a spiderweb of telepathic circuitry running through all those assembled, interconnecting a thousand-odd lives, fantasies, dreams, desires. Nothing was true; everything was permitted ... at least for this weekend. Then it would be back to the grindstone, a return to the mill-wheel that crushed their dreams into dust.

Vulcans embraced old friends from Asgard, Middle-Earth, and Alderaan. Clandestine kisses in broom-closets led to lascivious groping in the hallways, which led to sexual depravity in the elevators, which led to the freaking of many Mundanes, and the lowering of many purity scores. Masks fell away as insecurities melted in the fires of momentary romances; once-lonely hearts burned like supernovae, desperate lights in the dark of being different. Filk-balladeers went to great *paean*s, and vampire-slayers, lightcycle jocks, and Viper pilots all joined in. The crowd of fershnickered fen cheered for *Threes*, shed tears for *Hope Eyrie*, sang solemnly along with *Falling Free*, and groaned with delight at *Banned From Argo*, that golden zombie oldie that simply refused to die.

Rangers and Paladins went in search of dragon's gold, their fate sealed by a roll of the die. Klingons armed with peace-bonded *bat'leths*, Jedi sporting lightsabers, and pale Elves carrying bows all played at commanding armies of monsters at card-tables in the game-room. Elsewhere, small crowds of Ghostbusters, Wolverines, Delvian Pa'us and Dr. Mannhattans gathered to wax philosophical as they eagerly conversed: Who was the better Doctor . . . David Tennant, or Matt Smith? Was Joss Whedon the next Spielberg, or just an overrated hack? When humanity finally journeyed to the stars, would they find wise telepathic dragons, or parasitic eels masquerading as gods? What was the average airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow? The African, or European variety? How about in a warp bubble? How about in a warp bubble *designed by Wesley Crusher*? Elsewhere still, on the periphery of this *zeitgeist*, live-action role-players acted out vampiric fantasies in a world of blood, leather, and shadow . . . and they would punch you in the balls if you asked them whether or not they sparkled.

Were one to gaze upon this wild rumpus of wonder-junkies, one might miss the fact that up on the fourth floor, standing outside a room-party and talking to a short, moussed-haired man dressed in the tweed coat and bow-tie of the Eleventh Doctor—his personal favorite of the time-traveling Gallifreyan's various incarnations—was the city's missing superheroine, who had no idea that the fates of worlds whirled about her. She was a nexus of destiny on a pair of nice legs, the latter being the tweed-coated Doctor's primary concern at the moment, although he knew all too well that legs like that were usually attached to rejection. For the nonce, though, he was happy to drift off and fantasize about single-handedly rescuing her from the clutches of a dragon, in whose mountain lair she lay scantily clad, chained, and screaming . . . an act of heroism for which he hoped he would be richly rewarded, and preferably in the same way that the damsels in distress of the *Heavy Metal* universe usually rewarded *their* rescuers. If, that was, she didn't just kick the dragon's ass and fly away without him. She looked like she could, and it *would* be just his luck.

*Man, he thought, why is it that even in my fantasies, I can't get laid?*

### 3 - Our Hero Meets His Match

They had met an hour earlier, during a game of *Magic: The Gathering*, in which her black and blue deck of game-mechanical chaos-causers had thoroughly wiped the walls with his collection of green foliage-monsters and lava-spewing fire-creatures. Impressed with her cunning and skill, he had awkwardly initiated a full-blown conversation with her. To his great surprise, she had responded with enthusiasm, and now, an hour later, he found himself standing outside a room-party, still talking to her.

*This, he thought, is a new world-record. Quick, someone call Guinness, before she bolts.*

