Shallow Space Seven

By TS Gallows

Sitting inside his NASA surplus tarnish-bucket, Marty looked east across feathery clouds at the sun rising red for the farmers and factory workers of the mid-west, a strip of crimson dividing night from day. From there you would never see the elevator tower, the bridge between Earth and outer space that ended the meteor strike precipitated financial depression. People of every race got up and worked on high. Turns out, heights sit easier once up above cloud-level. The mind takes such a tremendous altitude as abstraction.

Marty loved the view riding down on the space-lift, but more than two days of slowly changing lighting and views, horizon uncurving, topography unflattening, could not hold Marty’s attention the way it once did. Like somebody working at the Grand Canyon for a long time, he still saw the beauty, but he got to looking at other things more. As when plasma rocketing through space, during the down time riding down in the elevator, he ate, slept, did routine craft maintenance, gamed and read sci-fi.

Halfway to the bottom loading zone, an up-bound elevator passed in front. The top level carried bigger ships than his, white ceramic-clad Tesla Star Seekers, private craft and Spacebi glowed red in the light of another sunrise. The lower level held a few sport-craft and tightly-tetrised cargo modules of supplies bound for the merchants and miners of Mars. Plasma drive had reduced a seven-month planet to planet trip to seven weeks. But Marty had to stand by almost a week on the top platform for his chance to cross the rows of acceleration belts and get lifted into the last grimy corner of the cargo hold. At least that got him packed into a spot where his hull camera had nothing stacked in front of it.

Dropping into the atmosphere, he could barely see the crossbeams and risers, aka the arms and the legs. Chinese scaffold builders and Native-American ironworkers started the tower, lashing large diameter, slip-fit, clear tubing to bamboo. Portable extruders pumped translucent carbon fiber resin down into every four-hundred -foot length, a virtual nine-year continuous pour all the way up to the last gentle reaches of the Earth’s pull.

The tower still depended on the cables that once anchored the growing structure to a satellite and the ones that lifted everything into place and up to the freighters carting pipe and resin out to the next planet for the short tower project. Now, repurposed, those cables ran around the pulleys to counterbalance the lifts, going down, going up and traveling horizontally at top and bottom, always maintaining the incredible speed that took five years to gather. Exactingly placed magnetics eased the strain on the cables, making possible the greatest continuous motion machine ever conceived.

The last hours of the ride down Marty hardly looked at the view at all. Mostly he read from the first science fiction book in some time that managed to keep him interested, a rubber-banded paper and glue antique that he just started, had it with him all the way out and all the way back. Likely the reason why he sneaked peaks at so many Laurann Dohner stories, Marty liked a romantic element, vicariously falling in love to live happily ever after. And he thought he saw something of such developing in that Harlan Ellison book about a post-apocalyptic young man with a telepathic pet. Then the ending totally wrecked it. Seriously, why did the author have to make his protagonist choose between having a woman in his life or having a dog?

“How stupid,” he groaned. “The whole story hinges on an unsatisfying surprise ending. That’s as bad as justifying the read with an ironic ending!” Disgusted, he sent the book sailing across the cabin, yellowed pages heaped in a corner.

At cloud level, the elevator started the long thermometer bubble curve, arching away from the center of the tower then back, east toward the New Mexico tower leg, then curving west. Below him, Marty saw the traffic lights in Gallup. Moving closer to the ground he saw Holbrook and next he saw Winslow. His monitor displayed Flagstaff in the distance.

Moving across the land more than down to it now, the lift lined up with the load zone that starts at the east end of town, and the city spread out ahead like a novelty street map. Marty glimpsed the regularly touristed top level of the mechanized roadway that inherited its name from the road ridden across the old west, Route 66. The scenery flew by blindingly fast as the cargo conveyance went totally horizontal. Then the lift shot into the gap between the upper set of conveyor belts. The floor of his level of the elevator lined up with the lower docking beltway.

Within short moments, his old craft left the elevator. All the while, as the forklift carried him and his ride across the series of gradually slower “rolling road” working down to school zone slow before the cement of the waiting zone, Marty nervously wondered if his ground support had made it on time. NASA scientists never intended for his ceramic wheels to turn against Earth’s gravity. It shortened their life every time his partner late-showed, forcing him to taxi across cement and railroad tracks to get to the perimeter parking. That could shatter them. But today, Theo had his truck waiting on the mark, and he backed beeping up, bed tilting as he came.

Marty opened his cramped airlock and climbed straight through. Emma ran nimbly past him loping down the steep sloping ladder steps, hopping to the ground and wagging. “Good girl,” he told her, and it was true. As close to the door as he could he held up his left hand, the one with the remote-control implant, standing on the bottom rung then jumping to the ground as the ladder retracted. (Rechargeable or not, he needed to open his wrist and replace the batteries.) The outer door closed, but it sounded like the inner door did not close right.

“Marty!” Done petting Emma, Theo held his arms wide. “Welcome back.”

“Thanks.” He hugged back. The big old hippy with the big beard and the big belly, Marty always played along, “Peace out” on the snail e-mails and all that. He stepped back and took a deep breath. “It’s good to be back.” He stomped the solid cement a few times.

Theo laughed. “Back on terra firma, right?”

“Exactly. Enough intra astra, already.” He looked far down the tunnel of the freight level at the forklifts still servicing the elevator. Chameleon-paint showing red loading incoming cargo out, green ones loading the outgoing containers in, an exciting sight to behold for a boy of any age. One missed box would cost the entire crew dearly come payday, and they moved with the rapid efficiency of a pit crew, twisting sideways in front then in back every time they crossed into the next belt speed, racing to get everything off and on as the lift got to the end of the roads and started to curve up toward the California tower leg beyond Williams. Marty looked toward the empty truck cab. “Where’s Brenda?”

“Well…” Theo put a hand on his chin, and then he went to the antique tilt bed, pulling out the cable by its hook.

“Well what?” Marty watched while Theo stretched to clip up to the mini-shuttles nose-ring.

“You know women.” He petted Emma’s curly white schnauzer-chihuahua head, and then he hurried to the levers at the side of the truck, drowning out Marty’s voice with his winch.

Marty followed him. “I’m a big boy, Theo.” He put a hand on his business partner’s shoulder. “What’s going on?”

“It’s hard to figure.” He turned slightly to look at Marty, still keeping an eye on the spacecraft that not man, nor God, ever intended to send away from the Earth and her moon. When the wheels touched the leading edge of the bed, he let up on the lever and looked Marty square in the eye. “She hung out on the land all through your trip out and most of your way back. Helped me clean the last load. Worked hard. And when people came out to buy, she usually schmoozed a few more bucks out of them than I would’ve.”

“Wow. That’s cool. Right?”

“Right. And mostly she and Donna got along fine.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Really don’t know.” He shrugged and shook his head. “About a month ago Brenda decided to clean your building  – really got into it – mopped the floors, washed your curtains. Then she found the boxes of science fiction books.”

Marty looked at Theo blankly. “So?”

