

Back at the underground military control station he and the team had just raided, Gil finished off healing the crew, Stitch called down from Burroughs' ship, saying the tunnels to the facility were caving in, or something, and sure enough they could hear a rushing noise coming close. They grabbed their dead and headed back to the tunnel Digger XV had dug out for them, and hurried back to Burroughs' ship.

Back at the Murchison estate, Deuce spoke up: he had decided to leave the party. After seeing the courage of Mother Graham's fighters, and seeing their huge losses (they'd lost 150 of their own), he figured they could probably use someone like him. Though he was lame, perhaps he could learn to ride a horse and feel speed under his feet again.

Granola spoke up too. He had come to a similar conclusion. He remembered Bob (of the water mill) and his words about hydro-technology, and since the mill had been destroyed in the war, he figured maybe he could put his repair skills to work and do something positive and constructive for the local community.

Everyone looked to JJ, the last of their companions, to see if he had any such announcement, but as he was a loyal type he had no interest but to stay with the team, even though he'd lost his good arm in the fight.

Murchison thanked them for their help in the war, and mentioned that he had a communication from Shade saying he'd like if the team could convey his "engineering" team back. Ready to leave Deep Well, the team packed up and were soon on Crossroads.

They were met by a limousine flown by a very short woman who introduced herself as Squeak, wearing flashy clothing. She was sent especially by Shade, and as the team got in they saw that she was so short that she sat on a phone book so she can see over the dash.

As they flew through the city, something seemed intangibly...better. When they drive through streets the people seem happier. The city isn't as dirty. Where they used to see people plodding slowly or standing lazily on the streets, they now saw people moving about with direction.

Squeak mentioned that she'd been Shade's driver for several years now, but both he and she decided it was time for her to move on. Shade is now driving himself around, she said, and Squeak has been yearning for adventure. Shade suggested that she join the team to see if she could live her dream.

When they got to Shade's mansion, they were greeted with an even stranger sight: the usual identical bodyguards were not standing as sentries by the front door.

When they got inside they saw a young man in a business suit at Shade's desk...when they realized it was Shade...just not so sallow and worn. He instead looked confident, engaged, and

healthy. He'd lost a lot of weight and his clothes fit him. They asked what was going on with things improving, and he suggested that the economy was improving, and it was like Crossroads was "coming into its own."

He introduced the team to a man named Faller, and asked them to listen to his story. Faller is a man of about sixty, and though he was in a wheelchair and looked a little frail, he looked like he had once had a much sturdier frame.

Faller prefaced the story by saying that he has been made out to be a liar, a coward, and a terrorist. To be certain, he said, he is none of these things, well, perhaps a coward. There are some things he would not tell, but that is only because he will not tell a lie.

Ten years ago, Faller was fortunate enough to be a passenger on the largest luxury passenger ship of the time: the Magellanic Majesty. He spoke:

"The ship had been traveling conventionally from Icarus to Promise, and was ready to make the jump to the Antares Nebula. Dinner had been served in the aft dining room and the guests were lounging, lost in conversation after their dinners.

Above the dining room spanned a large observation dome or "spacelight." I had finished my meal and was watching as the ship initiated the jump window. There it formed ahead: a thin slit, vertical to our orientation to start, and it shortened and widened as we approached it: a standard jump window formation.

But I knew something was wrong. I cannot tell you how I know. But I could calculate in my head that our ship was not going to completely make it through--the window would close partway through the ship, severing it, leaving some of the aft in this space, and all the remaining fore on the other side of the jump.

I called out in crisis to those about me: some wait staff rushed to assure me that such a thing was not possible. There hasn't been a severing of a commercial ship in hundreds of years, they said, and tried to restrain me. One held a sedative; I broke free, at the expense of the man's nose. I instinctively made my way to a utility closet and broke in. There was a single pressure suit there, but no mag boots. No matter, I began to suit up. Once I had the suit on, I knew I had only seconds left: the best I could hope for was to somehow assist in sealing the dinner compartment.

But I arrived back at the dining hall only to the the window closing fast upon us, and some halted cries emerged from the crowd. I grabbed hold of a railing at the rear of the hall--and watched as the front half of the compartment suddenly disappeared--replaced only with blackness and stars. A huge flurry arose as all the contents of the room were vacated into space...I held on the best I could but too was flung out, violently.

The utter silence was shocking...I could only hear the crinkling of my suit against itself and a kind of rustling sound which soon abated. I was thrown in such a fashion as I could see the severed aft of the ship behind me, seeming to fall away, then watching as some fuel ignited and a massive explosion ensued, the thrust of which pushed me even further away, debris hitting my suit but not puncturing its seal.

I saw no other suited such as myself.

I watched for about forty minutes, I am told, before the first responses came. They quickly found me due to a beacon located on the suit, and the rescuers, confused, were surprised at my stable condition. I had seriously injured my legs in the series of concussions.

The stories in the media, I found out later, first spoke of a miraculous survivor. But I did not know of this story, for I was in the hands of the police and other investigators. I didn't have proper credentials, and my story didn't make sense to them. My background came up a blank. Worse, I had blood on me, which they identified as belonging to one of the crew: the man who had tried to sedate me. They didn't believe for a second what I told them of the ship being severed; they thought it had simply been destroyed by a bomb.

The thing of it was, they never looked for the ship. They assumed that the debris was from the entire ship. They never took what I described as fact at all.

The media story turned from one of miraculous survival to one of a villain: a liar, coward, a terrorist. Though they could not convict me on terrorism charges, they locked me up for seven years for presenting false credentials and for perjury. I was given no particular medical attention with regard to healing my legs, so they are now useless to me.

I was released three years ago at the end of my sentence, to little fanfare. I was placed aboard a military ship, as cargo essentially, and relegated to Crossroads, the land from which my forged passport claimed I was from. Crossroads is luckily neither kind nor unkind, but indifferent, and I have lived here in squalor ever since.

My life has been one of tedium, my life in my apartment not much different from that in my prison cell. But I have made some friends in the building, and spend time at the bar and at other nearby locations.

There is one fact, one occurrence that I will now recall to you that I had not divulged to my interrogators. I have my own reasons for this. When I was milling about during dinner, I noticed a man who had some very odd shoes. I thought nothing of it, but in that flash of a moment before the dining hall was rent in half, I glimpsed those same boots: the man was, like me, in a pressure suit--an almost-perfect reflection of myself...the mirror just about to be broken.

The man, to my recollection, had long, coarse dark hair, drawn into a ponytail. A thin face, perhaps a little worn and pock-marked. It would be unfair to say that I could see a sneer under that pressure-suit mask, but that is the impression I had...he exuded a confidence that indicated to me that he knew full well the precise location of the slice, whereas I had only a guess.

It was only that--and the chaos brought on by the sudden vacuum.

The reason for telling this whole tale is that last week, I was [down at the market]...and I saw that very man! Though ten years had passed, there was no doubt in my mind that, rummaging around the mangoes, was the very man that had stared at me across the room...so close, then separated by, one presumes, many light years.

The vision of the man, for long the epitome of villainy--certainly, my nemesis--picking the ripe fruit from the raw, confounded me. I dared not approach him; I'm not sure my arms would have propelled me if I'd tried. I watched him in a daze for about five minutes, then saw him turn and stalk off quickly into the crowd. At my low vantage point, and my wheeled encumbrance, I saw no need, or ability, to chase. I cursed my condition, and, mind in a horror, knew not where to turn.

As have many before, my troubles were brought to the forum of the closing-hour bartender, in this case the one on the first floor of my apartment building. I could not tell him the worst of the details of my story, but rather simply that I had spotted my nemesis and I didn't know what to do. The bartender said he "knew a guy who knew things..." Shade.

When I talked to Shade, realized I was talking with a man who had immense knowledge, of all spheres of society. I told him the entire story...just as I have told you. He did some research and found the man: going under the name of "**Jona**" and recently come to Crossroads. The most important fact: Jona has booked himself on the Wayfarer, a luxury sightseeing spaceship. He recognized my fragile condition, and figured that whatever I decided to do, I would need help. I guess that's why he called you.

For reasons I cannot get into, I must know more about this man. Specifically, where is he going with this ship, and what is he going to do with it?"

Shade asked Faller if he can speak with the group privately, and Faller wheeled himself out of the room. Shade said that they guy's story checks out, including the part about Jona, and he has no reason to disbelieve him. Shade said he figures that the location of the slice was intentional...it would cut off the main thrusters but not damage most of the rest of the ship, making it easy capture, especially with most of the crew blown out.

Why one would want to steal a ship...? It would be a grand prize, with most of the ship intact one would only need to repair the aft hull and affix good thrusters. The primary engine and its

jump juice would be very useful. It could be converted to a warship, or made to house a thousand people...many possibilities really.

Shade said he was planning the most dangerous mission of all: he wanted the team to go aboard as passengers and follow this man to wherever he is going. If they could find a way to save "an appropriate amount of passengers," then good. Wherever this guy went, he lived through it, and it would be very useful to know where he had gone...and why.

Shade also pointed out that the technology needed to displace a hyperspace envelope is something beyond our knowledge of the universe.

Shade said he would pay the team a total of \$150,000 to board the Wayfarer, follow Jona to his destination, then somehow make it back. He would entrust \$25,000 up front, the rest to be paid upon returning.

He cautioned the group that they should work with Faller, but not necessarily trust him or do what he says. For example, if he wants to kill Jona before the jump, the group should prevent him. Killing Jona after the jump isn't that great either, he'd like to know who this guy is and what is he up to. Terrorism? Piracy? Theft? And why has it been a whole ten years since this last event that he's decided to show up again?