She had eyes the emerald of Kryptonite, and rosebud lips the color of Klingon blood-wine, their corners ticked up in a perpetually impish grin. She stood about five-foot-eight, fair-skinned and regal, like Galadriel of Caras Galadhon, fairest and wisest of the Elves who had remained in Middle-Earth. Too lovely by far to ever love a Dwarven tinkerer such as he. She wore her neon-blueberry hair in a Russian-spy bob-cut, though most of it was obscured

by her motorcycle helmet, on top of which sat a curious mass of wires and circuits, the centerpiece of which was a small, glass doughnut wrapped with coils of wire. A circular bolt of lightning arced, zapped, and writhed inside, an angry serpent of pent-up, blue-white fire. Cables snaked down from that to the rest of her costume, a form-fitting mechanical exoskeleton made of wheels, gears, and segmented pieces of armor-plating. It was sleek, too; as impressively mechanized as it was, the whole thing wasn't so ungainly that she couldn't have, say, comfortably driven a car while wearing it. And, however she bent, moved, or gestured, the suit responded fluidly, almost gracefully. He found himself wondering how she'd made it, what kind of power source it utilized, what—Dude, he thought. Hot chick. Actually talking to you. Focus.

"Sorry if I seem nervous," he said. "It's just that, well, except for my friend Buffy, I'm not real used to hanging out with a—"

"Eh, that's okay," she said, and smiled a smile filled with dazzlingly white teeth. "I *like* nervous. Proves you've got current running through your brain-cells. Y'know?"

"Huh," he said, and grinned. "Well, I never really *thought* about it like that, but okay. So, listen—"

"Listening mode . . . *on*," she said in a robotic, nasal voice, and lolled her head to one side.

He laughed. "That's awesome. Listen, I *know* this is gonna sound like a sleazy pickup line, but—"

"*Pfaw!* You're right! Worst . . . pickup line . . . ever! Guards, to the *dungeon* with him! My *personal* dungeon, if you please. Nudge-nudge, wink-wink, say-na-more, eh gov'nah?"

"Don't I *wish*," he muttered, and shuffled his feet. He was pretty sure she'd heard that. He cleared his throat. "Uh, anyway. I was gonna ask you this earlier, but . . . have we met? Before, I mean?"

"Of *course* we've *met*. Downstairs in the game-room, 'bout an hour or so ago. Hence the past tense. It would be impossible for us to be having this conversation if we hadn't."

"No, no. What I meant was . . . *ugh*. What I *meant* was, is it possible we've met somewhere else, somewhere else other than *con*?"

"Well, anything's *possible*," she said, and shrugged. "It's possible I could give birth to a mutant kangaroo with superpowers in the next thirty seconds. Damn, that'd be a quick pregnancy! But anyway . . ." She eyed him carefully, looking him up and down, then shook her head. "Mmmm . . . nope. We haven't. Like Commander Data and his evil twin Lore, I remember *everything*, and I don't recall us ever engaging in a conversational interface before this. But hey, it's a *nice* interface. So who's complaining?" In a high, funny voice, she turned her head and added, "*I am!*" She turned back the other way and said, "Quiet, you! I'm trying to *interface!*"

"I mean, it's just that I could've *sworn* I've seen you somewhere before. You don't happen to go to Wenzel U, do you?"

She gasped and put a hand to her mouth. "*Damn!* You've discovered my *secret identity!* And with my mild-mannered disguise thusly annihilated, I'm gonna have to be a superhero *all the frakking time* now. I'll have no choice! And then I'll burn out, and will have to give up crime-fighting for *good*, and thus leave the city in the clutches of madmen! *Madmen*, I tell

you!”

“Uh . . .” He was at a loss for words. For one thing, few women had ever talked to him for this long. For another, he found *this* one to be mesmerizingly demented. Buffy had hung around for *years* now, but she didn’t count; she was his roommate and best friend—not to mention Angelus’s girlfriend—and over the years, she’d become more like a sister than anything. Aside from her, he had little experience with the fairer sex; he knew less about women, romance, and sex than a disembodied alien consciousness downloaded into an androgynous android body. He had tried watching *Sex and the City*, but that had made him violent, so he’d stopped. He’d then tried reading Laurel K. Hamilton, but that shit just had been plain perverse. Finally, he’d tried reading *Cosmopolitan*, and had wound up putting the magazine down and backing away slowly. When it came to how to act around women, he felt as though he were crossing the Romulan Neutral Zone in a starship armed with squirt-guns.

Heck, now that he thought of it, there hadn’t even been this much actual conversation the night he’d lost his virginity. No, that had been more of a case of a ridiculously hot girl who had been stranded at his, Angelus’s, and Buffy’s place, and who—in a fluke that defied chaos theory itself—had taken an “interest” in him and had, over the course of one weekend, managed to lay him six ways from Alpha Centauri. Good memories. *Great* memories. Utterly useless. He cleared his throat and said, “Well, I *knew* I knew you from *somewhere*.”

