

CHASING DENISE

by ERRATIC CHEESE

* * *

CHAPTER ONE TOUGHGUY'S TABLE

*Alas, I thought I knew so much
Of love, and yet I know so little!
For I cannot stop myself loving her
From whom I shall never have joy.*

-Baron Von ToughGuy 3058

The PUB canteen was always alive with activity. If you weren't on duty, you were off duty. And if you were off duty, you were at the canteen. That's just how things worked. This was the waterhole of the DropShip. The booze oasis. A place for relaxation, fun and fine brew. Yup, everything happened down here at the canteen. It's where guys met girls, lost poker or got stoned. And with the band's jazzy music wafting thick in the air, the room had a satisfyingly dreamlike ambience.

At a corner table, shrouded in muted shadow, Sergeant ToughGuy gulped down on his beer with a pleasant smile. He wasn't drunk yet, but he could feel the inbound intoxication cascading towards his brain.

Sitting opposite ToughGuy, both in similar states of inebriation, sat Lieutenant Vereth and MechWarrior DaishiGuy. The trio feasted on frothy booze, patting their stomachs and belching unashamedly.

"Okay," ToughGuy began, "so I figure if I take off my clothes, the bees will lose my scent. You know? So I rip off my clothes and I'm running through this forest naked, only these darn bees are still chasing me!"

“Damn, dude.” DaishiGuy leaned forward, totally engrossed in ToughGuy’s tale. The Sergeant had been rambling on for over an hour, but his wacky stories had DaishiGuy totally hooked.

“Yeah, I just couldn’t shake them.” ToughGuy explained. “I thought I was gonna die, man.”

“Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Did you die?”

“No man, of course I didn’t frickin’ die!” ToughGuy snapped. “Shut up and pay attention!”

“Sorry.”

“Okay, so I’m running naked through this forest but I can’t seem to shake these damn bees.” ToughGuy continued. “So that’s when I figure I’d go hide in a bear cave.”

“A bear cave?”

“Yeah. I figure the sight of a big fifteen foot bear should scare the hell outta those puny bees.” ToughGuy stated. “So I run into this bear cave and I’m hiding in the dark. Next thing I know, this giant-ass bear comes out of nowhere, grabs me by the neck and starts chewing on my head!”

“Holy crap!”

“I know. I’m just sitting there, getting my head chewed off, and all the while I’m trying to figure out what to do next.” ToughGuy paused. “I mean, I either stay in the cave and get ripped apart by this bear, or I run outside and get killed by bees.”

“So what did you do?”

“You see, this is the clever part.” ToughGuy leaned forward, a glint in his eyes. “I figured I’d turn them against one other.”

“Against one another?”

“Yeah.” ToughGuy nodded. “My plan was, I’d run out of the cave and lure the bear into the swarm of bees. The bees attack the bear and leave me alone. Easy.”

“Cool plan.”

“Yeah, I thought so to.”

“Well what happened?”

“I ran out of the cave and got shot by some **Park Ranger.**”

“Park Ranger?”

“Yeah, tranquilliser dart hit me in the nuts.”

“Since when do ninjas use tranquilliser guns?”

“I said **Park Ranger** not **Power Rangers.**”

“Oh.”

“And anyway, you gotta realise by this point I was swollen like crazy. I’d taken about 500 bee stings and a couple blows from a bear. I was swollen all over and my clothes were totally torn.” ToughGuy shrugged. “So when this park ranger dude sees me, naturally, the guy freaks out.”

DaishiGuy nodded. “He probably thought you were some kinda abominable man-beast, or something.”

“Yeah, took 2 weeks for the swelling to go down. The doctors wouldn’t let me leave the hospital because they kept waiting for my weener and my biceps to shrink.” ToughGuy patted his muscular frame. “I had to explain to them that I lifted weights and was naturally well endowed.”

“Dude, that’s a freaking amazing tale.”

“I guess.” ToughGuy lazily lifted his beer mug. “Anyway, the moral of this story is that life sucks big time, so you might as well live it drunk.”

“Live what drunk? Life?” DaishiGuy asked, stifling a burp.

“Exactly.” ToughGuy nodded.

DaishiGuy leaned back in his chair, stirring the surface of his beer with his index finger. Middle-aged ice cubes melted into lozenges, swirling playfully to death within the delicious brew.

“As a fan of booze consumption, I ain’t gonna argue with that.” DaishiGuy licked his beer soaked fingers. “But I gotta say, I don’t think it’s possible.”

“What do you mean?” ToughGuy raised an eyebrow.

“Dude, do the math. Fifty-two weeks in a year. Forty eight beers a day... that’s like fifty thousand cans of beer each year, dude!” DaishiGuy argued. “That’s a lot of beer.”

“So?”

“I’m just saying, you know, it’s a lot of beer.”

“You saying you can’t handle it?” ToughGuy smiled.

“Course I can handle it!” DaishiGuy blurted. “I’m just saying that between the two of us, this universe ain’t got enough beer to keep us suitably intoxicated for the rest of our lives!”

“I never thought about it that way.” ToughGuy admitted.

DaishiGuy smiled and sipped at his mug. “The life of a drunk is a complex thing, my friend.”

ToughGuy nodded and raised his mug in a mock toast. “To beer, the cause and solution to all of life’s problems!”

“Amen!” DaishiGuy joined in with a laugh.

Across the table, Lieutenant Vereth sighed and shook his head. He’d been listening to both ToughGuy and DaishiGuy rambling on for the past half hour and their insane dialogue was beginning to suck away at his intelligence.

“You two guys done spewing verbal crapulence or should I start stabbing myself to death with this spoon?” Vereth asked, flashing his PUB-mates a look of pure disdain.

“What’s your problem, Vereth?” ToughGuy asked, setting down his beer mug.

Vereth folded his arms. “Well for starters, you guys are lousy conversationalists when intoxicated.”

“Ain’t no one forcing you to sit here.” ToughGuy snapped.

“Believe me, if I could get up, I would.” Vereth said

“Then what’s stopping you?” DaishiGuy asked.

“I gotta pee.” Vereth explained. “But I’m too lazy to walk to the bathroom and all this crazy beer talk is making my crotch all nervous.”

“Heh. I pity you and your saturated bladder!” ToughGuy grinned. “You may wanna’ look away while I order myself another mug.”

ToughGuy smiled and signalled the waiter to bring their table another pitcher of beer.

“You see guys, right now, at this moment in time, regardless of everything else that’s going on in the universe, nothing is more important to me than achieving the perfect state of complete and total intoxication.” ToughGuy garbled on. “If beer is my God, then drunkenness is my religion. You know what I’m saying?”

“Amen brother.” DaishiGuy nodded.

“You live and then you die, man.” ToughGuy continued, gulping down the remains of his beer. “That’s your whole damned existence summed up in one sentence. So basically, 50 percent of your life, you’re dead. Know what I mean? It just ain’t frickin’ fair.”

Across the table, Vereth shook his head. “You know ToughGuy, your rants are proof of reincarnation; no one could get this dumb in just one lifetime.”

“What?”

Vereth growled. “50 percent of your life, you’re dead?”

“Yeah? What about it?” ToughGuy asked.

“It makes no sense!” Vereth grumbled. “A hundred percent of your life, you’re alive.”

“Yeah, but then you die.” ToughGuy said.

“Death isn’t a percentage of your life, you dumbass!” Vereth stated.

“Yeah it is.” ToughGuy insisted. “It’s like fifty percent. Probably more.”

“Screw you and your negative IQ, ToughGuy!” Vereth snapped. “You’re twice as stupid when you’re drunk!”

ToughGuy lazily folded his arms. “Maybe. Maybe not. Who cares? Fact is, this booze is the only thing that keeps me living. Like blood in my veins, man.”

The waiter arrived and gently set down a pair of tall glass beer mugs. Ice cubes bobbed seductively within a sea of sensual brew, trails of condensation snaking their way down the curved glass walls like hungry tongues.

“All this booze is messing with your mind, ToughGuy.” Vereth warned. “All you do nowadays is sit at this table, sulking and moaning about your life.”

“I don’t sulk.” ToughGuy snapped. “It’s controlled pessimism.”

“What?”

“You know? Ying and Yang, mystic voodoo, bananas in panamas.” ToughGuy explained. “It’s an eastern thing.”

“Cut the hillbilly ethnics, ToughGuy.” Vereth sighed. “Sooner or later, you’re gonna realise you’re a god-damn moron.”

ToughGuy smiled. “You’re just pissed off cus’ you’re not drunk.”

Vereth shook his head. “I don’t know why I bother hanging out with you two bums.”

“Who you calling a bum?” ToughGuy asked, swatting the flies away from his alcohol soaked shirt.

“Look at you!” Vereth said. “You’re pretty much drunk, twenty four hours a day. Stop drowning your sorrows, ToughGuy. Beer doesn’t fix problems. Beer won’t get Denise to love you.”

ToughGuy’s eyes widened. “Who says this is about Denise?”

“Isn’t it?”

“Well...maybe.” ToughGuy shrugged.

“You’re wasting away, ToughGuy. You think Denise will ever fall for a drunk stoner like yourself?” Vereth asked.

“Shut up, Vereth!” ToughGuy blurted. “You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“You need help, ToughGuy. Look at you-”

“I said shut up! This table is for booze consumers only. Get lost!”

“I just wanna help.” Vereth explained.

“What are you now, a psychiatrist?” ToughGuy asked.

“Yes.”

“What the hell!?” ToughGuy blurted. “Since when?”

“I downloaded my diploma off the holo-net yesterday.” Vereth explained. “I’m now qualified to psycho-analyse humans and geese.”

“I ain’t no geese!” ToughGuy blurted.

“I didn’t say you were.” Vereth said, leaning forward. “Tell me, what’s on your mind, ToughGuy?”

“What?” ToughGuy asked.

“Maybe I can help.” Vereth said. “If you opened up to me a bit, I might be able to get to the root of your drinking problem.”

“I don’t have a drinking problem!” ToughGuy snapped.

“You’re on your fiftieth jug of beer, you haven’t left this table in 2 days and twenty minutes ago you saluted a frickin’ fish bowl.” Vereth yelled. “Don’t tell me you ain’t got a drinking problem!”

ToughGuy slumped backwards and exhaled weakly. Vereth was right. ToughGuy had been sitting at this table for over two days, filling his stomach with beer, trying desperately to force the images of Denise out of his mind. But how could he? Denise was imprinted in his thoughts, emblazoned on his brain like one of those chunky permanent marker pens that you use to write your name on luggage to prevent it from being stolen by those shady bandit guys who hang out by the airport conveyor belts. Yeah, Denise was a sexual goddess. How could he possibly stop her from invading his thoughts and dreams?

“I’m just going through a rough period... you know...it’s no big deal.” ToughGuy stammered.

“I understand.” Vereth nodded. “Listen, let me perform a little psycho-analysis exercise on you. It’s very simple and I think it may help.”

“Whatever.” ToughGuy shrugged.

“Okay, I want you to say the first word that comes to mind.” Vereth explained.

“Brain.” ToughGuy snapped.

Vereth shook his head. “No, we haven’t started!”

“Begun.”

“No, wait!”

“Pause.”

“Stop!”

“Cease.”

“SILENCE!”

“Quiet.”

“ENOUGH!”

“Plenty.”

“Would you please listen?”

“Hear.”

“NO YOU STUPID FOOL! YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND!”

“Comprehend.”

“Ahhhh Get away from me! Get away from me!”

“Leave, leave, leave.”

“Dammit ToughGuy. You’re CRAZY!!!”

“Insane! Unhinged! Demented!”

Vereth tossed his hands up in despair. “Forget it! Forget it! The test is over, ToughGuy. Just shut up already!”

ToughGuy looked blankly back at Vereth. “So how did I do?”

“You did good, ToughGuy.” Vereth forced himself to say. “You’re all cured. NOW HAND ME A DAMN BEER AND LEAVE ME ALONE!”

DaishiGuy tossed Vereth a bottle of brew and watched as the guy greedily sucked down on it’s succulent innards. Vereth had the right idea. It was no use. ToughGuy was unreachable. So what if the Sergeant wanted to drink himself deep into an early grave? Who cares? Might as well join him.

“That’s the spirit, Vereth.” DaishiGuy patted Vereth on the back. “Just keep on drinking. That’s the PUB way!”

“Yeah, well the PUB way cuts your life expectancy down by fifteen years!” Vereth snapped.

“Naw, man. You gotta chill out. Embrace life. Embrace beer.” DaishiGuy said. “Hell, beer is all that keeps me going.”

“That’s your damn solution to everything, DaishiGuy.” Vereth sighed. “It’s a wonder you haven’t died of alcohol poisoning.”

DaishiGuy smiled proudly. “Well, I can’t pretend to understand the mystic mysteries of beer. All I know is, fifty cans a day helps blur the cold harshness of my sad and pathetic life.”

“What harshness?” Vereth fumed. “You’re Chief Brigade Pillow Tester. All you do is sleep and test pillows!”

“The pillows make me itch.” DaishiGuy shrugged.

Vereth shook his head. “Big frickin’ deal. Try working in the engine room for a month! I swear, I’m growing a third ear and my toenails are starting to glow!”

“Radiation?”

“No, I’m a frickin’ cosmetic surgery junkie.” Vereth blurted sarcastically.

ToughGuy shook his head, a sad expression drifting over his face. “That’s nothing. You guys don’t know pain. You guys have it easy.”

The duo turned to face the Sergeant. “Oh? And how’s that?”

ToughGuy folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. “Well, try courting Denise. Try winning her love. There ain’t no greater challenge in this universe.”

“So I was right.” Vereth smiled. “This little booze marathon is all about Denise.”

ToughGuy nodded.

“You know ToughGuy,” DaishiGuy set down his beer mug, “maybe if you stopped freaking Denise out, she’d stop breaking your bones.”

“What are you talking about? I don’t freak Denise out.” ToughGuy said.

“Yes you do.”

“In what way?”

“It’s the little thing.” DaishiGuy announced. “For example, you’re always looking at her cleavage.”

“I don’t look at her cleavage.” ToughGuy blushed.

“Dude, it’s like your eyes are tied to her boobs with an invisible leash.”

“So? What’s wrong with that? Denise got some nice boobs.”

“ToughGuy, cleavage is like looking at the sun. You don’t stare at it. It’s too risky. You get a sense of it and then you look away.” DaishiGuy explained.

“I never knew that before.” ToughGuy admitted.

“And then there’s the way you dress.” DaishiGuy continued. “I mean, what’s up with the whole ‘netted vest’ thing?”

“I like to show off my well oiled muscles.”

“Yeah, well it makes you come across as a sort of male bimbo.” DaisihGuy said. “A mimbo.”

“What the hell is a mimbo?” ToughGuy blurted.

“I don’t know, but it obviously freaks chicks out.”

“Oh.”

“And another thing,” DaishiGuy continued, “you might want to cut your toenails.”

“What? My toenails are fine.”

“They’re long.”

“Long is good.”

“Man, it’s the thirty-sixth century.” DaishiGuy said. “Human’s don’t need toenails. We stopped using them for climbing trees and warding off predators the day we invented ladders and lasers.”

“That’s a load of crap. Denise loves me the way I am. She’s just playing hard to get!” ToughGuy said.

DaishiGuy laughed. “ToughGuy, she broke your spine last month. That ain’t romance! That’s assault with intent to kill!”

“You may have a point.” ToughGuy considered.

“Damn right I do.” DaishiGuy nodded. “Listen, Denise and you just aren’t meant for one another.”

“But I can’t imagine myself with anyone else!” ToughGuy squealed.

Across the table and opposite ToughGuy, Vereth shook his head. “You’ll get desperate and settle for someone else. It happens all the time. You see, sex and women are like food or Pokemon. You give up either, and you die a slow and horrible death.”

“What you talking about?” ToughGuy asked, dumbfounded

Vereth sat up straight, mentally preparing his little lecture.

“You see ToughGuy, programmed into our bodies is an insatiable hunger for food, sex and Pokemon. It’s human nature. Look, here’s an example.” Vereth tapped DaishiGuy on the shoulder. “DaishiGuy, if you had to give up sex, food or Pokemon, which would you pick?”

DaishiGuy paused for a moment while he considered. “Uh. Okay... sex. No, food. No, Pokemon. No, uh... I want them all! I want girls on Pikachu flavoured bread!”

“See what I mean?” Vereth smiled proudly. “Asking someone to chose between the three is like asking them to commit suicide.”

“Yeah, I guess I’m trying to live a fantasy.” ToughGuy shrugged.

“Damn right.” Vereth nodded.

“I just want ceaseless joy. You know? Never-ending passion like Romeo and Juliet.” ToughGuy whined.

“Dude, Romeo and Juliet both wound up dead.” Vereth pointed out.

“Oh. . .what about that guy from Titanic?”

“Dead.”

“Siskel and Ebert.”

“One’s fat the other is dead.”

“Prince Charles and Diana.”

“Gay and dead.”

“Bert and Ernie.”

“Dead Muppets.”

“Shrike and Perrin!”

“Okay.” Vereth grinned. “One point for you.”

ToughGuy smiled and basked in his minor victory. He grabbed his beer mug and took another slug at his booze. Orgasm in a bottle, the succulent brew raced down his throat, splashing downwards and tickling the mucus lining of his stomach.

“Listen ToughGuy,” DaishiGuy began, “what you’ve got to understand is that Denise is a first class lady. She’s a sexual goddess. No offence, but there’s no way a loser like yourself is ever gonna get in tight with the likes of her.”

ToughGuy wiped his mouth and set down his mug. “But I got big biceps.”

“Yeah, but chicks like Denise aren’t into all that superficial crap.” DaishiGuy explained. “They’re high maintenance ladies! Sophisticated mommas! They like the whole package, dude. Tall, dark and handsome. Brains and a body.”

“But I’m tall, dark and handsome.” ToughGuy insisted.

“You’re tall, dark, handsome and STUPID!”

“Yeah ToughGuy.” Vereth interjected. “Your stupidity is a major turn-off.”

“But I love her.” ToughGuy whispered.

“Love means nothing in this day and age, dude.” DaishiGuy said. “Love is cheap. Everyone’s got love. Nah, nowadays it’s all about the accessories.”

“What accessories?” ToughGuy asked.

“Exactly!” DaishiGuy pronounced. “What accessories? Face it ToughGuy, you have nothing that appeals to a girl like Denise. You’re a drunk stoner. You’ve got no direction. You’re like a compass with no arms! A traffic light with no light bulbs! Denise would have to be out of her frickin’ mind to even consider loving a guy like you!”

Vereth nodded. “And besides, winning her love is getting to be stressful on your bones.”

“Yeah.” DaishiGuy agreed. “What’s the count at so far? Twenty five? Thirty?”

ToughGuy shook his head, pain and sadness heavy in his eyes. Every time he tried to seduce Denise, she broke one of his bones. It had come to the point where it was almost a ritualistic part of their courtship. He would walk up to her and she would punch him in

the face. He would bring her flowers and she would fracture his spine. It went on and on, and frankly, ToughGuy was running out of bones to break.

“Thirty one.” ToughGuy finally whispered. “She broke my elbow again this morning.”

DaishiGuy: “Ouch.”

“But still, I can’t give up hope!” ToughGuy said triumphantly.

“There is no hope. She hates your guts!!” DaishiGuy said.

“Still, I figure soon she’ll cave in with pity. I mean, there’s only so many times you can knock a guy unconscious before you fall madly in love with him!” ToughGuy said.

“Keep telling yourself that and you’ll end up in a wheel chair!!” Vereth said.

“I am in a wheel chair!!!” ToughGuy proclaimed.

“HOLY CRAP!!!” Vereth blurted, suddenly noticing ToughGuy sitting in a wheelchair. “Didn’t notice your wheels, dude. When did that happen?”

“Yesterday.” ToughGuy grumbled. “I tried to buy Denise a drink so she broke my legs and stabbed my knees with a toothpick.”

“Ouch...and yet you still love her?” Vereth said.

“What the hell do you expect? I can’t stop thinking about her. Denise is like this really sexy screensaver, hardwired into my brain.” ToughGuy yelled. “You know what I mean?”

“Nope.” Vereth mumbled. “My screensaver is a picture of Crowfoot in a bikini.”

“That’s freaky, man.” ToughGuy stated.

“Yeah, I know.” Vereth admitted.

DaishiGuy sighed. “Listen ToughGuy, I think you should just accept the fact that you and Denise aren’t made for one another. She’s beyond you and I. Face it, you should be looking for something a little lower down the ladder.”

“What ladder?” ToughGuy asked.

“The ladder of love, man.” DaishiGuy said.

“What?”

“You know? The ladder of love. At the top of the ladder, you have the really hot chicks. The real primo-classy ladies like Denise or Princess Leia. But at the bottom of the ladder, nah, at the bottom you have the really sub-par gals. Chicks like Oprah, Rosie O'Donnell or Carlton from Fresh Prince.”

Dumbfounded, ToughGuy stared blankly back at DaishiGuy. “What’s all of this gotta do with ladders?”

“Nothing, it’s just a metaphor.”

“Metaphor? But I’m a guy, I don’t have periods.”

“That’s MENOPAUSE!” DaishiGuy yelled. “Man you’re so frickin’ dumb!”

“Here you are talking about love and ladders, what do you expect? I’m all confused!” ToughGuy tossed his hands up in despair.

“All right, all right, forget about it.” DaishiGuy gave up.

Vereth considered the situation for a moment and then said: “DaishiGuy is right, ToughGuy. This whole situation is like that movie E.T.”

“Oh God, what the hell are you talking about now?” ToughGuy blurted.

“You know, E.T?” Vereth said. “The alien with the flash-light finger.”

“Yeah, but how the hell is my love-life like E.T?”

“Well, you see when I was a kid, I loved E.T.” Vereth admitted.

“You mean like sexually?” ToughGuy asked.

“No!” Vereth blurted.

“I don’t wanna know about your alien fetishes, Vereth.” ToughGuy said.

“I don’t have an alien fetish!”

“You just said you-”

“No, I mean as far as I was concerned, E.T was the most amazing movie ever!” Vereth explained. “I would sit down in front of my holo-screen and watch it all day.”

“That’s sad, man.” ToughGuy pointed out.

“Well yeah, in hindsight I realise that. But that’s not the end of the story. You see, one day a couple years ago, I sat down to watch E.T. for the thousandth time, when something odd happened.” Vereth explained.

“You got a boner during the flying bicycle scene?” ToughGuy joked.

“What? No! I just couldn’t stand the movie! I hated E.T! By the end of the movie I wanted logs to randomly fall and smash open his big alien head. I wanted E.T dead!” Vereth seethed.

“Well duh, E.T. sucks big rhino gonads, man.” ToughGuy said.

“Yes it does.” Vereth admitted. “And that’s the point. It took me many years to realise that E.T. sucks. Maybe one day you’ll feel the same way about Denise.”

“You’re comparing my girl to a dorky looking alien?” ToughGuy snapped.

“No, I’m just saying-”

“Don’t make me roll you over with this chair!” ToughGuy threatened.

“Screw you, you misinterpreting fool. All I’m saying is-” Vereth began.

“Oh, I know what you’re saying!” ToughGuy fumed. “You think I’m some kinda pervert! You think I fantasise about aliens, tentacle humping on some far away swamp planet! Vereth dude, you’ve got a seriously warped and sick mind!” ToughGuy snarled.

“Dammit ToughGuy, you’re just a total dumbass.” Vereth said, throwing his hands up in despair. “Someone toss me another beer.”

* * *

CHAPTER TWO THE BRIDGE

*Rubber Ducky, you’re the one,
You make bath times, lots of fun,
Rubber Ducky, I’m awfully fond of you,
Doo-bee-doo!*

-Nicholas Kerensky 2815

“Bad boys, bad boys, whatcha gonna do, whatcha gonna do when they come for you! Bad boys! ” Major Loki stylishly whipped out his sidearm and twirled it around on his finger before smoothly returning the weapon to its holster. “Guys, I’m just totally bad!”

“Shut up, Loki!” Crowfoot snarled. “You’re not a bad-boy. You’re lame! You’re a lame boy! You suck total ass!”

The two senior officers were on the main bridge of the DropShip, surrounded on all sides by flickering computer banks and display screens. Ahead of them, a massive view-port displayed a streaking star field, while to their left and right, PUB sub-officers mindlessly attended to various degrading chores.

“You’re just jealous because my shift is over.” Major Loki smiled and waltzed up onto the upper command deck. “Admit it.”

“No I’m not!” Crowfoot protested.

“Yes you are.” Loki grinned. “Come on. Admit it.”

“I’m not jealous!” Crowfoot yelled. “In fact I’m glad your shift is over. Now get away from me!”

“Awww.” Loki chuckled. “Is Mister Senior Officer feeling a little blue?”

“Get away from me Loki!”

“You’re just jealous because I’m off duty. You’re jealous because I’m going down to the canteen to get stoned. And you’re jealous because you have five more hours till your shift ends.”

“You know what?” Crowfoot leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. “You’re right. I am jealous.”

“I knew it!”

“But then again, I’m your commanding officer.” Crowfoot stood up. “And you know what that means?”

Loki gulped. “Uh. . .no.”

“It means that I should never have to feel jealous.”

“What?”

Crowfoot stepped towards Loki and said with a hiss: “It means that you have to do as I say.”