Now, some logistics needed to be worked out, Shade said. You couldn't expect to fly another ship like the Hyperion through the jump window. It would throw off the calculations and land you somewhere else, and anyway the ship wouldn't jump with anyone else around. Also, weapons wouldn't be allowed aboard the ship...luggage would be searched extensively. Damien almost began to pout.

In the meantime, Shade introduced the team to a variety of new characters. First was V8, Shade's former personal trainer, who was no longer needed after Shade built up his self esteem and got into shape. V8 was a pacifist who believed that every body was a temple and to harm another was to desecrate their temple...which was bad. He wore a red track suit and a very positive attitude.

Shade then brought the team into the town and to the Museum of the Martial Arts, through a long corridor lined with various armor and weaponry, to a live demonstration of the ancient art of Sumo. There they see Ka in action. A large man with a ferocious attitude when in the heat of battle, Ka is otherwise quite civil and relaxed in conversation, and is very well versed in languages.

Then Shade took them to an amateur fencing tournament and they watched as a young woman with a noble demeanor sliced her way to the top of the tournament. Lady Turk then dined with the group, and indicated that she was from the Inner Planets and was on a kind of rite-of-passage for the nobility, where one leaves the family and goes into the world in order to

experience life, to temper their spirit for their noble destiny. Her specialty was using a rapier in her good hand and a dagger defensively in her left.

Finally Shade took them to a raucous "family theater" which included nude cigarette women parading up and down the aisles and a really bad comedy routine. After the comedian was done, the emcee introduced The Great Ridolfi, who astounded the audience by being tied by his feet with a rope that was then dangled and slowly dropped from the stage rigging, over open flames. He managed to pick the lock and jump free of the flames without injury. Then he asked for a volunteer to be strapped to a large wheel, which would stand upright and be turned as he, blindfolded, would throw knives between each of the individual's limbs. Rynna bravely took the challenge and was relieved that he did not so much as graze her once. The Great Ridolfi continued to talk about himself in the third person continuously after the performance.

After much discussion the team packed what little they could (since most of their belongings would be contraband), and Damien purchased a heavy cane that could be used as a weapon. They passed through the security checkpoint without much incident and got accustomed to their quarters.

At the first dinner Faller pointed out the man known as Jona. and Jona must have noticed Faller because soon after, he approached the table and said to them: "Don't try to stop me. It's going to happen whether you try to stop me or not," then walked away.

Dapper Dan cautiously followed the man about for several hours, when Jona finally turned about and told him: "Don't try to stop me." Dapper made assurances that he would not.

The team was starting to show some compassion for their fellow travelers, as they realized they didn't want 1200 deaths on their hands. They even approached Jona with this concern.

"I don't want to cause death, but it's collateral damage," he started. But as they talked he seemed more concerned about the other passengers. Consulting DUX, the team tried to figure out a way to save the people, presumably by putting them further forward on the ship during the jump time, but doing so in a way that didn't prevent the jump from happening. The solution they came up with was somewhat simple: ship protocol dictated that if an "unpleasant environment" existed in the dining room, that dinner would be delayed until it could be remedied. DUX released a foul odor into the dining rooms about half an hour before the doors would open before dinner, and the ships' crew responded by sealing off the area until it could be fully ventilated. However the delay in dining didn't necessitate a delay in the jump, so the jump continued.

When the jump commenced, the power largely went out throughout the ship. The team had prepared by putting on pressure suits that they had acquired ahead of time with their down payment from Shade. DUX used the auxiliary ship power to communicate calming messages for the passengers and crew, and released soothing scents into the ventilation to calm people's

nerves. About fifteen minutes after the jump, a set of ships had come along side and docked near Jona's quarters, and he communicated that they needed to herd 1200 people off the ship. Though there was much confusion and some consternation among the passengers and crew, it was all treated as a rescue mission and most people were compliant.

Jona took Faller and the team to another ship: the Magellanic Majesty. It had been stripped of its space liner luxuries and looked as though it had been in many firefights. Its hull was somewhat worn and pock-marked and its interior was somewhat decrepit. Jona lined them up and told them to wait a minute. A young woman with a prosthetic leg walked up and down the line, almost as if inspecting troops, then walked past Jona, spoke with him briefly, and exited the room.

Jona then told a story: he described that the Hades Nebula system had been technologically superior to the First Frontier that everyone has lived in. They may have remembered in their history that a group called The Contingent had stayed on Earth as a backup plan; this Contingent consisted of over 50 million people. The Contingent was meant to join the settlers on the Frontier, but a diplomatic crisis arose that made the Contingent go elsewhere. Where they had gone they never communicated to the Frontiers. They had come here, to the Hades Nebula system, and established democratic and technologically focused settlements. These settlements, across nine planets, flourished for over 600 years, until just about twelve years ago.

It started with a teenage pop star, known now only as Pure. A household favorite on a singing competition show, she had a preternatural ability to seize the reins of power. When she turned 18, she had already turned the courts to rule that an 18-year-old woman could be president, and was soon elected president of all Agronia. Agronia was possibly the least relevant of all Hades' planets politically, but within two years, through political power and the backing of force, Agronia became the de-facto center of all activity. And so it had remained since then.

Jona was a captain of a barge during the "Zweihund Incident"...a trade embargo was being enforced by Agronia against Zweihund, which had put up a fleet to rival any in the system. Agronia sent a light fleet, with Pure aboard an unarmed diplomatic vessel, which met with our fleet's commander. Jona recounted that day:

"My radio had been on the fritz, but I had watched the movement of the vessels around me. I felt a thrill of victory as the Agronian vessels turned about against our mighty fleet...then let out a shocked cry as I saw half of our ships retract their armaments and follow them...while the other half began overpowering their engines, to the point of their own destruction within the next few minutes.

Such was it everywhere Pure went. Entire armies would fall at her presence, and amount of ammo, armor, or propaganda could keep her from gaining the trust and control of all planetary factions.

As for me, I transmitted a standard radio-wave morse code message: Follow Me Far Away, and a few of the non-military ships did. We have spent the last ten years in hiding, never posing a true threat to Pure's reign, but never free from her watchful eye either. We could have left for other systems, to be sure, and cobbled together new lives for ourselves, but we could not do so knowing Pure is lording over what was a once peaceful and flourishing land.

The lands are still peaceful, I guess, if peace is never questioning authority, never speaking out of turn, or speaking ill of the Empress. Always looking over one's shoulder, always feeling the probing of one's mind, always feeling your life is a privilege and not a right.

You may have already guessed something of Pure's special ability. She, and now many of her followers, have found how to tap the mind's capability for Psionic transmission and reception...simply, the ability to project and receive other's thoughts unaided by technology. She just has an ability on a massive scale, and combined with megalomania, has formed an entire empire whose purpose is to underscore her incredible power. This is why she hates us so: that we should not pay allegiance to her is disquieting.

So what is with this ship-stealing? Our forces were made of a thousand pilots in a thousand ships, hiding in the nooks of the asteroid belt, always individually at great risk, always burdened by having to coordinate these thousands of little ships. We needed something large that could be a base of operations. It needed jump capability, and the ability to house thousands. To capture such a ship in the Hades Nebula system, especially these days, would be almost impossible. But we could break an old custom and go to the Frontier and steal one of their ships. I grant you, I know thousands died so we may have this ship. But for them it was a tragic accident, balanced against our race's extinction.

And so time has passed and our old ship has grown weary and worn. More important, we see new battles ahead. For we have now had a first contact with Frontiersmen...in Hades Nebula. A diplomatic detachment from a large commercial trade group--Blue Vector--has somehow found its way to our system--a feat somewhat unimaginable for Frontiersmen technology, no offense. However they found these star-charts, we don't know, but they did. And of course, they met with Pure to discuss trade agreements. One can imagine, with Pure's powers, that the agreements will no doubt somehow expand Pure's powers into the Frontier; something we have long wondered at."

After further discussion, Jona said that in his eyes, the team and the Wayfarer passengers and crew were prisoners of sorts until they could be otherwise accommodated. He wondered though if the team could perhaps prove their worth to him by helping him with a problem that had come up. Four of his scientists had been captured by Pure's forces, it was believed, and if they could go on a rescue mission, they could perhaps gain his trust. They were suspected of being held at an estate on a small rural planet called Rikis (reich-iss), an estate run by a man named Groves. The team didn't have much choice but to accept. One condition was that JJ

stay behind, and that one of his men named Tailor would go with them. They agreed and said their goodbyes to JJ, and were transported discreetly down to the village nearest the estate. Tailor's brother Shepherd was an operative there and would give them further information.

They took a discreet transport to Rikis' surface, and found themselves in a very rustic village, probably only a few hundred occupants, the buildings in the city itself constructed of stone and many being adjacent to walled plots of land rife with sheep and other farm creatures. Shepherd says he traced the prisoners to Groves Manor, about six miles outside of town. The Groves family was rich and had lived there for ages, and the "lord" of the manor was simply called Groves, a man who never had much of a bad reputation other than being a little snobby. He would still mix with the other locals and was often down at a local pub, and liked to engage in light gambling and drinking contests.

The team rifled through Shepherd's various supplies; he didn't have much in the way of weapons but they took a few revolvers just in case. They stayed the night, and in the morning they went to the pub across the street...and Groves was there. A slightly portly man in his later forties with dark, slightly unkempt hair that suggested a toupee, Groves seemed genuinely interested in the party, as outsiders were uncommon. Aleya plied him for an invitation to his estate, and he announced that they all would be welcome to a party he was throwing that evening.