“And I knew that you’d know that you knew. Did you know that?”

“Um . . . I *think* so,” he replied. “Uh, anyway. We’ve probably crossed paths without even knowing it. I usually work the labs. The computer labs, I mean.” Trying to sound nonchalant and cool and doing a bad job of it, he added, “So, like . . . what’s your major? I mean, I *assume* you’re a student, right?”

“Well,” she replied, “I *was* a *double* major, actually . . . A combo-meal consisting of a physics burger and a side of engineering fries topped with tangy multidisciplinary sauce. Graduated *egregia cum laude* in the summer of aught-ten.”

“Wow, *seriously?*” His eyebrows tried to climb into his hairline. “C’mon . . . you *couldn’t* have graduated then. You’re . . . I mean, *I’m* a double-major, and *I’m* still . . . I mean, *I’m* twenty-three, and you *can’t* be *that* much older than me—”

“Well, for your information, I’m *currently* hard at work on my doctorate.”

“*What?*” She *had* to be kidding with him. Had to. Then again, she *had* to be brilliant to have built that costume. If it *was* a costume . . .

“*Indeed!*” she exclaimed. “None of that interminable waiting by the big-ass Swedish particle accelerator for me, *no sir!* I’d rather be the reason they *build* the big-ass Swedish particle accelerator. Besides. Blackboards, chalk-dust, and calculators are what get *me* all hot and bothered, y’know? Well, that stuff, and Donnie Darko and Dr. Manhattan . . . giant blue dong, *oh my!* And oh yeah! Ian McKellen . . . but he has to wear his Magneto helmet if he wants to get any action from *me*.”

He hoped he wasn’t blushing. “Well, I don’t mean to be *rude*—”

“Ever notice how whenever someone says that, the next thing they say is usually extremely rude?”

“Well, *yeah*, but what I meant was . . . Well, my mom says it’s rude to ask a girl how *old* she is, given how we live in a patriarchal society that indoctrinates women with the idea that their worth as human beings is based on how well they measure up to some unrealistic standard of youth and beauty. *But—*” He sucked in a breath. “I just gotta know . . . How old *are* you?”

“Why, of all the *impertinent questions!*” she gasped, looking scandalized. “What a vile, mannerless inquiry! I’m *shocked*, affronted beyond reason! How *dareth* you! Of all the *unmitigated gall—!*” She hauled back a hand as if to smack him.

“Whoa, sorry, *sorry!*” he exclaimed, panic flooding his veins as he backed away slowly. “Look, I’m sorry. I’ll get out of your—”

She grabbed his coat-sleeve and tugged, laughing. “Oh c’mon, jeez, I was just *messin’* with ya! The answer is seven thousand, six hundred, and fifty-four *point—*” She poked him in the chest, “five.”

“Uh . . . is that twenty-one in *days?*”

“Indeed, good sir! Quite right! I’ve seen seven thousand, six hundred, and fifty-four *point* five beautiful, orange sunrises . . . and an equal number of gorgeous, purple sunsets. I prefer to count the days, y’see, as each one is a *challenge* we deserve credit for surviving.”

“Hmm. Nice philosophy. I’m a double-major too, y’know. Engineering, like you . . . but my other degree is in neuroscience.”

“Now *there’s* an intriguing cocktail,” she remarked. “Engineering and neuroscience. Okay. I am *so* not going to ask why you combined those two. Really, I’m totally not going to. Really. For serious. Not gonna do it. No—!” She threw up a hand and looked away dramatically. “Tell me not! Okay, lemme guess. C’mon, oh *please* can I guess? *Tell me, you secretive bastard!*”

“Um . . . okay,” he grinned, unable to help himself; her eyes were pretty when they glittered like that. *Stop it*, he told himself. *She’s way out of your league, and you know it; so stop getting your hopes up. Don’t get infatuated. Not again. That’s how you get hurt, remember?* He promptly ignored himself. “Sure, take your best shot. Guess away.”