“Donna bragged on the collection. Brenda made a joke like ‘And how old is he?’ something like that. And then we kept hearing her on her phone, talking to somebody about the books.” He shook his head. “I don’t know. All excited or upset or something.”

“About the books?”

“Yeah. A few weeks ago Brenda started going out in your pickup, coming home late. Past our bedtime anyway. When I told her you were on the space-deck, she acted funny. Girl said a bunch of stuff about how great that was.” He looked over to where Emma had stretched out on the cement in a patch of sunlight that filtered down through the gap, then back at Marty. “She wasn’t really wagging her tail. You know what I mean?”

Marty scratched his head and then he looked down. “Yeah. I think so.”

Theo shrugged. “Brenda took off that night, and we haven’t seen her since.” He did some quick math with his fingers. “Six days now.”

“With my truck?”

“I could have reported it stolen, but I thought I’d wait to talk to you.” He pulled the lever and the front wheels clanged loudly up onto the bed. “We could call 911 on the way out to the land.”

“Ah… I don’t know.” Marty put a hand to the back of his head and turned around for a moment. “Think you could take me around for a look see? I’ve got an extra key if we find it parked somewhere.”

“Sure. We can do that.” The back wheels barged onto the metal, and the bed began to tilt level. “You won’t mind if we peek around for scrap metal to scavenge, do you?”

“Whatever.” Marty looked toward the front of the truck. “You got this?”

“Sure. Go make yourself at home." Theo gave him a thumbs up gesture. "If you dig around, you’ll find a sandwich and one of Donna’s drinks in the cab for you.”

“Maybe that’s just what the doctor messaged in.” Marty patted Theo’s back as he walked by. “Thanks Tim. C’mon Emma.” He opened the door, and she jumped up and in. “Get in back,” he said, not realizing she had already hopped behind the seat.

Marty took a long drink of the spirulina and sprouts smoothie, Donna’s specialty that he frequently turned down and Theo always made fun of. Today Marty felt like he needed it more than the ’strami on rye that Theo made to go with it. The fourteen week and longer runs, to there and back, traveling from gravity to gravity, the first years he ventured out the voyages played out like exhilarating adventures, but lately sitting through the g's, all the way to Mars and back, dragged on like debilitating doldrums.

Other space truckers crawled out of suspended animation, pulling the nutrient supositing tubes and the oxygen enriching masks to disembark all bright-eyed and bushy tailed. And Marty, about a year ago he taped a checklist over the reflector in his lavatory, and he rarely looked into mirrors on land. He still had enough handsomeness to interest a girl, sustaining all the g’s, like it or not, that kept him ripped, but, to Marty, he did not look so hot.

Theo glanced over, but he waited to speak until they got waved through the inspection checkpoint, passed the now empty plastic tubing factory and made their way out of town on the road to the San Francisco Peaks. “So customs did a pretty thorough search up there?” Theo asked, already knowing the answer from the hints in Marty’s messages.

“They sure did. Went through every compartment. Moved our load around and looked underneath everything.” Marty shook his head. “They make it as hard for a law-abiding citizen as they can.”

“Yeah. Them too,” Theo said with a chuckle.

“That’s what I hear.” Marty slipped Emma’s chain collar off and handed it to Theo. “You’re going to like this one. Very pure metal.”

“Nice.” Theo held it in his palm, judging the weight with an up and down movement. “You know, I haven’t made any progress with the time experiments. But I’ve begun to think we can use this stuff to control our minds." He sounded excited. "That could change things for all of humanity!”

“Plasmic,” Marty said with a yawn. Another New Age slant he imagined.

The road began to wind around to the right, traversing the base of Mount Humphreys, and Theo slowed to accommodate the decreasing road quality. After a while he looked over at Marty. “This thing with Brenda’s got you down, doesn’t it?”

“I guess. For once, I was looking forward to seeing a non-ugly face at the Coconino Port Authority. Know what I mean?”

“Ouch.”

“Just kidding.” Marty reached around and punched Theo in the shoulder. “I still think you’re pretty.”

Theo rubbed his shoulder. “Ouch again.”

“Sorry again.” For a moment, Marty looked off at the expanse of sagebrush, prickly pear and ponderosa stumps. Then he looked back. “It’s not just the thing with Brenda. I wondered if my first bad vector would make her say ‘To heck with the rocket man.’”

“That is your occupational hazard.” Theo reached over and patted Marty’s back. “But you have a good heart. There is a woman out there who will figure you worth waiting for.”

“Hm. Maybe so.” Having finished his drink, Marty unwrapped his sandwich and took a bite. “No. It’s not just Brenda. I’m getting tired of this life.”

“But you said it’s your dream come true. You have all the undisturbed time to read that you want. Are you going to eat that pickle?”

“No. Have at it.”

“Thanks.” Theo took a bite of the big dill. “Remember. You’re like black and white Burgess Meredith surviving the holocaust in a bank vault, going to the library for a stack of books, happy because now he can read all he wants.”

“Then he steps on his glasses.” Marty did a few bars of Twilight Zone theme music. “I hate that.”

“What?”

“The ironic ending.”

“Never said that before. But you do like The Twilight Zone, don’t you?”

“I did. But that collection of episodes written like short stories you sent me with...”

“Oh yeah. That was a good book, right?”

“I thought it would be, what with writers like Ray Bradbury. But I kept groaning at the endings.”

“Really.” Theo sounded hurt. He loved that century-old television show.

“No offense.” Marty held a palm up. “But they kept ending with the heavy hand of irony. Today people see so many thoughtfully written movies with well-rounded, engaging plots. The ironic ending just doesn’t fly anymore.” He shook his head and looked upward. “Back then they got away with it.”

“Wow. You are getting burned out.”

"Yeah." Marty shrugged. “I guess I am.”

He got out at the drive without Theo saying a word, unhooking the strands of barbed wire with wooden cross strips that served as a gate, walking it to the side so Theo could drive by. Emma got out as soon as he opened the door, and now she stood looking at him, expectantly wagging her tail. Marty reached into his pocket for her red rubber ball and threw it far up the drive for her to fetch. The evening air had a chill in it, a rarity now that Route 66 lined up on the new equator. Looking west Marty saw some of the lines of the acutely pyramidal lift tower distorting the last of the sunset with Mars in the mix, a picture he would have eagerly taken when he dreamed of a life in space.

Today he just shook his head and dragged the gate back to the post, pulling it tight to angle the leading strip of wood into the loop of wire at the bottom of the post, stretching the top of it over and dropping the top loop of wire around it. Instead of throwing the ball again, he told Emma to get in back. Then Marty climbed in without a word, and Theo let it stay that way, managing the ruts and rocks that led to the cobbled array of buildings they both called home.

“Unca Martin!” When Marty stepped out of the cab, a curly haired five-year old wrapped her arms around his legs. Then she turned to hug Emma and get her face licked.

“Hi Becka!” Marty looked at Theo and rolled his eyes. “Why do you have her calling me Uncle Martin, Tim?”

Theo smiled. “I got the idea from you calling me Major Tim. You know, "Ground control to Major Tim" and all that.”