“Now wait a minute-”

“Hmmm. I think I’ll head on down to the canteen for a couple hours of boozing.” Crowfoot said nonchalantly. “Loki, why don’t you stay here for the next five hours and cover my shift while I’m away.”

“You can’t do that!”

“Yes I can.”

“This isn’t fair!”

“You have a complaint? Log it with a senior officer.”

“You are my senior officer!”

Crowfoot smiled. “Ain’t it great.”

“Damn you, Crowfoot!”

And so with a swagger Crowfoot exited the bridge, humming to himself as he did so. “Bad boys, bad boys, whatcha gonna do, whatcha gonna do when they come for you! Bad boys!”

Major Loki sighed and slumped down in a nearby chair. He’d been stuck on the bridge for the past 5 hours, bored out of his mind while he waited for his shift to end. He had been looking forward to a quiet afternoon at the canteen. A couple beers, maybe some poker, a little dinner before bed . . .Damn Crowfoot for robbing him of such delights!

“Wait a second.” Major Loki rubbed his chin, an idea blossoming in his mind. “With Crowfoot gone, that means I’m the senior officer on deck. . .Which means. . .”

Loki spun his chair around and pointed a finger at MechWarrior Rifleman, sitting peacefully halfway across the room.

“Rifleman, I’m leaving you in charge!” Major Loki snapped. “Cover things for a couple hours before I get back.”

MechWarrior Rifleman gasped. “But my shift ends in five minutes!”

“You have a complaint? Log it with a senior officer!”

“But-”

“That’s an order!”

Major Loki smiled and stood up. The afternoon awaited him. Food, poker, booze. . . Yes, the night was young.

* * *

CHAPTER THREE THE CANTEEN

*The lanky hank of a 'she' in the inn over there
Nearly killed me for asking the loan of a glass of beer
May the devil grip the whey-faced wench by the hair
And beat bad manners out of her skin for a year!*

- Lieutenant Verybad 3042

“Oh damn.” DaishiGuy cursed.

At the far side of the room, the cafeteria doors had swung open to reveal the imposing figure of Major Loki. The Major was dressed in full PUB uniform: khaki trousers, khaki shirt and a snazzy leather jacket with the PUB logo emblazoned on the back. The Major scanned the room before stomping purposefully toward a corner table occupied by the engineering duo, Shrike and Perrin.

“Menstrual craps acting up again, Daishi?” Vereth asked.

“What? No!” DaishiGuy snapped.

“Then what’s wrong?” Vereth asked, setting down his beer mug.

“It’s Major Loki.” DaishiGuy pointed out. “The Norse God of Mischief himself.”

“So?”

“I owe the guy like, fifty credits!” DaishiGuy said.

“You owe the Major fifty credits? How come?”

“Nah, it’s nothing.” DaishiGuy shrugged. “We made a bet and I lost.”

DaishiGuy pulled out his wallet and flipped through his cash. “All I got is 25 C-bills and a box of tic-tacs,” he said.

ToughGuy grinned. “So what did you and Major Loser bet on?”

“It’s nothing.” DaishiGuy said nervously. “Just some stupid bet that the Major won. . . Listen, you guys gotta help me out. Gotta loan me some cash.”

“All I got is a fiver.” ToughGuy said, checking his wallet.

“And I’m almost broke.” Vereth said. “What did you bet on?”

“Uh...I shouldn’t tell.” DaishiGuy mumbled.

“Spill the beans! What’s with the secrecy?” ToughGuy insisted.

DaishiGuy sighed and turned to ToughGuy. “Okay, okay. You know last Monday when you were sitting at the bar eating peanuts?”

“Those were salted acorns.”

“Yeah, whatever. But do you remember when Denise walked in and sat at that table over there?”

“Yeah I guess.” ToughGuy shrugged. “So what?”

“Well, you noticed her and went to sit down next to her.” DaishiGuy said.

“So? I was flirting with her. I always flirt with her. We were doing the whole romance thing. So what?” ToughGuy said.

“Yeah, and then she broke your shoulder!” DaishiGuy said. “I had fifty bucks on her breaking your neck.”

“What do you mean, *you had fifty bucks on her breaking my neck?*” ToughGuy asked, mimicking DaishiGuy’s voice.

“I made a bet. I thought Denise would break your neck. But she didn’t. So I lost the bet.” DaishiGuy explained.

“What the hell!” ToughGuy yelled. “YOU GUYS PLACE BETS ON MY BONES!?”

“Dude, it’s just a little light gambling. The whole crew is in on it.” DaishiGuy said.

“THE WHOLE CREW?” ToughGuy asked.

“Yeah. Everyone knows Denise always kicks your ass. It got pretty pointless betting on which one of you two would win. So we figured we’d bet on which of your bones she’d break, instead.” DaishiGuy explained.

“What the hell!” ToughGuy snapped. “How long has this been going on?”

“Um...almost six months now.” DaishiGuy admitted.

“SIX MONTHS!! That ain’t right, man! I’m getting my ass kicked by a woman, and here you guys are raking in cash at my expense? Vereth, did you know about this?” ToughGuy asked.

“Know about it?” Vereth laughed. “I had ten bucks on your elbow and five on your ankle getting fractured.”

“YOU SONS OF FISHES!” ToughGuy blurted.

“Come on man, calm down. It’s just a little bet. No big deal!”

“No big deal? No big deal? I’m in a wheel chair and you guys are frickin’ betting on which bones I break!” ToughGuy yelled. “That ain’t morally right, man. That’s like sleeping with your own sister or shampooing your hair with toothpaste!”

“Dammit ToughGuy, you’re overreacting.” Vereth said.

“No I ain’t. The way I see it, I deserve some of that money for all the abuse I’ve sustained.” ToughGuy challenged.

“What? Screw you. I ain’t paying you.” DaishiGuy snapped.

“Wait, wait, wait.” Vereth interjected. “ToughGuy has a point. I mean, here he is getting his butt kicked by a girl, breaking an average of 2 limbs every week, sustaining all sorts of psychological trauma and embarrassment . . .and what does he have to show for it? Nothing! Surely the guy deserves something.”

“Damn straight!” ToughGuy snapped.

“Now I have a plan...” Vereth grinned. “A plan that will land you some major cash.”

“What? What kinda plan?” ToughGuy was slightly concerned now. Historically, Vereth’s plans were always of an insane nature.

“We fix your fights.” Vereth smiled proudly.

ToughGuy’s jaw dropped. “Those aren’t FIGHTS, man! I’m trying to SEDUCE Denise. The whole constant-broken-limb thing is just a side effect of our romance!”

“Doesn’t matter.” Vereth explained. “The next time you and Denise meet, just ensure that she breaks your toes.”

“WHAAAAAT!?” ToughGuy yelled.

“I’ll place 40 C-bills with Shrike and another 40 with Perrin. I’m sure I can lure Droopy and Akula in on the bet as well. They’ll never think of betting on your toes.” Vereth rambled on.

“You want me to break my toes?”

“Yes.” Vereth nodded.

“You want me to BREAK MY TOES?”

“Well no, actually it will look more realistic if you let Denise do the breaking.”

“YOU WANT ME TO LET DENISE BREAK MY TOES?”

“Yup.”

ToughGuy exploded. “ARE YOU CRAZY!! Man, I ain’t getting my limbs broken for a measly couple bucks. That’s the stoopidest idea ever!”

“Why, is there some kinda problem?” Vereth asked.

“No.” ToughGuy fumed sarcastically. “No problem at all, only the small matter of my FEET’S TOTAL COLLECTION OF TOE’S BEING BROKEN!!”

“ToughGuy, she doesn’t have to break them all...”

“Shut up, man! Just shut up!” ToughGuy yelled. “I’m tired of you and your stupid ideas...look here comes Major Loki. I got a better idea. Watch me work my magic.”

* * *

CHAPTER FOUR MAJOR LOKI

*Oh my! Oh my!
The cellar is dry!
We grow distraught
For the beer is nought!*

-MechWarrior Mumbles 3044

Major Loki walked up to the trio, his polished boots clipping the deck at precise intervals. He loomed over their table, flashing a tiny smile that seemed to say, “*worship me for I am your superior!*”

“At ease gentlemen.” Major Loki said. “You too, ToughGuy.”

“Thank you sir.” ToughGuy, DaishiGuy and Vereth said in unison.

“I believe you have something for me, DaishiGuy.” Loki said sternly.

“Huh? What? Oh the money! How much was it again?” Daishiguy fumbled for his wallet.

“Fifty C-bills.” Loki said.

“Oh yeah.” DaishiGuy pretended to look for money.

ToughGuy smiled and butted in on the conversation. “I don’t mean to pry sir, but what’s this little monetary transaction all about?”

“Nothing.” Loki snapped. “Just a little business deal. A private matter.”

“Would this business deal have anything to do with me being in a wheel chair, sir?” ToughGuy asked.

“What?” Loki asked, clearly taken off guard.

“Come on Major, I know what you’re up to. You and your little brass band have been putting bets on me ever since I’ve had a crush on Denise. Making cash while I break my bones.” ToughGuy challenged.

“How dare you, Sergeant!” Loki fumed. “Do you know who I am?”

“Why? Did you forget?”

Major Loki puffed out his chest with a snarl and gestured to his rank insignia. “This is the uniform of a great man!”

“Yeah well, does he know you’re wearing it?”

“I don’t think I quite like your tone, Sergeant!”

“I can try something a little higher pitched if you like.”

“Are you mocking me?”

“No, you do that all by yourself.”

“Shut up at once!” Loki snarled. “I am your superior!”

“You aren’t my superior.” ToughGuy said. “Species wise, at least.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Loki asked.

“Couple more years of evolution and I’ll get around to explaining it to you, cave boy.”

“Are you insulting my bone-structure?”

“Maybe.”

“Why you. . .you insubordinate fool!” Loki yelled. “I’ll have your hide locked away in the brig!

“Good. Anything to get me away from your Neanderthal stench.”

“You must think I’m joking!”

“No, I think you’re stupid.”

“You think I’m stupid?”

“Gee I don’t know, do you still think Disneyland is a part of the UN?”

“You’re walking the fine line between insubordination and self masturbation, soldier!”

“Yeah, and by the looks of your stomach you ain’t anywhere near the line of malnutrition.”

“THAT’S IT SERGEANT! I’VE HAD ENOUGH OF YOU!” Loki yelled.

“That’s funny, because I’ve had enough of you!” ToughGuy countered.

“I’m filing a report recommending your demotion!”

“I recommend you un-file that recommendation!”

“You’ve got a lot of nerve, ToughGuy!”

“Yeah.” ToughGuy growled. “I’m high on testosterone and low on tolerance for money swindling gamblers like yourself.”

“You’re going down for this ToughGuy!” Loki promised. “I’m gonna court martial your ass like an anorexic baby at a nipple convention.”

“Pffft, you don’t scare me.” ToughGuy said. “One word to Palerider and I’ll have this whole gambling racket crashing down on you.”

“That’s crazy talk, you legless freak!” Loki said.

“Oh really?” ToughGuy smiled. “How many people are in on these little bets? Shrike? Perrin? Akula? I’m betting the entire command staff is in up to their heads in illicit gambling!”

“You crazy punk! You don’t know what you’re talking about!” Loki fumed.

“I know that you guys should be setting an example for the rest of the crew.” ToughGuy said. “What happened to honour and integrity?”

“It went out the window when I joined the PUB!” Loki snapped. “Now give me my fifty C-bills!”

“No DaishiGuy!” ToughGuy ordered. “Don’t give him nothin’!”

“Why you insubordinate little scallywag!” Loki blurted.

“You like making bets, Major? You like making deals?” ToughGuy hissed. “Well I’ll make you a deal. I want a hundred and fifty credits, right now!”

“What the hell?” Loki snapped. “Are you insane?”

“No. I think that you’ll find that I am very serious.” ToughGuy said.

“You’re insane.”

“No. I said I was serious.”

“I do not doubt your seriousness, Sergeant. I’m simply saying that your also quite insane!” Loki yelled.

“Well Major, I beg to differ. And so if you don’t rustle up that cash by the end of the day, I’m gonna squeal to Crowfoot or Palerider.” ToughGuy promised.

“Is that a threat?” Loki seethed.

“Nope, that’s an origami panda.” ToughGuy said, randomly producing a paper panda. “This is a threat: If you don’t pay me 150 C-bills, I’ll make sure that Palerider demotes

your ass like a buncha bums. And I guess with you guys demoted, that leaves guys like me and DaishiGuy open for a promotion.”

“You wretched wrench wielding wench! You wouldn’t dare!” Loki growled.

“Oh I dare. I dare big time!” ToughGuy said. “Now go run back to your table and discuss this cash-raising issue with your partners in crime.”

“Damn you ToughGuy, you freemason fool!” Loki yelled. “We’ll meet again! WE’LL MEET AGAIN!!”

Loki snarled and raced back to his table in defeat. With the Major gone, the trio burst out laughing.

“Smooth, ToughGuy. Real smooth.” DaishiGuy giggled.

“Yeah, those blackmail classes really paid off.” ToughGuy smiled.

“Nice one ToughGuy.” Vereth patted the Sergeant on the back. “That Major Loki is a major pain in the ass.”

“Damn right.” DaishiGuy nodded “Hey, do you know one time I caught him cheating on the Urbie simulators?”

“Who? Major Loki?”

“Yup. Aimbots, Wall Hacks, Jump Cheats. You name it, Major Loki hacked it.” DaishiGuy pointed out. “Only reason he’s ranked number one on the PUB scoreboard is because he has a degree in Q-basic.”

“Damn, man.” ToughGuy moaned. “We really gotta do something about that Major.”

Across the table, DaishiGuy smiled. “You can start by plucking the facial hairs off his ass.”

ToughGuy giggled. “Yeah, what’s up with his beard?”

DaishiGuy shook his head. “Ever since he turned Major, he’s been trying to look distinguished and important.”

“Well it makes him look disgusting and impotent.” ToughGuy said..

“That’s nothing.” Vereth pointed out. “You seen Phoenix’s new moustache?”

“HAHAH. Damn, man!” ToughGuy laughed. “Dude’s moustache so big, he gotta walk down the corridors sideways!”

DaishiGuy leaned back in his chair laughing. “HAHAHA. Looks like he has a motorcycle handlebar on his face. Makes you wanna just jump on and take him for a ride!”

“Easy rider baby!” ToughGuy giggled.

“Hell yeah!” DaishiGuy wailed.

“Heh, Phoenix is a total yokel.” Vereth nodded.

“Yeah, but did you know he’s wanted by the law?” DaishiGuy asked.

“Who, Major Phoenix?”

“Yup.” DaishiGuy nodded. “Back on Solaris, Phoenix used to burgle houses.”

“No way!” They gasped. “He’s a burglar?”

“Yeah, it was a long time ago.” DaishiGuy explained. “He was the only gay burglar on the planet. He’d break into people’s houses and redecorate their living rooms.”

“HAHAH. He’s gay?” Vereth asked.

“Sometimes.” DaishiGuy said.

“No, I heard he’s bisexual.” ToughGuy offered.

“Bisexual?” Vereth looked disgusted. “That’s just wrong, man.”

“Hey dude, don’t knock bi-sexuality. It doubles your chances of getting a date on a Friday night. HAHAHA.” DaishiGuy joked.

“Heh. I tell ya dude, the PUB is messed up.” ToughGuy said. “Guys like us should be running things. The upper ranks are just a bunch of total circus freaks.”

“Word.” DaishiGuy nodded.

“You know what I heard MechWarrior Mumbles say the other day?” ToughGuy asked.

“No, what?”

“I don’t know, the guy keeps mumbling.” ToughGuy said. “But you know what I heard BandMaster Droopy Mczip say yesterday?”

“What?”

“This is gonna sound crazy, but apparently Palerider has three ass-cheeks.” ToughGuy revealed.

“WHAT!”

“It’s true.” ToughGuy said. “Doctor Willis says he suffers from tri-buttockiasis.”

“Tri-buttockiasis?” DaishiGuy asked.

“Yeah.” ToughGuy nodded. “When he farts, it comes out in stages.”

“That’s freakin’ weird man.”

“Yeah, and apparently Palerider’s weener has this little chord, you pull it and his gonads start to sing.” ToughGuy said.

“Singing Gonads?”

ToughGuy nodded. “Dude’s got a musical crotch, man.”

“What do they sing?” DaishiGuy asked.

“I dunno.” ToughGuy admitted. “But the guys in Bravo Company got a tape recorder hidden under his bed. We’ll find out soon enough.”

DaishiGuy exhaled. “That’s some bizarre crap, dude.”

“Yup. The upper ranks are messed up big time, man.” ToughGuy said.

“Total circus freaks.” Vereth said.

“Total circus freaks.” DaishiGuy nodded.

“Anyway,” ToughGuy exhaled. “you think they’re really gonna pay me?”

“Who?” DaishiGuy asked.

“My little blackmail.” ToughGuy said. “You think Loki and his gang are really gonna pay up?”

“Oh. Yeah I do, actually.” DaishiGuy said. “Guys like Loki are nothing without their rank. They won’t risk demotion for a stupid 150 C’s.”

“I guess you’re right.” ToughGuy nodded.

“Of course as higher ranking officers they’re gonna pretty much make your life a living hell from this day onwards.” DaishiGuy said.

“Damn, I didn’t think about that.” ToughGuy said.

“Yup. Once you come out of that wheelchair, they’ll probably make you the new DUD launcher test dummy. But hey, at least you’ll be 150 C’s richer.” Vereth quipped.

“Oh man....” ToughGuy sighed.

“Speaking of cash, who’s gonna take care of this tab?” Vereth said, collecting all the empty beer mugs and sliding them onto a plastic food tray.

“What? Oh the beer.” ToughGuy said.

“I say we all pitch in.” DaishiGuy offered.

“Okay.” Vereth nodded.

“Fine.” ToughGuy said, raising his hand to signal the waiter. It was then that the canteen doors swung open to reveal the stunning figure of Denise. ToughGuy froze mid-motion, his jaw dropping as he began to salivate. . .

“Guys. . .” ToughGuy gasped. “It’s Denise.”

* * *

CHAPTER FIVE RIFLEMAN

*I never drink beer on a Monday
Cos Monday’s the day fer mi health
An’ the wife’s got me countin’ them units,
I’ve just got to take care o’ miself
So I merely have wine wi’ mi supper,
An’ just the one litre OK?
Then a rather large rum in mi coffee
An’ I calls that mi sensible day.*

- Crowfoot 3155

“Who’s in charge here?” Major Akula stormed onto the bridge, his polished boots clipping the deck at precise intervals.

MechWarrior Rifleman gulped. “Uh. . .I am sir.”

“What?” Akula blurted. “Where’s Palerider?”

“Palerider left, sir.” Rifleman explained. “He put Crowfoot in charge.”

“Well where’s Crowfoot?”

“Crowfoot left, sir.” Rifleman explained. “He put Major Loki in charge.”

“Then where the hell is Loki?”

“He put me in charge, sir.”

“And who the hell are you?”

“MechWarrior Rifleman, sir.”

“Rifleman? I don’t remember seeing your name on the PUB rooster.”

“It’s written under the wing, sir.” Rifleman insisted. “In very small letters.”

“Damn rooster!” Akula growled. “I told em’ we shoulda got a bigger bird!”

“Yes sir.” Rifleman nodded.

“You know we had a chicken once? But we upgraded to a rooster cus’ Perrin kept trying to barbeque it.”

“That’s pretty weird, sir.”

“Nahhh that ain’t weird.” Akula shrugged. “You shoulda seen what we had before the chicken!”

“Uh. . .what was it, sir?”

“An ostrich!” Akula reminisced. “Enough room on that bird to write everyone’s name twice.”

“Well what happened?”

“Damn bird died of ink poisoning!”

Rifleman's jaw dropped.

"Ah heck. Least she was a loyal ostrich." Akula sighed. "Ain't like that damned PUB penguin!"

"What penguin?"

"Don't you know? Before the ostrich we had a penguin." Akula explained. "Damn bird flew away and went AWOL."

"But penguins don't fly!"

"Turns out this one was a licensed aerofighter pilot."

"A fighter pilot bird?"

"A lot of weird stuff happens around here, kid." Akula patted Rifleman on the back. "Flying penguins, officers blowing bubbles through their nose, Urbies on skateboards. Pretty soon you'll grow accustomed to it."

"Uh. . .okay sir."

"Well carry on, solider." Akula started to turn around.

"Uh . . .wait a minute, sir." Rifleman gulped.

"What is it?"

"Well. . .I'm kind of a newbie sir." Rifleman admitted. "Do you think it's wise me being in charge?"

"Don't worry kid." Akula smiled. "What could possibly go wrong?"

* * *

CHAPTER SIX DENISE

*This is the ballad of The Sad Cafe
It's a funny little place down Oklahoma way
Where the cowpokes go to feel sad and blue
And their cows and their horses. . .
Well they go there too.*

The sultry PUB officer seemed to enter the room in slow motion, her feathery hair cascading along her shoulders, her skintight jumpsuit flexing as her body moved. They watched as Denise walked over to the bar and pulled her body up onto a stool, perched there like a goddess awaiting brew.

“I’ve got to go talk to her!” ToughGuy squealed. “I’ve got to express my true love!”

“Quick! Clamp his wheels!” Vereth screamed. “Don’t let him roll away!”

With expert efficiency, Vereth and DaishiGuy wedged an empty mug of beer under each of ToughGuy’s wheels, thereby pinning him in place.

“You fools! I must talk to Denise! Let me go!” ToughGuy pleaded.

“Expressing your love is what got you in that wheelchair in the first place!” Vereth pointed out

“No, I must go. My soul mate awaits. She hungers for me!” ToughGuy was shaking uncontrollably now, foaming at the mouth.

“Calm down. Your body can’t take another beating, dude. Please, just forget about Denise.” Vereth insisted.

“No, it will be different this time. She will fall in love with me. Please, trust me!” ToughGuy pleaded.

“Come on ToughGuy, let’s look at this like a bunch of intelligent human beings.” DaishiGuy said (*despite the fact that between the three of them, they had an IQ of about 9*). “For the past six months, every time you’ve tried to flirt with Denise, you’ve come back to this table with a broken bone. A different broken bone each time, I might add.”

“So?” ToughGuy said simply.

“So what makes you think that this time will be any different?” DaishiGuy asked.

“Pheromones!” ToughGuy snapped.

“What?” Vereth asked.

“Pheromones!” ToughGuy proclaimed. “I bought a couple ounces of baboon pheromones off BeerRunner.”

“Did you say BABOON PHEROMONES?” Vereth asked, clearly confused.

“Yeah.” ToughGuy nodded.

“Umm....at the risk of sounding stupid, please feel free to elaborate.” Vereth said.

“Well you see, apparently during their mating season, baboons release this intense sexual hormone in order to heighten their chances of attracting the opposite sex.” ToughGuy said. “It’s a well known fact.”

“What the hell is BeerRunner doing with baboon pheromones?” Vereth asked.

“You ever wondered what the PUB secret beer ingredient is?” ToughGuy asked.

“NO WAY!!”

“BABOON PHEROMONES, BABY!.” ToughGuy smiled.

“UGHHH!!” Vereth almost threw up.

“So you see, this morning I soaked my entire body in baboon pheromones. One whiff and Denise will fall madly in love with me.” ToughGuy said proudly.

“Either that, or go on a CLASS 10 VOMIT SPREE!!!” DaishiGuy yelled, feeling nauseous.

Across the table, Vereth was having trouble absorbing all this new information. “Hang on, hang on....ToughGuy, you mean to tell me that you’re soaked in this stuff right now?”

“Yup.”

“In baboon love nectar?”

“Yup.”

Vereth and DaishiGuy exchanged glances and then instantly back their chairs away from ToughGuy.

“Stay away from me man!” Vereth yelled.

“What? What? Hey it’s harmless.” ToughGuy said.

“ToughGuy, you’ve got seriously warped sexual issues.” Vereth said, shaking his head in disbelief.

“You calling me a pervert?”

“Gee I don’t know. Do tampon advertisements still turn you on?”

“Only the one’s with yo momma in them!” ToughGuy snapped.

“Screw you! Your birth certificate is an apology letter from a condom factory!” Vereth challenged.

“I don’t think I appreciate your insults.”

“I don’t think I appreciate you moisturising yourself in monkey secretions” Vereth shot back.

“Big deal. Like you’ve never tried this.” ToughGuy said.

“What? Soak my body in monkey juice?”

“Yeah.”

“Believe it or not, I never have!” Vereth blurted.

“So you think it’s a bad idea?” ToughGuy asked.

“No, it’s a great plan. . .IF YOU INTEND TO SEDUCE MONKEYS!!”

“Will you two shut the hell up and calm the hell down!” DaishiGuy interjected. “Now listen ToughGuy, we just don’t want you going out there and embarrassing yourself again. Look at you. You’re a pile of wheeled broken bones. For once in your life, do yourself a favour and ignore Denise.”

“You know I can’t do that.” ToughGuy moaned. “I’m willing to try anything to win her love. If that means soaking my body in monkey hormones, then so be it.”

“You’re willing to try anything?” Vereth asked.

“To win her love, yeah.”

“Then why not start at the most obvious place?”

“What’s that?”

“Think about it, ToughGuy.” Vereth said. “Denise doesn’t love you because she hates you.”