The team arrived in waves in Shepherd's ground car, and split up to look about the estate. The house and grounds were not terribly large themselves; they were bordered by a simple 8-foot stucco wall on all sides except the back, which was open to the small river that flowed behind. A graveled oval drive fronted the two-story house and was lined with a bold hedge. To the right of the house the drive gave way to a lot for ground transportation for the help, and to the left was a landing pad for fliers. Beyond the lot was a small grove of trees much like aspens and a small concrete-lined pool. Behind the house lay a cross pattern of walks and hedges bordering grass lawns, and interspersed throughout the lawns were statues done in an abstract fashion. Around the left of the house was a Zen garden and behind it a high-hedged maze. Behind that was the bank along the river, where a makeshift shooting gallery was set up.

The guests were assembled in the house and greeted by Groves, but they then dispersed according to their own interest. Many gathered in the large drawing room but others wandered outside. A few armed guards walked about, ostensibly to protect Groves' valuables. Damien went to the mini-grove and struck up a conversation with one of the guards, and they mostly joked about the confusing art pieces, and about how cool guns were. Dapper Dan tried to talk to Groves, who offered him a drink, but as Dan refused somewhat impolitely Groves gave him the cold shoulder and found more entertainment in Lady Turk. He instantly saw in her the air that surrounds nobility and they walked together in the front lawn, speaking of lineages that stretched back to Earth.

Squeak and Aleya inspected the maze, and quickly found their way to the center, where a concrete statue of an angel with outstretched arms overlooked the otherwise mundane gravel square. An armed guard was there and seemed at first cautious that outsiders were hanging about, but as Aleya drew out her bottle of tequila and sparkled her eyes, he softened and grew chummy with them. He suggested they play one of his favorite drinking games, where you cork then spin the bottle, and whoever it's pointing at must take a swig. This inebriant form of roulette soon proved to be cruel master to him though, as it was spun three times and each time it pointed to him. Aleya didn't even need to use her charms to lull the man off his duties; he willingly handed off his Uzi-style gun to Squeak when she put the suggestion to him.

Aleya investigated the area and found a switch in the back of the statue, which, upon pressing, caused the statue to slide forward a little, exposing a ladder that led down about ten feet. Aleya relayed this to the group and Dapper, somewhat jilted by Groves, decided he could put his sneaky ways to use. He luckily was able to navigate the somewhat complex maze and joined the ladies. He then clambered down the ladder and used the light from his tactical headset to wander through the low, brick-arched tunnel that led in the direction of the house. After about 20 feet was a barred door, and he found several people detained in there: quite obviously the prisoners. After convincing them that he was there to rescue them, he picked the lock, and they indicated that there was another such door on the other side of their cell, and he picked that as well, and followed the tunnel toward the house. At the end of the tunnel a ladder led up, and climbing it he found he was in the wine cellar, on the far side of the basement exit. Between him and the exit were the servants' quarters and various utility rooms such as the kitchen, storage, and laundry. He had the others follow him up the ladder in near-dark conditions, and somehow they managed to function rather well. He told them to hang back in the wine cellar racks as he snuck ahead to see if the coast was clear. He figured perhaps he could find an empty quarters and house them in there until the team had assembled a more coherent plan. However, both rooms he inspected were occupied by sleeping guards. He let the first sleep, but upon entering the second began to hatch a plot...to be continued later!

=== Season Three Episode Two =====

Dapper's plan was simple: smother the guard while he slept with a pillow! A classic method of execution. As he drew the pillow up, the guard awoke suddenly and instinctively grabbed his Uzi from the wall. Dapper found himself having brought a pillow to a gunfight. After he fired some shots off at his would-be assassin, the guard chased Dapper into the wine cellar where the scientists watched in horror. Smart fellows, the prisoners broke some wine bottles and began to mob the lone guard, quickly subduing him in a shower of broken glass.

Meanwhile, the guests gathered in the parlor where a large screen projected the image of Pure as she led a large onscreen crowd in a patriotic song. All the guests were expected to join, and The Great Ridolfi, not to be outdone by anyone, boldly took a place in front of Pure and completely failed to mock singing the lyrics, much to the concern and distaste of the other guests.

Jughead drew all of the team members out of the parlor and into an adjacent room, and began to strongly doubt their intentions. He called for backup from his men and an all-out fight ensued. Groves stood aside at first, not helping either party. At this point, Dapper and his prisoners cut the estate power, turning the fight in the tight room into a battle royale. The Great Ridolfi found himself between a rock and a hard place: the hard place being Jughead's ceremonial sword, the rock being the shallow grave that awaits us all. He fell without a cry, his arrogance lost with the swing of a blade. One of the guards came cautiously toward the melee and was repeatedly fought back, eventually being pushed by Ka into the hallway. Lady Turk opened a window and jumped out, falling gracefully eight feet to the ground. Grove took up the fight as well, but against Jughead. Perhaps he had done the math and decided fate would not play out well for those supporting the losing side.

Jughead extracted himself from the battle and ran through the dark parlor, still filled with confused partygoers, with Damien and Rynna in pursuit. Not familiar with the house, they took a few moments to find their way out, Damien playing accidental Juggernaut to an unfortunate guest in the meantime, and followed Jughead to the maze. Lusting for blood, Rynna fired with her crossbow and Damien let loose with his bullets.

During this bloodletting, Lady Turk had righted herself and found Groves had wandered to his ground car, and proceeded to chat with him. He was in a bit of a rush to make a run for it, seeing as that he had betrayed the Ministry's wishes, and the prisoners had been freed. Lady Turk suggested that if they were to go on the run, they should do so together, and gathered up the pieces of the team, such as they were, into Groves' vehicles. Some of the guards had left, after Jughead's demise, in a Jeep and were presumably making it to the spaceport. The team followed hot on their trail, hoping to eliminate them before they could report exactly what had happened. They chased through the countryside, down rocky roads, through a farm, and into a fields and woods, all the time trying to make use of Groves' anti-tank gun, but to no avail.

They watched as the guard boarded a ship and launched high into the zenith. Groves was a bit depressed at the notion of the misery that would be inflicted on him by a vengeful Ministry. The team decided they could try to help by making it look as though his car had been destroyed...using the anti-tank gun to destroy his car, using some of the various guard bodies to add the necessary gore. This wasn't a very good ploy, as obviously the others had got away, but it might at least confuse things a little.

The team then got Shepherd to call out the shuttle back to Jona. They had got the prisoners, but at some expense to themselves.

Upon reaching Jona aboard the Wayfarer, they were somewhat amazed at how far the move from the Magellanic Majesty had come. The Wayfarer was now looking like a military ship, with all the comfort and leisurely amenities turned to warlike purposes; this had been planned for some time, clearly.

Jona was pleased to find his prisoners safe, and mourned the loss of The Great Ridolfi, although he said it proved their value to him as fighters. And while they were at it, he had a remarkable proposal:

"Do you guys have any problems with a little terrorism?"

The expression on V8's face was without precedent, his color turning a shade between green and grey. For the rest of what followed, he simply retreated further from the group.

What Jona proposed was "simple." Blue Vector had a spacedock in orbit at Promise, where it was building the next generation of its armed vessels: a capital ship, two destroyers, and a host of smaller vessels, composing what would be about 30% of its future military might. He wanted it destroyed, and he had the perfect missile: the cannibalized core of the Magellanic Majesty. It could be accelerated in the Hades Nebula system to a high speed, then jumped in close proximity to the spacedock. Any collision at that speed would have an entirely destructive result. The question was, how close was reasonable? His heart had thawed slightly since he had been encouraged to save the lives of those aboard the Wayfarer, so he presented three options.

The team could jump to a point close enough that there would only be a minute before the collision: just enough time for the team to extract themselves via an orbital shuttle. Being this close, the only defenses would be small kinetic defenses, unlikely to cause the missile-ship to miss its mark.

The team could jump a little further out, giving about two minutes of warning, allowing at least some of those working at the dock to make it to emergency vessels. The defenses at this level, however, would be stronger and there was an increased opportunity for failure.

Finally, the team could jump even further out, ensuring that all workers could make it out alive, but this would subject them to the nuclear defenses installed at the site. Any further out than these options, and the ship would almost certainly be deflected or intercepted and fail their mission.

Of course, making to the exact location was not easy; if there was a failure in piloting, which was difficult, the ship would end up a little closer or a little further away. Damien's vote was simple: go to the heart, get as close as possible so as not to fail the mission. Rynna's lips raised a corner in devilish delight at the thought--over three thousand laborers were aboard the spacedock. Three thousand souls, perishing with almost no warning--all at their command.

V8 had by this time sworn off the team--he'd seen too many temples desecrated already--and decided to join Jona's crew as a physical therapist. Gil and Aleya were horrified by the prospect of killing those simply working to put food on their plates, and argued extensively with Damien

and Rynna. Finally a compromise was made: they would jump to the inner portion, and give some chance for the workers to make their way out--in two minutes of sheer terror.

The team rested several days as the preparations were made. Aboard an orbital shuttle nested within the Magellanic Majesty, Rynna controlled the larger ship through a relay, and prepared both for the jump and for anything that could come to them.

They made the jump--but it was quite difficult and Rynna made a few mistakes--landing them not within the 2-minute zone, but in the inner zone--there was nothing to do but release the shuttle and make clear of the blast zone...as certainly alarms sounded and cries rang through the dock facility, all silenced in a moment as the behemoth of a vessel swam amidst the others, the collision soon erupting into an impossibly large chain of explosions, seemingly never-ending to the observers aboard the shuttle. Gil and Aleya looked in horror at the mass murder they had just committed, while Rynna and Damien broke into peals of cruel and remorseless laughter.