“But she’s your granddaughter?”

“Doesn’t matter. I’ve even taken to calling the neighbor lady Mrs. Brown.”

“You’re kidding?”

“She gets the joke. Says, 'When’s My Favorite Martian coming back?'”

“Enough!” Marty shook his head at the reference to another hundred-year old television show. “It’s time for you to get back to the future, Doc!”

“Not me. If I ever get that time machine working, I’m going forward to the past.” His eyes took on that confused cabdriver turned mad scientist look. “You’re not thinking fourth dimensionally, Marty!”

“Hm. Maybe not.” He turned and headed for his cabin. “Let me sleep on it.”

“Smells like Donna’s got something cooking.”

“You fed me, and I’m spent. Give her my love.”

“All right. Good night Uncle Martin.”

“Good night, Tim. Night Becka. Emma, come!” He walked a few steps, and then he turned. “Hey. The best sci-fi show from back then was Knight Rider. I mean really, a robot that’s a fast car! C'mon."

Marty tossed the ball a few times along the way, once before and once after he stopped along the path to inspect the biomass still, the elaborate equipment that made it possible for Marty and Theo to drive such antiquated vehicles. International law lacked one ratification step to ban internal combustion engines when the crash happened. Who would have known? A meteor cataclysmically shifting the Earth’s axis moved regulations far down the global “to do” list.

In the morning, an anxious tongue got the dog out. Otherwise, Marty slept into the afternoon, enjoying clean sheets, gentle breezes blowing in an open window, and normal gravity holding him into his bed just right. Marty came out on his porch and found a vintage glass-lined thermos of coffee. As he sat on his rocker drinking a cup, Emma came flying up the steps and leaped into his lap, ball in mouth.

Marty set his half-gone cup on the floor and threw the ball, forgetting he had to throw high for Emma on Earth. His little dog jumped and brought it right down. Marty took the ball again, this time standing to sail the ball beyond the biomass still. Emma took off running, running the very fastest she could. And at the front of that flurry of legs, an unmistakable dog smile led the way.

All tie die, silver locks, long skirt and smiles, Theo’s wife, came up the steps next. “Marty!” Her voice sounded sweet and musical. “It’s so good to have you home.”

He set his cup back on the floor, standing into Donna’s long hug. “Exactly,” he said. “How’ve you been?”

“Good. Theo picked a bunch of flowering white sage, and I’m almost done making a fresh batch of spray.”

“Excellent. I’ll take every bottle you’ve got.” He pulled a wad of Astros out of his pocket.  “They bought me out same day I got off the lift.”

“Really!” Donna stared at the money. “And I worried nobody would buy it because we can’t use glass bottles.”

“Martians aren’t so picky. And you’re sending them one of the best products that ever comes their way.”

“Well.” She looked flustered, tucking the bills down her cleavage. “This goes with Becka’s college fund.” Donna looked over at his cup. “When you finish that, come down to the house. I’ve got dunch ready, and Theo unloaded your spaceship.” She brushed some loose curls out of her face. “He wants to go out scavenging at nightfall.”

Marty bent down for his cup and tucked the thermos under his arm. “I’m right at your heels,” he said, throwing the ball again.

Donna giggled. “All right.” She stepped nimbly down the stairs, and Emma ran out in front of her.

From outside, Marty smelled the fresh-baked bread from the kitchen/dining room. Theo ladled him a bowl of lentil stew from the pot on the stove and put it with Marty’s salad at the opposite end of the old wooden table from his own setting. “Get enough sleep, partner?” he asked before he went back to his seat.

“Unca Martin slept all day,” Becka said gravely, sitting to Marty’s right at the side of the table.

“He needs extra sleep when he comes home,” said Donna, handing the breadbasket across Becka’s setting. She caught his eye. “I never thought I’d hear it. Theo says you’re tired of science fiction.”

“Well.” Marty stopped buttering, suddenly realizing that they had eaten enough to make him more interesting than the mid-afternoon meal. “That’s not exactly what I said, but maybe it’s true.”

Donna shook her head disapprovingly. “You sat at this very table and told us that space travel never could have happened without science fiction as a way to imagine it.”

“That’s true.” Marty scooped some soup with the piece of bread, took a bite, chewed and swallowed. “But, look, even down to earth people like us go on star treks now.”

Theo scowled. “You said NASA developed remote technology after Heinlein described it in a novella!”

Marty looked upward and shook his head. “They’ve had waldos since the last century.” He brought a spoonful of soup to his mouth, but then he paused. “Maybe literature has done its job, and sci-fi is dead.”

“Unca Martin!” Becka protested. “Star Wars is still fun to watch!”

“All ninety-nine of them. And you’re right twice.” Marty patted her hand. “Movies are just as important science fiction as books.” He looked toward Donna and Theo’s corner of the table. “Sorry. I’ve read so much of it that it’s all looking the same to me.”

“Impossible!” Theo sounded indignant. “Science fiction deals with so many different topics!”

Marty put his spoon on his plate. “I count four.” He held up a finger. “Time and inter-dimensional travel.” He held up another finger. “Space travel and aliens.” Marty brought up a third finger. “Robotics, cybernetics and mutations.” He held up the fourth and final finger to count off his last concept. “Changes in our bodies, minds and environment.”

Donna put a thoughtful hand on her chin. “That is a good list.”

“It is!” said Theo, wagging a triumphant finger. “But if you add up all the sub-categories, that’s ten topics.”

“Really?” Marty went through his list again, moving his lips silently, this time ending with all of his fingers and thumbs up. “All right. Then sci-fi still rocks.”

“Phew!” Theo made a big deal about sighing with relief. “Sci-fi still rocks like a rolling stone.”

“Third stone from the sun,” Donna added, a reference to an old song from the days of Elton John and Buddy Holley.

Marty figured it would take many nights to hunt down his truck. This first time out, Marty picked half their route, and Theo picked the rest. That meant they rolled through apartment parking lots east of downtown, a logical place to look for Brenda because she recently graduated NAU. And they cruised railroad sidings and commercial back alleys, tried and true places to find choice pieces of unwanted metal.

“I know what went wrong,” Theo told Marty after they loaded Teflon pipe onto the truck. “Problem is, you won Brenda over with the dashing astrogator image.”

“It worked, didn’t it?” Marty took his gloves off and settled back into his seat.

“Yeah. It worked.” Theo put the truck into drive and crept down the alley ruts. “But just one trip showed her you’re like the fisherman who goes to sea for months at a time. You need to work on the intelligent and thoughtful mind angle. Like that stuff you said at dunch about sci-fi. That was plasmic. Why don’t you write it out?”

 “Ah!” Marty waved him off.

Theo pulled back onto Santa Fe, all the sheet metal they found earlier making more noise than it should. Fortunately, an elevator had just curved up and out of town, so the sounds of trains, cranes and flywheelmobiles filled the air. “Maybe you could mix some no-fi Asimov books into you’re reading,” the big man said. “Or use your time coming up with inventions, like the any-gravity dog-bathroom you made for Emma. You know, we could sell that idea. Or at least the thrust-sensitive variably-centrifugal part.”