She gasped. “I *knew* it! Just *knew* it! You’re building a Soong-type android with a positronic brain! Ooh, what’s its name? Oh *please* name it after me! *Please?*”

“Oh man, do I ever *wish*,” he admitted. “But no, nothing *that* earth-shaking. Well, maybe a *little*. Sort of. It’s a good thing, too, ‘cause on the list of people qualified to give birth to sentient artificial life, I don’t think I rank too highly.”

“For shame, sir! Where would *Victor Frankenstein* be if he talked like that!”

“Uh, well, probably happily married and with a successful medical career.” He laughed nervously, then studied his drink. “All I was saying to begin with was that you look really *young* to be doing doctoral work.”

She grinned. “Well, dad transferred to Nevada when I was 4,738.5 days old, right before my junior year; I got picked on like a *motherfrakker* for being so young, and it didn’t help that I was such a total *geek* . . . and it was even worse because I was *proud* of it. I graduated from the base’s high-school when I was 5,467.5 sunsets old, and enrolled at

Wenzel U that fall. A good deal of my grade-skipping was due to my teachers getting pissed off at me for reading epic fantasy novels in class . . . and *still* getting better grades than everyone else.”

“Wait . . . the *base's* school?”

“Yeah, the Air Force base.”

“Oh, you grew up on one of those?”

“Yep. Area 51.”

“Uh . . . *the* Area 51.” The gears in his head screeched to a grinding halt.

“Uh-huh, yeah.”

“Area . . . *fifty . . . one.*”

“Uh, yeah . . . again. Funny, you’re not *dressed* as the Doppler effect, but you’re doin’ a darned good impression of it.”

“Of *course* you’d say Area 51,” he said, and chuckled. “Because, *you*. The top secret military base that the government denies even exists . . . the place where they supposedly keep the flying saucers. *That* Area 51?”

“Yep! That’s the one! They deny it’s there, but it’s there, all right. And they *do* in fact have flying saucers there. I’ve *seen* them. Wasn’t supposed to, but I have. That’s where my dad went to work, way back when; his company’s an R&D contractor for the Air Force, y’see. It’s a bummer, him being so far away. I miss him.” She looked glum for a moment. “But, hey, he keeps in touch, so it’s all good in the hood. He tells me stuff. *Sends* me stuff.” She grinned fiendishly. “Y’know—stuff marked *Top Secret* and *For Your Eyes Only*. Equations, diagrams . . . various mechanical puzzles that need solving. And sometimes he even smuggles me out . . . *Toys*. You know—parts of the crashed ship that the military has on ice.”

“Oh *come on*,” he said. “Pull the other one. If that were true, why would you be telling *me*, some guy you just met?”

“Dunno. Perhaps I feel I can *trust* you. Can I? *Can* I trust you?” she asked, her raised eyebrow ping-ponging back and forth.

“Well, yeah, I . . . *guess* so.” Then, her eyes lending him confidence, he added, “Yeah. Yeah, *sure* you can . . .” He froze then, his mind going blank; he had been about to use her name, but had forgotten it. “Ugh, look. Forgive me for being *stupid*, but I . . . kinda forgot your name.”

“Ha! You’re *funny*.” She giggled. “That’s why we have *these*, y’know.” She tapped her name-tag. *Dizzy*, it read. Now he felt *really* stupid. She flourished aside an invisible hero-cape, leapt backward, and exclaimed, “Discuss: A dazzlingly demented dominatrix, a Discordian avenger, a whirling-dervish of derangement, her demeanor drastically different from the ditzy debutantes of the dominant, domesticated paradigm, a dare-devil who deftly deconstructs daydreams with a dire determination, in an attempt to deliver the denizens of this dimension from the dismal darkness of their day-to-day depravity and debauchedly dramatic feelings of despair!” She sucked in a deep breath and stuck out a mechanical gauntlet. “Dizzy Roentgen, at your service. Scientist, inventor, Lurker, Trekker, Caprican, Browncoat, Whovian, subgenius . . . and semi-professional Chaos Magician, though I frequently find myself returning to the ‘technomage’ paradigm. The comforts of home, and

all that.” She chuckled, and looked wistful for a moment. “Ah, the Sons of Ether and the Virtual Adepts. My home-boys.” She tapped her heart with her fist twice.