“Duh.”

“So why does she hate you?” Vereth asked.

“I don’t know. I’m a tough guy with a sexy bod and a killer six-pack. Maybe she likes skinny wimps who play turn-based robot board games.” ToughGuy shrugged.

“Maybe.” Vereth nodded. “But the fact is, once you figure out why she doesn’t love you, you can then set to work changing those aspects of your personality.”

“I don’t understand.” ToughGuy admitted.

“All I’m saying is that if you want Denise to love you, you’re gonna have to change your behaviour. Become a better person.” Vereth pointed out.

“Me become a better person? That’s impossible.”

“Yes it is. But at least then you can commit suicide, knowing you tried everything.” Vereth shrugged.

“You know what, Toughguy? Vereth has a point.” DaishiGuy said.

“I do?”

“He does?”

“Yeah.” DaishiGuy nodded. “Maybe you should see some kind of psychiatrist. Someone who can help you change your ways. Someone who can help you identify the problems with your personality. Some kind of love guru.”

“A love guru?” ToughGuy asked. “What’s a love guru?”

“It’s sort of like a sexual Yoda.”

“Heh. Where am I gonna find a love guru?” ToughGuy asked.

“Yeah, where’s he gonna find a love guru?” Vereth asked.

“Think about it.” DaishiGuy said. “Who is the most wise, most knowledgeable person on this ship?”

“I don’t know, dude. The PUB only has a total combined IQ of about 120.” Vereth said.

“Yup.” DaishiGuy nodded. “And those 120 IQ points all belong to one man.”

“You mean...?” Vereth began.

“Yes.” DaishiGuy nodded. “The Loremaster.”

“Dave? You want me to go to Dave for advice?” ToughGuy blurted.

“Trust me ToughGuy, Loremaster Dave is your only hope. His wisdom knows no bounds. His knowledge encompasses all. If anyone can help you, it is Loremaster Dave.” DaishiGuy said.

“Where do I seek out this great man?”

“The journey will be long and perilous.” DaishiGuy ominously admitted. “You will encounter many foes and dangerous traps. The terrain will be harsh and virtually impassable...actually no...Dave is sitting at the table behind you.”

“Wow. He must have sensed my troubles.” ToughGuy gasped.

“Aye. The mysteries of the Loremaster may never be fully understood.” DaishiGuy said sombrely.

* * *

CHAPTER SEVEN DAVE’S TABLE

*Alas, I love her
and she hates me!
Our romance of contradiction.*

-Baron Von ToughGuy 3058

Loremaster Dave sat alone at his table, a newspaper spread out before him, a tall mug of beer nestled in his right hand. ToughGuy approached Dave, clearing his throat nervously as he parked his wheelchair opposite the Loremaster.

“Hi Dave. Do you mind if I sit here?” ToughGuy asked.

“Oh hello, Sergeant. Go ahead.” Dave smiled.

“Thanks.”

ToughGuy felt a little bit uneasy being around the Loremaster. The way Dave moved, the way he talked, the way his eyes seemed to gaze into your very soul. Dave spoke with a wisdom that can only come from experience. Or maybe it just seemed that way because the rest of the PUB was just so damn retarded.

“Are you hungry?” Dave randomly produced a shotgun and cocked the barrel. “I ordered the chef to fly a flock of ducks over my table. I can shoot down two if you like.”

“Um...no thanks. I’m fine.”

“Yup, I know how you feel.” Dave said, leaning back in his chair. “Ever since WolfCross ate that fluorescent beef jerky, got Salmonella poisoning and went on his little diarrhoea extravaganza, this place hasn’t quite been the same. But I don’t mind. I’m a big fan of bacteria. It’s the only culture some folk have.”

“Heh.” ToughGuy chuckled. “I guess you’re right.”

“Come now, ToughGuy. What’s wrong?” Dave asked, sensing ToughGuy’s troubles. “You didn’t just come here to chat. You want to ask me something.”

“Well...”

“I won’t bite. Ask away.”

“It’s kind of embarrassing.”

“Life is full of embarrassment.” Dave said. “True strength is derived from facing down such situations and moving on.”

“Wow, the guys were right. You really are wise!” ToughGuy said.

“Wisdom stems from experience. I’ve been around a long time, ToughGuy. Life has simply thrown more my way.” Dave said.

“I see.”

“So tell me, what’s your problem?” Dave insisted.

“Well this may sound kind of crazy, but I’m in love with Denise.” ToughGuy admitted.

“There’s nothing crazy about that. Love is a natural and wonderful emotion.” Dave pointed out.

“Yeah, but Denise hates my guts.”

“Are you sure she hates you?” Dave tenderly asked.

“Well, she seems to break my bones a lot.”

“Yup, that’s usually a sign.”

“I just want her to love me, Dave. I want her to feel the same way for me, as I do for her.” ToughGuy said. “I love her so much.”

“Ah.” Dave rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“I know it sounds silly...”

“Silly? No, no, no. There is nothing silly about love, my friend. Love is a complex thing. You need to nurture it slowly, carefully, only then can you reap its rewards. Tell me, how do you feel about Denise?”

“What do you mean?” ToughGuy asked.

“When you look at her, what goes through your mind? Why do you love her?”

“Well, she makes my weener harder than Chinese arithmetic.”

“I see.”

“I’m in love with her.”

“But what you described isn’t love. Sure, Denise arouses you, you are attracted to her, she brings your loins to prompt attention, but this isn’t love. What you’ve described is the most basic of animal attractions. A primal lust that all living things possess.”

“What are you saying?” ToughGuy asked, his stupidity kicking in.

“Love is a funny thing, ToughGuy.” Dave said. “At the most basic biological level, it exists to bring two people together. It’s a trick played by nature on your emotions, a device used to bring about a union, for the sole purpose of producing offspring. But while love may seem like a mechanical cycle, it is also simultaneously very complex. True love is a lasting thing. When you love someone, you love them forever. Sure, the initial impetus is indeed of a sexual nature, but what keeps both lovers together is the sense that they complete one another.”

“You saying I should get my tongue pierced?”

“What? No!!”

“I’m just a little confused over here.” ToughGuy admitted.

Dave shook his head as if to imply that ToughGuy was missing something important. “Love is when you look into Denise’s eyes and see everything you need.”

“I see.” ToughGuy lied.

“No you don’t.”

“I don’t?”

“No.” Dave insisted. “Because love is blind.”

“Ah.”

“Love is like the soft humming of an insect’s wings.” Dave said mysteriously.

“I think I understand what you’re saying.” ToughGuy lied again.

“No you don’t!”

“I don’t?”

“No.” Dave said. “Because love is too soft to hear. Like the romantic whisper of a serenade, kissing your ear.”

ToughGuy was totally confused now. “Ooh.”

“Love is a feeling that leaves you naked. Raw to emotion.” Dave said.

“Yes, I see.” ToughGuy said, scratching his chin.

“You have to judge love with your heart, ToughGuy. You say you love Denise, well then love her. Make an effort to appeal to her, and let her know how you feel. Let her know how she makes you feel.”

“I’ll try.” ToughGuy said.

“There is no try, only Styrofoam.” Dave pointed out.

“Ah okay.” ToughGuy nodded uncomfortably.

“So go forth ToughGuy, and win Denise’s heart. Win her love.”

“Uh...okay. Thanks Dave.”

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHT TOUGHGUY’S TABLE

*Mon Dieu! Monetary joy is momentary,
the bliss of mounting figures is a ghost.
For now upon this morning I shall marry
and pay int'rest on what int'rests me the most!*

-Baron Von ToughGuy 3058

ToughGuy returned to his table and rolled beside DaishiGuy and Vereth with a sigh.

“Well, what did Dave say?” DaishiGuy anxiously asked.

“I GOT NO FRICKIN’ IDEA, MAN!!” ToughGuy blurted.

“What? You must have picked up something.”

“Dave makes no sense! The guy is like a poet whacked out on glue inhalation!” ToughGuy said frantically. “It’s like he re-arranges his words before he speaks. One insane sentence after the other, hammering into your skull like a woodpecker with a jackhammer. And don’t get me wrong...I know he makes sense...I know he does. I know he’s trying to say something. There’s communication involved, I swear to God! But it’s like I’m a frickin’ down syndrome retard baby and I just can’t get a grasp of his crazy wisdom!”

“I see.” DaishiGuy said simply. “Well, did you remember anything he said?”

“Yeah, something about love being like a romantic serenade, like the humming of an insect’s wings, raw, naked and emotional.” ToughGuy recited. “The guy makes no sense. Or maybe I’m just stupid. Tell me I’m not stupid, DaishiGuy! TELL ME I’M NOT STUPID!”

“You’re not stupid ToughGuy. Jeeze calm down.” DaishiGuy complied.

“Then why don’t I understand Dave?” ToughGuy frantically asked. “Why didn’t he tell me how to win Denise’s love?”

“Ah ToughGuy.” Vereth smiled knowingly. “Yes Dave did. You just don’t understand how guys like the Loremaster operate. They’re poetic geniuses. They speak on a whole different level. Dave told you *exactly* how to win Denise’s love!”

“He did?”

“Yup. *Love is like the humming of an insect’s wings, a sweet serenade, raw, naked and emotional.*” Vereth repeated.

“So? What does all that crazy crap mean?” ToughGuy asked, still confused.

“You gotta get **NAKED** and **SING** Denise a **SONG** about **BUGS**.” Vereth said.

“WHAT!!!?”

“That’s what he said.” Vereth nodded.

“Yeah, but that seems kinda weird, Vereth.” DaishiGuy interjected.

“Listen, if Dave says ToughGuy should get **NAKED** and **SING** Denise a **SONG** about **BUGS**, then ToughGuy should get **NAKED** and **SING** Denise a **SONG** about **BUGS**. The guy is a genius!” Vereth said.

“I guess.” ToughGuy shrugged.

“There is no guess, only Styrofoam.” Vereth said.

“What?” ToughGuy raised an eyebrow.

“Nothing. Now listen. You head over to Denise and tell her that tonight, you’re going to win her love once and for all. Tell her that you have a surprise for her.” Vereth said.

“What surprise?” ToughGuy asked, completely in over his head now.

“The naked bug song!” Vereth said.

“BUT I DON’T KNOW ANY NAKED BUG SONGS!” ToughGuy squealed.

“Yes you do.” Vereth insisted. “Think back to last year. The Christmas song routine we did at the PUB talent show.”

“Jitterbug?” ToughGuy asked.

“Bingo.”

“I don’t know guys, this seems a bit crazy.” ToughGuy said.

“Don’t worry, it’ll be fine. Now you head on over to Denise while DaishiGuy and I go talk to Band Master Droopy Mczip. We’ll get the band ready for our little musical number.” Vereth plotted.

“Wait, what do I say to Denise?” ToughGuy hastily asked.

“I don’t know.” Vereth stood up and started to back away from the table. “Use your lame pick up lines. Your half-baked seduction. Just keep Denise busy till we get back!”

“Oh, okay.” ToughGuy said, taking a deep breath as DaishiGuy and Vereth left the table.

Like a hacker who means to access T:\flw.quid55328.com\aaakk/ch@ung but gets T:\flw.quidaaakk/ch@ung by mistake, Sergeant ToughGuy was in way over his head. Words and ideas were darting back and forth, zipping by too fast for his booze drenched brain to contemplate. He had to focus. To concentrate. He had to win Denise!

She was still sitting at the bar, far across the room, her back arched over as she feasted on a tall mug of beer. ToughGuy had to go over there. He had to smooth talk his way into her heart. . .

“Okay ToughGuy...you can do this.” ToughGuy said to himself. “Lock S-foils to attack position! Here I go!”

* * *

CHAPTER NINE RIFLEMAN

*I never drink wine on a Tuesday,
Cos Tuesday's mi weightwatchin' club
It's the day I eat nothin' but cabbage,
The day I don't go much fer grub
Now such a diet demands plenty fluid,
Somthin' light an' completely fat-free
So I've chosen that strong German lager
An' I just have five pints wi' mi tea.*

-Crowfoot 3155

“Uh. . .commander.” Sensor officer Mav gulped. “We have an unidentified object, bearing 556.00 mark 7.”

Acting bridge commander MechWarrior Rifleman jumped up from his chair. “What do you mean unidentified? You mean like invisible?”

“What?” Sensor officer Mav spun around. “No sir! It appears to be visible!”

“It’s visible?” Rifleman asked.

“Yes sir.”

“Umm. . .well what is it?”

“A vessel, sir.”

“A visible vessel?” Rifleman asked.

“Uh. . .yes sir.” Mav nodded. “It appears to be on an intercept course!”

“Well what kinda vessel is it?” Rifleman gasped. “Pirates? Space whalers? Mercenaries? Or are we talking blood vessels here?”

“No sir, it’s a Clan Battleship!” The sensor officer yelled. “Sensors have positive confirmation!”

“CLAN BATTLESHIP!?” Rifleman started bashing his head against a computer monitor. “OH MY GOD, WE‘RE ALL GONNA DIE!!!”

“Sir, the ship is increasing speed!” Mav called out. “It’s heading directly for us!”

“GAHH!” Rifleman blurted. “Well run away! Set sails! Get us outta here!”

“Sir!” The radio officer yelled. “The Clan Battleship is hailing us.”

“Gah!” Rifleman gasped. “What does that mean?”

The radio officer sighed. “The captain of the Clan Battleship would you like to speak to you, sir.”

“But I don’t want to talk to him!” Rifleman whined.

“Sir, he insists.”

“I don’t care!”

“But sir-”

“Tell him I’m busy! No, tell him I’m in the shower!” Rifleman began unbuttoning his shirt.

“Sir, he insists!”

“Gah!”

“Sir I’m putting him on screen!”

“Which screen?”

“The main screen!”

“Which one is that?”

“The big one!”

“Well I’m not looking!” Rifleman took off his shirt and started tying it over his eyes.

Suddenly the main view screen sprang to life. . .

“AHHHH!” Rifleman gasped, yanking off the shirt. “I wasn’t ready!”

“I am Star Captain Eduardo Von Hiddleburp of the Clan Jade Falcon!” The on screen image blurted. “I claim you as my bondsman!”

“Bondsman?” Rifleman’s jaw dropped. “GAH! Sorry, I’m not into kinky sex games!”

“The mere suggestion of intercourse with you freebirth scum, sickens me!” The Star Captain snarled. “Prepare to die!”

“Wait! Wait! Wait!” Rifleman snapped. “What are you doing?”

“I am preparing to destroy your ship!”

“No, don’t!” Rifleman pleaded. “You can’t just kill us all.”

“Well, what do you suggest?”

“Uh. . .I don’t know.”

“THEN PREPARE TO DIE!!”

“Wait. . .wait. . .wait!” Rifleman snapped. “How about you leave us alone?”

“That is against my violent clan nature!”

“Well your violence is against my peaceful nature!”

“This is an interesting scenario.” The Clanner said. “I know not what to do.”

“Uh. . .how bout you turn your ship around and I turn my ship around and we both sail off in opposite directions.”

“But what does this accomplish?”

“Absolutely nothing.” Rifleman admitted.

“I like your idea.” The Clanner said. “Farewell.”

“Cya!” Rifleman waved.

And so the two ships spun around and headed off in opposite directions.

* * *

CHAPTER TEN SEDUCING DENISE

*Roses are red,
Violets are blue,
Sugar is sweet,
And so is yo momma.*

-ERRATIC CHEESE 1998

ToughGuy rolled over to the L-shaped bar and cautiously approached Denise. Several other PUB officers were sitting there, shrouded in darkness, nursing their mugs of beer in solitude. They looked like zombies. Lost souls, tired of life and tired of living. Feeding away the remains of their pitiful existence to the one know as beer.

ToughGuy panned his gaze away from the darkness and onto Denise. She looked beautiful. Like a Goddess. An Angel. Her feathery hair cascaded over her shoulders, glistening seductively in the dim light like a handkerchief after a sneeze. ToughGuy wanted to hold her, to feel Denise’s gorgeous body close to his. He wanted to touch her. To talk to her. To put his nose next to her ear and smell the inside of her brain. Everything about her intrigued him. . .

“Hey babe.” ToughGuy said, tapping Denise gently on her shoulder. “What say you come sit on my lap and we’ll talk about the first thing that pops up, WINK WINK!”

“ToughGuy, what are you doing here?” Denise asked, instantly annoyed.

“Well, I saw you sitting alone.” ToughGuy said awkwardly. “I just thought I’d waltz on over and keep you company.”

“I don’t need your company!”

“But a pretty girl like you doesn’t deserve to be alone on a wonderful night like this.”

“Maybe I like being alone.”

“Well then, I’ll keep you company anyway.”

“I’d rather you didn’t.” Denise abruptly turned her back to ToughGuy.

“Listen Denise, you can’t carry on avoiding me.” ToughGuy said. “I can see it in your eyes. Your love for me grows.”

“Yeah.” Denise nodded. “Like fungus in a petri dish.”

“Come on Denise, stop acting this way.”

“ToughGuy, I’m serious.” Denise snapped. “Get away from me, or I swear to God, I will personally rip your head off!”

ToughGuy blushed. “I like it when you talk dirty.”

“Bah, when will you come to your senses!”

“I will never come to my senses!”

“I can’t believe this.” Denise sighed. “ToughGuy, you’re nuttier than a squirrel turd!”

“And muscular too.”

“Why do you act like such a kid?”

“I prefer the term, vertically impaired pre-adult.”

“Promise me something ToughGuy.” Denise said. “Never breed.”

“Me breeding is all up to you baby.”

“You think you’re God’s gift to women, don’t you?”

“Baby, I’m God’s gift to everybody.”

Denise sighed. “I don’t know which is bigger. The hole in your head or the size of your ego.”

“None of the above. They both lose out to the pecker in my pants.”

“Typical man. All you think about is sex.”

“I don’t only think about sex.” ToughGuy insisted. “Sometimes I think about you.”

“You’re sick.”

“And you’re my love aspirin.”

Denise sighed. “Why do you do this, ToughGuy? Why do you insist on flirting with me?”

“Because I love you.”

“You wouldn’t know love if it jumped up and bit you on the butt!”

“Is that an invitation?”

“No it’s an insult!”

“Oh.” ToughGuy shrugged. “Well you know, we should get married anyway. Give me two minutes and I can sew you a wedding dress.”

“I’d sooner marry an Urbie!”

“Awww come on Denise!”

“No ToughGuy! And no amount of flattery will change that!”

“I just wanna get laid.” ToughGuy whined.

“Try crawling up a chicken’s butt and waiting.”

“Ouch.” ToughGuy frowned. “Why are you so cruel to me?”

“Because I HATE YOU!!!!” Denise yelled. “You’re an IMMATURE FREAK!”

“But Denise, I’m willing to change.” ToughGuy said. “I’ll do anything for you.”

“Well make like a lemming and jump off a cliff!”

“Don’t say that, Denise.” ToughGuy said. “You know that deep down inside, you dig my silhouette big time.”

Denise sighed and slammed her empty mug down against the bar. A new anger flamed in her eyes. “What do you want from me, ToughGuy?”

“I’ll be honest. I want sex.”

“Listen ToughGuy, sex with you is out of the question. I don’t like you! I don’t even like seeing your head poke through your sweater!”

“But Denise, my love for you is like diarrhoea!” ToughGuy grumbled. “I can’t hold it in!”

“You obviously know nothing about love, ToughGuy.” Denise said.

“Listen babe, I play Hentai dating games. I think I know a thing or two about love.”

“Oh, so now you find romance in computer games?” Denise asked. “You’re even more sad and pathetic than I thought.”

“Hey, if you squint the pixels look sexy.” ToughGuy argued. “And at least a video game can’t call the cops when I beat it!”

“ToughGuy we have nothing in common.” Denise said. “You know nothing about me! How can you be in love with someone you don’t even know?”

“That’s not true, Denise.” ToughGuy protested. “I know everything about you.”

“Oh yeah?” Denise’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Well then, where am I from?”

“Uh, I don’t know.” ToughGuy shrugged. “I always figured you were one of those omnipresent women from like, all over the place.”

“You see!” Denise blurted.

“Okay! Okay! Ask me another question!”

“What’s my second name?”

“You have a second name?”

“SEE, TOUGHGUY!” Denise snapped. “You know nothing about me!”

“Wait! Ask me another!” ToughGuy begged.

“What’s my favourite food?”

“Uh, lamb chops?”

“I’m a vegetarian, ToughGuy.”

“WAIT, I KNEW THAT!” ToughGuy lied. “I’m also. . .against. . .the whole animal killing thing. That’s why I only eat the excess skin and hair that falls off of my body.”

“Just admit it, ToughGuy.” Denise shook her head. “You know absolutely nothing about me.”

“Well then why don’t you tell me something about yourself?”

“No way!”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re a weirdo!” Denise snapped. “That’s like giving your kid’s personal details to a registered paedophile!”

“But Denise, I love you!”

“Stop saying that, ToughGuy!” Denise snapped.

“I love you!”

“STOP IT!”

“I LOVE YOU!!!!”

“GAH!!” Denise slapped ToughGuy hard on the cheek.

“Ow!” He jolted backwards. “What was that for?”

“Being an idiot!”

“That hurt!” ToughGuy squealed. “Just because I rock, doesn’t mean I’m made of stone!”

“Get away from here, ToughGuy.” Denise hissed. “I’m starting to lose my temper.”

“But you hit me hard.”

“So?” Denise raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t you supposed to be a tough guy?”

“Yeah.” ToughGuy smiled sheepishly. “But I melt in your arms.”

Denise almost blushed. “Do you think up these lame pick up lines all by yourself?”

“They’re cute, aren’t they?”

“Nope, they’re childish and dumb.” Denise shook her head. “Do they ever work?”

“Well, I’ve only ever tried them on you and Shrike.” ToughGuy admitted. “So far you’ve resisted. But Shrike fell for me pretty quickly.”

“Well why don’t you go bother him?”

“He’s not my type.”

“And what exactly is your type?”

“You.”

Denise sighed. “You’re insane.”

“But admit it, you find me cute, don’t you?”

“No ToughGuy!” She said firmly. “And if you weren’t already in that wheelchair I’d break your knees again!”

“Okay, okay. Listen Denise, I know in the past I’ve been kind of annoying. I haven’t exactly treated you right. But all of that is about to change.”

“Are you finally going to cremate yourself?” Denise quipped.

“No, Denise. I’m serious.”

“I don’t care ToughGuy. I really, don’t care.” Denise said. “I’d never love a creep like you.”

“But I’m a good guy, Denise.” ToughGuy shrugged. “Heck, if I had boobs I’d breast feed all the starving children in Somalia.”

“That’s nauseating.”

“Yeah well, one man’s manure heap is another guy’s gold mine.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Denise asked, flashing a startled look.

“I dunno.” ToughGuy shrugged. “But you’ve got to give me another chance, Denise. I love you. I really do. When I’m alone at night, my heart beats your name. Denise....Denise....Denise.....”

“You should get that checked.”

“Please, please, please, Denise.” ToughGuy begged. “Let’s start over. I’ll do anything for you. Just tell me what.”

“Go die, ToughGuy.” Denise said, shaking her head. “Just go die.”

“I didn’t mean that literally.”

“Well I did. GO DIE!!”

“But Denise-”

“Listen ToughGuy, I could care less about you.” Denise snapped. “You’d think the last six months of constant broken bones would have served as a clear enough message, but I guess you’re too dumb to realise. I hate you ToughGuy. I always have. You’re annoying. You’re stupid. You’re immature. I hate everything about you!”

ToughGuy raised an eyebrow. “Listen Denise, if we’re to have a meaningful relationship, you’re going to have to stop hating me.”

“We will never have a relationship! Don’t you understand! I detest you!” Denise was growing furious now, her eyes bloodshot, her mouth foaming.

“I didn’t know you felt this way.” ToughGuy said, fighting to hold back the tears. “Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

“GAHHH!! YOU STUPID FOOL!”

“Fine Denise.” ToughGuy sobbed. “I’ll leave you alone. I’ll walk away.”

“FINALLY!”

“But I want you to know this, I’ll never stop loving you.” ToughGuy promised.

“That’s nice. Now run along, little crazy man.”

“No.” ToughGuy said. “You have to dance with me.”

“What?”

“Just one dance. If my knees weren’t broken, I’d get down on them and beg you.” ToughGuy said. “It’s a small price to pay, Denise. One dance, and I’ll leave you alone forever.”

“What?” Denise gasped. “No! And besides, you’re in a wheel chair!”

“It doesn’t matter. One dance, Denise, and I swear. . .I cross my heart and hope to die, I never, ever, will speak to you again. Just one dance Denise. Please. Just one dance.”

“Go away!”

“Why won’t you dance with me, Denise?” ToughGuy croaked.

“There are still a couple hundred bones in your body ripe for breaking, ToughGuy.” Denise threatened. “Don’t make me hurt you.”

“You’re already hurting me.”

“Just get lost, ToughGuy.”

“What are you afraid of, Denise?”

“I’m not afraid of anything.”

“I know what this is all about.” ToughGuy smiled. “You’re protecting yourself.”

“Protecting myself from what?” Denise asked, slightly confused.

“There we are on the dance floor, maybe hitting it off really well.” ToughGuy began. “Soon we end up having a few drinks together. You relax. I relax. We laugh. We begin to feel comfortable around one another. We finally get past the sexual tension that’s been holding us apart.”