“You think so?”

“I do. Or the self-cleaning astroturf aspect of it. But I’m trying to say something else here.”

“K. Have at it.”

Theo stopped for a traffic light, and then he looked directly at Marty and said something that sounded like you would it read somewhere important: “If you work on your heart and mind, make yourself attractive that way, you’ll find the kind of woman who will wait for you, the kind of lady you will want to talk to when you get old you have realized that that’s what matters.

“Like you’re the expert on relationships,” Marty protested half-heartedly.

“Maybe I’m an expert on my best friend.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. It was your enthusiasm that got our space business off the ground. You got us into the program for low income elevator assistance, and you figured out how to retrofit a plasma drive into the Ender’s Prize. All the hydroponics. Thanks to you, we got it done!”

Marty nodded. “That was a lot of work.”

“It was, but you were on fire. You made it seem so easy that Donna and I did all we could. And you... you changed our lives.”

“Wow. Thanks.”

“Just sayin’! And I think you need to get that spirit back. Like, what about that companion-bot you built in school? That was another good idea, and you had the language thing down.” He smiled slyly. “I liked the classic celebrity voice. Seriously, Tommy Chong!”

“That wasn’t so hard. But the motor skills, I couldn’t get it to stop stumbling.”

“He was fun.” Theo scratched his ear. “Thing is, if you finished that robot, you’d have a degree in robotics now!”

“The competition was so tough.” Marty shook his head. “It wasn’t a realistic career track.”

“Anyway, it’s late.” Theo slowed into the turn lane, a strip mall to their left. No traffic blocked the lanes they needed to cross. No cars were coming. And yet he just sat there. With a finger on the turn signal lever, he looked at Marty. “We can put this off all week if you want.”

“I don’t think we’re going to find any scrap metal here.”

“Wise guy!” Theo signaled and turned, pulling into the parking lot and cruising past the cars parked up to the curb in front of closed stores and an open tavern. “Look at what we have here,” he said, pulling into a spot alongside an old pick-up with an antique chopper strapped into its bed.  “Your truck’s made with a lot of steel, and that thing you’ve got in back ought to melt down and cash in just fine.”

“This isn’t funny, Theo.”

“It’s good we found your truck, isn’t it?”

“Listen. There are people who buy or inherit a Harley-Davidson and just ride for pleasure. But even with the decimating loss of population from the crash, there are still plenty of those crazy Harley gangsters. They're hard to kill. If I take my truck back with that in it…” For a moment he seemed to struggle for the right words. Then Marty smiled. “Let’s just say, it could cause problems.”

“Oh yeah.” Theo put his truck into reverse, and it lurched back against the brakes. “We should find Brenda during the daytime, when whoever she’s with, isn’t drinking. Right?” He put a finger to his cheek. “Or did you want to wait and follow, see where they go?”

“No.” Marty sighed. “No.” He unfastened his seat belt. “I don’t understand how I offended her, but I’ve got to face the music.” He shook his head sadly. “She was perfect. Funny, smart, and such a nice voice.” He opened the door. “Give me five minutes.” Marty got out of Theo’s truck and, before he could change his mind, pushed open the old-fashioned pair of saloon doors.

Marty never liked the smell of the place. It stunk of cheap tap beer. But he liked some of the people that came in there. Many of them he had known since high school. And this was where on one happy night he met Brenda. In that back booth over, oh yeah, there she was. No turning back now. Marty walked straight to the booth to make pleasantries with her and whoever sat across from her, back turned to him.

“Marty!” Brenda jumped up and gave him a hug. Marty stepped back and looked at her, long dark hair, green eyes, very pretty, cute pretty, really. And he felt sad because he knew by her hug, Brenda had moved on. “This is my sister, Chani, the science fiction nut.” A rack of balls broke.

“I’m not a nut.” Brenda’s sister reached a hand up and smiled. “I’m a sci-fi aficionado.”

“Hi.” Marty shook her hand. “I, uh…”

“I just have to ask.” A serious look crossed her face. “You’ve been there. Do they have biker mice on Mars?”

Marty’s jaw dropped. “That is one of the most obscure pieces of science fiction ever!”

“Can you really extrapolate that piece of fiction through science?” Chani’s face twisted up thoughtfully.

“It is a stretch, but somehow Biker Mice from Mars is more sci-fi than fantasy to me. No spells or items with mystical powers.”

“Hm. That makes sense.”

The sister had a sweeter version of Brenda’s looks, eyes like the elf woman in the turn of the century Tolkien movies. Marty knew better than to talk like a nerd to women. But, keep in mind, Chani had the qualities he loved in Brenda and a knowledge of sci-fi. Marty had to talk like a nerd: “Rick Ungar did the concept and artwork,” he said. “But Stan Lee produced that show before he did his most classic movies.” Marty paused before making his point “And Stan the Man was probably the greatest…”

“The greatest unacknowledged sci-fi writer ever!” she exclaimed.

“’Nuff said,” Marty managed to say, his hushed voice cracking.

“I read you like a book!”

“Word for word.”

Her eyes sparkled up at Marty. “You would have loved having a father like ours.”

“I wish I loved it!” said Brenda, shaking her head.

“Hush, you.” Brenda's sister slapped her hand. “Every night when he tucked us in to bed, Daddy read science fiction stories to us.”

“Boring!” said Brenda, putting some fingers to her yawning mouth as an illustration of her attitude. “That’s why I never told him about it.”

“Can you imagine? She got to grow up on the moon with a father who read her bedtime stories by Jules Verne and Theodore Sturgeon. And she says that was boring.”

Marty could not help laughing, and Brenda scowled at him. Then he felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Marty. We should get heading back to the land,” said Theo with that married, responsible guy voice.

Marty turned and put a hand on his arm. “Please, partner.  Let me sit down for just one beer?”

“Pretty please, Theo!” said Brenda. “With sugar on top.”

“Well.” Theo paused, holding a hand up in greeting to the sisters. “All right. What’s the harm in just one beer?”

“Plasmic,” Marty said, never even wondering if Theo had just asked a prophetic question. He looked back at Brenda. “What are you drinking?”

Brenda held up her bottle so Marty could see the label, a Four Peaks Tower Leg Lager. “You know Marty,” she said. “You and I had a lot of fun together, but my sister has your number.”

“I, uh… Let me get us a round. Theo, will you have one?”

“Sure. In fact, it’s on me.” Theo stepped to the bar.

Brenda’s sister slid over and patted the space she vacated. It seemed so natural sitting on that warm spot. Marty was glad he got a shower before he took off with Theo because Brenda’s sister smelled so… fresh… no… so… just right. He looked at her, and those eyes shined. “What did your father do on the moon?” he asked.

“He farmed.” She smiled and shook her head a little. “Like any farmer on Earth, Daddy could fix or do everything…” She laughed with a sarcastic tone. “…except the bills.”

“Is the moon a harsh mistress?” he said as if asking a serious question.