“Humm. A *technomage*, huh?” Without thinking, he smiled, and quoted *Babylon 5*. “*We are dreamers, shapers, singers, and makers—*”

“*—We study the mysteries of laser and circuit, crystal and scanner,*” she chimed in, the two of them grinning like mad as they recited the line together. “*Holographic demons and invocations of equations. These are the tools we employ, and we know many things . . .*”

“*Hells yeah!*” She put up a hand, and tried to high-five him. He got overeager, and missed, spilling his soda all over them both, and they both cracked up laughing. She put up her hand again. This time, their palms connected, and they both broke into fits of laughter once more.

“Man,” she crowed, tossing her head back and cackling, “are we *eleven different dimensions of simply-not-right*, or *what?*”

“Whew!” he said, relaxing a little and easing into a more thoughtful mode. “Your world sounds so full of *wonder*, Dizzy. I wish mine was. Myself, I tend to be more . . . well, *scientific* about things. Come to think of it . . . I’ve *never* met a scientist who actually believed in *magic* before now. You *sure* you’re a physicist?” He offered her an approximation of what he supposed was a confident, charming smile.

She laughed and wiggled her eyebrows up and down. “In the words of Werner Heisenberg . . . Maybe. Actually, you’d be *blown away* by how compatible the magical and scientific worlds are. *Must* I quote Arthur C. Clarke? I mean, do I *gotta?* Doing so would be *so* pedantic. But you just watch it, buster . . . I ain’t afraid to get all *pedantic* up in this bitch.”

“Lemme guess,” he said. “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.’ Right?”

“Yes! *Exactly!* Look, imagine an atheist and some religious guy, neither of whom have ever seen a factory robot before, suddenly happen upon one doing its *thang*, and they both realize that some force other than electricity has to be directing its movements. The religious dude screams, ‘That thar machine is *possessed!* The pah’ur of Christ compels it!’ The atheist—who in my mind kinda sounds like Spock—says, ‘Captain . . . I have analyzed these readings, and I can detect no other forces present; the only *logical* conclusion is that there *is* no such force.’ But then, a *third* dude steps out from behind the emerald curtain, and reveals that *he* possesses the power of the *algorithm*, the *program code*. And that’s the heart of it, right there: The ‘energies’ we mages command aren’t really *energies* as physics understands the concept . . . they’re more like programs, algorithms, code that we key into the circuitry of the living computer that we commonly call ‘the universe.’”

“*Wow*. My friend Angelus would absolutely *love* that definition,” he said, grinning. “And when you explain it like *that*, it all sounds so perfectly . . . well, *reasonable*.” He added, in an English accent, “Well, ah *say* reasonable . . .”

She whacked him lightly on the arm. “Verily I say unto you, *plblblblblbt!* Hear me now, Gadget! I’m *not* some fluffy-bunny. No . . . I’m a *paradigm-hacking badass*. I’ve used a toy sonic screwdriver as a wand to call the corners, a plasma globe as my ritual flame, and an

Erlenmeyer flask as my cauldron. I call upon *Thor* to bring the *thunder*. I capture elementals in Poké Balls. And I channel *Ishtar* and *Betty Boop* when I *fuck*.”

For the third time, he choked on his drink.

“But still,” she went on, “It’s good that you’re skeptical, y’know? Keeps you from getting all caught up in the dominant frakkin’ paradigm. Most Mundanes will gladly accept whatever their ‘common sense’ or the idiots on Fox News *tell* them is reality, even if it *isn’t*. And when they run into something that requires them to use their *imagination*s and actually *think*, well, they’ll either pretend it isn’t there, or they’ll simply ignore it, and go around. Or they’ll condemn it as evil, and try to destroy it. Trust me.” She sighed. “This I know, good sir . . . this I know.”