“THERE IS NO SEXUAL TENSION HOLDING US APART.” Denise screamed.

“Oh there is.” ToughGuy nodded. “That’s why you won’t dance with me. You’re afraid where it may lead.”

“It leads nowhere num-skull!” Denise snapped.

“Oh, it leads somewhere Denise.” ToughGuy insisted. “Maybe we develop this intense love life, something truly incredible. We decide to move in with one another. Then, a few months later, we get married. I get promoted to Lieutenant and we buy a big house. You really want kids but I don’t know. I mean...I really want my freedom, but we have a kid anyway and I grow resentful. The sparks start to fade and to rekindle them we have two more kids. Two lovely kids, but they’re young and annoying and they vomit in my briefcase. I work too much now, just to keep up with the bills. I have no time for you. You’re stressed, I’m stressed. You stop taking care of your body, I stop working out. Eventually I start looking at other women. I mean, I love you still, but the lust is there, you know? And soon, to get past our slow sex life and my declining confidence I turn to an outside affair with some Latino chick called Lola. You find out because I’m careless and you’re smarter than me. You throw me out- justifiably so, I might add- and we have to explain to our kids, our poor, cute, little kids, why mommy and daddy are splitting up. That’s just too sad, Denise. I know you know that. And I know that’s why you won’t dance with me. That’s why you won’t risk a relationship with me. But there’s a solution, Denise. An easy solution. So please, if you dance with me, and we hit it off, and we fall in love, lets think about the children and keep our relationship on a purely sexual level, because we both know where the two of us are heading.”

Denise just sat there, the insane monologue having jarred her brain. “You are a highly disturbed individual!”

ToughGuy shrugged. “Yeah, so let’s get kinky.”

That's when Denise punched ToughGuy in the face, sending his wheelchair rolling back across the room. The inertia brought ToughGuy back to his table, where his chair was steadied by his buddies, Vereth and DaishiGuy.

* * *

CHAPTER ELEVEN TOUGHGUY'S TABLE

*Her fists on me, she did lay
My broken neck, knees, vertebrae.
But when my heart, she did break
Me from myself, she did take.*

-Baron Von ToughGuy 3058

“What happened?” Vereth asked.

“She did a Bruce Lee on my face and sent me rolling.” ToughGuy wiped his bloodied lip.

“Ouch.” Vereth said.

ToughGuy shook his head, a new determination in his eyes. “This is the end guys. My relationship with Denise is falling apart. Dave's naked bug song is my only hope.”

Vereth looked at ToughGuy nervously. “Uh yeah, ToughGuy, about the song...uh our plan has hit a little snag.”

“What snag?” ToughGuy asked, suddenly worried.

“Band Master Droopy Mczip can't play.” Vereth said.

“What do you mean he can't play?”

“The guy has a toothache.” Vereth explained. “He can't sing. He can't play his saxophone. We have no band leader!”

“A toothache?” ToughGuy said. “A little toothache has never stopped Droopy before!!”

“Dude, it's serious.” Vereth insisted. “Droopy tied his loose tooth to a door knob with a piece of string in an attempt to pull it out.”

“And what happened?”

“He slammed the door shut and locked himself outta his apartment.”

“Ouch.” ToughGuy said.

“Yeah.” Vereth nodded. “The guy’s been sleeping out in the corridors with no food or clean clothes for a week. He’s disoriented. He smells bad. I hardly recognised him.”

“Well then, we’ve gotta find another band leader.” ToughGuy insisted.

“But who?” Vereth asked.

“What about Crowfoot?” DaishiGuy offered.

“Crowfoot?” Vereth laughed. “Are you crazy? That guy hates our guts. He hates everyone’s guts. He’s the biggest gut hater on this DropShip! There’s no way he’s gonna help us!”

“But I’ve seen him playing the sax. The guy’s got musical skills.” DaishiGuy said.

“I ain’t denying his ability to play the saxophone. I’m just saying, you know, Crowfoot is a loose cannon.” Vereth explained.

ToughGuy rubbed his chin. “Well, who else can we ask?”

“I don’t know, man. I can’t think of anyone else.” DaishiGuy paused for a moment. “Wait...what about Lieutenant Verybad?”

“Lieutenant Verybad?” Vereth asked.

“Yeah. I’m sure I’ve seen him playing the sax with Droopy.” DaishiGuy pointed out.

“Yeah, but he’s very bad.” Vereth said.

“Of course he’s Verybad, who else would he be?” DaishiGuy said.

“No, I mean he sucks.” Vereth explained. “Lieutenant Verybad sucks at playing the saxophone. He is *very bad*.”

“Ohhhh.” DaishiGuy chimed with realisation. “That guy really needs a new call-sign!”

ToughGuy shook his head with frustration. “Okay, okay. So who are we asking?”

“I think we have no choice.” DaishiGuy said. “We’ve got to ask Crowfoot.”

“You sure?” ToughGuy queried.

“I guess.” DaishiGuy nodded uneasily.

“Okay then.” ToughGuy backed up his wheelchair and put on his Santa-Claus hat. “Hi-Ho, Hi-Ho to Crowfoot’s table we go!”

* * *

CHAPTER TWELVE CROWFOOT’S TABLE

*Jack Sprat could eat no fat,
so he became macrobiotic,
and an enormous pain in the neck.*

- ERRATIC_CHEESE - 2001

Crowfoot glared back at the trio of PUB officers, his arms folded, his intense gaze hammering into their skulls. He had been half way through munching on a plate of spaghetti and tofu balls, and this little interruption was making his dietary body-clock all zany.

“Listen to me you crazy sons of bitches, do you really expect me to help you?” The Executive Officer said, wiping the tomato sauce off his lips.

“We were hoping that you would, sir.” Vereth said.

“Let me get this straight.” Crowfoot began. “You want me to lead the music band, while you three sing Jitterbug in the buff.”

“Uh...no sir. I’ll be the only one naked.” ToughGuy said nervously. “Everyone else will be fully clothed.”

“Oh, well ain’t that a relief!” Crowfoot sighed. “Now I ain’t gonna bother asking you three, what this little nudity jamboree is all about, because frankly, I think the explanation is gonna be ten times more insane.”

“Heh. I think you’re right, sir.” ToughGuy smirked.

“You think I’m right? Let’s get one thing straight solider, I’M ALWAYS RIGHT!” Crowfoot snapped. “You got that?”

“Uh, yes sir.” ToughGuy said, taken off guard.

“Good.” Crowfoot took a sip at his glass of wine and wiped his mouth again. “Now, what’s in this for me?”

“What, sir?” ToughGuy asked.

“For me! What’s in this for me!?” Crowfoot repeated. “Playing the saxophone while your testicles dangle in front of me, ain’t exactly my idea of a good time. So I want to know, what the hell is in this for me?”

“Well sir, we kinda thought you’d help us out for free. You know, outta friendship.” DaishiGuy shrugged.

“Are you kidding me?” Crowfoot laughed. “I hate you bums! ToughGuy, you remember the time I picked the lock to your room and poured a bucket of water on your face while you slept. That was me! And DaishiGuy, you remember the time I sent you a memo saying “*meet me in the Mech Bay, signed Crowfoot*”, and when you arrived at the Mech Bay I was waiting there with a tennis racket and I chased you around the place, trying to whip your butt, that was me also!”

“Uh. . . I know sir.” DaishiGuy shrugged.

“So in light of my obvious past hatred for you guys, what makes you think I’d even remotely entertain the notion of helping you bums out for free.” Crowfoot growled.

“Uh, I don’t know sir.”

“There isn’t much that you do know, is there soldier!” Crowfoot snapped.

“I know that the German word for constipation, is farfrompoopin.” DaishiGuy shrugged.

“Son, that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.” Crowfoot hissed.

“Sorry sir.” DaishiGuy said.

“Listen, I’ll be blunt.” Crowfoot said. “I want a hundred C-bills upfront. You give me the money, and I’ll play in your little musical band. Deal?”

“I guess we have no choice, sir.” ToughGuy sighed. “If this is the only way to win Denise’s love, then so be it.”

“Denise’s love? Is that what this crap is all about?” Crowfoot asked, slightly intrigued.

“Yes sir.” ToughGuy nodded. “My little musical serenade will win her heart.”

Crowfoot shook his head. “ToughGuy, how many women have you slept with?”

ToughGuy paused. “Roughly...”

“I don't care *how* you did it, you sicko.” Crowfoot snapped.

“No, I mean about 4, sir.” ToughGuy explained.

“About 4? What do you mean?” Crowfoot said. “You aren't sure?”

“Well sir, when I woke up, they weren't there.” ToughGuy said.

“ToughGuy, I think those were dreams.” DaishiGuy whispered. “Sexual fantasies.”

“Oh.” ToughGuy looked embarrassed. “Suddenly I'm a virgin again.”

“Listen ToughGuy, I'm not gonna talk you out of your crazy plan because frankly, I want the money.” Crowfoot admitted. “But I gotta say, this little naked bug song of yours is the most insane idea I've ever heard.”

“Sorry sir.” ToughGuy said sheepishly.

“Don't be sorry, solider.” Crowfoot snapped. “You're a Sergeant, you've got to look at this from a military point of view. Denise is your target! You have to win her love. That's your objective! Only a fool would go into battle without backup plans and fallback scenarios. You're a goddamned soldier, ToughGuy. Think like one!”

“What do you propose, sir?” ToughGuy asked.

Crowfoot leaned back in his chair and smiled, his military brain flexing. “You can't rely on this little naked insect serenade. You've gotta have fall back options. You've got to wear Denise down! Constantly bombard her with your love! Hit her from all angles, left, right and centre! Pound her with romance, solider! Keep her guessing!”

“Good suggestions sir.” ToughGuy nodded.

“Damn right.” Crowfoot nodded. “Romance is a battlefield sergeant. You gotta grab your objective by the neck and never let go!”

“Strangle Denise?”

“No you dumbass.” Crowfoot sighed. “You gotta focus. Pinpoint her weaknesses. Tear down her defences!”

“I see.” ToughGuy nodded.

“Now get outta here, the three of you.” Crowfoot said. “I’m trying to eat my dinner. Don’t bother me till you’ve rustled up my cash!”

“Yes sir.” They said in unison, and left the Executive Officer to tend to his plate full of spaghetti.

* * *

CHAPTER THIRTEEN RIFLEMAN

*It's raining, it's pouring,
my old man is snoring,
he went to bed,
and bumped his head,
and couldn't get up in the morning!*

-Nicholas Kerensky 2815

“Sir!” Sensor officer Mav cried out, “I’m reading an extreme energy source, dead ahead!”

“What?” Rifleman stood up. “You mean like a windmill?”

“Uh. . .Negative sir.” The sensor officer said. “I’m putting it on screen.”

“No. . .no!” Rifleman blurted. “Stop putting things on screen. Whenever we have a problem you guys always put it on screen! Stop putting things on the screen!”

“But sir-”

“No! Whenever you put things on screen I have to deal with it.” Rifleman moaned. “No more putting things on screen!”

The main monitor suddenly winked to life, displaying a giant glowing orb about 2 miles long. The mysterious object pulsed eerily, ripples of energy darting across its surface.

“What did I just tell you?!” Rifleman growled.

“But the object appears to be drawing us in.” Mav explained.

“What do you mean it’s drawing us in?” Rifleman gasped. “It’s a giant ping-pong ball!”

“It’s pulling us closer, sir.”

“Well push it away!”

“But sir-”

“Shoot it! Aim for the eyes!”

“Sir our weapon systems seem to be malfunctioning!” The weapon’s officer cried.

“Turn the ship around!” Rifleman ordered. “Down periscope! Man the hatch! Water the flowers! Get us away from that thing!”

“Sir the object is hailing us!” The radio officer reported.

“What?” Rifleman grumbled. “It’s a giant glowing ball, how can it be hailing us!”

“Sir, it wishes to speak with you!”

“No way! I’m not talking to that thing!”

“Sir it insists!”

“GAH! I’m not talking to a giant glowing ball! What would my psychiatrist say?!”

“But sir-”

Suddenly a thundering voice bellowed from the bridge speakers.

“I am ZOG, Supreme Being and Lord of this sector! Who be thee that dare travel the holy land!”

“Uh...greetings mysterious. . .talking blob.” Rifleman slumped down in his chair. “I am Rifleman.”

“Then you shall die!” The creature said.

“Wow, wow, wow.” Rifleman yelled. “ZOG, hang on a minute!”

“Sir, the object is doubling in size!” The sensor officer reported.

“Ewww, it’s swelling!” Rifleman gasped.

On screen the glowing ball began to rapidly expand.

“Sir, the object’s diameter now registers as six miles wide!” Sensor officer Mav exclaimed. “Impact in 20 seconds!”

“GAH!” Rifleman yelled. “Hey ZOG, what are you doing!?”

“You have forsaken the holy land!” ZOG said. “You and your kind shall pay!”

“Wait! Wait! Wait!” Rifleman yelled. “You’re making yourself all fat!”

“My increase in mass shall crush your vessel.” ZOG stated.

“Who cares about my vessel?” Rifleman said. “Think about what you’re doing to your health!”

“My health?”

“Your physical well-being, man!”

“Hmmm. My rapid increase in size does make me feel unpleasant.”

“You know, for a Supreme Being you sure do lack basic health education.” Rifleman scolded.

“You speak wisdom!” ZOG admitted.

“I sure do.” Rifleman nodded. “Now why don’t you make a couple laps around the universe and start burning those calories?”

“Very well.” ZOG said. “I shall do as told.”

Thus Supreme Being ZOG went on his way, leaving the PUB DropShip safely behind.

* * *

CHAPTER FOURTEEN TOUGHGUY’S TABLE

*My whole soul, and all of me from myself, she has taken.
For when she took herself from me, she left me nothing
But desire and a yearning heart.*

-Baron Von ToughGuy 3058

The trio returned to their table and signalled the waiter to bring them another round of booze. ToughGuy slumped forward in his wheelchair and rested his head on his elbows, a look of melancholy pasted to his face. He looked sad and dejected, like a man who thought he had won the lottery, but when he went to collect his winnings, had found out that he had not won.

“You guys ever get the feeling that your entire life revolves around this room?” ToughGuy sighed.

“Nope.” Vereth shrugged. “My entire life revolves around this table. My world must be smaller than yours.”

“I just feel so...frustrated.” ToughGuy said. “It’s like I’m a giant pin-ball, bouncing stupidly from one table to the next.”

“There’s a scientific term for that.” DaishiGuy pointed out. “It’s called Kevin Costner syndrome.”

“You mean Kevin Costner the actor?” ToughGuy asked.

“Yup.”

“The guy who acted in Waterworld?” ToughGuy asked.

“Yeah dude.” DaishiGuy nodded. “But Waterworld sucked so much ass.”

“True.” Vereth said. “They had like a billion dollar budget and it still sucked ass.”

“Yeah, the water kept evaporating so they had to keep paying for more water.” DaishiGuy explained.

“The movie woulda sucked ass anyway.” Vereth said.

“You mean without the water?”

“Yeah.” Vereth nodded. “They shoulda saved cost and filmed it in the desert.”

“Then it woulda basically been a Mad Max rip off.” DaishiGuy pointed out.

“True.” Vereth admitted. “Mel Gibson is so sexy.”

“Word.”

ToughGuy paused for a moment. “Guys, wait a minute, what does Kevin Costner have to do with giant pin balls?”

“I dunno.” DaishiGuy shrugged. “But Waterworld was total crap, man.”

Vereth nodded. “The thing I don’t understand about that movie is, I mean, if there’s so much water everywhere, why was everyone so dirty? You know? The whole world is covered in frickin’ water! Hello, take a bath ya dirty grime covered fools!”

“That’s a good point, dude.” DaishiGuy nodded. “But maybe there were like, bad-ass ninja fish or something.”

“So? You don’t need to actually go in the water. You can use a bucket to fill up a bath or something.” Vereth offered.

“I dunno.” DaishiGuy shrugged. “Maybe the fish attack buckets?”

“Maybe.” Vereth nodded. “But what about his gills?”

“The gills behind Kevin Costner’s ears?”

“Yeah. How does someone evolve gills so fast?” Vereth asked. “I mean, at the beginning of the movie they say the Earth has been covered entirely by water for almost a hundred years, right? Now it took like a billion years for human’s to evolve from monkeys, so how does it only take a hundred years to evolve a couple gills? It makes no sense.”

“I dunno.” DaishiGuy shrugged. “Maybe Kevin Costner was a fish and was evolving into a man?”

“No dude, he was a man and he was evolving into a fish.”

“Either way the movie was total crap.”

“Yeah. It sucked major ass.”

ToughGuy looked at them, slightly confused. “Guys, what’s this got to do with anything?”

DaishiGuy patted ToughGuy on the shoulder. “The point is, ToughGuy, that men can’t grow gills.”

“What?”

“Kevin Costner syndrome. It’s impossible for men to evolve gills in such a short space of time.” DaishiGuy said. “It’s like your relationship with Denise. It’s impossible for a romance to just blossom overnight like Kevin Costner’s earlobe gills. You have to be patient and give things time to evolve naturally.”

ToughGuy’s jaw dropped. “Holy crap, man. That’s deep.”

DaishiGuy nodded. "And it's true."

ToughGuy shook his head. "But I can't wait that long. I want Denise's love now. And I'm willing to pay for it!"

"Ain't gonna happen." DaishiGuy said. "Love takes time."

"Then maybe I should just break up with Denise. End our relationship. Quick and painless."

"Like a Band-Aid." Vereth quipped. "One motion, right off."

"Exactly." ToughGuy nodded.

"Well technically, you and Denise have no relationship." DaishiGuy noted. "So there really is nothing for you to end."

"Damn." ToughGuy mumbled. "Not only does she hate me, but she refuses to let me break up with her!!"

"Owned." DaishiGuy grinned

"I just feel so alone..." ToughGuy moaned.

"Uh oh. He's having a prom night, flashback." Vereth quipped.

"No, I'm serious. If I can't have Denise, I don't know what I'll do." ToughGuy grumbled.

"You can always take up sports." Vereth offered.

"Yeah." DaishiGuy nodded. "Like Extreme Recycling."

"Recycling rocks!" Vereth proclaimed. "But I was thinking more along the lines of water sports."

"Dude, we're in a DropShip, floating through space!" ToughGuy yelled.

"So? Don't you own a bathtub?" Vereth asked.

"Shut up man!" ToughGuy snapped and then instantly calmed down. "You know, I've never told anyone this before, but the reason I'm always working out, pumping iron and lifting weights...is because...well, I'm kind of insecure."

“Wow, wow, wow. Hold it right there ToughGuy.” DaishiGuy said. “We don’t need to hear this.”

“Come on guys. I need closure.” ToughGuy insisted.

“No! We’re guys. Guys don’t share their feelings.” DaishiGuy said uncomfortably.

ToughGuy ignored them and continued spilling his feelings. “I guess I figured if I had the perfect body, Denise would like me. And so I started working out everyday. Working on my muscles. Becoming buff. Eating only protein bars and porn flakes. But despite my muscles and my tough guy status, I’ve never felt more weak in my life. I don’t feel like myself. I feel rejected and stupid, not strong and omnipotent.”

Vereth raised an eyebrow. “Dude, if I was omnipotent I’d kill myself!”

“Excuse me?” ToughGuy said.

“Hey if little *Vereth* was dead, then I got no reason to live!” Vereth snapped. “It’s like having a gun and no ammo. . .a fishing rod and no bait.”

DaishiGuy sighed. “Vereth, he said OMNIPOTENT not IMPOTENT!”

“You mean there’s a difference?” Vereth said stupidly.

“Yeah, one means invincible, the other means LACK OF SPERM.”

“That’s a pretty big difference.” Vereth said.

“Damn right.”

Vereth paused for a moment as if deep in thought, and then said. “Well, which would you rather be? Omnipotent or impotent?”

“Omnipotent obviously.” DaishiGuy responded quickly.

“No, I mean would you rather be omnipotent if it also meant being impotent or would you rather be potent but mortal?” Vereth rephrased.

“Oh. You mean would I rather be Superman with no weener or Clark Kent with big gonads?” DaishiGuy said.

“Exactly.” Vereth nodded.

“Hmmm.” DaishiGuy considered. “Well Clark doesn’t get Lois anyway. He’s a nerd. He never gets to use his hump stick, so he might as well be impotent. I don’t know...it’s not a fair comparison.”

“Yeah but would you trade all your super powers for the *possibility* of banging Lois Lane.” Vereth said.

“For the possibility?”

“Well it’s not certain is it? Sure, you’d have the crotch luggage, but there’s no guarantee that she’d be attracted to you minus all your super omnipotent powers.” Vereth said.

“Then I guess I’d rather be omnipotent and impotent than impotent and mortal...” DaishiGuy said hesitantly. “I think.”

Across the table ToughGuy just stared at the two of them in disbelief. “UH HELLO?? GUYS? I’m having a romantic crisis, meanwhile you two are delivering your thesis on Superman’s libido? This is the BT universe guys, why don’t you stick to the programme!”

Vereth shook his head. “ToughGuy, this discussion is valid, given your current state of affairs.”

“What the hell?” ToughGuy blurted.

“Think about it.” Vereth said. “You’re like Superman, minus the cape. You’ve got the big muscles, the six pack and massive biceps. You’re a total hunk...”

“Thanks.” ToughGuy blushed.

“And yet Denise still hates you.” Vereth added. “It’s the Superman, Lois Lane complex in reverse.”

Just then, the waiter arrived and set three beer mugs down on the table top. ToughGuy looked at the booze blankly, a sombre expression washing over his face.

“So what are you saying I should do?” ToughGuy mumbled.

“I don’t know, man. All I’m saying is that if Denise manages to hate a Superman like you...a Tough Guy like yourself, then there’s obviously something fundamentally wrong.” Vereth said. “Maybe you should try being Clark for awhile.”

“That the dumbest advice ever.” ToughGuy snapped.

“Your momma.” Vereth said reflexively.

DaishiGuy interjected. “Listen, don’t worry ToughGuy. We’ll help you win Denise.”

“Thanks guys. But I’m starting to think that this is all one big waste of time.” ToughGuy said.

“It won’t be.” DaishiGuy insisted. “But like Crowfoot said, we should have a backup plan. In case this naked bug song, doesn’t work.”

“The bug song will work.” Vereth proclaimed. “Loremaster Dave never makes mistakes. If he says it’ll work, then it most definitely will work.”

“I know, I know.” DaishiGuy said defensively. “I’m just saying, you know, it’s best to be prepared.”

“No, no, no. You guys are overreacting. Remember, we have Dave’s stamp of approval.” Vereth seemed convinced. “The Loremaster’s naked bug song method will work!!! He’s a genius!!”

“Oh come on Vereth! We don’t even know for sure if this little R-rated serenade is exactly what Dave meant.” DaishiGuy argued.

“Are you saying that I wrongly deciphered Dave’s wisdom?” Vereth shot back.

“Maybe. Maybe not. That’s the point. We don’t know for sure.” DaishiGuy said. “And frankly, singing a song about insects, stark naked, ain’t exactly at the top of my list of methods for seducing dames.”

“Let me tell you something, DaishiGuy,” Vereth snapped, “when it comes to seducing dames, no one knows more than me. Hell, if sex were fast food, I’d have golden arches over my bed!”

“Oh really?” DaishiGuy challenged.

“Yeah.” Vereth insisted.

“What about that incident on Solaris last year?” DaishiGuy pointed out.

“What incident....oh.” Vereth suddenly looked embarrassed.

ToughGuy anxiously leaned forward. “What happened on Solaris?”

DaishiGuy smiled. “Ok check this out. Vereth and I are in this bar-”

“Shut up!” Vereth snapped.

“-and this girl is making eyes at Vereth.” DaishiGuy said with a grin. “So after a while he goes over to her and after a minute or two, I see them kissing. Now, I know what you're

thinking. Vereth's not the type of guy who just goes to bars and makes out with girls. And you're right. Vereth's not the type of guy who just goes to bars and makes out with girls.”

ToughGuy’s eyes widened. “You kissed a guy?”

Vereth shrugged. “Well, yes and no. Yes, I did kiss a guy. And no I did not, not kiss him.”

“That’s nasty, man.” ToughGuy squirmed.

Vereth sighed. “In my defence, it was dark and he was a very pretty guy.”

DaishiGuy laughed and shook his head. “And that’s not the only time something like this has happened to Vereth. A couple months ago, at some bar on Carver IV, Vereth starts flashing his nipples at some woman across the room.”

“She started it!” Vereth squealed.

“She was breast feeding her kid!”

“That would explain the little bald man.” Vereth said absently.

ToughGuy and DaishiGuy broke out laughing.

“Hahaha, you crazy queerbait.” ToughGuy squealed.

“Are you laughing at me?” Vereth asked, an intense look on his face.

“No he’s laughing with me.” DaishiGuy giggled. “I’m laughing at you!”

“Damnation to the two of you!! To think I once considered you my friends!!” Vereth moaned.

“HAHAHA...alright....alright. Enough! Vereth’s man-kissing-nipple-flashing isn’t important.” DaishiGuy calmed down. “The fact is, though, Crowfoot was right. We gotta have back up plans. We can’t rely on this naked bug song.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay.” ToughGuy nodded. “But what about the cash? If I don’t pay Crowfoot 100 C bills he won’t lead my music band.”