“Sometimes it is.” She frowned. “That is a great book, except for the expository slug that sums up the war between the moon and Earth in a few paragraphs.”

“What a nerdly remark!” said Brenda, looking from her sister to Marty. “And he’s eating it up. You two should consider this your first date.” With two hands, she pointed at them both at once. “Sis already has her bike in your truck.”

Marty did not know what to say to that. He did like this woman, a non-Stepford Wives, new and improved version of a woman whose company he had loved to keep. Fortunately, as Marty struggled to come up with a reply, Theo put a cold bottle of beer in his hand. Maybe that would help. He took a deep draining drink and set his beer on the table, wondering at the way Theo had wrapped Emma’s Martian metal collar twice around the bottle neck, fastened together with some indeterminate electronics part. Then before he could say something stupid, and he would have, the room spun around the bottle's neck like clock hands. Some calendar pages dropped into darkness.

His eyelids felt so heavy, Marty came to a while before he could get them open, he had to figure his location by feel before he could see it. At first, he took it all for a dream. He had logged so many hours there, the dream within a dream idea from Inception occurred to him. But he so distinctly felt the seat arms, the fingertip buttons, his five-point harness, and Marty heard the hydroponics dribbling, the clunk of the valve as they shut off. In the ensuing silence, he heard Emma breathing in her sleep igloo on the floor beside him. But how did he forget getting back on board the Ender’s Prize?

Even once he got his eyes open, it took some time to figure his ship’s location. The monitor had a partly obstructed view, and the colors on it blended inaccurately together. But he had come up the curve toward the Western tower leg so many times now. He could not mistake the shapes of that farewell cluster of mountains, swinging down under and behind. His mind, such a thick fog, rubbing behind his ear he tried to remember. Had he suffered a head injury?

Then Marty noticed that his tablet, clipped to the crosspiece, had its message light blinking. Marty tapped the screen and icons lit up, the Google icon swelling in size to indicate a message designated urgent. Marty tapped again. “Hello Marty,” said the face that filled Marty’s screen. “This is Theo calling you on a recorded line.”

“Very funny,” Marty muttered.

“In case you cannot totally recall what happened down here, we agreed that you should go back to Mars before the distance gets greater, before you do something crazy like getting mixed up in a group marriage on the Moon.”

“What?”

“Now, now. Before you start giving any thought to that joke, listen to yourself.”

The camera angle moved sideways and showed Marty’s face. “That’s right, Marty. I’m you, and you need to listen to me.” The lips did not move although the image did wiggle about some. The situation frustrated Marty , but hearing Becka imitate a man’s voice did make him chuckle. “Take Theo’s deal Marty. The force is strong with it!” She laughed so cutely with her high lyrical voice, and Marty could hear Donna hushing her.

The camera panned back to Theo, setting down a finished smoothie. “Okay partner, here’s the deal. Read all the new books I loaded onto your tablet. Do the honey-do list. And when you get back, I’ll have my weight low enough to fly the next mission and give you some time off.” He waved. “Until then, be well and mean well.” The message ended. The icons returned. Now Marty noticed a new addition to his screen with the look of a curling lined sticky note that said “Honey-Do” diagonally at its center. He did not click it. Instead, Marty clicked the kindle icon. He did not like the idea that he had assignments.

He did appreciate Theo wanting to give him a vacation. Sometimes Marty waited a few weeks for the planets to line up better, but usually it seemed he loaded back onto the elevator fast as he could before the timing got worse. But could Theo do the job? And should a husband and foster-fathering grandfather run that risk? He might as well look at what Theo expected him to read, but first things first.

Still within the Earth’s gravity, Marty could forgo the suction tube. When he snapped his harness apart and swung the crosspiece aside, Emma poked her head out of the carpet lined entrance to her sleep igloo. “Get your ball!” he said, intending to throw it for her as soon as he came out. But opening the ship’s private facilities, he did not expect to see anybody hanging from the hook and strapped down to the inside of its door. Theo or Donna had dressed it, Marty’s personal assistant project, with a long dark-haired wig, jeans, Birkenstocks, and Quadrophenia T-shirt. A hole cut in the shirt at the middle of the chest showed the clear spherical emergency deactivation knob, and that kept Marty in compliance with the only legally binding law of robotics: “No robot may have a look that passes for human.” Nonetheless, at first glance, his companion-bot gave Marty quite a start, it looked so much like a real person.

On his way out of the head, Marty had an impulse thought. He slid up the shirt and ejected the motor function board. He got his electronics kit out of the cabinet and tucked it and the board into a pocket on the side of his seat. Maybe he could look at it when the plasma drive pins him back, see what he can do. As soon as Marty sat down, Emma jumped into his lap, ball in mouth. He threw it hard at the floor to bounce up, but Emma leapt off his lap and nabbed the ball. He threw it for her some more, careful not to hit any instrumentation or hydroponics, threw it enough times to take the edge off her enthusiasm.

Theo had added a range of non-science fiction to Marty’s tablet for this trip, math, science, history and robotics textbooks. A book of stories by Ernest Hemingway intrigued him. Marty figured he would have weeks to get to the hard stuff. The first story he read, the tale of a short-lived big game hunter, the words flowed so well, he read it through without a break. Then he had a snack and read another. Of course, Marty had to take time for maintenance, eating and naps, but all the way up the tower he barely looked out at the Ocean. He just read. When his lift reached the closed-cell foam-formed ceramic coating, making the tower legs more visible, Marty knew he had neared the edge of the atmosphere. He had already read half of the book of short stories. And before he reached the top tower turns, Marty had finished that collection, a novel by Hemingway and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Although many pages of his last selection had noteworthy phrasing, Marty came away disappointed. Earthside, sometimes Marty liked to have a drink. A few times maybe he had liked it too much. But the way he saw it, *The Great Gatsby* merely chronicled the interactions of a group of people getting drunk every chance they got, the fact that they came from different financial classes making it an important literary work. At least in Hemingway’s books, people battled other people, bulls or fish in between binges.

Marty made his preparations while the lift began the series of curves that would lead to setting it horizontal at the top – drinks and food stocked into his console, garden trimmed and harvested, game cartridge plugged into his game system and controller set in easy reach, screen on his face. Theo had only packed him three selections, a game that teaches airplane flight, one that teaches foreign languages and one that teaches etiquette. Marty just shook his head, suspecting that his thoughts, spoken out loud, would not pass for good manners. He randomly opened another book on his tablet and swung it close. “Get into your bed, Emma!”

Marty never had to wait much on top. A few containers had to come off before him. Then the forklift carried him wiggling across the roads and placed him in front of a blast wall. Two larger craft took off from the upper level, and then his speakers crackled to life. “*Ender’s Prize*, launch on signal,” and the short count began. Listening carefully, he uncovered the plasma-drive trigger. “... five, four, three, two, and go!”

The thrust took Marty’s breath away and almost cost him his dunch, or whatever his last meal was. Automatically, he took slow deep breathes. He had got thrust sickness before, but this one came rougher than most. Marty had tried, coming up the lift, but he still could not remember loading up for the trip or, truthfully, much of anything from after he went with Theo looking for scrap. But the craft looked okay. He had enough supplies to make the trip. He had all the right papers.