“I just meant that . . . well . . .” Don’t *scare this one off, please*, pleaded a small voice inside his head. “I mean, *you* might be able to get away with having a philosophy like that, but my former *stepdad* was a psychiatrist, and my *mom* is a research-psychologist. *They* always told me that I’ve got such an overactive imagination it occasionally overheats, and threatens to blow all my fuses, so I gotta be careful about how I construct my . . . *paradigm*. Y’see, I have this little . . . mental problem. I mean, it’s under *control* and all, I take medication for it, but—”

“They *what?*” cried Dizzy, sneering, and seeming to suddenly pay attention again. “Why, nonsense! A little paradigmatical recklessness is *never* a bad thing! I’ll let ya in on a little secret. What psychologists like your mom call *magickal thinking*—and usually in a tone of voice suggesting that someone just farted—is really a *discipline*, of sorts. It’s actually a psycho-mythic version of the scientific method, if you think about it.”

He promptly extended his hand. “Terry . . . Terry Anders,” he said, shaking her hand.

“I know . . . it’s on your name tag,” she said, and then leaned in closer. “And it says your *real* name is *Gadget*.”

He started to speak, wrestling with his shy, self-consciousness streak until he had it in a headlock. “Well, yeah. That’s what Angelus always calls me. Figured it’d make a good ‘nym. See, I’m an inventor. Always coming up ideas for . . . well, neat little gadgets. Speaking of which . . . How and why did you *build* that thing you’re wearing? It had to be a *ton* of work, so you *had* to have a reason.”

She smiled softly, then looked down. “Let’s just say it makes me a better dancer.”

Now what the hells did *that mean?* Oh well, the time for idle talk had passed. This was it; it was now or never. “Um, *okay* . . . Hey, listen”—*here we go*, he thought; *do-or-die time*—“Um, I don’t normally . . . uh, *do* this kind of thing, so I’m not very good at it, but would you . . . uh . . . like to, uh . . . go somewhere more private? Maybe my room, or something?” She raised an eyebrow, and he quickly shifted gears and pivoted. “Oh, wait, no! No! I didn’t mean it like *that!* I just meant that maybe we could hang out and . . . *talk*, y’know, away from all the, uh . . . Y’know, maybe get to know each other better. I mean, uh, in the *Platonic* sense, of course! I mean, you don’t *have* to, or anything; it’s not like I’m gonna tie you up and throw you in the back of a van, or anything.” *Please let her realize that was a joke.*

“Aw, why *not?* That could be *fun*.” She paused, and fingered the buttons on his tweed

coat. “Your *room*, huh? Hmm. Just the *two* of us?”

Unable to keep the disappointment from his voice, he licked his lips and said, “Well, uh, *no*, not exactly. I’m with friends. My buddy Angelus and my friend, Buffy.”

“*Ooh*, Angelus and Buffy. A vampire in search of a soul, and the hunter-of-things-that-go-bump-in-the-dark that loves him. How very Shakespearean. Which is appropriate, seein’ as how Joss Whedon has now gone and *done* Shakespeare.”

“Eh, they have their moments, I guess. They’re in back in our room right now. If I know them, they’re either fucking like rabbits—”

“*Run away, run away!*” crooned Dizzy, then cleared her throat. “J’excuse, monsieur. Please, continue.”

“—Or Angelus is coding. He and I are sort of in the middle of a secret new project. And if he’s coding, then Buffy is probably mad at him, and is probably losing herself in a textbook. They’re both really into the whole ‘vampire lifestyle’ thing. Buffy goes to Wenzel too, y’know—getting her Masters in biomedical engineering. Anyway. You wanna come?”

“Do I *what?*” She blinked, taken aback.

“Uh . . . oh! No, no. No, I meant do you wanna *come hang out with us?*”

“Oh, okay, just checkin, because I’m not sure what that would do to the suit. But sure, why not?” Then she smiled, and Gadget was fairly sure that if she had asked him to run through the halls naked, he would have. “Lead the way, Doctor. I’ll be your *Companion*. Only, y’know, in a ‘platonic-yet-still-with-some-sexual-tension-in-the-TARDIS’ way, and not a ‘Kaylee-Fry-doing-Simon-in-the-engine-room-of-the-Serenity’ way.”

As they walked, Gadget kept looking back, partly to see if she was following, and partly because he was amazed at the smooth responsiveness of that exoskeleton she wore; it was almost a *part* of her. Momentarily, he paused to get his bearings, then headed toward the elevators, his navigational skills temporarily short-circuited by hormones.