“Well, what about Loki?” DaishiGuy said.

“What about him?” ToughGuy asked.

“Dude, did you forget? You blackmailed the guy into giving you 150 C bills by the end of the day.” DaishiGuy reminded. “So let’s go collect our wages.”

“Oh yeah.” ToughGuy smiled. “Okay. So we collect the dough, we pay Crowfoot and we get the band organised. Then what?”

“We formulate our plan of romantic attack.” Vereth smiled.

“Our plan of romantic attack?” ToughGuy asked, intrigued.

“Think Desert Storm with cupids and G-strings.” Vereth quipped.

“Yeah, it’s like Crowfoot said. We should be treating this like a military situation. Denise is the objective. So let’s think like tacticians.” DaishiGuy said.

“Listen guys, don’t let the rank of Sergeant fool you, I’m hopeless when it comes to all this military stuff.” ToughGuy said. “What do you suggest?”

DaishiGuy leaned forward, using his hands and empty beer mugs to form a crude battle plan on the table. “We hit her from all angles. Flowers. Serenades. Ice cream. Cake. Barbie dolls. Puppies. We totally smother her in romantic chick stuff.”

Vereth nodded. “And then when the music starts and you strut out onto that stage, stark naked, the lights dimming and the saxophone kicking in...at that moment, when your voice fills the room...that’s when we hook her. That’s when your love wins her heart.”

ToughGuy was smiling like a kid. “Excellent. Excellent. But where do we find all that gear?”

“Easy.” DaishiGuy said. “We’ll get chef BeerRunner to put aside some ice-cream and cake. A nice romantic meal. And I’ll steal a couple Barbie dolls from WolfCross’s room. The flowers shouldn’t be hard to find either.”

“What about the puppies?” ToughGuy asked.

“The cargo hold is full of stuff, man.” DaishiGuy explained. “We’re transporting a batch of dogs and rabbits and other cute animals to some zoo on Polanski IV. I’ll head on down and see what I can rustle up.”

“Sounds like a plan to me. Kind of weird...but a plan nonetheless.” ToughGuy nodded. “I guess Vereth and I will see about scaring Loki into giving us the cash early. We’ll meet back at this table in ten minutes. Good luck!”

* * *

CHAPTER FIFTEEN
MAJOR LOKI'S TABLE

*Teenie-Weenie Super Guy,
Pops right out before your eye,
He's no bigger than your thumbs
Snap your fingers, here he cums!*

-ERRATIC CHEESE 1998

Major Loki, Shrike and Perrin sat around a circular table, feasting on potato chips and ale. A pack of playing cards lay scattered, while several smouldering cigarettes died slowly in a stained ashtray, screaming slender tendrils of muted smoke.

“We saw you talking to Crowfoot.” Loki said, turning his chair to face ToughGuy and Vereth. “I thought we had a deal?”

ToughGuy shook his head. “Relax. Crowfoot doesn't know yet.”

“Oh yeah?” Loki hissed. “How can we be sure?”

“Listen, no one else knows about your little gambling spree.” ToughGuy assured. “So just give us the money so we can go over there and pay Crowfoot.”

“Pay Crowfoot? I thought we were paying you?”

“Yeah.” ToughGuy nodded. “You pay me. I pay Crowfoot.”

“We pay you, you pay Crowfoot?” Loki asked, gesturing with his hands.

“Yeah. You pay me and I pay Crowfoot.”

“Why don't I pay Crowfoot for you?”

“You don't even know why Crowfoot is being paid!” ToughGuy blurted.

“Well then, why are you paying Crowfoot?”

“That's none of your business.”

“How can I be sure it's none of my business, when you won't even tell me what the business is?” Loki fumed.

“Dammit Loki, why are you doing this?” ToughGuy said.

“Doing what?” Loki said, clearly confused.

“This!”

“Crazy muscle-man, you talk so much but say so little!” Loki snapped.

“Okay, you guys are totally drunk.” ToughGuy exclaimed. “What’s going on here?”

Across the table, a bloodshot Perrin spoke with an intoxicated grin. “Well, we were trying to play poker, but Shrike here threw all the Jacks away because they looked kinda scary.”

An obviously drunk Shrike, nodded clumsily. “They wanted to eat all the chocolate in my head.”

For long moments, ToughGuy just stared at Shrike and Perrin in amazement, watching as the engineers drifted in and out of consciousness. “Listen guys, I see the booze has gotten to you. You three are all fully stoned. So just give me the money, and I’ll be on my way.”

Loki paused for a moment, as if considering whether to pay ToughGuy. They locked gazes briefly before the Major smiled and yanked out a wad of cash from his jacket.

“I guess we owe you, ToughGuy.” Loki forced himself to say. “Made a lot of cash betting on your little fights. Heck, your duels with Denise over the past six months have been kinda entertaining. So here, take the money.”

ToughGuy’s eyes widened. “Those weren’t duels! I was trying to seduce her!”

“Oh.” Loki shrugged as he handed the cash over to ToughGuy. “Well, you gotta work on your technique.”

“Yeah, like you could do any better.” ToughGuy hissed.

Loki’s eyes narrowed to slits. “I could.”

“Well maybe. But not with Denise. Seducing Denise ain’t like seducing a regular girl. She’s like an onion. She’s got layers. Layers that regular girls don’t have.”

“You saying she’s fat?” Loki asked.

“No, I’m saying she has extra layers.”

“Like blubber?”

“No!”

“You mean like a walrus, right?”

“No. Like an onion! Layers of defence, you know?” ToughGuy mumbled. “Gah! Denise is a very complex person!”

“Why would onions need defensive layers?” Loki asked.

“What the hell? I don’t know, man. To protect them from the other frickin’ evil onions.” ToughGuy shrugged. “Listen, all I’m saying is that it takes a special man to win over a girl like Denise. Trust me.”

“Pffft. If I wanted Denise, I could have her like *that*.” Loki snapped his fingers. “You see ToughGuy, all women are the same. You figure one out, you figure them all.”

“Yeah and how would you know? You spend all your time in here knocking back whisky and beer.” ToughGuy said.

“Don’t underestimate the power of beer, ToughGuy.” Loki said solemnly. “Once you harness the special powers of beer, it frees your mind.”

“Yeah, I bet.” ToughGuy said sarcastically.

“Have you slept with Denise?” Loki asked bluntly.

“What!?” ToughGuy said, slightly shocked.

“Denise. Have you slept with her?”

“Uh..no.” ToughGuy said nervously. “I kissed her though.”

“You kissed her?”

“Well I blew a kiss her way when she wasn’t looking.” ToughGuy said sheepishly.

“That’s even worse!”

“How is that worse?”

“I don't know, but it's the same.”

“You’re crazy.” ToughGuy said.

“No I ain’t. You see, romance is all about the first kiss.” Loki explained. “Everything you need to know about a woman is in that first kiss. That first kiss is like the blueprint to her entire body.”

“How so?” ToughGuy asked.

“Kissing is pretty much like an opening act, you know? I mean, it’s like the stand-up comedian you have to sit through before Tom Jones comes out.”

“What?”

“And don’t get me wrong,” Loki continued, “it’s not that chicks don’t like the comedian, it’s just that that’s not why they bought the ticket. You know?”

“I see.” ToughGuy lied.

“The problem is, though, after the concert’s over, no matter how great the show was, girls like Denise are always looking for the comedian again, y’know? It must be an attention span thing or something. I don’t know. I figure somewhere along the line of evolution, female DNA got mixed up with antelope or something. I dunno. But anyway, a word of advice, ToughGuy, bring back the comedian. Otherwise you’re gonna find yourself sitting at home, listening to that album all alone.”

ToughGuy raised an eyebrow. “.....are we still talking about sex here?”

Loki leaned back in his chair, a stern look on his face.

“Okay let me put it another way.” Loki said. “You see, the basic difference between men and women sexually is that men are like firemen. To guys like us, sex is an emergency, and no matter what we’re doing we can be ready in two minutes. But women, nah, women are like fire. They’re very exciting, but the conditions have to be exactly right for it to occur. You understand?”

“You saying I should set Denise on fire?” ToughGuy said.

“No, I’m saying...dammit....what are you, stupid?” Loki fumed.

“Ain’t my fault nothing you say makes sense!” ToughGuy blurted. “I’m not sure if you’re drunk or just plain retarded.”

“Who you callin’ retarded?”

“Gee I don’t know, who else around here is talking pure industrial grade faeces?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Loki snapped.

“It means I’d rather blow torch my kneecaps than sit here listening to your crazy abstract wisdom!”

Major Loki stood up, swelling with anger. “You wanna start me up, punk? Huh? Huh? You wanna start me up? Just open the choke and pull the cord, pal. There's gonna be an earthquake and you're dancing on the fault line!”

ToughGuy laughed. “Old man, you couldn't kick my ass, if my ass came pre-kicked, pre-packaged and gift wrapped in foil paper!”

Loki snarled. “I'm gonna bust your brains, ToughGuy. Gonna kick your ass, Tony Danza style! Who's your boss? Who's your boss punk!?”

“Pffft. You don't scare me.”

“Well maybe this will!” Loki's yanked out his sidearm and levelled the gun at ToughGuy. “I'll give you ten seconds to haul ass before I blow your brains out! Do not pass go, DO NOT COLLECT 200, BITCH!”

* * *

CHAPTER SIXTEEN THE KITCHEN

*Oh! to be a cauliflower
beside a Brussel Sprout
deep within my cauli heart
I'd positively shout.
I'd be happy in a casserole
consomme or stew
oh! my little Brussel Sprout
if there I was with you.*

-Chef BeerRunner 3058

ToughGuy and Vereth escaped to the cafeteria kitchen, where Chef BeerRunner was busy overseeing the preparations to the crew's evening dinner. BeerRunner, wearing a traditional cook's hat and apron, scowled as the two PUB officers darted through his kitchen.

“Cease your reckless motion at once!” BeerRunner shouted. “What are you guys doing back here?!”

“Sorry Chef. We're hiding from Major Loki.” ToughGuy explained. “He wants to kick our combined ass!”

“Well I'm sure the Major has a very good reason for his assault on your buttocks.” BeerRunner replied.

“No he doesn’t!”

“I’m sure he does. Tell me, in what way did you befoul him?” BeerRunner asked.

“Befoul? What the hell?” ToughGuy gasped.

“Ah ToughGuy, you are a rowdy character.” BeerRunner sighed. “Tell me, where would we be without the agitators of the world attaching the electrodes of knowledge to the nipples of ignorance?”

“What the...uh??...Gah!! Listen to me you crazy cook, Loki is out to kill us!” ToughGuy growled.

“That is of no concern to me. Now remove yourselves from these premises!” BeerRunner insisted. “Both of you!”

“Hey wait, cook dude. You’ve gotta hide us!” ToughGuy pleaded.

“Hide you?” BeerRunner scowled. “I most definitely shall not! That is not in my job description!”

“Well what is in your job description?”

“Cooking and typing.”

“Well type it into your job description and hide us with haste!” ToughGuy snapped.

“Ah, a cunning attempt to manipulate me. But I shall not concede. Now get lost, both of you!” BeerRunner said, grabbing the two PUB officers and nudging them towards the doorway.

“Wait, wait, wait.” ToughGuy blurted. “We need your help!”

“Have your ears failed you at such a young age? I’ve already said no!” BeerRunner hissed.

“No, no, no this is something else.” ToughGuy stammered. “It’s about Denise.”

BeerRunner’s eyes widened. “Ah Denise. What a whimsical wind did blow, did blow with whimsy from high to low. She is a rose amongst thorns, she is.”

“Uh yeah.” ToughGuy shot BeerRunner a strange look. “Well uh, you gotta help us.”

“Help you in what way?” BeerRunner asked.

“I’m preparing a sort of party for Denise.” ToughGuy rapidly explained. “Something special to win her love.”

“Ah. Well this sounds very interesting. But I’m not interested.”

“But we need your help! You’ve got to cook something for her. Something romantic.” ToughGuy pleaded. “You’re the best chef on the ship, BeerRunner.”

“I’m the only chef on the ship!”

“Exactly. So if anyone can rustle up something special, it’s you.”

BeerRunner smiled. He welcomed the flattery. “Well then, what sort of banquet do you propose I concoct?”

“I dunno.” ToughGuy shrugged. “Something sexy.”

BeerRunner’s smile widened. “Yes. Yes. I shall create a feast so scrumptious and flavoursome! A culinary orgasm to tantalise her taste buds. A meal so seductively erotic, Denise will have no choice but to melt in your arms and languish in my cuisine. Yes...yes...I can taste it now.”

“So will you help us?”

“I most certainly will!” BeerRunner proclaimed. “Now leave my gastronomic premises. I have work to do! Victuals to prepare! Rest assured, ToughGuy, this shall be the epitome of meals. My greatest food masterpiece ever!!”

* * *

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN HUDSON, LOUHOBBS and ERRATIC_CHEESE

*Chicken Boo, what’s the matter with you?
You don’t act like the other chickens do,
You wear a disguise to hang with human guys,
but you’re not a man, you’re a Chicken Boo.*

-Nicholas Kerensky 2815

ToughGuy and Vereth pushed their way through the kitchen doors and stepped out into the dimly lit canteen. They weaved their way through the grid of tables, dodging drunk crewmates and light-footed bartenders. It was then that a flicker of motion caught ToughGuy’s attention. MechWarriors LouHobbs and Hudson were anxiously swaggering towards the duo, panting and sweating profusely.

“There you are!” LouHobbs jumped with excitement. “We’ve been looking all over for you, man.”

“What?” ToughGuy asked. “What’s wrong Lou?”

“DaishiGuy told us about your little predicament.” LouHobbs said.

ToughGuy raised an eyebrow. “What predicament?”

“Dude, your inability to seduce Denise.” LouHobbs said.

“Listen guys-”

“No ToughGuy.” LouHobbs said softly. “It’s okay. Impotency affects one in ten males-”

“I’m not impotent!” ToughGuy blurted.

“That’s okay too. Because potency affects nine in ten males.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Lou?” ToughGuy barked.

“Chill out, man.” LouHobbs said. “Hudson and I, we’re just here to help.”

“Oui.” Hudson nodded. “Vive la résistance!”

ToughGuy looked at Hudson strangely. “What did he say?”

“I don’t know.” LouHobbs admitted. “He’s got these French issues.”

Vereth gasped. “Hudson is French?”

“Yeah.” LouHobbs nodded.

“What the hell? Since when?” Vereth asked.

LouHobbs shrugged. “Pffft, I don’t know. I think he’s been this way since last week Tuesday.”

“Wow, I never knew.”

“Yeah.” LouHobbs nodded. “Dude has his own vineyard set up in his cabin. Ain’t that right Hudson?”

“Vive la résistance!” Hudson repeated.

“Why does he keep saying that?” Vereth asked.

“Because he’s French.” LouHobbs snapped. “Man, they got so much weird European crap over there.”

“Yeah.” ToughGuy nodded. “Penis shaped bread and that Eiffel tower thing.”

"Nudist beaches, man." LouHobbs added.

"Sweet." ToughGuy nodded. "Naked French men make me moist."

"Word." LouHobbs drooled.

Vereth scowled and folded his arms. “Come on guys, stop insulting the French.”

ToughGuy flashed Vereth a quizzical look. “Why?”

“Because it’s not nice.” Vereth scolded.

“Vive la résistance!” Hudson nodded.

“Pffft. Hey Lou,” ToughGuy smiled, “what do you call a thousand French men with their hands up?”

“I don’t know.” LouHobbs admitted. “What?”

“The French army. HAHAHA” ToughGuy said.

“HAHAHA. Good one.”

“Breaking news, this just in. . .” ToughGuy said in a comical voice. “France has just pre-emptively surrendered. . . to a box of cornflakes. HAHAH!”

“HAHAHAH, it’s funny because the French lose wars. HAHAHA!” LouHobbs giggled.

“HAHAHAHA.” ToughGuy laughed.

“Hey, ToeGuy, why don’t they have fireworks at Euro Disney?” LouHobbs asked.

“I don’t know. Why?”

“Because every time they shoot them off, the French try to surrender. . .HAHAHAHA.” LouHobbs said.

“HAHAHAHA!” Toughguy broke out laughing. “Hey Lou, how can you identify a French Infantryman?”

“I don’t know. How?”

“Sunburned armpits.” ToughGuy squealed. “HAHAHAHA.”

“HAHAHAHAHA.” LouHobbs laughed.

“HAHAHAHAHA.” ToughGuy laughed.

Hudson looked at them blankly. “Vive la résistance!”

“I don’t know what you guys are laughing at.” Vereth said sternly. “The French were instrumental in the US achieving independence. You shouldn't forget that. It’s sad the way you react so strongly against the French exercising their right to object to the crazy ideas of a Texan half-wit. And lets face it, even the most jingoistic patriot must now have a sneaking suspicion that George is a total jackass.”

The trio looked at Vereth with confusion.

“Vereth, stop stepping out of character, man!” ToughGuy growled. “Save this political crap for the message boards!”

“No man, stop dissing the French!” Vereth said firmly.

“Forget about the damn French.” ToughGuy said. “This is BattleTech. You’re ruining the whole ambience thing for the readers.”

“What readers?” Vereth asked.

“The guys reading this story!” ToughGuy blurted.

Vereth folded his arms. “Oh, so now you’re acknowledging the presence of readers? Good job ToughGuy, you just shattered audience immersion.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” ToughGuy squealed.

LouHobbs shook his head and sighed. “He’s right ToughGuy. You just killed this story.”

“What? What did I do?” ToughGuy said frantically.

“You acknowledged the presence of readers.” LouHobbs pointed out.

“Yup.” Vereth nodded in agreement. “The First Rule of Storytelling: Never let the Readers know that the Characters they are reading about are aware that they are in a story.”

“But this is a story!” ToughGuy blurted.

“Shut the hell up, ToughGuy.” LouHobbs snapped. “Stop straying from the script!”

“What script?” ToughGuy blurted. “No one gave me a script!”

“What do you mean you have no script!” ERRATIC_CHEESE suddenly appeared. “I’m practically spoon-feeding you your lines!”

“WHO THE HELL IS THIS?” ToughGuy gasped.

“I’m the frickin’ author you dumbass.” ERRATIC_CHEESE snapped.

LouHobbs sighed. “Dammit ToughGuy, now you brought CHEESE into the story.”

“WHAT THE HELL?” ToughGuy looked confused. “Who IS THIS GUY?”

“Just shut up before you do more damage, ToughGuy!” Vereth snapped.

“WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON!”

“This story is dead, that’s what’s going on!” ERRATIC_CHEESE growled. “I shoulda written a normal BATTLETECH story full of ’Mechs and explosions. All this romantic dialogue is turning me into a wimp.”

“NO!” ToughGuy snapped. “You can’t just string me along for seventeen chapters and then abandon me without warning!”

“I can do what I want, punk.” ERRATIC_CHEESE snarled. “You’re all puppets in my hands! Now fondle my belly button!”

“But this is my story!” ToughGuy screamed. “I gotta find out if Denise falls in love with me!”

“What’s the point?” ERRATIC_CHEESE sighed. “I’m ending this story right here.”

THE END.

“No!” ToughGuy snapped. “I’m not leaving without Denise!”

“The story is over, ToughGuy.” ERRATIC_CHEESE sighed. “You messed it all up.”

THE END.

“Stop that!” ToughGuy growled. “This is not the end!”

“Nobody’s reading anymore, ToughGuy.” ERRATIC_CHEESE insisted. “And I’m tired of writing crazy crap that no one appreciates.”

THE END.

“Stop it, you damn polysaturated queer!” ToughGuy yelled. “I ain’t leaving!”

“Vive la résistance!” Hudson nodded.

“Shut up Hudson!” ToughGuy blurted.

“Leave Frenchie alone.” LouHobbs insisted.

“Kiss my ass.” ToughGuy cursed.

“Way ahead of you.” LouHobbs pulled his lips off ToughGuy’s buttocks.

“Ewwwww.”

“Minty.” LouHobs licked his lips.

“Oh God, I can’t believe I write this crap.” ERRATIC_CHEESE sighed.

“And you’ve got no choice but to write more.” ToughGuy said firmly. “You’re finishing this damn story, whether you like it or not!”

ERRATIC_CHEESE exhaled deeply. “Listen to me ToughGuy, get out while you still can. Getting to the end isn’t worth it.”

“What are you talking about?” ToughGuy asked.

“This isn’t a happy ending ToughGuy.” ERRATIC_CHEESE warned. “Things get darker and they may stay that way unless I write a sequel.”

ToughGuy’s eyes narrowed to slits. “You’ve finished writing the story, haven’t you?”

ERRATIC_CHEESE nodded. “This is all just a chapter edit.”

“Well what happens at the end?”

“I can’t tell you that ToughGuy.” ERRATIC_CHEESE said. “I just can’t.”

“Do I get Denise?”

“I can’t say.”

“Well what happens to me?”

“I’m not revealing any more information ToughGuy.” ERRATIC_CHEESE said firmly. “What I’m offering you is a choice. Either end the story right here, or continue till the end.”

ToughGuy paused for a moment. “If I end the story here, then I don’t get Denise.”

ERRATIC_CHEESE nodded. “That’s a certainty.”

“And what happens if I finish the story?”

“Maybe you get Denise. Maybe you don’t.” ERRATIC_CHEESE said. “Or maybe something else happens. Something far worse.”

An ominous silence fell across the canteen. ToughGuy and ERRATIC_CHEESE locked gazes, their unblinking eyes joined for several long heartbeats.

“You know I have to go on.” ToughGuy whispered. “You’ve already made that choice for me. My love for Denise propels me into uncertainty. . .and I accept that.”

ERRATIC_CHEESE said nothing.

“What ever happens, I just want to say thank you.” ToughGuy said. “Thank you for using me as your main character. Thank you for making me your star.”

“No problem, ToughGuy.” ERRATIC_CHEESE said, despite the fact that he hated the Sergeant.

“What ever happens, I’ll always appreciate this.” ToughGuy said softly. “But you know I have to go on.”

“I understand.” ERRATIC_CHEESE suddenly vanished.

ToughGuy composed himself and then turned to face Vereth, Hudson and LouHobbs. “Okay guys, get ready. We’re restarting this chapter. We’re taking things from the top.”

LouHobbs looked confused. “Uh. . .what’s going on?”

“Just say your damn lines, Lou.” ToughGuy snapped.

“Fine.” LouHobbs took two steps back and tried to remember his first lines. “Uh. . . ToughGuy. . . I’ve been looking all over for you.”

ToughGuy stood there, trying to remember his response. “Shit. . . I forgot what I’m supposed to say.”

ERRATIC_CHEESE whispers into ToughGuy’s ear.

“Oh yeah. Thanks.” ToughGuy thanked the author and then turned to face LouHobbs. “Looking for me? What for?”

“I’m here to help you win Denise’s heart.” LouHobbs said mechanically.

“But what do you know of love?” ToughGuy asked.

“You have no idea how vast this universe is, ToughGuy. You can’t begin to imagine the intricacies of life and love.” Lou said enigmatically.

“What are you? Stephen Hawking’s love child?” ToughGuy asked.

LouHobbs smiled. “The universe is a scary place, ToughGuy. And when I’m done revealing its hidden secrets to you, you will learn to respect and fear it.”

“Yeah, somebody once told me how frighteningly vast the universe is.” ToughGuy said. “But I told that story around the campfire and nobody got scared.”

“Yes, well to understand mankind we have to look at that word itself. MANKIND.” LouHobbs sat down. “Basically, it’s made up of two separate words ‘mank’ and ‘ind’. Now what do these words mean? It’s a mystery, and so is mankind.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” ToughGuy snarled. “What’s all of this got to do with Denise?”

“You see ToughGuy, fundamentally, the universe is made up of energy.” LouHobbs explained.

“So?”

“Everything is energy. This table is energy. You and I, we are energy.” LouHobbs tapped the table top. “Every single thing is energy. . . except electricity.”

“Wait a minute. Electricity is not energy?” ToughGuy asked.

“No.” LouHobbs said firmly. “Electricity is a fruit.”

“Fruit?” ToughGuy seemed confused. “You mean like a banana?”

“Exactly.”

“Electricity ain’t no fruit man!” ToughGuy blurted.

“I am teaching you a new way of perceiving. Firstly by making you realise we process our perceptions to fit a mould, and secondly, by fiercely guiding you to perceive energy directly.” LouHobbs folded his arms. “Thus, today we shall eat electricity for it is a fruit.”

“Eat electricity?”

LouHobbs pulled an electrical chord out of his pocket and plugged one end into a nearby electrical socket. He then handed the other end to ToughGuy. “Now I want you to start chewing on this 200 volt electrical cable.”

“Gee, okay.” ToughGuy said whimsically.

ToughGuy took the electrical cable and bit into it with his teeth. A sudden surge of electrical current then shocked the Sergeant, darting through his body and jolting him violently.

“AHHH!! AHHHH!!” ToughGuy screamed.

“Excellent.” LouHobbs pulled the electrical chord out of the socket and patted ToughGuy on the back. “You have learnt your first lesson, ToughGuy.”