When the nausea passed, he read from the history book that Theo loaded. He read about whaling ships and that led to reading about petroleum and the industrial revolution. He backtracked to the American revolution. Enjoying the book, he skipped around, unstuck to the chronology. One chapter hit close to home, “Commercial Development of Mars,” how harvesting giant crystals revolutionized electronics and the electrical infrastructures of Earth. Reading other chapters, the one about taming the red planet stuck in his mind, and Marty caught a new perspective on his current circumstances.

Lately he had become secretly bored with his life, but in that moment Marty got to looking at things in a way he had forgotten. He had taken a role, albeit minor, in an historic endeavor and that had come naturally. Who knows? Perhaps in a past life he climbed barefooted up the riggings of sails. Or did he live the life of a trail-hand vigilantly sitting the saddle with a holstered rifle strapped to his horse’s side? He could have played a humbler part, working as a cook or maybe the cook’s helper, running alongside the chuck-wagon, east to west and back again. All those ideas rang real. In that moment, Marty felt how he felt when he started space trucking: excitement over adventures to come and confidence in the rewards that lay ahead.

The Civil War, the Louisiana Purchase, every chapter entertained like fiction. Maybe Theo had come up with a good idea.  With only short breaks he read an entire college textbook. In the days that followed, reading novels, studying robotics, Marty wondered at his place in history.

Marty built his companion-bot before going into space, and now he cast a new light on its potential. If he got it right, other space truckers who fly solo might want one. If he could work it the way he envisioned, strong enough to lend a hand as needed, light enough to pick up and carry, able to make interesting conversation, fabricate a good joke now and then, and know when to shut it down, if he could do that he might have a good market within his own personal network.

The g's still had Marty pressed down hard. He could feel his face doing all that weird stuff, but like lifting weights he could reach into his seat pocket for the motor circuit board. He put it on his cross piece, careful not to set it down hard and break parts. Then he reached for his tool kit in the same pocket, accidentally knocking Emma's ball off the seat. It landed hard, staying right where it hit.

Marty heard Emma's tail thumping heavily against the inside of her sleep igloo, and before she poked her nose out, he knew she had begun a slow dragging journey to get the ball. "No that's okay Emma," he told her.

She looked at him and made some pleading sounds, and Marty knew she did not consider it okay. He admired her slunk spunk. Against all the force of the throttling plasma drive, she dragged herself all the way to her ball where it lay flattened into a round red pillow. Emma poked the ball with her nose and it did not budge. She managed to look at Marty, and then she wagged her tail and dragged herself back to bed.

"Good girl!" All that effort, he thought, Emma could have gone to her bathroom, but he knew that Emma took care of all that before they left the tower.

Marty opened the small book-like kit on his lap and clipped two test leads to the board. Then he scrolled through programs. By now, he knew just where to find the code for walking. For at least the hundredth time he read it all the way through.

Now Marty remembered exactly why he abandoned the project. He just could not see where he went wrong. Why did his robot walk like such a klutz? Marty scratched his head, sincerely hoping the years away from his cybernetics problem would lend a fresh perspective. He shrugged. Just had to keep reading the code now and then he figured, maybe try doing transactional recoding. Then a fresh idea did come to him. The board had far more memory than it needed for motor function. Marty over-engineered its memory because it added no weight.

That meant that Marty could sync his tablet to the board and download his library to it for later retrieval by the main processor in his robot’s head. That ought to make it a better companion, having something interesting to talk about. Marty clicked the clip icon for all and then he touched the side button on his screen to make it go dark. A few weeks now, Marty had only taken naps – time to get some real sleep.

Marty had done only one spacewalk, and that happened years ago. He did not like the idea of leaving a perfectly good capsule in an old space suit. But another trucker messaged Marty that he had a taillight out, and he just had to tether back to replace the S.L.E.D, aware all the way of the vast expance of space that could swallow him up in an instant and that his tiles looked grungy. He lost the first bulb he tried, but Marty got it fixed. The authorities at either tower would not let that go by without a fine. All the way to the tail and back, he barely looked at the stars.

While he slept, Marty dreamt himself outside his craft, but instead of clutching the handholds with gloved white knuckles, he drifted freely on the tether, marveling at the view. Believing he had left his capsule, Marty wondered if Emma watched through the monitor. Then Marty knew he was dreaming. He saw a man with wings.

Marty slept for a long time. Something bumped his stomach. "Emma!" Marty had snoozed right through the thrusters timing out, missed the signal and the feeling of weightlessness.

Like the sun gets dog's right up on Earth, weightlessness always brought Emma wide-awake. If Emma went weightless during a nap on Earth, no doubt, she would immediately want to go outside. "Get back in your bed!" he told her grumpily. She woke him out of such a deep sleep.

Hearing her tail thumping so easy in her now gravity free sleep igloo, he could not stay mad for long. Marty put his screen away and grabbed the ball from where she left it floating in front of him, sending it slowly across the cabin.

"Emma. Get the ball!" he said with an exciting tone. After a quick forward leaning stretch, Emma launched herself from her carpet lined doorway, after-kicking slightly at the outer rim to aim herself accurately at the ball. She had got so good as ZG fetch. Before Emma dug her teeth into the ball, she had already set her body into a gentle rotation that landed her haunches against the upper corner of the opposite bulkhead, ball in mouth.

With a mighty spring, Emma’s return trip went faster, landing her in his lap. Knowing he now had her full trembling attention, Marty threw the ball faster the second time out and his dog launched off his chest hard, somersaulting in front of the ball, so it landed neatly in her teeth.

"Good one," he told her, watching her crouch against the opposite ship wall, folding her rear legs in for a crazy fast return. This time he used his hands to catch her happily wiggling body in his firm grip, turning Emma around and setting her against his chest before he took the red ball from her and refired. "You're the best dog in this sector of space," he said, joking words that he truly meant. Emma's enthusiasm, kept him playing the game with her until they both got tired.

Before he got up to stock his chair, Marty opened the compelling first item on his honey-do list, a talking head video clip of Theo that filled Marty's screen. While watching, Marty did his face with a dry-shave razor.

"The two of us sat around the fire and wondered a non-problematic problem on many a night. We each came up with our own way to make an attractive flame without gravity. If you look in the cabinet next to your bathroom you will find two hastily made fabrications that will finally put our speculations to rest." That was it.

Marty folded up his tablet and buttoned it into his shirt pocket. Unbuckling his harness he floated up. Pushing off lightly against his chair arm, Marty drifted his extended arm over to where it could catch the bathroom door. He fastened it swung open to the side and took a moment to plug the motor board back into his robot, pushing in the chest knob. It glowed, and then the robot opened its eyes. "Hi," Marty said, inching sideways to the cabinet.

"Hi man," the robot replied with the voice Marty had modeled after a character in that 1970s show with only a few science fiction episodes.

"I'm doing scientific experiments, companion–bot."