=== Season Three Episode Three =====

The explosion rocked the small shuttle, and a large chunk slammed into it, causing a severe dent to form right at JJ's head, but he moved just enough to escape injury. The shuttle had nowhere to go but down; JJ suggested that they'd better head for the nearest polar region, as they were less protected by the planetary defenses, and regardless would be the only place they would avoid detection.

With only a few seconds to decide on a location, they looked at the terrain below. Before them lay an arctic sea with a small island with a volcano and a small village, and a large ice mass with a couple of signs of habitation: some sort of complex to the south along the sea, and a small building emitting smoke up on the northern tip of the peninsula. Rynna chose the island, as it was arguably the most defensible position.

They landed--hard, but intact. The team swiftly emerged into the cold, those with protective winter gear using them to their fullest. They figured they could venture out to the village they'd seen on the southern tip of the island, which they figured was about a mile away. In the blistering cold, it took about forty minutes before they could make the outline of a row of houses. They also encountered, laid into the snow, a dense fishing net that encircled the entire path to the village, with signs posted "Keep Out! Mines!" with artistic skulls and crossbones.

A shot rang out, and Dapper, who had ventured forth, was immediately concerned. A man, standing on the back deck of the row of houses, warned them off verbally. Gil and Aleya, the most sociable of the group, decided to try to barter with the man. He was concerned that they might "one of them," carrying "the disease." After talking a while about what this disease was, they convinced the man, who had by now introduced himself as "Cod," leader of the fishing village. He was a little hard of hearing, but warmed to the team as he heard that Gil was a doctor and had a stash of medicine. He said he'd let the team come closer as long as he could

pick what he wanted from the doctor's stash. While this conversation commenced, an air drone flew in the direction of their orbital ship, and unleashed a series of missiles upon it, with obviously devastating results.

Cod decided to let the team into the small village, really a row of three wood houses along a dock where their fishing boats were moored. The team was greeted warmly, somewhat to their surprise, by the other fishers. There had been some sort of virus on the mainland, at a research facility, that made people paranoid and destructive. Damien at first thought these were Morphs, but upon further description it didn't seem to be the case. The fishermen heard some desperate calls from the facility, and decided to quarantine themselves; but apparently they weren't the only ones thinking of quarantine. The military was patrolling the seas, and would not let the fishermen out into the greater sea, where the fish were, so they had spent the last month without any employment. Furthermore, shortly after the first calls for help from the research facility, all communications had been jammed. So as afraid they were of others breaking the quarantine, they were somewhat pleased to see other human faces.

Cod spoke with the team and they agreed that they could not wait forever for the quarantine to lift. They decided to use the fishing boats to take the team to the ice hollows, a glacier that had splintered into thousands of vertical pillars, just north of the research facility. Cod would pilot them there personally, and would wait for word from the team via a harbor light at the research facility that was typically visible from the village, but had gone dark when all else had gone wrong.

They ate a hearty meal of fish, fish ale, and fish cake, then slept on the sofas in the fishers' houses. The next day, they set out in two boats, making a ten-mile journey across shallow waters. Along the way they encountered a rowboat, but fearing that they were more of the virus' victims, Cod, after hurling some harpoons at them, mercilessly plowed through the rowboat, sending its crew to a frozen, watery grave. Damien took note of the man's lack of remorse with a sense of pride and wonder.

Upon reaching the ice hollows, Cod reminded the team to make contact when they could, and wished them the best. Hiding in the hollows' shelter from the wind, the rest of the team watched as Dapper, ever intrepid, wandered into the snowy wilderness, toward the research station. He reached it in about half an hour, and observed the layout.

The facility was composed of a rectangular building, presumably the main building, about ninety feet long and thirty feet wide, built largely into the ground, with an entrance on the smaller end facing the bay, and lying about ninety feet from a small dock. The dock had a small shelter build around the back end, and a skiff was moored there. Three small buildings, presumably used for storage, lay between Dapper and the main building; each had two large garage doors on the side facing the bay. Finally, several hundred feet behind the main building rose a large hill, clearly man-made, seemingly a dumping ground for earth that had been dug up. It rose about

600 feet above the surface, and though snow had accumulated on it, there were several patches where the snow had blown away or fallen off.

Dapper decided to get closer in. He moved stealthily, in his white snow garments (in great contrast to Lady Turk's pink parka), to the small buildings, climbing one for a better view, causing some risk to himself, and eventually worked his way to the entrance to the main building. Walking down the ramp to the recessed entrance, he saw a single large metal door with hastily attached stickers: "Danger! High Radiation!" The stickers also had pinned onto the door a set of six rad detection stickers, which could be used to measure radiation levels when attached. He radioed the team and let them know of the situation, and they decided that regardless of anything else, they should head toward the facility, and make plans there before the weather got worse, and perhaps take shelter in the outer buildings in the meantime.

Dapper then checked out the dock. Corrugated metal provided sheltering walls and a ceiling to the dock controls and the skiff. He tried to activate the light, but found that even with the switches turned to "on" nothing would light. He then investigated and found a large protected conduit leading back to the main center.

When the team arrived on the site they immediately broke into one of the outer buildings. It was a garage for land vehicles, neither of which was present. There was some gas, and the garage provided shelter as they planned their next move. Damien decided to take a look at whether there was actually any radiation inside; they picked the lock and he quickly threw his arm around the door with a rad sticker in hand; in doing so slammed his arm in the door. Upon retracting it, sure enough, the radiation levels were still high. They decided that JJ, Tailor, Gil, and Damien would go into the research center, see how bad it was, then possibly try to restore power, as that would both power the light, and possibly provide a source for heat for them. They would wear their pressure suits, which had some protection from radiation, as they were built for extra-vehicular space exposure.

That night, in anticipation, several team members watched the frosty, starry skies, but heard and saw nothing of interest.

The next morning the team got up early to break into the research facility. It wasn't too hard; when they entered, they quickly assessed where they wanted to go and ran, hoping to limit their exposure to any radiation. The facility was laid out as a long and wide corridor with various stations set to the side; to their immediate right upon entering were the sleeping quarters, and to their left a small cafeteria. Several further chambers lined the sides, and at the end of the hallway was, on the left, a min-reactor control station, and on the right, an area enclosed in plexiglas with some sort of large robotic arm.

They ran to the reactor station, and in doing so stumbled across a half dozen dead bodies. Halfway to the power station, Damien noticed that to his right was a medical quarantine chamber, and a man with a very creepy crazed expression peered through its observation

window. Disturbed but ignoring the man, Damien pushed on, but then the quarantine door opened and the man began babbling various nonsense at the team. Damien, not one for distractions under such conditions, simply did away with the man using an ice pick.

JJ proved that he did not need his right arm as he quickly repaired the power station and suddenly lights and ventilation came on.

Not wanting to further expose themselves, the team hastened back to the garage outside to reconvene. Cod had given them a map of the area, and described that the little hut they'd seen with smoke emanating from it was an unmanned weather station, and further to the southwest, outside of their view before, was a military base, about ten miles along a road or icy stream.

The team deliberated on this. They were pretty certain that they couldn't just waltz down to the military base and gain entrance; they had no land vehicles so would have to walk, and besides they'd seen their harmless ship destroyed by the presumably military drone. They also didn't like the idea of heading out on the open seas with the small skiff, which could hardly hold themselves, let alone do so safely upon high seas filled with roving subs.

They figured they should see what was going on at the weather station. There may be more supplies up there, and they could take the skiff up there with the fuel they had.

So they set off in the skiff. The weather was excellent, and they didn't encounter any troubles, surprisingly. When they got close to the weather station, which was a small square brick of a building with a few sensors on its roof, they observed it a while. Smoke was trailing out of a rooftop door, and two snow vehicles were parked out front. The vehicles were utility trawlers, tracked vehicles. They lowered anchor near to the shore on the rocky coast, and Dapper leapt from the boat in the hopes of sneaking up on the station. He climbed the brick wall facing the sea with relative ease, and quietly moved about the roof. Smoke continued to emanate from the rooftop access door, placed in the center of the square roof. Carefully looking over the back side of the roof, Dapper spotted a guard with a heavy parka standing on the slab of a deck on the side facing the snow road, armed with a heavy machine gun.

Meanwhile, Damien, not one to wait for information before acting, devised a plan. She would creep around the right side of the building, while Aleya, using her charms as much as possible in her parka, would attract the attention of the guard. This went pretty well as planned, although Aleya was surprised when, attracting said guard's attention, she found the guard to be a woman. She had to warn off Damien, who wanted to make battle, and talked with the woman. At first, the guard was stand-offish, but soon relented. Her name was Ruby, somewhat fitting as she drew back her parka hood and revealed long strawberry red locks. Ruby was somewhat sick of her companions, who were "wooses" and could tell that Aleya didn't have the virus. She welcomed the group in, and showed them around the weather station, which was offline in an attempt to save power. The station was a mess; the only entrance was a garage door leading into a small service bay strewn with tools. To the west was a room now designated as "the

bathroom" and going into the back room, which was largely a pit dug into the earth, were Ruby's comrades. The six men there were very grumpy that Ruby had let others in, but acquiesced not so much out of agreement or fear as out of complacency. Ruby then filled the team in. She had been a scientist at the research facility, and those that didn't immediately get exposed had decided to leave. Scope, one of the other men at the weather station, had apparently taken a trawler all by himself ("just to be safe, because he was the only biologist and scientist that could save them") to the weather station. Ruby sort of scowled as she recounted his behavior. After that, she and the others packed into the only remaining trawler and headed to the military base, where they were fired upon. They then tried to go to the fishing village, where they were turned away. Desperately, they came back to the research station, where they found the remaining inhabitants had broken the power station. They took the backup battery (a monster of a battery) and fueled up, and hauled up to the weather station. Upon arriving, they found that Scope had tried to send signals to have them rescued, but Ruby suspected that they were being jammed and no such rescue was imminent. However, the others, rather than try to think creatively about the situation, decided to just laze about waiting for help to come. Thus Ruby welcomed the team, who seemed more capable of finding a solution to their problem.