“GAHH! WHAT THE HELL MAN!?!?” ToughGuy yelled, his clothes smouldering, his hair sticking up, his body crackling with static. “You freakin’ pumped my face full of electricity you crazy son of a bitch!”

“Now go on your way and win Denise’s heart.” LouHobbs said. “And take this newfound knowledge with you.”

“WHAT NEWFOUND KNOWLEDGE!?! YOU JUST SHOCKED MY FRICKIN’ BRAINS OUT!!” ToughGuy snapped. “WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO THAT FOR!?”

“In time you will understand my teachings.” LouHobbs stood up and gestured for Hudson to join him. “Come Hudson, let us journey to the brewery with hopes of filling our stomachs with the one known as beer.”

“Vive la résistance!” Hudson nodded.

And with a slight bow, Hudson and LouHobbs left the canteen.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN RIFLEMAN

*Drive, drive, drive your car
Gently down the street
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,
Life is but a treat.*

Nicholas Kerensky - 2815

Doctor Willis stormed onto the bridge, his stethoscope dangling loosely from his neck.

“Where the heck is Palerider?!” Doctor Willis snarled. “The guy’s ten minutes late for his monthly checkup!”

Rifleman just stood there, dumbfounded. “Uh. . .I don’t know.”

“Who the heck are you!?” Willis blurted.

“Uh. . .I’m Rifleman.” Rifleman identified himself. “I’m the senior officer in charge.”

Willis examined Rifleman for a brief moment. “Aren’t you a little young to be a *senior officer*?”

“I’m not young!” Rifleman protested.

“Well then they did a good job on your plastic surgery.”

“I’ve never had plastic surgery!”

“Then what’s ya secret?” Willis asked. “Is it moose piss? It’s moose piss, isn’t it?”

“WHAT!”

“It’s gotta be moose piss.” Willis nodded knowingly. “I knew this guy, spent all his life sleeping under a moose. Ninety years old, yet he’s got the body of a teenager. I swear to God! It’s amazing! Course he smells like moose piss all the time. . .but I hear chicks dig that sort of thing.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the miracles of moose piss, man.” Willis said. “Ironic, isn’t it? That the cutting edge of medical science just so happens to also be the urine of a moose.”

“Uh . . .”

“Anyway.” Willis poked Rifleman’s stomach experimentally. “When was your last check-up?”

“My last check-up?”

“What are you, DEAF?”

“Uh. . no.”

“Then when was your last check-up?”

Rifleman shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know.”

“I mean I forgot.”

“Forgot? You mean like AMNESIA?!” Willis gasped.

“I don’t have amnesia!”

“Come on, lean back and let me look up your NOSE.” Willis pushed Rifleman down into a chair and tilted the seat backwards.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

“I’m saving your life.”

“But I feel fine!” Rifleman insisted.

“Everyone feels fine before they DIE!”

“Listen to me-”

“How are your bowels?” Willis began prodding Rifleman’s buttocks. “Huh? How are they?”

“What?”

“From the smell of your breath, your dietary tract seems to be lacking a proper supply of roughage.”

“Roughage?”

“Wheat. Cereal. Fibre.” Willis recited. “Helps to smoothly expel faeces!”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“What are you, STUPID?”

“I’m not stupid!” Rifleman protested.

“I’m talking about DIARRHOEA! A serious illness. Let me ask you something. If 4 out of 5 patients suffer from diarrhoea, does that mean the fifth enjoys it? No! Absolutely not!”

“I don’t have diarrhoea!”

“That’s because you’re CONSTIPATED!” Willis snapped.

“I’m not constipated!”

“Yes you are.” Willis insisted. “But don’t worry. We will get rid of that constipation right away. Then we tackle that diarrhoea!”

Rifleman gasped. “This is crazy! I don’t have diarrhoea!”

“Well a stool sample should tell us for sure.” Doctor Willis randomly produced a bucket. “Here, poop in this.”

“AHH!” Rifleman yelled. “Are you crazy!”

“What?” Willis asked. “Is the bucket too small?”

“I’m not pooping in a bucket!”

“Fine, fine, fine.” Doctor Willis sighed. “How about you just tell me the texture of your faeces.”

“WHAT?”

“Are they firm? Stringy? Liquid in nature?”

“GAH!” Rifleman snapped. “I’ve got a DropShip to run! The texture of my TOILET LOGS are the last thing on my mind!”

Willis paused. "You seem stressed."

"You're damn right I'm stressed!" Rifleman blurted.

"That could be due to a lack of vitamin D or too much vitamin E." Willis scratched his chin. "Or is it too much vitamin D and not enough E? Either way, you've got too much of something and not enough of something else."

"Screw you and your vitamins!" Rifleman yelled. "I'm fine! There's nothing wrong with me!"

"You sure?" Doctor Willis pointed at Rifleman's trousers. "You look like you've got a serious case of intergalactic wedgie going on down there."

"It's these pants." Rifleman explained frantically. "They're too tight."

"Really? I think maybe you like the feel of them riding up your butt." Willis examined Rifleman. "In fact, those pants may be the cause of your constipation!"

"GAH!"

Willis nodded. "Yup. I recommend you stop wearing pants . . .for at least a week."

Rifleman's jaw dropped. "Stop wearing pants?"

"Might as well lose the shirt too." Willis added. "Just to be safe."

Rifleman was growing increasingly agitated. "GET OUT OF HERE!"

"Not until you get naked!"

"I'm not getting naked!"

"Then I'm not leaving!"

"You can't do this!"

"I'm chief medical officer on board this DropShip." Willis pointed out. "Now show me some skin!"

"Fine! Fine!" Rifleman began taking off his clothes. "There! I'm naked! You happy?"

"Good." Willis studied Rifleman's naked body. "Now I prescribe total nudity for at least a week. No socks, no shirts, no pants, you got that?"

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Rifleman nodded. “Just get out of here.”

“I’ll check up on you in a couple hours.” Willis promised. “Take care.”

And with that, the Medical Officer left the bridge.

* * *

CHAPTER NINETEEN TOUGHGUY’S TABLE

*Scooby Doo is my hero,
For it is plain to see,
Not afraid to show emotion,
Can be brave, when needed be.
Always hungry, always eating,
Would leap buildings for a treat.
Can be loving, can be gentle,
As a doggie, he’s so sweet.*

-Droopy Mczip 3032

ToughGuy and Vereth returned to their table to find DaishiGuy already there, waiting for them. DaishiGuy had assembled a variety of womanly gifts and had arranged them on the table to resemble a market display rack. Large bouquets of flowers, ornate dolls, necklaces, jewellery, flasks of perfume and intricately knitted lacy underwear. Every gift you could possibly consider giving a woman and more. One item stood out, though. It was a large wheeled box, about a meter and a half long and a meter tall. ToughGuy and Vereth looked at the box with curiosity.

“What’s in the box?” Vereth asked.

“A puppy.” DaishiGuy smiled. “Denise will love it.”

ToughGuy rolled over to the box, his clothes still smouldering. He lifted a small viewing slit and leaned forward, peering inside. Suddenly a large creature lunged up at him, growling ferociously and causing the box to jerk upwards. ToughGuy jolted backwards with fear.

“HOLY CRAP!!!” ToughGuy snapped. “What the hell is that thing!?”

“It’s a puppy.” DaishiGuy repeated.

“That ain’t no frickin’ puppy, man!”

“Sure it is.” DaishiGuy insisted. “It’s a baby pit-bull.”

“A PIT-BULL!!?” ToughGuy blurted. “A FRICKIN’ PIT-BULL?”

“Yeah, what’s wrong?”

“That’s like the most deadly species of dog ever!”

DaishiGuy shrugged. “A dog’s a dog. Denise won’t know the difference.”

“Pit-bulls are evil, man.” ToughGuy explained. “They’re like trained to kill bears and crap. They’re basically the Great White Sharks of the Dog Kingdom!”

“So?”

“So why the hell don’t you just hand Denise a gun and ask her to blow her frickin’ brains out!” ToughGuy yelled.

“Gee ToughGuy, I think you’re overreacting just a tad bit.” DaishiGuy said nonchalantly.

“I can’t give Denise this.” ToughGuy said, backing quickly away from the box.

“But it’s romantic.” DaishiGuy objected.

“Flowers are romantic. Soft lighting and classical music are romantic. Deadly flesh eating dogs are NOT ROMANTIC!!” ToughGuy snapped.

“Yeah but it looks so cute.” DaishiGuy protested.

“It’s ugly and it will bite her arms off!”

“Are you kidding me? Denise knows self defence.” DaishiGuy said. “This dog wouldn’t dare mess with her.”

“Man, you’re so dumb.” ToughGuy sighed. “Would you give this as a gift to someone you loved?”

“You mean like my grandma?”

“Yes.”

“My grandmother is dead.” DaishiGuy said. “Why would I give a gift to a dead person?”

ToughGuy sighed. “Okay. Well let’s say your grandmother was still alive, would you give this thing to her then?”

“No.” DaishiGuy shook his head. “My grandma was allergic to dogs.”

ToughGuy sighed and threw his hands up in despair. “I can’t reason with a moron.”

“You talking to me?” DaishiGuy asked, Travis Bickle style.

“Yes. Look, this is a deadly puppy. . .It’s not even a puppy, it’s a small frickin’ dog! In a couple more months it will be big enough to eat any one of us!” ToughGuy explained.

“I think you’re overreacting.” DaishiGuy said.

“Why’d you have to bring a pit bull, man.” ToughGuy asked. “Weren’t there any poodles down there?”

“I couldn’t find anything else. We must have unloaded all the cute and cuddly animals at our last stop.” DaishiGuy explained.

ToughGuy sighed and signalled the waiter to bring their table another round of beer. He rose three fingers and did a small spiral motion to signify 3 mugs. There was silence at the table for several moments, before Vereth finally spoke.

“I’ve got an idea!” Vereth proclaimed. “We can fix this problem!”

ToughGuy grumbled. “Oh man. . .you have a track record for stupid ideas, Vereth.”

“But this idea will work!” Vereth protested.

“Listen Vereth, no offence, but if brains were dynamite, you wouldn’t have enough explosives to blow your damn nose!” ToughGuy snarled.

“Shut up, this is my greatest idea ever!” Vereth snarled

“Oh yeah? What is it? You wanna tranquillise it?” ToughGuy said sarcastically. “Gee that’s a good idea. Let’s give Denise a sleeping dog! We’ll tell her it’s dead so she won’t have to worry about it waking up and eating her!”

“No man. Just shut up for a second.” Vereth said.

“Yeah, yeah.” ToughGuy grumbled. “Well, what’s your idea?”

“It’s a little something I learned in my kindergarten art class.” Vereth began.

“Oh man, this idea is dumb already. . .” ToughGuy mumbled.

“Listen, we get some pink bows, some fancy ribbons and we make a pretty little dog necklace.” Vereth said. “And then we glue a little bow-tie around it’s neck. Chicks absolutely adore cute little bows. Then we get a dog safety muzzle, spray paint it yellow and tie it around the dog’s mouth to prevent it from biting anyone. It’ll be safe, and it’ll look beautiful.”

“IT’LL LOOK LIKE A FOUR LEGGED HANNIBAL LECTER!!!” ToughGuy blurted.

“Still, it’s worth a try.” Vereth shrugged.

“You wanna dress the dog up like a psychopath with a bow tie? Holy Sweet Buddha on a wheels, man that’s stupid!!” ToughGuy exclaimed.

“What? You got any better ideas?” Vereth challenged.

“Yeah, run down to the armoury, fetch me a shotgun and a mop.” ToughGuy snapped. “We shoot this dog right here!”

“Kill it?” DaishiGuy gasped.

“Damn right!” ToughGuy blurted.

“We can’t give Denise a dead dog!!”

“We’re not giving her any dogs!!!” ToughGuy yelled.

“You can’t kill an innocent creature!” DaishiGuy argued.

“Why not?”

“There are laws against stuff like that!”

“What are you, Green Peace?”

“No, I’m a Black Belt in Karate.” DaishiGuy tied his ninja bandana around his forehead. “And I ain’t letting you kill that dog!”

“Kiss my non-pagoda ass you dojo sucking samurai wannabe!” ToughGuy blurted. “This is a dangerous beast. I’m acting with the crew’s safety in mind.”

“No you aren’t. Admit it, you just hate this dog!!!” DaishiGuy said.

“I don’t hate the dog. We just met. I barely even know it!” ToughGuy said.

“Then why do you want to kill it!”

“Cus’ it’s a frickin’ dangerous wild beast!” ToughGuy yelled.

“No it’s not. It just made a bad first impression on you, that’s all.” DaishiGuy said.

“IT TRIED TO BITE OFF MY FACE!!” ToughGuy screamed.

“That’s no reason to kill it.”

“Dammit. You guys are nuts! Total frickin’ acorns man!” ToughGuy sighed.

“Us nuts?” DaishiGuy scowled. “We ain’t the ones at war with a caged dog.”

“We’ve got no choice!” ToughGuy protested.

“Yes we do. We dress the dog up like Vereth said.” DaishiGuy insisted.

“No way.” ToughGuy snapped.

“Think about it, man. Chicks like dressing up and all that crazy crap. She’ll absolutely adore the dog.” DaishiGuy said. “It will be like a life-sized, four legged Barbie doll.”

ToughGuy sighed and slumped back in his chair. He couldn’t argue anymore. “Fine. We do this your way. Dress the dog up!”

“Excellent.” DaishiGuy nodded.

“I’m going to pay Crowfoot. You guys stay here and beautify that beast. But if this thing backfires, I swear to God, it’ll be your nuts in a vice.” ToughGuy threatened.

* * *

CHAPTER TWENTY CROWFOOT’S TABLE

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
And no-one tried to fix him,
‘Cus he was a total dumbass egg,
with no insurance policy.*

-ERRATIC_CHEESE 1998

Crowfoot always had a sadistic look in his eyes. Always. You were never quite sure whether he was looking to give you a friendly hug or just gain enough leverage to crack your ribs. The Executive Officer had just finished eating, and was now busy tending to a jug full of beer. He had a toothpick dangling from his lips and a napkin in his left hand. When he saw ToughGuy approaching, Crowfoot cracked a wry smile.

“You got the money?” Crowfoot asked, all business.

“Yeah.” ToughGuy grumbled. “God man, I got the money.”

“What’s your problem?” The XO asked.

“Nothing.” ToughGuy snapped. “No actually, everything. This whole evening sucks. Today sucks. Yesterday sucks. Tomorrow will suck. My whole life sucks.”

“Yeah, ain’t it great.” Crowfoot smiled.

“I just feel so hopeless.”

“What’s wrong?” Crowfoot asked, wiping his brow. “Actually no. I don’t care.”

“It’s just that....”

“I don’t care ToughGuy.” Crowfoot said firmly. “Just give me my damn money.”

“Fine.” ToughGuy said, handing Crowfoot the money. “But please, you and the band better play your hearts out. I don’t want to be up on that stage looking like a complete fool.”

“You don’t wanna look like a fool?” Crowfoot laughed. “You’re gonna sing Jitterbug, naked in a wheelchair. You can’t possibly not look like a fool.”

ToughGuy sighed. “Well, once it has an effect on Denise.”

“Oh, it’ll have an effect on Denise. Believe me.” Crowfoot smiled.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” Crowfoot said. “Only that this entire idea is gayer than Elton John in a wedding dress.”

“Thanks for boosting my confidence.”

“No problem.”

ToughGuy exhaled deeply. “I just want to feel true romance. You know? I wanna feel love. I wanna feel the wind blowing through my hair.”

Crowfoot smiled. “Only way you’re gonna feel the wind blowing through your hair is if you run down a hill with your hands above your head.”

“You saying I’m bald?”

“Nah, I’m saying you got hairy armpits.” Crowfoot giggled. “Tell me Sergeant, why the hell are you going ahead with this?”

“What do you mean?”

“This. Why do you keep thinking up these crazy ideas to seduce Denise?”

“I don’t know. I guess if I’m to live my life without Denise, I’ve got to be sure that I tried everything. You know? I can’t live knowing that there may have been a possibility, no matter how remote, that things could have worked out between us.”

“Aww, ain’t that cute.” Crowfoot mocked. “You’re breaking my heart with all this Florence Nightingale, Celine Dion, dandelion bull-crap.”

“Yeah, laugh it up.” ToughGuy said.

“Oh, I intend to.” Crowfoot smiled.

“Screw you Crowfoot! Sometimes you can act like such a jerk!” ToughGuy snapped, instantly regretting his choice of words.

Crowfoot raised an eyebrow, a stern expression suddenly washing over his face. His eyes bore down on the Sergeant like twin shotguns. “Excuse me?”

“Uh...I’m sorry, sir.” Toughguy stammered.

Crowfoot whipped out his sidearm and jammed the gun against ToughGuy’s cheek.

“You damn well better be! One more outburst like that, and I swear to God, I’ll have you fed intravenously to my goldfish!”

“Uhh I’m sorry sir.” ToughGuy apologised again.

“You’re sorry?” Crowfoot yelled. “Listen solider, this may be PaleRider’s outfit and that may be his name on the logo, but I want you to be absolutely clear on one thing: I run this show, and I expect every god-damned officer in this unit to show me respect!”

“Yes sir. I’m sorry sir.”

“Don’t think that because you’re all messed up and riding around in a sissy looking wheelchair that I’m supposed to show you mercy. Mercy is not a word, Sergeant. Cross it out of your dictionary and swallow the page. If you slip up, don’t expect me to show you compassion! The enemy will not show you mercy. He will not show you pity. He knows no sympathy. He will bite your balls and start chewing till your face turns blue. Do you understand? Now I’m a gentle man, Sergeant. I like flowers and I like rainbows and I like the occasional episode of the Cosby Show. But don’t ever ask me to back down from what I believe in. Cus’ the moment you take that first step, that first frickin’ step away from the truth...away from what you know is right, deep down in your heart, that Sergeant. . . *that*, is when the jaws of failure sneaks up right behind you and bites you in the ass. And believe me solider, I’ve seen many good men get bitten in the ass. Sometimes I go entire weeks, just watching asses getting bitten. And let me tell you, it’s not a pretty sight. No damn way! You may think and you may say ‘yeah, that’s a nice pair of cheeks’ and yeah, you’d be right. But when the ass biting begins, solider, when those jaws of injustice and all that’s wrong and bad in this universe, comes creeping up behind you and takes a giant bite outta your ass. . .when you feel that bite, solider, that’s when those lovely pair of cheeks start to look a lot less appetising. And believe me, I got a big appetite. God damn, so help me I like to eat. But I’m a moral man and I know when not to bite ass, and I know when not to cross the line.

You see, what you gotta understand Sergeant, is that this is the military. Yeah sure, we got no formal military training, and yes we spend more time drinking beer and getting stoned than driving ’Mechs and saving lives. . .but God dammit this is a military unit!! A unit, Sergeant. I want you to hold that word in your head for a minute. A unit! And once our unity is broken, we got nothing!! You hear me Sergeant? We got nothing! That’s when it all breaks down. That’s when the system crumbles. That’s when we collapse. And that collapse, Sergeant, is what opens the doors. The doors of Hell, Sergeant. Believe me, you do not want to see what’s behind those doors. So from now on, when I say jump, you say how high. When I say put that hula hoop around your waist and start spinning, you better shake your ass and hope to God that that there hula hoop doesn’t touch the ground, because believe me, one slip up, and I will be on your ass like a dung beetle on a compost heap on the fourth of July. Right there on your ass, all day long, chewing away till you got nothing to sit on but a giant bone with my lovely tooth marks. You got that Sergeant?”

ToughGuy just sat there, slack jawed. “Uh...yes sir.”

* * *

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE TOUGHGUY’S TABLE

*Yankee Doodle stayed at home,
Cooking for his pony.
Put fat spaghetti in a pot,
And called it macaroni.*

*Yankee Doodle, stir it up.
Let it gently simmer.
Add the pepper and the salt,
And that's your pony's dinner.*

-Chef BeerRunner 3022

ToughGuy returned to his table in a state of shock. Crowfoot had messed with his head good. ToughGuy could still feel the senior officer's words hammering into his skull.

"Did you pay Crowfoot? Everything go okay?" DaishiGuy asked, noticing ToughGuy's troubled expression.

ToughGuy was shaking his head, speaking fast and looking slightly epileptic. "Listen man, I don't want to talk about it. What happened at that table, nobody ask me. Okay? Nobody!"

"Jeese, man. Fine. Chill out." DaishiGuy backed off.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm sorry." ToughGuy apologised. "It's just that this whole damn thing seems to be spiralling out of control. You know? Everybody's got an opinion. Everyone's telling me what to do."

"We're just trying to help."

"I know. And I appreciate it. But it's getting confusing." ToughGuy whined. "I mean, there's Loki telling me to set Denise on fire, Vereth telling me to dress up this dog, Crowfoot telling me to treat this like a military situation and Dave telling me to get naked and sing a song about bugs. God dammit, I feel like I'm losing my mind!"

"You lost your mind a long time ago, dude." Vereth pointed out.

"Yeah. . . . I guess you're right." ToughGuy perked up. "So how's this insane little plan of ours going? We all set?"

"Yup. Operation Funky Wombat is good to go." DaishiGuy nodded.

"Funky Wombat?" ToughGuy raised an eyebrow.

"I couldn't think of anything else." DaishiGuy shrugged. "You no like?"

“Nah...it’s fine.” ToughGuy shrugged. “It’s fine.”

“Good.” DaishiGuy smiled. “Well, we’ve got the gifts all ready. Chef BeerRunner is almost done with his romantic meal, and we’ve got this dog all beautified.”

Vereth nodded and tapped the portable dog cage. “Take a look. As pretty as it’ll ever be.”

ToughGuy opened the viewing slit and peered inside. The animal looked ridiculous. Tied above its devilish eyes was a pink nylon ribbon and wrapped tightly around it’s mouth was a safety muzzle, spray painted an intense shade of yellow.

ToughGuy didn’t know whether to laugh or call an Exorcist. “Nice work Vereth. Looks like your mother.”

“Thanks.” Vereth nodded.

“Wait a second.” ToughGuy leaned forward and studied the dog carefully. “Vereth, THIS DOG IS DEAD!!”

“What?” Vereth brushed past the Sergeant and peered into the box.

“It’s not breathing!” ToughGuy yelled. “You SUFFOCATED the damn dog!”

“No I didn’t!” Vereth snapped.

“Vereth you dumbass, how tight is that muzzle?” ToughGuy

“Muzzle’s are supposed to be tight!” Vereth insisted.

“You retard! And you used lead-based DropShip paint!” ToughGuy said. “You had this dog inhaling NOXIOUS PAINT FUMES, MAN!”

“He killed the dog?” DaishiGuy asked, pushing his way between them.

“Yeah, take a look.” ToughGuy said. “Suffocated the poor thing.”

“Damn.” DaishiGuy swore.

“Vereth, you crazy psycho!” ToughGuy snapped. “What’s your problem, man?”

“What? What?” Vereth raised his hands in defence. “You said you didn’t like the dog anyway.”

“Yeah, but we didn’t tell you to kill it!”

“I didn’t kill it.” Vereth protested.

“You’ve got this thing practically hooked up to a homemade gas chamber!” ToughGuy blurted.

“I’m sorry, guys.” Vereth threw his hands up in despair. “I really am.”

DaishiGuy shook his head, sadness in his eyes. “This reminds me of the time my pet bulldog died.”

“You had a bulldog?”

DaishiGuy nodded. “I named him Rolex.”

“Rolex?”

“He was a watch dog.”

(BUH DOOM DOOM CHING!)

“You never told me you had a pet bulldog.” ToughGuy said.

“Well it wasn’t really a bulldog.” Daishi admitted. “I created a new species by cross-breeding a bulldog with a shiatsu.”

“Really?” ToughGuy was amazed. “A bull-dog and a shiatsu?”

“Yeah. I called it a bull-shit.” DaishiGuy explained. “It died of AIDS.”

“You had a pet bull-shit called Rolex that died of AIDS?” ToughGuy’s jaw dropped. “Shut the hell up DaishiGuy! God dammit, between Vereth’s canine homicide and your crazy Frankenstein experiments. . .I . . .dammit I’m losing my mind!”

“Gee, ToughGuy I’m sorry.” Vereth apologised.

“Nah, it’s okay.” ToughGuy said. “It’s not your fault Daishi is a sicko.”

“No, I mean I’m sorry for killing Denise’s gift.” Vereth said.

ToughGuy sighed. “Never mind, Vereth. The dog woulda made a lousy gift anyway.”

“But what do we do now?” Vereth asked.

“Well. . .” ToughGuy began. “I guess we wait. Crowfoot and the band should be ready soon. We shouldn’t have anymore problems.”

“Uh. . . ToughGuy, I think we have a big problem.” DaishiGuy suddenly looked troubled.

“What is it?” ToughGuy asked, noticing the sudden look of concern washing over DaishiGuy’s face.

“Quick!” DaishiGuy whipped his finger upwards and pointed at the bar. “Denise is leaving!”

ToughGuy and Vereth panned their gazes across the room. Denise had gotten up and was walking away from the bar, making a beeline for the cafeteria exit.

“Holy Crap! Where’s she going?” ToughGuy blurted.

“Oh man, it’s almost 6’o clock.” Vereth noted, glancing at his watch. “She must be getting ready for her night shift.”