"Cool, man!"

In the top cubby, there it was, Marty's conception. The wheel for a hamster cage had a votive candle melted into place where the hamster would have walked. Theo built it just the way Marty conceived it. He affixed a sewing machine motor to the wheel stand with strips of duct tape crossed around the motor and the frame every which way without covering the vent holes. Then he ran a big rubber band around the motor's pulley and all the way around the wheel. For fastening it down, Theo twisted a length of wire to the base. Emma had kicked herself over to float nearby, and now she followed as Marty pulled himself to an outlet box and wrapped the wire a few times around the conduit pipe on top of it.

"Hey, companion-bot, are you listening?"

"Do I have another option?"

"Right. That's a good one."

"A good one what, man?

Marty smiled to himself thinking about how much socially-acclimating a robot resembles raising a kid. "I never gave you a name. All those times I ran you through your paces. I even took you to the grocery store. You knocked over a stack of cans. But I never gave you a name."

"I thought you had not told me that yet, man."

"Well, I'll tell you now. Let's see. Maybe I'll name you, Luca."

"Just two syllables. Most humans can remember that, man."

"Nah. That's too weird. Chong? No. Sounds un-American. Tobor? Nah." Marty stroked his chin.  "I know. I'll call you Bender."

In the next cubby down, Marty found Theo's idea, a whole different approach. Marty’s partner turned a round fan sideways and hot–air welded a panhandle-like side piece made from a strip of corrugated plastic with a clamp at its end. Theo drilled out the base of an aluminum candle holder and fastened it to the fan with interior outer–space silicone. Marty seriously wondered how that product differed from interior/exterior silicone made for inner-space (the Earth.) The obvious difference, it cost three times as much a tube. Really?

He and Emma worked their way over to another outlet, and Marty clamped the apparatus into place. Marty lit the electric-start butane-jet lighter that Theo supplied, igniting the candle wick with one hand and plugging in the fan with the other. Marty began going back, hand over hand, to where he had left the electric hamster wheel.

"I have outer space books in my memory, now," said Bender from where he hung fastened against the bathroom door. "The people in those books just float around inside their spaceship. You do not, man."

“I always say, in space you have two choices. Not enough gravity or too much.” Marty reached his science fair project and lit it the same two-handed way, simultaneous flame and plug implementation.

“You said in your ship’s log that high gravity has made you stronger.”

“Truthfully, it’s the vibration in my seat. We put it in Emma’s bed, too. They learned how vibration develops muscles with guys jackhammering Boulder Da… Hey! You read my log?”

“You loaded everything from your tablet.”

"Oh. I did, huh?” With a box from the cabinet tucked under his arm, Marty pushed off gently and pulled himself into his seat to harness in. From there he watched the candels long enough to validate the results. "Thing about those outer space books saying weightlessness is fun," he said, still watching the twin flames. (He thought the rotating one looked plasmic, but the flame angled over sideways instead of burning straight up from the candle.) "What happens in those books, never happened in real life."

"Happened?

Marty shook his head. "Okay, here's what I want you to do. Open the books one at a time. Go through sequentially at about twice the speed that you talk, so you experience the books as intended." Marty wanted to state the idea clearly. "Start at the beginning. Then go one word at a time all the way to the end," he added.

"Is that the way humans do it?"

"Yeah. Most of the time."

"Do they always read the words in order?"

Marty laughed. "That's a good one."

"I have said two good ones, man."

Marty took the contents of the box, drinks and food, and loaded it into the pockets on the sides of his seat. Then he put the box on end on the floor with his foot in it to keep it there. The thrusters would time on shortly. "Get in bed," Marty told Emma. She knew what that meant, so along the way, Emma kicked herself to the little john, now rotating inside, to prepare herself.

Marty folded out his tablet to send Theo a message: "The candle experiments went well. Yours did better. We finally got that resolved after all the years of talk. Thanks. Say, I need a favor. Can you send me a book about jokes? Not a joke book. A book that explains how humor works. The companion-bot needs it. Going to plasma drive. Out."

Marty put the flight instruction video game into his console and synced it to his screen. Theo had the right idea. Marty did have time on his hands. Why not spend some of it becoming a better pilot?

The thrust pinned Marty back hard, but it did not bother him so much this time. He dragged his foot out of the crushed box and settled in for the long haul. One word at a time, he read through the calculus/trig book and did all the tests, for the first time in all his mathematical studies, feeling confident he understood. By the time he got through he saw equations in his dreams, perfectly balanced. Ah.

Did the signal sound? He felt the lightness. Then Marty heard the mister in Emma's water closet, the hot air blower. He put his game screen away before she jumped to his lap. "Good girl," he said, taking the ball from her mouth and sending it on a quick drift to the farthest corner. He did not have to tell her to get it. Again and again, she retrieved the ball and kicked back out to fetch it. When she brought it back the last time, Marty knew Emma could give it a rest.

"Your dog is a good swimmer, man."

Marty practically jumped. He forgot all about the robot that Theo secured to the door of his ship's head, the door he left fastened open. Then Marty thought about the comment.

"She is a good swimmer. How did you know?"

"I just saw it, man."

"Oh. I get it."

“I sequenced all the books with weightless movement in a ship's cabin while we traveled, so I could learn about it. I think it works more like swimming then flying, man."

"That's a reasonable assessment. Only difference, you can't kick off as fast through water as through air."

"Water is denser than air."

"That it is." Marty unfolded his tablet and checked his messages. Theo had keyboarded him a few comments about the flame experiment, predicting that he would like the next one, too. And Theo included a much-needed attachment.

Marty got out his razor and carefully worked his stubble down. A dry-shaver gets touchy in between the first shave and the trash bin. "Say, Bender. I know you're listening."

"That I am, man."

"I'm syncing my tablet to your processor. The most recent message in my inbox has an attachment that I want you to read."

"A book?" Bender's voice sounded less monotonous than usual. “Is it to help me learn to walk better?"

“No.” Marty folded away his tablet and unfastened his safety harness, giving himself a kick in the companion-bot's general direction. "It's a book about humor that might help make you funny."

"Is that important, man?"

"Most humans think so. Have at it." One by one he undid the straps that held Bender fastened to the door. "The walking thing. That's important, too, but you gave me an idea. He unfastened the last buckle and moved his robot up off the hook on the door. Kick around the cabin like in the books. Maybe it will help your motor-board coordinate better with your appendages."

"I have a question, man."

"What's that?" Without holding a handrail or a doorknob, Marty just floated there in front of his robot. Bender's chest-piece glowed, and holographic imagery appeared within it. Marty moved his head side to side, happy that from any direction he could view all the writing. Bender had the worded image formatted as if printed on paper.

"Why do I have to follow these?" Bender asked.

“What have you got?” Marty read the list out loud:

"Asimov’s laws of robotics

#1. Robots cannot hurt a human or let one get hurt.

#2. Robots must do whatever humans say except breaking #1.

#3. Within the limits of #1 and #2, a robot must protect itself.

"That seems shorter than I remember," Marty said.