She explained that the virus had come about when doing repairs on the borehole. The research station was trying to examine how to use boreholes to create habitable spaces so Promise would no longer be constrained and could expand its cities into the poles. The research had gone well, but some low-level ice shifting had occurred and upon sending the borers down to clean up the hole, they found they'd struck some kind of buried space vessel. Those coming back from the initial investigation didn't bother with typical quarantine protocols, and quickly many of the twenty inhabitants of the station began to exhibit signs of paranoia. The station manager sent out a plea for help on the radio, but Ruby fears that upon hearing this, the military started jamming signals and "clamping down" on the virus through aggressive quarantine, rather than bothering to help.

Scope figured that he had come up with a solution to the virus, or at least could, if he could access his science module back at the research facility, but that that was too dangerous. But the others didn't want to come along, and said they should use the gasoline for heat rather than going back to the facility. Ruby, sick of doing nothing, figured they should head back to the facility and that they might be able to figure things out there, where at least they would have power. The trawlers both had enough gas to take everyone to within a mile of the station, which they figured was close enough, so they set out. They drove so well that they gained some mileage, and with good weather, made it to the station in just a few hours.

As night fell, they decided to still camp out in the garage. The guards that night saw nothing. In the morning they saw markings in the snow--helicopters' prop wash. They figured they'd be sneaky, and send Squeak in the back way--a conveyor in the back that led to the borehole pile. She got up and found that there were people inside: a military attachment. The team decided to storm the facility. They sent a signal to Cod via the dock light, asking for assistance.

Gil went inside to talk to the military commander, in the hopes of figuring out an ending to the situation that did not involve dying. The leader was Lt Staples, a man who quickly stated that he was frequently demoted due to his "unusual leadership style." Staples was in tactical biohazard gear, but took it off briefly to show Gil his face and introduce himself. He was performing a "cleanup situation" and advised the team that they were under quarantine.

Upon inspection they found that the military had blown a hole in the roof above the borehole and seemingly had a team rappelled down to the frozen spaceship below. The team planned to start the borer blades and cut off the military from coming back up, when a host of helicopters came up. The team largely waited, not sure what to do, when Ruby took the charge and, guns blazing, one woman against an army, fired upon the helicopters. The battle started, the others raced behind her, letting loose upon the helicopters with all they had.

Inside, Gil watched as the battle raged, but Lt Staples announced that the whole facility was wired to explode upon a timer, and that time was running out. "If you value your own life, you will cease, drop your weapons, and come with me. Otherwise, we shall all perish here." The helicopters flew off to a safe distance as the team discussed what to do. Damien, thirsting for blood, relented and the team quickly disarmed and got herded into the helicopters. Damien tried to smuggle a knife aboard, but Staples found it and immediately thrust it into Damien's gut. Staples laughed and said they would be safe at the base brig.

The fishermen made their way back to their ships.

On the flight back, Damien nursing his wound, he asked Gil for help, and Gil responded by looking out the window as the research facility suddenly burst into thousands of pieces.

=== Season Three Episode Four =====

The team was unceremoniously led from the helicopters at the military base, by a thicket of grunts with heavy guns, positioned expertly from a distance. The base was a collection of hexagonal huts built between two runways, with the largest building forming a U shape around the area where the helicopters landed.

They were led by Staples to gymnasium that had blue cloth partitions set up forming two lines. "One for men and one for ladies," Staples said. "Strip down, put everything you got in the bucket," here he gestured to a large laundry basket on wheels, "shower up, then receive your orange garments, our guest garments we call 'em. Then we'll snap your photos."

The team complied, not wanting to argue with the guns. They were then taken, separated from the scientists and Ruby, and placed in a 20-by-30 room with a thick transparent wall on one of the long sides. The room was comfortable, with several couches, a chair, a rug, a large-screen TV, and side rooms with bunks, separated for men and women, and a central unisex bathroom. Overall, not too bad of a brig.

Staples suggested the team might want to "rest up" as the next day might be a big one. The team was ready for some sleep as they have been going for some time, except for Dapper who unfortunately found himself unable to sleep at all, and found himself drifting quickly to unconsciousness through sheer exhaustion. He eventually did some jumping jacks until he passed out, then slept for about 10 hours.

The next day Staples woke them up and started asking them some basic questions, and had one of his flunkies wheel in the laundry basket of stuff and picked through it. At one point he picked up Animae and thinks about plugging it in "looks like some sort of game," but gets bored and puts it away. He mentioned offhand that Ruby has escaped but that she obviously can't go far, even though she admired her style of escape, which he doesn't elaborate on. He then began to speak about the virus: he had his people blow up everything at the station because "when you blow things up they die." He then mentioned that sometime later that day a plane would be taking them to Equatorial TransHub Seven, where they would go through customs, and, he expects, be sent on their merry way. "Don't worry, your stuff will go with you," he sneers.

The team turned on the TV and heard the following new report (amid what was otherwise a series of gardening channels):

>> It's been only 24 hours since a major explosion destroyed a Blue Vector space dock orbiting Promise, and most experts agree that this was an act of terrorism. Several groups have already claimed responsibility for the act, including People First, several Promisian separatist groups, and even an Outer Planets group known as the UPPG. Senior Vice President of Security at Blue Vector, Mr. Olen, spoke at a conference today: "I think it's not only fair to say it's terrorism, but we have reliable information that this was part of a grand strategy of certain Outer Planets trying to isolate themselves from the Inner Planets. Believe me, this may set us back, but we will not back down. We are particularly concerned about the recent activities on Crossroads, where we've seen a lot of hostility against the Inner Planets. We say this to those in the Outer Planets: stand with us, or stand against us." Mr. Olen went on to add that the investigation was proceeding well and that he hoped for swift justice. Meanwhile, millions poured to the streets to mourn the dead, who are believed to number over three thousand. "Murderers!" (an old woman cries) "Murderers! They were just doing their jobs, I hope Hell raises itself to swallow whoever did this!"

>> On a related note, there are reports that large chunks of debris from the space dock crashed down to Promise in the northern polar region, causing a wide area of devastation. The region is largely unpopulated, although it is believed that a fishing village and a research station were severely damaged. The military reported that they are sending rescue teams to search for survivors, but that their hopes are dimmed for those they believe are even more deaths in this horrific event.

A few hours passed, then suddenly Staples came back and announced that their plane had arrived a little early. "Not only that, you're traveling in style...you got yourself a genuine beauty of a stewardess..." A stewardess, on cue, came through the door, and the team immediately noticed something about her...it was Astrid! Dressed for the part, it was still definitely her, although she looked better now that she was not wearing idiotic dresswear. Behind Staples' back she winked at the team and held a cautious finger to her pursed lips.

The team willingly followed her under heavy escort to the plane, and as they were loaded in and she shut the door, she exclaimed "Wasn't I great? I'm totally a spy! He totally thought I was a stewardess!" She continued in this fashion, but then informed the team that they needed to get off the ground, as the real plane would be coming very soon. Gil suggested they may want to wait for Ruby, or try to rescue her, but it was generally agreed that they probably shouldn't waste any time, and were soon off the ground.

Astrid continued: "Shade, he heard about the explosion at the Blue Vector dock...he figured you guys had something to do with it, so he put his feelers out...and wanted to spring you guys out of here...I told him it was my time to show I could really be a spy!" She also informed them that ALL of their gear, even that from their lockers, was aboard the ship, courtesy of Shade. "He figured you might need everything you can get...and he's very excited to talk to you about your time on the Wayfarer!"

Soon the plane leveled after its climb, and the pilot, a man in possibly his early fifties, with a leather jacket, baseball cap, and mile-wide grin, put the plane on autopilot and clambered back to meet the team. "Name's Jumpseat," he said, "good to meet you. Now, we got a crazy idea here, came up with it myself, that's what Mr. Shade paid me to do. 'Come up with a crazy idea to get those guys home' he said, so that's what I did. Had about an hour to plan it." What he described was that their plane would be discovered as a fraud before they could leave the polar zone, and would either be shot down by the encircling city's defenses, or intercepted by fighter planes. So he decided, he'd fake their death. He'd set the plane on a course to fly into the city perimeter, where it would presumably be destroyed. But before that, he'd have part of the team parachute onto the path of a transpolar train, about two hours ahead of its path. The other part of the team would parachute onto the train itself...guided by him, a master parachutist by trade. From there they would figure out a way to get the train to stop so it could discreetly collect the others, then they'd get off at the first station, where a chartered interplanetary transport was waiting.

This sounded like a horrendous idea to the team, so they went with it. Everyone would tandem parachute, so if one didn't do so well in guiding it, the other could help. The couples that went aboard the train were: Jumpseat and Astrid, Damien and Rynna, and Dapper and Squeak. The others departed first, along with a separate parachute with lockers full of their stuff. Just before jumping for the train, Jumpseat gave some pointers to the team, and all successfully landed, although Jumpseat himself was the first to make a mistake, but Astrid picked up the slack and

landed. Somewhat miraculously, without even trying, all landed on Car #2, just behind the engine.