Just then, all the lights in the room dropped by 30 percent. The DropShip had entered its night cycle.

“We can’t let her leave!” DaishiGuy snapped. “This whole ‘*ToughGuy winning Denise’s heart*’ plan revolves around Denise being here!”

“Okay, don’t panic! I’ll buy us some time.” ToughGuy growled and spun his wheelchair around. “You guys get everything else ready. I’m not sure how long I can stall her!”

* * *

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO PLAGUE DOG

*Well an octopus' life ain't easy
I wanna tell you why
Too many arms to wave hello with
Too many arms to wave good-bye.*

-Nicholas Kerensky 2815

“Sir!” Sensor officer Mav yelled. “Giant floating dog, dead ahead!”

MechWarrior Rifleman, still naked, stared at the main bridge view screen with disbelief.

“I am Plague Dog.” The on screen image announced. “Part fungus, part canine, I seek to corrupt your minds with nonsensical ramblings.”

“What the hell is this?” Rifleman gasped.

“My neutrino sub-processor is currently scanning your vessel’s data bi-flow pathways.” Plague Dog grinned. “Plague Dog shall soon have full access to your genitals.”

“Gah!” Rifleman gasped. “Did he say genitals?”

“Scanning.” Plague Dog said. “Excellent. Your polar matrix has been refluxed. Data appendage released. PLAGUE DOG MODE ACTIVATED!!”

“Gah! What’s he doing?” Rifleman asked.

“He appears to be hacking our systems, sir.” Mav explained. “The sensors screens are completely dead.”

Suddenly the bridge lights flickered and several computer panels winked offline.

“VICTORY!” Plague Dog yelled. “Plague Dog HAXOR your SHIPZOR.”

“Sir, our engines are offline!” The helmsman exclaimed.

“Gah!” Rifleman gasped. “Bring them back online!”

“I can’t, sir!” The helmsman snapped. “My console won’t respond!”

“HUMAN SUXOR! PLAGUE DOG ROXOR!” Plague Dog laughed.

“Oh no!” Rifleman exclaimed. “He’s using GEEK SPEAK to hack our ship!”

“Geek speak?” Mav asked.

“It’s a special code used only by highly lame beings.” Rifleman explained. “I’m fluent in over 9000 dialects.”

“PWNED!” Plague Dog’s mechanical voice reverberated throughout the room. “ALL YOUR SHIPZOR BELONG TO PLAGUE DOG!!”

The DropShip jolted violently.

“Quick, open a communication channel.” Rifleman ordered. “I can beat him at his own game.”

“I can’t, sir.” Mav said. “Com-lines are down.”

“There must be some way-”

“OWNAGE!! OWNAGE!! OWNAGE!!” Plague Dog yelled in the background.

“Hang on.” Mav said. “I’ll try re-routing backup power into the emergency SOS antenna!”

“OWNAGE!! OWNAGE!! OWNAGE!!”

Rifleman nodded and strode to the centre of the command deck. All around him, monitors and consoles flickered and died. He waited anxiously for Mav. . .

“Yes!” Mav exclaimed. “It’s working!”

“Excellent!” Rifleman smiled. “Open a channel.”

“Channel open, sir.” Mav pointed at the screen.

“Plague Dog!” Rifleman snarled. “I command you to stop your infestation of our ship at once!”

“LOL, LMAO, LMFAO!!” Plague Dog laughed.

“I also speak geek speak, Plague Dog.” Rifleman warned. “I’m a level 9 Lame Master. PREPARE TO BATTLE!”

“LOLZOR!” Plague Dog chuckled. “PLAGUE DOG LEVEL 10 LAMEZOR MASTER. HUMAN HAVE NO CHANCE OF STOPPING PLAGUE DOG!”

“Oh really?” Rifleman’s eyes narrowed to slits. “We’ll see about that, you canine bastard!”

Plague Dog snarled and began his verbal geek speak attack. “U SUX COX!!”

“NEGZOR!!” Rifleman entered his level 9, lamer battle stance. “PLAGUE DOG SUXOR THE COXOR!!”

“YOU SUXOR THE COXOR AND FUXOR THE OXOR!!” Plague Dog countered.

Rifleman shook his head. “PLAGUE DOG SUXOR THE COXOR AND FUXOR THE OXOR WITH NO SOXOR!!”

“YOU SUXOR THE COXOR AND FUXOR THE OXOR WITH NO SOXOR ON ROXOR!!”

Rifleman flipped over twice and balanced on his head. “PLAGUE DOG FUXOR THE OXOR WITH NO SOXOR ON ROXOR AND GOTZ CHICKEN POXOR!!”

“CHICKEN POXOR?”

“AFF-ZOR!”

“CRAPZOR!” Plague Dog cursed.

“OWNED!!” Rifleman balanced on one leg whilst punching the air with his fists.

“OWNZOR BLOCKZOR!!” Plague Dog countered. “HAXOR SHIPZOR! 9 ATT4K!!”

“BLOCKZOR!” Rifleman blocked Plague Dog’s attack..

“HAXOR SHIPZOR! 10 ATT4K!!”

“BLOCKZOR!”

“HAXOR SHIPZOR 11 ATT4K!!”

“BLOCKZOR!” Rifleman blocked yet another attack.

“HAXOR SHIPZOR 12 ATT4K!!”

“BLOCKZOR!!”

“GAH!!” Plague Dog snarled. “YOU BLOCKZOR PLAGUE DOG HAXOR WELL!”

Rifleman grinned. “OWNED!”

“OWNZOR BLOCKZOR!” Plague Dog countered.

“OWNED!”

“OWNZOR BLOCKZOR!” Plague Dog countered again.

“OWNZOR BLOCKZOR OWNZOR!”

“OWNZOR BLOCKZOR OWNZOR BLOCKZOR!” Plague Dog countered yet again.

“Give it up Plague Dog.” Rifleman snarled. “I L33T, YOU SUX!”

“YOU SUX!” Plague Dog insisted. “PLAGUE DOG E-LEET!!”

“NEG-ZOR!” Rifleman shook his head. “DOGZOR NOOBZOR!”

“NEG-ZOR, YOU NOOBZOR!” Plague Dog said.

“PLAGUE DOG NOOBZOR!”

“YOU NOOBZOR!”

“I NOOBZOR!” Rifleman bluffed.

“I NOOBZOR!” Plague Dog accidentally said.

“OWNED!” Rifleman smiled.

“DAMNZOR!!!”

Plague Dog suddenly exploded.

Rifleman collapsed to his command chair, exhausted.

“You did it sir!” Mav triumphantly proclaimed. “You owned him with your lameness!”

“Thank’s Mav.” Rifleman was panting heavily. “Are the systems back online?”

“Green across the boards, sir.” Mav nodded.

“Excellent.” Rifleman wiped his sweaty brow. “Start the engines and get us out of here.”

Thus the engines fired up and the PUB DropShip continued on its way.

* * *

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE LIAR LIAR

*Roses are red, violets are blue,
That’s what they say, but it’s not true.
Roses are red, and apples are too,
But violets are violet, violets aren’t blue!
An orange is orange, but Greenland’s not green,
A pinky’s not pink, so what does it mean?
To call something blue when its not, we defile it,
Ah what the hell, it’s hard to rhyme violet.*

-Baron Von ToughGuy 3058

ToughGuy raced his wheel chair across the room, jerking it to a halt before Denise.

“Denise, wait! You can’t leave!” ToughGuy screamed.

Denise stopped in her tracks, scowling furiously. “What is it now, ToughGuy?”

“You can’t leave.” ToughGuy repeated. “You’ve got to stay here.”

“Stay where?” Denise asked, folding her arms sternly.

“Here! In the canteen!”

“Get out of my way, creep!”

“No, wait!” ToughGuy said quickly, as he tried to improvise a story. “PaleRider asked me...uh...ordered me to tell you to wait here.”

“What?” Denise asked. “What for?”

“I don’t know. But it’s an order from. . . uh . . . Palerider. So I guess you have to obey it.” ToughGuy lied.

“What’s this all about?”

“He. . .uh. . . just wants to speak to you. . .uh. . . about something important.” ToughGuy stammered.

“Well, why does he want to speak to me?” Denise asked.

“Oh, he’s been talking to people a lot lately. Trying to get to know the crew.” ToughGuy ad-libbed. “Must be a mid-life crisis.”

Denise shot ToughGuy a strange, unsure look. “So he wants me to wait here?”

“Yeah. . .uh. . .you’re to wait for him at the bar. He should be here soon. You know, ten, fifteen minutes. Soon. He should be here soon.” ToughGuy rambled on.

“Why didn’t he call me personally?”

“Oh...well...he did.”

“He did?”

“Yeah, but you weren’t home.”

“But I carry my com-link wherever I go.”

“Yeah. . .yeah. . . that’s a good point..” ToughGuy nodded. “But you know how it is with communicators. Always working when you don’t want them to. Always broken when you need them.”

“But mine works fine.”

ToughGuy shook his head. “Everything works fine Denise. But nothing ever does. You should know that.”

“What?”

“You know.” ToughGuy said smoothly. “The ironic law of mass consumerism. Blah Blah, I don’t think I need to spell it out for a smart girl like yourself.”

Denise was beginning to suspect something. “Come on ToughGuy. Stop messing with me. Why didn’t PaleRider call me?”

“I don’t know.” ToughGuy shrugged. “Maybe he was shy?”

“Shy?”

“You know how guys are around you...it’s...you know...the whole awkward pretty girl thing.” ToughGuy said. “Personally I think it’s your boobs.”

“What!?”

“Okay Denise, I’ll be honest.” ToughGuy was losing her. He had to re-improvise this whole thing. “Palerider wants to speak to you about...”

“About what?”

“Uhh...you see....I promised I wouldn’t tell.”

“Spit it out ToughGuy.” Denise ordered. “Don’t make me re-break your legs!”

“Well this is only a rumour...okay?” ToughGuy said uneasily. “Apparently PaleRider is thinking about giving you a promotion.”

“A promotion? Me?” Denise looked shocked.

“Is that too hard to believe?” ToughGuy queried cautiously.

“No...I mean...”

“Good.” He said triumphantly.

“It’s just such so surprising.”

“Yes it came as a shock to me as well.” ToughGuy smiled. He had her hooked now.

“This is so unexpected.” Denise gasped. “I mean, I’ve been leader of the DUM-DUMs for quite a while, but a promotion would mean command of Alpha or Bravo company.”

“Yup, that’s a pretty big step up.”

“I’ve been training with Loki and Akula.” Denise said. “Running through the Urbie combat simulators, but I never for a moment thought that I’d be given a command opportunity.”

“Yes. . .well Loki and Akula are pretty good mentors. So. . .uh. . . why don’t you just sit down here at the bar and wait for Palerider?” ToughGuy nudged her back towards the bar table. “He should be here soon.”

“Okay.” Denise nodded and sat back down on her barstool. “Oh look, there he is!”

A look of panic suddenly washed over ToughGuy’s face. “WHAT?”

“It’s Palerider!” Denise yelled with excitement.

ToughGuy spun around to face the entrance doorway. Sure enough, Palerider had entered the canteen, tugging at his uniform as he marched over to one of the corner tables.

“Oh crap.” ToughGuy cursed his bad fortune. “No, that’s not him.”

“Yes it is!” Denise assured him. “Look!”

“NO IT’S NOT HIM!”

“Of course it is!”

“No, that’s Akula.” ToughGuy squinted, trying to convince her otherwise.

“No, it’s Palerider!”

“No. . .no that’s Akula.” ToughGuy said firmly. “He’s just so far away that he appears to be Palerider. But trust me, that’s not Palerider, that’s simply a distorted Akula!”

“No ToughGuy...that most definitely is Palerider.” Denise confirmed. “I better go speak to him.”

“No!” ToughGuy yelled. “Uh...I mean, it’s best not to seem too forward. Let him come to you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Yeah.” ToughGuy nodded nervously. “Look, let me go speak to him. I’ll remind him that you’re still here waiting.”

“Oh.” Denise nodded. “Okay.”

ToughGuy spun his wheelchair around and rolled uneasily towards Palerider’s table. The Sergeant had no idea how he was going to weave his way out of this mess. Somehow he had to get Palerider over to the bar, and trick him into congratulating Denise. . .

“Uh, sir?” ToughGuy tapped Palerider on the shoulder.

“Hey ToughGuy.” Palerider said with a cheerful grin. “What’s up?”

“Can I speak to you privately?”

“Sure.”

“It’s about Denise.”

“Ah, Denise.” Palerider smiled. “You two love birds been at it again?”

“Uh. . . well no sir.” ToughGuy mumbled. “Well . . .yes sir. Uh, I’m not sure.”

“Well then, what’s wrong?” Palerider asked.

“Well sir, she uh. . .” ToughGuy didn’t know what to say. He decided to go for the direct approach. “I was wondering if you could go over there and congratulate Denise.”

“Congratulate her on what?” Palerider sensibly asked.

“Well. . .”

“What is it ToughGuy?”

“Well, you see Denise and I. . .” ToughGuy began.

“Oh my God!” Palerider suddenly blurted.

“What?”

“You’re having a baby aren’t you?” Palerider yelled with joy.

“Who? Me? Right now?” ToughGuy patted his stomach, frantically searching for signs of pregnancy.

“No, Denise!”

“What? No! I mean, yes!” ToughGuy said, slightly unsure. “Yeah, Denise is having a . . . Denise and I . . . we’re having a baby.”

“I always knew you had it in you ToughGuy.” Palerider said proudly. “All those fights and squabbles between the two of you, heh, I recognised the signs of true romance.”

“Thank you sir.” ToughGuy blushed.

“So when is the wedding.”

“The wedding?”

“Well you have to marry her now.” Palerider said firmly. “I won’t have any officer of mine advertising pre-matrimonial intercourse. No way. You marry that woman and you love her and your kid for the rest of your life, Sergeant.”

“Yes sir, of course.” ToughGuy said nervously. “Things are just going by so fast, you know?”

“Yes, I understand.” Palerider nodded. “So is it a boy or a girl?”

ToughGuy gulped. “What?”

“The kid, is it male or female?”

“Well. . .”

“Is it too early to tell?”

“Um no. . .it’s a boy.”

“Excellent. I guess congratulations are in order!” Palerider patted ToughGuy on the back. “So have you two decided upon a name?”

“Uh, Jill.”

“That’s a girl’s name.”

“Yes. . .uh that’s the girl’s name. The boy’s name is Jack.”

“Jack and Jill?” Palerider raised an eyebrow.

“I like nursery rhymes.” ToughGuy said nonchalantly.

“So Denise is having two babies?”

“Yup.” ToughGuy nodded awkwardly. “A boy and a girl.”

“You mean twins?”

“Well no, not exactly.”

“What do you mean, not exactly?”

“Well. . .uh. . .”

“Forget it ToughGuy.” Palerider said with a playful grin. “Come on, let’s go congratulate Denise. A pair of brand new babies! Ah such wonderful news!”

* * *

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR TOUGHGUY’S BABY

*Broken and beautiful, fractured and rare
Missing pieces that used to always be there.
Busted and heavenly, trash from afar
To me you look splendid,
Just as you are.*

-Baron Von ToughGuy 3058

Palerider journeyed across the room and greeted Denise with a beaming smile.

“Ah Denise, congratulations. This is great news!” Palerider said enthusiastically.

“Thank you sir. I’m so very proud.” Denise grinned.

“You should be, you’ll be a very busy girl soon!”

“I couldn’t have done it without Loki and Akula, sir.”

“Loki and Akula?” Palerider raised an eyebrow.

“Yup, they were the ones who gave me the practise.”

“Practise? You practised with Loki and Akula before ToughGuy?!”

“Well, yes sir.” Denise nodded. “They reminded me what it was like to feel that hot stick between the legs.”

Palerider looked flustered by this kinky admission. “What?!”

“They drilled me hard, sir.” Denise said. “Really pounded it into me.”

“Well. . .uh. . . you’ll certainly have your hands full.” Palerider said awkwardly. “Do you think you’re up to the task?”

“Definitely sir. I enjoy being in control.” Denise said proudly. “I intend to ride those boys hard.”

“Shouldn’t you. . .um. . . wait a bit. . .before continuing with that sort of activity?” Palerider said.

“No sir.” Denise said. “I prefer to strap myself in and get busy as soon as possible.”

“You mean right now?”

“You can watch if you like.”

“Watch?” Palerider looked shocked.

“ToughGuy can come as well.” Denise said. “An audience really gets me going.”

“Denise, I never knew you behaved this way!” Palerider blurted.

“I just thought an experienced hand like yourself, could offer me a few pointers.” Denise shrugged.

“Well I’m sorry Denise, I don’t engage in that sort of activity with my crew.” Palerider abruptly turned to face ToughGuy. “Umm, Sergeant can I have a word with you, privately.”

ToughGuy mentally cursed the whole situation. “Uh, sure sir.”

Palerider sidestepped behind ToughGuy’s wheelchair and pushed the Sergeant towards a corner table. Palerider then sat opposite ToughGuy, half hidden in shadows.

“Loki and Akula?” Palerider fumed. “What the hell is this all about? I thought you said you were the father of those babies?”

“Well sir, frankly they could be any one of ours.” ToughGuy said uneasily.

“WHAT?”

“Personally I hope they’re Akula’s.” ToughGuy shrugged. “I can’t bare the thought of fathering Loki’s kid.”

“WHAT!”

“I guess I’m going to have to keep my fingers crossed until the DNA tests get back.”

“Good God man!!”

“But listen sir, genetics, chromosomes, none of that is important. What’s important is that Denise and I . . .we. . . we’re going to raise these babies together. Like a family.”

“What do Loki and Akula think of all this?”

“I don’t know.”

“Shouldn’t you tell them?” Palerider asked. “Any one of those guys could have frickin’ fathered those kids!”

“I guess.”

“I can’t believe you, ToughGuy.” Palerider snarled. “How could you let Denise do this?”

“Umm. . .”

“Loki and Akula?” Palerider yelled. “Can you imagine how those kids will turn out.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty scary.”

“God dammit, ToughGuy! The PUB ain’t ready for this kind of fiasco.” Palerider sighed. “BattleMech combat I can handle. Crazy psychos hijacking my ship, that’s okay. But inter-crew, cross-pollination. . .dammit ToughGuy. . .this is like incest.”

“Listen sir, it’s no big deal.”

“This *is* a big deal, ToughGuy.” Palerider blurted. “Listen, I want you to bring Loki and Akula over here, right now! I want to speak to them.”

“Uh yes sir.”

ToughGuy wandered across the canteen, mentally cursing this whole situation. His lies were mounting and the whole situation was cascading out of control. Apprehensively, he jerked his wheelchair to a halt alongside Major Loki's table and flashed an uneasy grin. "Uh, hello again Major."

"I've already paid you, ToughGuy!" Major Loki snarled. "What do you want now?"

"Well, you see, the boss wants to speak with you and Akula." ToughGuy said.

"Palerider wants to speak with us?" Loki fumed. "God dammit ToughGuy, you told him about our little gambling racket, didn't you?"

"No I didn't. I mean. . . I don't know how he found out." ToughGuy said.

"Fiddlesticks!" Loki cursed. "The boss is probably gonna demote our ass. Come on Akula."

The trio journeyed back across the room and huddled around Palerider's table. The boss looked up at them, but avoided eye contact.

"Frankly Loki and Akula, I'm totally shocked." Palerider said. "I'd never, in a million years expect this sort of behaviours from the two of you."

"We're sorry sir." Loki admitted. "It was just so much fun at the time."

"Fun? You think this is fun?" Palerider snarled. "Think of the consequences! Think of how this affects ToughGuy and Denise!"

"Well sir, Denise seemed to enjoy it." Loki shrugged.

"She enjoyed it?" Palerider asked.

"Hey, she was cool with it." Loki said. "We gave her a cut of the action as well."

"WHAT? You think this is some kind of game." Palerider yelled.

"I know it's wrong sir." Akula offered. "But we were bored. It was just a little fun."

"And Denise enjoyed it." Loki nodded. "To her, it was just like a little morning workout. And hey, she seemed to like seeing ToughGuy all beat up."

"You two sicken me." Palerider bowed his head. "How could you be so irresponsible!"

"Hey, we're not the only one's sir." Akula pointed out. "The whole crew was in on it."

"The whole crew?!!" Palerider looked shocked.

“Yeah, Shrike, Perrin, Verybad, DaishiGuy, the whole crew.” Akula pointed out.
“Basically everyone.”

“GOOD GOD!” Palerider yelled. “And Denise just let you. . .”

“Yeah, you know how she is.” Loki said. “She likes to get physical.”

“Gahhh.” Palerider snapped. “And why did you leave Toughguy out of it? I mean, he’s the one making all the commitments.”

Loki glanced at ToughGuy and shrugged. “Yeah he got beat up pretty bad. But hey, we figure he’s in a wheel chair. What’s he gonna do about it?”

“Oh I see.” Palerider nodded. “Is that what this is all about ToughGuy? You can’t perform sexually while in a wheelchair, so you get Akula and Loki here to do it for you.”

“Perform sexually?” Loki asked, looking slightly confused.

But before Loki could enquire further, Palerider jumped to his feet and nudged them towards the bar table. “The three of you come with me!” Palerider ordered.

Palerider led Akula, Loki and ToughGuy back to Denise at the bar.

“Denise.” Palerider shook his head. “I’m shocked, and fully disappointed with you.”

“What sir?” Denise raised an eyebrow.

“Letting Akula and Loki have their way with you. . .that’s something I probably could have overlooked.” Palerider admitted. “But the whole crew? God dammit, Denise! I mean, sure, it’s none of my business what you do in the privacy of your own room, but-”

“Her room?” Loki asked. “Sir, this all happened right here on the canteen floor.”

“I don’t want the details!” Palerider snapped.

“Sorry sir.” Loki apologised.

“Listen Denise, I won’t pretend to understand what you’re going through.” Palerider said. “I’ll never understand a woman’s hunger for motherhood. But -”

“Motherhood?” Denise looked confused. “Sir, what are you talking about?”

“These babies inside of you, Denise. Think about them. They can’t live in this sort of environment.” Palerider explained. “Frankly, any one of the crew could be their fathers.”

“Sir. . .uh. . .I don’t have a baby in side of me.” Denise pointed out.

“I’m sorry, I meant 2 babies.” Palerider corrected himself.

“Two babies?” Denise asked.

“You mean you didn’t know?” Palerider said.

“No!” Denise snapped.

“Well I’m sorry to be the one to have told you.” Palerider said.

“Sir, there are no babies inside of me!”

Loki looked startled. “Denise is pregnant?”

“No, I’m not!”

“Yes she is!” Palerider countered.

“No I’m not!” Denise repeated.

“Then who is?” Akula asked.

“She has two babies inside of her.” Palerider re-repeated.

“Twins?” Akula asked.

“No, not twins exactly.” Palerider explained. “Two babies, each a different father.”

“Is that even possible?” Loki asked.

“You tell me, you two are probably the fathers!” Palerider snapped.

“What the hell!” Loki looked startled. “I ain’t impregnated nobody!!”

“Then it must have been Akula!” Palerider proclaimed.

“Well I have been known to sleepwalk naked.” Akula considered.

“This is crazy, I have no babies inside of me!” Denise yelled.

“Stop trying to hide your dual-pregnancy, Denise.” Palerider ordered.

“Sir, I’m not pregnant!”

“Yes you are!” Palerider insisted.

“No I‘m not!”

“Hey wait, so where are the babies?” Akula asked.

“Well they ain‘t inside me.” Loki said.

“And they most definitely are not inside of me!” Denise yelled.

“Maybe they got out, I‘ll check under the tables.” Akula offered.

“Akula, you fool! There are no babies!” Denise yelled.

“What the hell? Denise, are you sure?” Palerider asked.

“Of course I am!”

“But I thought you, Loki and Akula. . .you know?” Palerider said.

“What are you talking about, sir?” Denise asked.

“You three didn‘t. . .?” Palerider mumbled awkwardly.

“Didn‘t what?” Denise was growing frustrated.

“You didn‘t trade bodily fluids?” Palerider said softly.

“What?”

“You didn‘t have sex?”

“WHAT? NO WAY!” Denise yelled.

“Ahhh....That‘s a relief.” Palerider exhaled.

“Wait, wait, wait.” Loki said. “You mean to tell me that this was all about Denise being pregnant?”

“Yeah, why?” Palerider asked.

“We thought you were busting our asses because of our little gambling racket.” Loki revealed.

Palerider spun to face Loki, a new fire in his eyes. “GAMBLING RACKET?!!”

“Uh oh.” Loki gulped.

“WHAT GAMBLING RACKET?!” Palerider yelled.

“Denise’s baby has a tennis racket?” Akula asked.

“I have no babies!” Denise screamed.

“Shut up Denise!” Palerider ordered. “Loki, what gambling rac-”

“Oh, gambling racket.” Akula nodded. “I thought you said-”

“I can’t believe you guys thought I was pregnant.” Denise fumed.

“Shut up Denise!” Palerider ordered.

“I must be putting on weight.” Denise mumbled.

“WHO’S BEEN GAMBLING?” Palerider repeated.

“Wait a second, is Denise still pregnant?” Akula asked.

“No, she’s just fat.” Loki said.

“DAMMIT, WHO’S BEEN GAMBLING!”

“I’m not fat!” Denise screamed.

“Then you must be pregnant!” Akula reasoned.

“I’m not pregnant!” Denise growled.

“Okay, so is she fat or is she pregnant?” Akula asked. “I’m confused over here.”

“Shut the hell up Akula!” Palerider growled.

“But sir, where are Denise’s babies?” Akula asked.

“I have no babies!” Denise yelled.

“Well we better start looking for them.” Akula said. “They couldn’t have crawled far.”

“Forget about the damn babies!” Palerider screamed.

“I just found out I was their father, and you want me to abandon them!” Akula squealed.

“Akula you dumbass!” Palerider tossed his hands up in despair. “You are not their father!”

“What?” Akula suddenly looked saddened. “Then who is?”

“They have no father!” Palerider yelled.

“No father? Oh my gosh.” Akula blurted. “IMMACULATE CONCEPTION!!”

“WHAT THE HELL!” Palerider bellowed.

“Don’t you see?” Akula proclaimed. “Denise fathered Jesus!”

“She did not father Jesus, you dumbass!” Palerider sighed.

“Yes she did.” Akula gasped. “She gave birth to Jesus in twin-form.”

“Double Jesus?” Loki asked.

“Yeah, twice as effective. Combats sin, twice as fast!” Akula explained.

“Akula, you sound like a god-damned aspirin commercial.” Palerider sighed.

“SHUT UP, YOU ATHEIST ZEALOT!” Akula hissed.

Denise shook her head and panned her gaze across the group of men. “Listen guys, I don’t know who put this crazy idea into your heads, but I most definitely am not, nor have I ever been, pregnant.”

But Akula just shook his head. “Do not deny this heavenly miracle, Denise! This is a great moment in history.”

“Oh, for crying out loud.” Palerider fumed. “Akula shut the hell up! There are no SPIRITUAL MESSIAHS on my DropShip!”

“Uh...sir, Akula may be right!” Loki stammered. “We should start searching the ship for the God-child twins.”

“Don’t try weaselling out of this, Loki.” Palerider scolded. “You’re staying right here, and you’re going to tell me all about this gambling racket that’s been going on!”

“But sir, we must go seek out the baby Jesus twins!” Akula protested.

“There are no baby Jesus twins!” Palerider yelled.

Akula gasped. “YOU VILE ATHEIST! How can you deny this miracle!”

“Shut up Akula!” Denise ordered. “I didn’t give birth to supernatural twins!”

“What? You mean they’re regular babies?” Akula asked.

“No!” Denise yelled.

“They’re not supernatural? They’re not natural? What the hell are they?” Akula’s eyes suddenly widened with realisation. “Oh my God! THEY’RE SUB-MOLECULAR, AREN’T THEY!?”

“Sub-molecular?” Denise asked.

Palerider rubbed his chin. “You mean like amoeba?”

“Denise gave birth to amoeba?” Loki asked.

“Oh my gosh!” Akula panicked. “Then they’re also probably airborne! Nobody inhale!”

“Airborne babies?” Palerider couldn’t believe the insanity.

“Nobody breathe, each breath could kill a child!” Akula said frantically.

“Shut up Akula!” Palerider snapped.

“No wait, he could be right!” Loki said. “Quick, everyone breathe through their noses. The babies may be able to grab onto our nasal hairs!”

“This is stupid.” Palerider rolled his eyes.

“Breathe through your nose, sir!” Loki snapped.

“No!”

“Listen sir, do you want to be the one responsible for ingesting Jesus?” Loki asked.

“What?” Palerider asked.

“Do you?”

“Well. . . no.” Palerider admitted.

“You know what happened to the last guy who inhaled a messiah? He got struck by fifteen lightning bolts and got hit on the head by a falling anvil!” Loki said.

“Oh my!”

Loki nodded. "It wasn't a pretty sight."

"Okay. Okay." Palerider said, trembling with fright. "What do I do?"

"Good." Loki said. "Now everybody listen up. We're going to comb this entire room with our noses, taking deep breaths. . .sorta like nasal vacuum cleaners. We've got to sniff every inch of air until we're sure that the Godly Twins are safely nestled on our nose hairs. Any questions?"

"Yeah." Denise interrupted. "Why are you being so stupid? I didn't give birth to any sub-molecular airborne babies!"

"Oh yeah? How do you know?" Akula challenged.

"Well. . ." Denise tried to think. How could she disprove this stupid theory?

"You can't reject what has happened, Denise." Akula insisted. "You gave birth to immaculately conceived sub-molecular airborne, amoeba-babies. You should rejoice in this miracle!"

Palerider nodded slowly and took Denise's hand. "I think they're right, Denise. Something incredible is going on. I can feel it!"

"But sir. . ." Denise started to protest.

Suddenly Akula yelled: "I THINK I CAN FEEL ONE GRABBING ONTO MY NOSE HAIR!"

"He's found one!" Loki said triumphantly. "Hurry we must find the second God child before it's too late!"

The gang joined hands and slowly moved around the canteen. Hunched over like chickens, they meticulously sniffed at the air, making strange snorting sounds as they drew in deep breaths.

"Hey, what are you guys doing?" MechWarrior Mumbles asked, as he passed by, carrying a tray of beer mugs.

"Mumbles! Quick man, breath through your nose!" Palerider ordered.

"But my nose is congested!" Mumbles looked confused.

"We're searching for the last God-child!!" Palerider yelled.

"What's this gotta do with my nose?"

“The Sub-molecular, airborne God Child. He’s floating somewhere around this room!”

“Okkkkay.” Mumbles shot his boss a strange look.

“We’ve already found one!” Palerider grabbed Mumbles by the collar and shook him forcefully. “HE’S INSIDE AKULA’S NOSE!”

Mumbles frantically backed away from the strange group of people. “Stop it, you’re scaring me!”

“I’m serious, man!” Palerider assured him.

“Why are you so cruel to me? Why? Why? Why?” Mumbles began to cry, and hastily backed away from the odd gang.

“GOOD GOD, MAN! THIS IS NO JOKE!” Palerider shouted

Mumbles wiped his eyes, his cheeks slick with tears. “Why does nobody like me? Who put you up to this trickery? Was it Willis? Verybad? ToughGuy? ”

It was then that jolt of realisation suddenly hit Palerider, Denise, Loki and Akula. Furious they yelled: “GAH!!! TOUGHGUY!”

But the Sergeant had run away, over five minutes ago.

* * *

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

*Hey diddle-diddle, the cat ate a fiddle,
And musically vomited chunks of wood for a week.*

-ERRATIC_CHEESE 1999

Sergeant ToughGuy pulled his wheelchair up onto the stage. He had quickly changed his clothes and now wore a simple, silk bath robe, with absolutely nothing underneath. Far across the room, Denise, Palerider and the gang were still talking, but ToughGuy knew that it would only be a matter of time before they noticed the missing Sergeant.

“Can you see my nipples through this robe?” ToughGuy asked, tightening the straps.

“No. But don't worry, I'm sure they're still there.” Crowfoot said.

“I guess it doesn’t matter.” ToughGuy said. “I’m going to be naked soon.”

“Please, don’t remind me.”

Crowfoot stood at the centre of the stage, poised like a Greek, saxophone-wielding statue. ToughGuy sat to his right, clutching a microphone nervously. Arranged behind them were the other four members of the band: MechWarrior Otter on the piano, WolfCross on the trumpet, Omnimoribund on the drums and Phoenix on the guitar.

“So where’s Vereth?” Crowfoot asked. “Isn’t he supposed to be singing backup with me?”

ToughGuy nodded. “Yeah. Here he comes.”

Vereth hopped onto the stage, twirling a microphone in his hands. “DaishiGuy is in position. We’re all set.”

“Excellent.” ToughGuy flashed an uneasy smile and turned to face the band. “Okay dudes. Everyone ready?”

One by one they all nodded.

“Okay.” ToughGuy said. “Let’s do this.”

* * *

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX SHOWTIME

*Upon my bed, last night I did lay
looking up at the stars
The beautiful sky, pinpricked with white
Saturn, Jupiter and Mars
I lay there thinking, dreaming
watching the cosmos float by
And suddenly I thought
Where the fuck is my roof?*

-ERRATIC_CHEESE 1958

Denise, Palerider, Akula, and Loki raced across the room, a murderous rage in their eyes. Sergeant ToughGuy had embarrassed them and made them look like fools, and so now they hungered for vengeance. Hungered for his blood! Hungered for his torn flesh hanging limply from their teeth!

“When I get hold of ToughGuy, I’m going to rip out his eyeballs and stuff his skull full of bubble wrap till he dies of plastic poisoning!” Denise snarled.

Palerider shot Denise a concerned look.

“With you permission of course. . .sir.” Denise added sheepishly

“Permission granted.” Palerider smiled.

Suddenly, all around the room, the lights flickered and died. There was a moment of panic as the crew found themselves blanketed in total darkness.

“What the hell?” Palerider asked, stumbling in the shadows. “What’s going on?”

Then, all around the canteen, with an electrical whir, disco balls began to lower from the ceiling. One by one the lights jerked to life, pumping the air full of neon beams. Wedges of multicoloured light stabbed at the darkness, illuminating confused faces and skittering across beer stained tabletops. Then, with a loud THUD, four giant spot lights sprang to life, revealing the stage and ToughGuy’s small band of performers.

“Hey look!” Akula pointed out. “That’s ToughGuy!”

“What the hell is he doing up there?” Palerider growled.

Sure enough, ToughGuy was up there on the stage, sitting in his wheelchair and dressed in a ridiculous silk robe. The whole canteen fell silent, as the crew gazed up at the stage with bewilderment.

“My fellow crewmates, behold, for I am ToughGuy!” The Sergeant yelled into his microphone. “Tonight, I stand before you as a man! I stand before you as a lover! I stand before you here tonight, because if I were behind you, you wouldn’t be able to see me!”

The P.U.B audience just looked blankly back up at the Sergeant. “YOU AIN’T STANDING FOOL, YOU SITTING IN A WHEELCHAIR!!”

“Uh. . .” ToughGuy mumbled. He didn’t expect this sort of reaction.

“GET THIS LAME CLOWN OFF THE STAGE!!” The audience heckled.

“No wait!” ToughGuy insisted. “Wait! We’re here to perform!”

“BOO! BOO! TURN BACK ON THE LIGHTS I CAN’T SEE MY DAMN FOOD” The audience yelled.

“Please, just a moment of your time!” ToughGuy begged.

“BOO! BOO! FREE NELSON MANDELA! BOO!!! BOO!! TOUGHGUY SUCKS!!!”

“Wait! I promise, this show will be fun!” ToughGuy was sweating now. He had to convince them. He hadn’t even started performing and already his audience was rebelling against him!

“GET OFF THE STAGE LOSER! BOO!! BOO!!”

“But there will be plenty of nudity!” ToughGuy promised.

The audience abruptly fell silent, the promise of uncovered flesh and bare skin, tantalising their loins and bringing their gonads to prompt attention. In unison, they erupted with cheers: “DID HE SAY NUDITY? YAY, YAY, BRING ON THE NUDITY!!! ENCORE!!! ENCORE!!! LET’S SEE SOME FLESH!! MAN BOOBS!! MAN BOOBS!!”

“Thank you! Thank you!” ToughGuy smiled and bowed appreciatively. “Thank you all!”

ToughGuy rolled his wheelchair along the edge of the stage, blushing as the audience cheered him. They clapped and whistled, their voices growing with excitement. He had them hooked, but it was Denise he had to reel in.

“Now we’re gathered here tonight because of a very special lady.” ToughGuy began. “A lady who fills my heart with love. A lady who tingles my loins with her mere presence. Yes, tonight we’re here to celebrate the finest female specimen in the universe. We’re here to celebrate, Denise!”

A spot light suddenly hit Denise, illuminating her startled expression. “Oh God, not again!”

ToughGuy swivelled his wheelchair to face Denise as the audience fell silent. “Denise, when I first saw you I fell instantly in love. I had this sudden urge to pollinate you with my love tadpoles. I know, I know, this sounds crude and immature. But I’m being honest with you because I love you. I love everything about you. And lets face it, I’m a love machine and you’re a love machine and it would be a great tragedy if our cogs didn’t align.”

“Get down from there ToughGuy!” Denise yelled.

“No Denise.” ToughGuy said firmly. “This is what our relationship has come to! Tonight I lay everything down on the line. I’m showing you and everyone else who the real ToughGuy is. And if you still don’t love me after tonight, then fine. . . there’s nothing else I can do.”

“You’re embarrassing me ToughGuy.” Denise snapped.

“Babe, I ain’t done nothin’ embarrassing yet.” ToughGuy suddenly ripped off his robe, thrusting his well oiled, naked body into view.

The audience gasped.

Suddenly the piano blazed to life and Crowfoot and Vereth began their moody backup routine.

*“You do the Jitterbug. . .
You do the Jitterbug. . .
You do the Jitterbug. . .”*

“What the hell is this?” Palerider asked, pushing his way through the thick crowd of PUB onlookers.

The audience watched as ToughGuy rolled back to the centre of the stage, the spot light tracking his naked body. His nipples glistened in the light, his muscular frame slick with lotion, the curves of his buttocks glowing gloriously like twin moons. . .

“Oh God, he better not be singing that song!” Akula looked up at the band, his face contorted with disgust.

*“Jitterbug. . .
Jitterbug. . .”*

“Oh No!” Loki yelled. “Not George Michael! The only man with lyrics gayer than Elton John!”

*“Jitterbug. . .
Jitterbug. . .”*

Up on stage, ToughGuy winked mischievously at Denise. He leaned forward, waited for the drum roll . . .

Pa-Pa-Pa-Pa-Pa-PAM!! Pfffft!

. . .and started singing:

***“DENISE, YOU PUT THE BOOM-BOOM INTO MY HEART,
YOU SEND MY SOUL SKY HIGH WHEN YOUR LOVIN’ STARTS
YOU JITTERBUG INTO MY BRAIN
GOES A BANG-BANG-BANG ‘TIL MY FEET DO THE SAME.”***

***“BUT SOMETHING’S BUGGING
SOMETHING AIN’T RIGHT
MY BEST FRIEND TOLD ME WHAT YOU DID LAST NIGHT***

***YOU LEFT ME SLEEPING
IN MY BED
I WAS DREAMING
BUT I SHOULD HAVE BEEN WITH YOU INSTEAD!”***

Down in the audience, Major Loki grabbed Palerider and yelled: “Cover your ears, sir! Don’t let the words reach your brain!!”

“It’s too late!” Palerider screamed, grooving to the music. “I got the jitterbug!”

“Nooooo!” Loki screamed, frantically stuffing his ears with his handkerchief.

Pa-Pa-Pa-Pa-Pa-PAM!! Pfffft!

***“WAKE ME UP, BEFORE YOU GO-GO
DON’T LEAVE ME HANGING ON LIKE A YO-YO
WAKE ME UP BEFORE YOU GO-GO
‘CAUSE I’M NOT PLANNIN’ ON GOING SOLO
WAKE ME UP BEFORE YOU GO-GO
TAKE ME DANCING TONIGHT!!!”***

“*Yeah, Yeah, Yeah. . .*” Vereth chimed in.

Major Loki grabbed Palerider. “Cover your ears, sir! Please cover your ears!”

“But he puts the boom-boom into my heart!” Palerider protested like a kid.

***“YOU TAKE THE GREY SKIES OUT OF MY WAY
YOU MAKE THE SUN SHINE BRIGHTER THAN DORIS DAY
YOU TURNED A BRIGHT SPARK INTO A FLAME
MY BEATS PER MINUTE NEVER BEEN THE SAME”***

“Sir,” Loki cried. “I can’t lose you like this!”

“Then dance with me, man!” Palerider began to moonwalk. “Lose yourself to the jitterbug!”

***“CAUSE YOU’RE MY LADY, I’M YOUR FOOL
IT MAKES ME CRAZY WHEN YOU ACT SO CRUEL
COME ON BABY, LET’S NOT FIGHT
WE’LL GO DANCING EVERY NIGHT!!!”***

Pa-Pa-Pa-Pa-Pa-PAM!! Pfffft!

Major Loki dropped to a crouch and began praying. “Please God, end this suffering! End this suffering!”

“Weeee, I feel so pretty!!” Palerider spun like a top in the background.

***“WAKE ME UP, BEFORE YOU GO-GO
DON’T LEAVE ME HANGING ON LIKE A YO-YO
WAKE ME UP BEFORE YOU GO-GO
‘CAUSE I’M NOT PLANNIN’ ON GOING SOLO
WAKE ME UP BEFORE YOU GO-GO
TAKE ME DANCING TONIGHT!!!”***

Loki was bashing his head against the floor now. “Must. . .swallow. . .tongue. . .Must . . .ease . . .pain.”

Crowfoot and Vereth leaned in with the background vocals:

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. . .”

Followed by ToughGuy:

***“SO CUDDLE UP BABY, MOVE IN TIGHT
WE’LL GO DANCING, TOMORROW NIGHT
IT’S COLD OUT THERE, BUT IT’S WARM IN BED
THEY CAN DANCE, WE’LL STAY HOME INSTEAD!”***

Loki collapsed onto the floor, the music seeping into his skull. “I need to vomit. . .someone fetch me a paper bag. . .Uggghhh. . .too late. . .damn I don’t remember eating corn. Oh jeeze, that ain’t corn. Oh crap, it’s moving! It’s crawling up my legs. . .ohhh that feels good. Oh yeah. Yeah! Yeah! Make love to me you tiny piece of mysterious vomit!”

Pa-Pa-Pa-Pa-PAM!! Pfffft!

***“SO WAKE ME UP, BEFORE YOU GO-GO
DON’T LEAVE ME HANGING ON LIKE A YO-YO
WAKE ME UP BEFORE YOU GO-GO
‘CAUSE I’M NOT PLANNIN’ ON GOING SOLO
WAKE ME UP BEFORE YOU GO-GO
TAKE ME DANCING TONIGHT!!!”***

“Yeah, Yeah, Yeah. . .” Vereth chimed in.

***“OH WAKE ME UP, BEFORE YOU GO-GO
DON’T LEAVE ME HANGING ON LIKE A YO-YO. . .”***

Elsewhere in the audience, Shrike and Perrin scratched their chins in bemusement.

“Well, you gotta admit.” Shrike said. “He pulled off the whole nudity thing nicely.”

Perrin nodded. “Yup. Considering he’s naked and singing a George Michael song in front of an audience of mostly men, coulda been way gayer.”

**“...WAKE ME UP BEFORE YOU GO-GO
‘CAUSE I’M NOT PLANNIN’ ON GOING SOLO...”**

“You think Denise is still gonna kill him?” Shrike asked.

“He’s a dead man.” Perrin nodded again.

“...YEAH WAKE ME UP BEFORE YOU GO-GO...”

“You think we should stop her?” Shrike asked.

“Ten bucks says she breaks his left elbow.” Perrin smiled.

Shrike grinned. “Nine bucks on his neck.”

“You’re on.”

**“...TAKE ME DANCING TONIGHT
OH YES PLEASE TAKE ME DANCING TONIGGGGGGGHT!!!”**

MechWarrior Otter let loose a final piano volley and WolfCross wined it off with a flourish with his trumpet. Seconds later and Vereth and Crowfoot rounded the song off with their moody background vocals.

***“You do the Jitterbug. . .
You do the Jitterbug. . .
You do the Jitterbug. . .
You do the Jitterbug. . . Thank you.”***

The audience erupted with cheers. Like a swarm of testosterone fuelled teenage fans, they swamped the edge of the stage and began chanting: “TOUGHGUY BUMBAYE! TOUGHGUY BUMBAYE!”

“Thank you!” ToughGuy bowed, smiling proudly like a kid. “Thank you all! Thank you all so much!”

* * *

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN DENISE

*Rub-a-dub-dub,
three men in a tub,*

*a butcher, a baker and a . . .
ah hell,
the rest of this rhyme is even gayer.*

ERRATIC_CHEESE - 1995

ToughGuy scanned the crowds, anxiously searching amongst the cheering faces for Denise. She had to have loved the song. She had to! This was his gift to her, she had to have loved it. . .

Then he saw her, standing at the foot of the stage, her arms folded, a stern expression welded firmly to her face. . .

“I can’t believe you, ToughGuy!” Denise said, taking a step up onto the stage. “I can’t believe what you just did!”

“Uh oh.” ToughGuy gulped. He’d seen this side of Denise many times before, and he knew what came next. “Please don’t hurt me!”

Denise punched ToughGuy in the face, sending his wheel chair rolling backwards.

“OWW!” ToughGuy cried. “What’s the matter? I did this for you!”

“I’m tired of your little games, ToughGuy.” Denise snarled. “You embarrass me, time after time. I keep telling you that I don’t love you, but you keep coming and coming. Why won’t you just leave me the hell alone?!”

The audience had now fallen silent, their once ecstatic mood having been ripped away and replaced with one of confusion and intrigue. ToughGuy could feel their combined gazes weighing heavy on the stage, as they watched the drama play out.

“Listen Denise I . . . “

“Shut up!” Denise was trembling now, her left eye twitching, her cheeks flaming red.

“But-”

“SHUT UP!” She repeated and took another step towards him. “I can’t stand you ToughGuy. DON’T YOU SEE? I CAN’T STAND YOU!”

“Denise I didn’t mean to-”

“I don’t care ToughGuy. I’m tired of you and your childish schoolboy antics.” Denise snarled. “Why don’t you grow up!”

“But Denise-”

“SHHH!” Denise brought her finger up to her lips. “Dead men don’t talk.”

Denise suddenly yanked out her sidearm and levelled it at ToughGuy’s chest.

The audience suddenly gasped. Everyone began to panic.

“DENISE WAIT!” ToughGuy yelled.

Crowfoot, Vereth and WolfCross all frantically backed away from ToughGuy, keeping to the far edge of the stage and away from Denise’s line of fire.

“I’m putting an end to all of this ToughGuy!” Denise snapped. “This little fantasy of yours. . .it ends here!”

“Denise, put the gun down!” Palerider scrambled up onto the stage. “Put it down now!”

“Get away, sir!” Denise yelled, beads of sweat snaking down her face, her once pristine locks of hair now wild and menacing. “I don’t want to shoot you.”

Palerider gestured with his palms, trying to maintain an air of authority. “Denise, listen to me. . .”

“NO! I’M TIRED OF THIS.” Tears streaked down Denise’s cheeks, her lower lip quivering. “Don’t you see? He keeps coming and coming. He’s like a horny version of the Terminator! He’ll never stop. I break his legs, his arms, his neck, but he just keeps. . .coming and coming. . .It will never end, sir!”

ToughGuy was trembling in his wheelchair, the gun still levelled at his chest. “But Denise, I love you.”

“STOP SAYING THAT!!” Denise shouted.

“But I do.” ToughGuy repeated.

“STOP SAYING THAT!!”

“Stay out of this ToughGuy.” Palerider said coolly.

ToughGuy’s eyes widened. “She has a gun pointed at my stomach, how the hell can I stay out of this?”

“I’m going to kill him!” Denise insisted. “There’s nothing you can say to make me change my mind.”

“Denise, I know how annoying ToughGuy is. But I can’t let you shoot him. You know I can’t.” Palerider took a step forward, trying to close the distance between him and the gun. To his left, Crowfoot and Vereth had taken a hint and were now beginning to form a loose circle around Denise

“You don’t know how annoying he is!” Denise snapped.

“Of course I do.” Palerider nodded. “Believe me, I understand.”

“NO! YOU DON’T!” Denise yelled.

“Listen Denise.” Palerider said. “Look at ToughGuy. Just look at him.”

“No.”

“Denise, look at him!” Palerider ordered.

Trembling, Denise forced herself to look into ToughGuy’s eyes. The Sergeant sat there, naked and crying in his wheelchair. His face was swollen, trails of blood staining his split lip, his broken legs tightly wrapped in bandages and casts. He had a dozen plasters and bruises scattered around his naked body, marring his chiselled features like skid marks on a desert highway.

“Look at that, Denise.” Palerider said. “ToughGuy spends more time in the infirmary than anyone else on this ship. You break his legs, his neck, his elbows. There isn’t a damn bone in his body that’s you haven’t tried to break.”

“He deserved every one of those injuries.”

“I know that Denise. I know.” Palerider nodded. “But only someone truly and deeply in love with you would keep crawling back for more punishment. Don’t you see? ToughGuy will never give up, no matter how many of his bones you break. He’s going to keep on trying. That’s how much he loves you Denise. That’s how much.”

“Yeah, well I don’t want his love.”

Denise pulled the trigger and ToughGuy’s chest exploded. Blood gushed out from the wound and splattered across the faces of everyone nearby. ToughGuy collapsed, slumping forward, his face and chest buckling onto his broken legs.

“NOOO!” Palerider screamed, darting for ToughGuy and reflexively pressing his palms hard against the Sergeant’s bleeding wound.

The audience screamed with shock, their ghostly wails reverberating throughout the canteen. Up on the stage, Crowfoot and Vereth dove for Denise, swatting the weapon out

of her hands and tackling her to the floor. She hit the deck hard, her face slamming against the stage. They rolled her onto her stomach, and quickly pinned her arms behind her back. But she didn't resist them. She seemed to have accepted the consequences of her actions.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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Published by DropShip Command
(DropShip Games, LLC)
December 5, 2005

Version 1.0

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