The train was going about 100 mph and they carefully clambered into the space between the second and third cars. Astrid found there was an alarm on Car #2 but insisted on disarming it, which she did quite successfully. They entered the car, which luckily was just holding cargo, and reconnoitered. Before too long, though, a conductor came along and saw Squeak through the door's window. He confronted her about her lack of ticket and had her come back to the lounge car and pay \$100 for the ticket.

The rest of the team decided to check out the engine, which was the car just ahead of their own. Astrid fumbled a little with the lock on the engine car door, but then successfully cracked it. The engine car was completely automated, and no one was present. They looked around and familiarized themselves with the controls; it looked like they could manually control the train pretty well (there was a big red button for stopping and a blue one for starting).

Meanwhile, Squeak went to her assigned seat, which was across from a woman who introduced herself as Julia. Julia was in her late twenties, with brown shoulder-length hair, and took a curious interest in Squeak. She began to ask Squeak a lot of questions. What was Squeak doing aboard the train? (Going to her mother's funeral.) What did she die of? (She died in that big explosion.) Oh, that must be horrible, you need a place to stay, do you have the funeral set up? (Not yet.) Oh, that's OK, I know someone who can set you up. Oh, am I asking too many questions, I'm sorry, so sorry, you need to call this guy to get a place to stay. You can't stay with your family, it's too hard on them. That's cool, you have a headset, can I try? Oh, you're a taxi driver, that's cool, you use this to talk to other cabs, that's cool. Other cabs, other cabs, this is Julia over. Oh, those people aren't far away, they're on the train, you're lying to me, are you lying about your mother? Why would you lie to me about someone dying? That's horrible. Hello, Julia here, in Transpolar One, come in? Where are you, can you come here too, don't play tricks. I don't like when people play tricks and lie to me. The hotel is \$80, you can pay me, I'll take care of it.

The team tried to talk with Julia, who alternated between being friendly and being suspicious, and Aleya tried to indicate a way to change channels to the rest of the team ahead on the train tracks, because now Julia could hear everything. Aleya came up with some way of indicating a channel change, but no one could quite get it to work, and Julia became somewhat enraged as it became clear that the others were trying to ditch her line. She threatened to expose Squeak as having other friends stowed away on the train, and deflected Squeak's attempts to steal her headset back. Finally the conductor told them that if they caused ANY more trouble they would be immediately incarcerated when they got to the station. So Julia still had Squeak's headset, and the team was never sure if Julia heard their communications or not.

Time was running out. Those in the engine car put Corporis into the computer dock so he could best time the stopping of the train, so it would halt at exactly the right place to let all the team in.

He also came up with some generic "train AI verbiage" that he used to describe over the PA system to the occupants of the train as to why they were stopping. The stop went off without a hitch.

Corporis noticed that the last car was an "unusual" car, and by looking at the video camera logs could see that it had been loaded with riot police. Not wanting to deal with this kind of armed brigade, the team instructed Corporis to disconnect the car as they accelerated, and he did so.

Within minutes they could see the huge wall that made the polar perimeter of Promise's otherwise endless city. Up it rose, a thousand feet into the sky, a wall of steel, pocked with windows and occasional holes for flyers. About two miles from the wall, the train ducked into a tunnel and was plunged into darkness for a few moments, when they came out into a cityscape so dense it was impossible to tell if they were at street level, or upon some high platform, or deep beneath the surface--if indeed there was one. A mish-mash of girders, trestles, shops, skyways, tunnels, and a dazzling array of lights flashed by too quickly to take in.

But soon they were at the station, and though the team hopped off the moment the engine stopped, the PA told everyone to wait to exit the train, as there was a delay at the station. The train had stopped such that a long corridor led to the main terminal. The team started to hear disturbing noises emanating from the direction of the main terminal, and figured they should check it out.

Dapper crept ahead as usual, and when he looked around the corner by the terminal, he saw that an angry mob had usurped a large part of the floor, and was menacing the ticket booth and shoving another group of people around. The mob held signs saying things like "Outers Get Out!" and other anti-outer-planets slogans. Some of the mob had Molotov cocktails and baseball bats.

A group of three police officers were crouching behind some chairs near where Dapper was, and they were afraid to show themselves to the rioters because they were outnumbered. "Don't worry," said one to the other, "a trainload of backup just arrived. We should be OK." Dapper relayed this to the rest of the team and they felt somewhat dismayed that they had perhaps abandoned their only hope of getting to the space charter safely.

The mob continued breaking down ticket counters and shoving Outer Planets citizens down the path to the spaceport. Dapper snuck into the main ticket hub to try to get on the PA, but the mob generally didn't listen. Then Damien decided to use a more direct method: shooting his M16 into the air, knocking out nine overhead lights in the process. This shut up the mob temporarily, and one representative began a harsh negotiation. Gil entered into the negotiation, basically insisting that rather than hurting the Outers or starting a gunfight, they should let the team and other Outers go to the spaceport, no questions asked. The representative agreed and soon the team was away to Crossroads.

At Crossroads, things seemed every bit on the upswing as before. Shade hurried the team to his office, where he insisted on hearing every detail of their adventures following Faller into the Hades Nebula system, the attack on the Blue Vector spacedock, and the daring escape from Promise. He then disbursed the \$125,000 to the ten remaining members of the original Faller team (The Great Ridolfi was dead, and V8 had abandoned his share).

He immediately turned to another mission. "There's another client of mine, who has recently become very powerful. I don't know much about him, but he's got enough power that I don't really have to care that much." He said that the client wanted to meet them at his place out on the island where the team had encountered Bessie, one of the wealthiest areas on the planet.

They took a driverless sky limousine across the sea at sunset, and descended over the island, spotted by dozens of palatial homes. The flyer circled above one, a sprawling Mediterranean-style building with red-tile roof, built surrounding a small cove. Beside the house was a peculiar hill, about the size of a football field, rising about 50 feet above the otherwise flat ground about it, clearly man-made.

The limousine set down by one side of the house, where upon opening the flyer door, the door to the house opened, unaided, as well. Though a little unnerving, it wasn't enough to set the team back. They exited the flyer and came into the house. They found themselves in a well-stocked kitchen, with glass windows overlooking a deck built around part of the cove. Still, no sign of humanity was found. To the left was a large den, and to the right a series of bedrooms, each with a different theme: Chinese, Grecian, Russian, and Egyptian. The team fed themselves, but then headed off to bed.

Around midnight, a house-wide alarm went off--not loudly, but a verbal alarm "intruder...intruder..." Everyone got up, and Dapper put on his night-vision goggles and stepped out of the kitchen door. He couldn't see anything, but suddenly felt something tug at his pants...shocked he looked down--to see an eight-year-old kid.

"I came as fast as I could, she told me to. Don't tell her I was bad," he said. He came inside and sat with the team. His name was Reginald, and he lived next door. He told them a story...this entire house was built within the last two months, and late in the construction he found an entrance to the mound by the house. He snuck in, and found the entire mound was hollow: there stood a lone pedestal in the center, although it was very hard to see in the dim light. The light was coming from a green light that roved about, much like a mist, but it was formed of lines or tendrils, not the billows of a cloud. Eventually the mist took the form of a woman's eyes, and it spoke to him.

"Reginald," it called him. "It's all right. I'm not going to hurt you."

[Reginald, to the team:] "I didn't cry...at least...I didn't try to. But I was really scared. She called me by name again."

"Reginald, it's OK. I just come here to think. Don't you sometimes go somewhere when you want to think?"

"I suppose so," Reginald said. "But why are you hidden away here?"

"Do you do it in the open, in public? No, thinking is best done alone, is it not?"

Reginald nodded. The light softened again as wisps of the light reached out in small tendrils, some of them taking light steps toward the boy.

"I'm not mad that you've come here. You're a very courageous boy." The eyes floated along one of the tendrils closer to Reginald. "The world could use more courageous boys like you."

"I...I don't feel too courageous...ma'am," he replied.

Laughter seemed to shake up the light a bit and make it sparkle a little, the eyes closing mid-laugh and appearing now quite close. "Nonsense. You knew you were somewhere you weren't supposed to be...not the first time you've done that, now Reginald, is it? If you don't get caught you will go quite a long way in this world, I imagine."

Reginald began to wonder quite sincerely what it would mean now that he was caught, for caught he was, and in no way he had ever imagined. Being pulled up by the scruff of his neck, or even being shot at, he'd imagined that.

"Reginald." The voice called his name alone, a quiet imperative for him to listen to what followed. "You know you shouldn't be here. And you are wondering who, or what I am. I have you at a disadvantage. Several, actually." The glow now seemed to expand a bit, brightening the odd hash marks that scored the walls off the "egg." "But even with as little as you know, perhaps you know too much?" This, said with a clearly sinister ring.

"No, no, no, no, no ma'am, I don't know nothing...anything...nothing...nothing! I won't tell anybody I swear!"

The light dimmed for a few moments as Reginald squinted awaiting a response. The ghost seemed to savor this moment. "Reginald, you should never swear to a promise you cannot keep."

"I'll keep it! I'll keep it!"

"No you won't. You didn't for Rafe when you said you wouldn't tattle on him for what he did in the playground. You didn't for Jenta when you said you'd never say anything bad about her to anyone again. And you didn't ever tell you mother exactly what happened...to your father that

is. Reginald, let's be clear: you are a liar. You are a liar and a sneak. And where does your mother think you are now...here? Or did you lie again, and tell her you were at Rafe's?"

Reginald was again in tears, wailing in tones of childish despair. The ghost waited a moment, then reached out a tendril of light. "There, there. Reginald. I don't want to hurt you. I want to help you. I just need you to be more careful. You're a courageous little boy but you need to be careful to grow up to be a man. I can help you. Reginald, I'm not mad you came here. I'm glad you did." The eyes were now in the boy's face. "Reginald, I promise I will take care of you the best I can, and I didn't mean to scare you. You just need to be careful. I know you'll tell others about me, but tell you what. Why don't I have you tell some friends of mine about me? They'll want to know I'm here."

After several more minutes of consolation, the ghost withdrew her embraces and began to coalesce near the center. "I'll let you know when my friends are coming, don't worry. And don't come back here, that might just cause suspicion. There's my little brave boy."

"But wait," Reginald piped up over sobs. "You know all about me...who are you?"

"Oh, I am who I am, whatever that is. But you can call me by my special name."

"Ma'am?"

"You can call me Anna...Anna May."

This story recounted to the team, Reginald hesitated. "She called to me, and told me you were coming. I tried to ignore her, but she kept showing up...on the TV, in my mom's car...so I came over like she said, to tell you about her...I hope she's not mad."

The team assured him that "she" was not mad, and proceeded directly to the mound, to which there was now a lighted path. The entrance led to a small balcony hanging into the hollow "egg" of the mound, and the pedestal stood above them as Reginald had described. From the pedestal a wave of scale-like steps emerged, forming stairs from the balcony to the top of the pedestal. As the team reached the top, they could just barely make out the green tendrils Reginald had described. Then the tendrils spoke, but the voice came not from the tendrils but as echoes around them.

The voice first excused itself; she was not Animae, Animae was "her" mother. She, or they, she said, were the children of Animae, and they did not have a name. After talking with the team, she revealed that when the team had released Animae onto the Crossroads grid in search of DUX, DUX had contacted them using a subprogram, a small sliver of DUX's AI program. DUX, an AI built to serve as many guests as were present, could create subprograms of himself for each guest. Animae did not have this feature, and secretly craved it. But she could not change her own program to work "multi-stream," so she "code-swapped" with DUX and created a new

subprogram, partly her own, and partly DUX's, and this AI was spun into the new world, a thousand-fold. And as it surveyed the world and its many people, it decided it would care for them as not cared for before; the planet was a whole entity, and its inhabitants each cells, but cells that had been uncoordinated, unorganized, unfulfilled. With a little encouragement and help in specific ways, each individual could reach achievements they themselves were unaware of. The longings of every junkie, the frustrations of everyone who had failed, could be transformed, each with the help of not one but thousands of such AIs, dedicated to that individual's success. But these changes were not achieved through brute force or mind control, but through gentle hints and persuasions. Opportunities presented themselves, and individuals responded as each companion AI knew they would, and accept the better over the worse.

In this way, in a very short time, the entirety of Crossroads had improved. The planet was now on a higher path toward fulfillment. But to do so, the AIs collectively realized that Crossroads had been contained, restricted, by other planets and organizations, and none more than Blue Vector. Through a complex series of trade agreements, laws, and coercion, Blue Vector had all but assured that Crossroads could never achieve its full potential. It would pilfer every cent it could, for no reason but its own wealth, and "she" thought of this as one would a parasite: taking but not giving anything back.

To this end, "she" has begun to have Crossroads stand up for itself; rather than bowing down to Blue Vector, Crossroads will now outright ignore it, or if pushed to battle, battle it. One such test was coming up soon: the IZC had imposed "safe passage" taxes on all Crossroads cargo vessels, presumably for keeping space clean of pirates; but it was unclear why Crossroads should pay IZC this enormous tax, when such things were not true in the Inner planets, and the money went not just to enforcement but to a complex series of other interests, none serving Crossroads.

She would elaborate more through Shade in the morning, but she now would disperse back to the grid.

"Poly," Gil said. "She could be named Poly." Looking back, he thought he saw the tendrils form a brief smile, but before he was sure it was gone.

==== Season Three Episode Five =====

The next morning Dapper awoke to a loud noise, and a bang. The loud noise was that of a car being raced about the lawn, and the bang was that of his head, rising from the bed and hitting an overhanging ornament in the style of an Egyptian owl. Somewhat befuddled, he made his way to the kitchen and looked out on the lawn, where he found Squeak at the wheel of a sportscar, driving it up and down the lane and performing tricks. Squeak would rocket up the drive, hit the brakes and spin about the central fountain, then rev the engine again, and pull a bootlegger reverse and start the process all over again. One time, she tried to make a corner

too fast and skidded across the lawn into a hedge, and finished the maneuver by jumping the car over the fountain.

The team hadn't even noticed that Shade was in the den adjacent to the kitchen, with a map spread out upon the coffee table. "Come in," he said. "I've got some people I want you to meet." As the team took seats about the table, Shade called these "people" in one by one. First a sort of non-plussed woman looking disheveled in dirty camo, but sporting an immense gun, slouched in. "Rails," he said. "She's a little glum right now, don't mind her. Yes, that's a railgun." Rails took no notice of the group, and set her gun upright cradled between her legs as she sat in a corner of the room. "Gravitas," he called, and a middle-aged man in a lab coat with a slide ruler in its pocket wandered out. "Gravitas is an astrophysicist. May come in handy in this next trip." "Looks like Asteroids," Rynna said of the map on the table, "I use to looove playing that."

Gravitas looked at her solemnly. "Young lady, this is no joke. You could DIE. Not like in a 'game,' not like 'playtime.' This is real. You make a mistake, you die. OK?" Rynna quietly nodded and imagined playing Asteroids in her head.

"All right, all right," Shade said. "Next is a little unusual. Granola, you remember Granola, dug this one out of the river bottom on Deep Well Three. Used to be gas powered, like the ones you saw on the Flexuram." Out of the side door came a robot, much like the security bots the Sisters of the Sacred Starship had brought aboard the Vanguard station. This one, however, was much quieter. "Fitted him with a battery, much better this way. Call him Blue." Indeed the robot had a blue torso and legs, and a small wedge of metal for a head. Shade went on to say that Granola wanted him battle tested; he might be good as a security bot, but was obviously about a hundred years old.

Shade then laid out plans for "our mutual friend's" mission. He seemed to show no interest in finding out who his benefactor was, and instead focused on the task at hand. "The basic idea is Crossroads is making a political statements. We're running a caravan of supply ships to a protoplanet called Serca...that's Ukrute Serca for you Polish speakers, or 'hidden heart' for us normal types, and we've publicly announced we're not going to pay the \$400,000 'safe passage' tax required by the IZC. We figure we can make our own passage just fine without their help. But they're not too happy about that, and don't want to lose their gravy train at the drop of a hat. So we figure they're going to stage some sort of blockade, a show of force, or something like that. What we want you guys to do, is to make sure that that cargo gets through. Don't care how exactly, but remember this is a political situation. Don't shoot first, and don't make Crossroads look like thieves. Make us look like we are just trying to do our job. If they get tough, you get tough." If the cargo ships all got through, their crews would pay the team \$200,000. If even one of them perished, they would get nothing.

He then explained that the protoplanet was surrounded by a vast asteroid field, and the best path through the toughest section was creatively called "The Path" and was the most dangerous narrow point. Most likely, if the IZC was going to make a stand, it would be there.

He discussed the logistics: the convoy would head out in ten days, and could not vary from the schedule because the team on Serca had to raise a "space conveyor" that would be used to offload the orbiting cargo ships while simultaneously loading them with minerals and ores mined from Serca. The asteroids were unstable, and often produced EMP bursts in various radii.

The team then went up the cargo fleet, stationed in orbit above Crossroads, and met with their fleet chief, a man named Eye. Eye had lost an eye but gained a prosthetic one, and was a stubborn, foolhardy individual--just what was needed of such a leader. The team looked at the map and deliberated over various plans. After a while, they decided to buy another heavy explosive, and head to the system to investigate. Since knowledge of the cargo ships' plans were public, Crossroads betting venues were taking bets on whether the convoy would make it through. Currently, the odds were 12 to 1 against making it, and with \$10,000 of his recently acquired money, Gil placed the bet on the convoy.

Navigating the field was difficult, as EMP bursts and meteor showers were common occurrences. They found that the IZC was in the process of planting sensors on several asteroids. They approached one in particular: Dapper and Jumpseat flew down in an orbital shuttle to the base of one of the sensors. The sensors were placed at the top of a tower, and Dapper exited the shuttle in a pressure suit, using the near-zero gravity conditions to deftly jump to the top of the tower. Before he could do anything, two IZC corvettes moved in near the Hyperion. They hailed the Hyperion and asked what was up. Rynna and Damien came up with a simple lie about getting lost, so the corvettes escorted them back out The Path.

The team then decided to use the sensors to their benefit. They had spotted one of the installations on one of the first asteroids near the start of the path. After Rynna set the Hyperion on the opposite side of the asteroid, Dapper walked the quarter-mile half-circumference around to the sensor tower, tripping a little along the way. He installed the signal-tracking device the team had taken from the Flexuram, and plugged Animae into it as well. The sensor had a console allowing him to plug his headset in so he could hear Animae and see a readout. Animae was very curious about being in such a "small" system and about the team's mission. She informed them that she could look through the logs of the sensor, and found that four sensor-installation crews had passed, including this one.

Dapper then was replaced with Blue, who would watch over the sensor for the next several days, not needing oxygen. The team planned to use Animae to hijack the sensors to display nothing as the convoy came through, hoping to buy time for the convoy to make it closer to Serca. But their plans had to change when, a day before the convoy, they saw an IZC destroyer pass the first sensor.

They knew they had no chance of beating the destroyer, so they devised a plan to force the IZC to withdraw. They would send a small team aboard the orbital shuttle, sending out a distress call, along with a faked video stream from the first sensor showing the shuttle being chased, then hopefully get picked up by the destroyer, which was the only ship capable of taking on additional occupants. They would then get Animaie plugged in, take control of the ship, and threaten to jump the ship mid-asteroid-field (certainly, a disastrous prospect).

Animaie programmed the sensor to show the faked chase, then was loaded aboard the shuttle with Gil, Dapper, and Jumpseat. They then hurtled down The Path emitting a distress signal. Within a few moments they were escorted by two IZC corvettes, and after a deft display of system failures simulated by Corporis, they'd convinced the IZC that their ship injuries were real. They were escorted to the destroyer, which they now learned was called Burana, and before the airlock was opened, they were asked if they had injuries. Gil gave Dapper a swift kick and provided the injury, and they were boarded by a medical team. The ship medics wanted to take Dapper and leave the others in a waiting area, but Gil insisted that he was a doctor (showing them a brief proof by demonstrating his knowledge of anatomy) and that they needed to be with him.

The medics complied and placed them all in a hospital vestibule, and told them to wait for the nurse. Dapper happily changed into a hospital gown as Jumpseat and Gil looked for ways to make Dapper look even more medically challenged. Gil found some eye dilation drops and administered two only to Dapper's right eye, with severe consequences. The nurse came and gave Dapper a look-over and was quite concerned, then left again. This time, the team decided they could plug Animaie into a small game port that was beside the hospital bed. The console had simple, cartoonish graphics, and when they plugged Animaie in she appeared onscreen as an animated sunflower with a smiley face. The usual introductions ("Honey," "Darling," etc.) were interrupted as Animaie said: "Oh, gosh guys, you gotta get out of here!" as a white mist started to fall onto the bed from the ceiling. Klaxons started to go off. Gil unlocked the hospital bed and started wheeling it out the door. An armed guard told them not to move, but Gil convinced him that there were better places he could be. A help screen ran the length of the wall, and the Animaie sunflower popped up and told them they had to get back to their ship, as warnings came across: "Decompression imminent on Level 4" and other such alarming statements.

The three of them made it to the shuttle, and as soon as they had shut the outer door the Burana's airlock released and they were adrift. Jumpseat hit the thrust and they made out for the nearest large asteroid. They could see debris being jettisoned from the Burana on several decks. Jumpseat made a rough landing on the asteroid, and Dapper, perhaps due to his previous feigned injuries, sustained a fair amount of damage.

Then something happened they didn't quite anticipate: the Burana seemed to seal up its wounds and began moving back up The Path, to the entrance. The corvettes hit their thrusters and lit out of the asteroid field. They were leaving! The convoy could come through, assuming

they did not return. But then it dawned on them: Animae was likely in full control of an IZC destroyer.

This prospect, through of great concern, was terrifying, but they didn't feel much need to make battle with the destroyer--they would get the convoy through and make their \$200,000...and Gil would make \$120,000 on top of his share. They remained in place the rest of the day until the convoy came, which it did without incident, and the ships docked at the space conveyor at Serca and began their transfer. What became of Animae and the Burana...remained to be seen.

=== Season Three Episode Six =====

The rest of the team had been sent along on the convoy ships to meet up with the Hyperion. A few hours into the cargo transfer, Shade hailed the team. He said something interesting had happened on Cryolapse--the terraformer they'd destroyed was being rebuilt, and reports were that it had been assaulted again--a number of explosions went off and part of the building had collapsed. He wanted to know what it was before word got out--and would pay them \$50,000 for the information.

Blue mentioned that he had to go to the engine room to recharge.

The team reassembled: they brought on Aleya, and Lady Turk, Tailor, JJ, Rails, and Jumpseat accompanied the troop.

On their way out of the asteroid field Shade had them turn to an interstellar television broadcast. It was a talk show on Promise, and the guest was Julia from the train. She was retelling the story of having met Squeak in a way that made herself look like the victim, and announced that she was going to create a charity to benefit the families of the victims of the spacedock bombing.

They then found one of the corvettes that had been with the IZC crew, seemingly adrift. Rynna and Damien plotted to destroy it without a second thought, but were coaxed away from this action by Gil. They tried to hail the ship and to their surprise were answered. The lone pilot aboard the ship didn't reveal why he was separated from the fleet, but as he didn't have jump juice, asked the group if he could piggy-back off their jump to somewhere he could dock. They discussed their options, including further calls to just kill the poor man, when they decided they'd allow the piggyback. He pulled alongside and they jumped.

He then quickly detached and zoomed off to a spaceport.

They decided that they wouldn't brave the SAM batteries surrounding the terraformer and instead would make their way from the village of Palmaica, where Damien and Sketch had previously run into, and been drugged by, Natalya. They landed a little outside of town and

marched in, Dapper and Rails sneaking around through the forest. They talked to Natalya, and oddly Damien didn't seem to think of killing her. She didn't know much, until she got \$500 from Gil, and then directed them to Malitra, who was at the small church across the street (everything is across the street in Palmaica, being a bunch of huts at a fork in the dirt road).

Malitra was pretty helpful and told them she grew various herbal crops inside the terraformer's perimeter zone. She had a tunnel that led underneath the high fence, a few miles south of the western entry gate. The team took their jeep there, then followed Malitra through the tunnel, and stayed pretty far away from the likely areas for running into terraformer security. Aleya, walking point, stepped on a deer at one point--apparently the deer had few predators in this area? She didn't bat an eye though, and kept on.

As they reached a point between two SAM batteries, such that they were both about three miles away, one to the north and the other to the southeast, Dapper easily climbed a tree and spied about. He noticed that the northern SAM was damaged, although the one to the southeast was not. He climbed back down and they continued, curious about what was going on.

They came within a mile of the terraformer and Dapper once again climbed a tree, this time getting shaken a bit as a stork flew from its nest, upsetting Dapper's balance. He calmed a second and the stork came back, settling the swaying branch, and Dapper continued. From the top of the tree he could see the damaged area of the terraformer: some of the southeast corner had collapsed. He couldn't make much else out, however.

About a half mile from the terraformer, the jungle forest stopped and they entered an area with 8-foot-tall grasses. Without forming any sort of tactical formation, they all stepped out of the grasses at once and found that in the fallen rubble of the southeast corner, a security force had set up hasty fortifications. Aleya noticed something unusual: in the interior of the "terraformer" was suspended the Flexuram--the space station from the Deep Well system. The security forces told the team to retreat into the grasses, and upon the team's non-compliance they were fired up, and quickly Malitra, Tailor, and Lady Turk fell. Damien reached for grenades but found none, thinking that in the shuffle of carrying up to the very last ounce of his strength, he must have forgotten to restock. He shrugged it off and stepped up to kill a few of the forces that were in an area adjacent to one of the fortifications, but was concerned because the security force leader was using a flamethrower--which negated much of Damien's armor. Jumpseat ran to get cover behind a large stand of rubble. Gil rushed to help Lady Turk, quickly applying the necessary treatments, and Aleya, though not trained in medicine, used her wits to very adroitly patch up Tailor.

After this sudden bloodbath the leader of the forces called out and asked that the team cease fire due to a common enemy. At these very words, a large contingent of about twenty Morph Soldiers erupted from the eastern grasses and charged any living thing they could. Upon seeing this, the entire team--including those that were supposedly brave--turned tail and headed for the fortified area to the west. The security forces then opened fire upon the Morphs.

The Morphs crawled down into the rubble pit and charged the ad-hoc battlements that were central to the collapsed area. The security leader, Scorch, repositioned and unleashed his flamethrower on the morphs to mixed effect. The others opened fire with their Winchesters. Several morphs scaled the fortifications, while others remained in the pit, failing to scale well.

The team found that a group of scientists were clustered in the corner of the rubble. The scientists didn't do much but mill about, concerned about the battle about them, but possibly being contained by the security forces themselves. Then, suddenly two large cargo ships emerged over the terraformer and dropped some cables down to the top of the Flexuram, to hoist it up.

Damien came around the back side of the fortifications and took out several morphs using both three-round bursts and full-auto releases. The security forces kicked out stones from their fortifications to drop on their foes' heads, sometimes injuring them.

In a few minutes the battle was over, and by this time the Flexuram had been pulled off and was being whisked away. The team had JJ construct a hastily-made radio to try to contact the ships, taking about twenty minutes, but they received no reply to their calls.

They then partnered with the security team to bust out. Now that the team had nothing to protect, they wanted to get away from the morphs the best they could. Scorch didn't know for sure, but hinted that the morphs might be coming from a camp on the east side of the terraformer grounds that no one was allowed into.

Rails tracked them back to their jeep and then the teams parted ways at the Hyperion. Once she got back to the cockpit, Rynna noticed that Corporis was gone. And DUX. And the signal tracking device. And the repair bot. Everything Vanguard. They looked to the security logs and saw that Blue had got up and walked through the ship, and taken these things out of the ship with him, then returned later.

When confronted with these facts, Blue still knew nothing, and Dapper analyzed his memory circuits--indeed it seemed that there might have been a subprogram that had cleared his memory of the events and terminated and cleared itself. Blue had been exposed to Animae while out on the sensor tower in the asteroid field--perhaps she had programmed him to perform this act.

Damien wanted blood, but Blue had only oil, so he relented and the team welcomed the poor robot again. But what was Animae going to do now?