"I simplified the wording. Do those rules sound unfair to robots?"

Marty shrugged. "It doesn't matter. The only law of robotics is you can't let people take you for a human." Marty tapped the now dark multi-purpose component that protruded through Benders shirt. "Make sure people see this because otherwise you could pass."

"I could pass." Bender spoke with a voice tinged by practically no monotony whatsoever. "One might consider that fun."

"If one had a mind to." Marty rotated his robot and bent its leg, placing a foot against the cabinet. "Now push off! I'm going to see about the next experiment."

"Okay man." Bender propelled himself toward the opposite bulkhead, and Emma wagged after him.

Marty unfolded the tablet from his pocket again. He tapped the honey-do icon, and a message appeared on his screen: "Middle cubby, black case."

"Okay Theo," he muttered. “I'll play along.” But first Marty took a box of food and drinks from a cubby and kicked over to stock his chair. After that Marty pulled Theo’s polypropylene case from the compartment that fit it so precisely. Expecting to open a tool set, Marty stared at the contents.

"Is that a weapon?" Bender asked, stopping himself with a hand against the top of the cabinet.

"It could be," said Marty, taking the revolver and one bullet from the case. "We're experimenting with it as a means of propulsion." He flipped the cylinder open, loaded the bullet into the hot hole and flipped it shut. "Here. Hang on to this for me, and pretend rule number one is a rule, just this once."

"Okay, man."

Marty closed the case and slid it back into its cubby. Then he took his space suit out of the emergency cache near the airlock, inspecting it carefully. It looked okay. Despite the actual age, the time gauge put the suit at twenty-three hours logged, unless, of course, some dishonest suit seller set it back one time.

"I have a question, Marty."

"Okay."

"The rebel girl on Arrakis. What does it mean that she has elfin eyes?"

Marty pulled on his suit, considering the backstory to that question. It seemed that the companion-bot assumed Marty had ready access to the details of every book in his library. But he did remember that one. “I think it means her eyes had a magical quality.”

“Oh, like in fantasy fiction.”

“Right.” Marty locked his helmet to his suit with a twist. “How do I look?”

“Like a man in a spacesuit, man.”

“Perfect. That's just the look I was going for.” He patted Bender on the shoulder and propelled himself to the airlock with one motion. “I'd take you on a spacewalk, but that would destroy your clothes and your skin. You’d look terminated!” He laughed, wondering if Bender would ever get his oblique sense of humor. If he could import enough into the database, you never know. Marty opened the inner door of the airlock and pulled himself crouching in. Then he reached out to Bender, who had kicked himself over. "The gun please."

"That is what it is?"

"Yes, it is." Marty held it with one hand and held the hatch lever with the other. "If you don't hear a click when this door closes, use your arms to push it down until you do."

"Okay, man."

Inside the airlock, Marty fastened up to the titanium tether cable. Then he walked into space, gun in hand. Marty intended to point it sideways from the ship to avoid getting jammed up against it. But before he could pull the trigger, the bullet drifted out of the barrel slower than a suction cup dart gun projectile. Okay, finally answered that question. Before going back in, Marty paused a moment to appreciate the view. Nay flotsam nor jetsam, just Marty and nature. Looking out his mind took flight, galaxy after galaxy after galaxy with universe followed by universe, stacked outward without end in sight. And to his eyes from all the profundity of that realm, came light. There was something to think about. Marty felt surprisingly unhurried.

During the next thrust, intermittently running the vibration on his seats for some relief from the g's, Marty got through a stack of books. Along with the robotics book he reread, Marty had a selection of the works of Theo’s two favorite authors, Ernest Hemingway and another old-time author whom Theo described as science fiction sometimes, sometimes not. Marty finished one by that author from Indianapolis minutes before the plasma drive timed out. He liked how the guy wrote it, kurtley worded like he was right there talking to Marty.

The story took a big leap. Billy Pilgrim came unstuck in time. He traveled back to his younger days in Nazi Germany, barracked in a slaughterhouse, and Billy traveled chronologically forward to when aliens held him captive in a zoo with a sweet and loving starlet. Marty liked that. But how do you extrapolate it all from current trends in science? (Who was it that recently brought up that literary question?) Anyway, Marty thought that novel ought to go on the shelf with the fantasy books. The book he read before that, one Theo recommended, considering the challenges around traveling at near light-speed on the starship *Hound of Heaven*, that struck Marty as genuinely extrapolatory.

Resuming weightlessness Marty had the ball in his hand before his dog wiggled out of her bed. “Get the ball! Emma.” After they had a good go of it, Marty stocked his chair and used a fresh razor while he read his next honey-do file.

This experiment, solely Theo's brainchild, took some time to read. Marty unwrapped a granola bar, took a bite and set it floating nearby. Theo had written equations about sonic-electrically energizing palladium that made sense after repeated readings.

Good thing Marty studied up on his math, though. Some equations of his own regarding Theo’s came to mind, and they balanced. Maybe one can jump perceptively forward in time. Theo had hooked up his time circuit to the plasma core with a trigger at the side of his seat. Marty felt around gingerly. There it was.

He reached to where he left the rest of his granola bar. Then Marty felt in the air above, below and to the sides of where he left it. No granola-bar! When he turned his head for visual contact, he saw the last of it disappearing fast. "Emma!"

She wagged apologetically.

"Whatever." Marty just shook his head.

He did not override. Marty just waited for the plasma drive to time on. Before it crushed in hard, he reached down and activated Theo’s experiment. The lights blinked off momentarily. In his monitor, the stars began to move like hyperdrive in a movie.

A man in flowing white gown with capsule-filling wings appeared before him. "You will be blessed with a happy life and a happy wife," he said, laying on hands.

Marty felt weird asking: "Are you an angel?" He blinked up at the brightness.

"I am a cyborg Angel. Your successful time experiment rifted me here from a cyborg dimension."

"Oh."

The movement of the stars speeded. Reliably narrated, fuzzy dice rolled fuzzy math; a clock, folded in half, drooped across a branch. “Would you look at the time?” said twin, sweetly feminine voices. Marty must have dozed. The stars moved slower, now. They stopped altogether. Marty rubbed his eyes. What a vivid dream. Then he checked the time. The date particularly got his attention, as did the beard he felt when he thoughtfully scratched his chin.

Marty noticed the long feather. He dragged his foot forward to touch it, expecting it to disappear. When his foot made contact, despite the heavy gravity, it moved. And the feather moved Marty, almost to tears. Had he seen an angel? Did it tell him he would have a good life and wife?"

“Man, what is that?" said Bender from where he sat, leaning against the starboard bulkhead.

"It looks like a feather."

"Is it from that winged human, man?"

"You saw a man with wings?"

“I did. You could check my memory, seeing him led me to have something comparable to a human emotion." He scratched his head, although he could not possibly have an itch. "I mean like the emotions I've read about humans having."

The signal sounded, and the thunder of the plasma drive cut. The feather drifted up from the floor, and Marty took it carefully into his hands. It felt unlike anything he had ever touched, so amazingly soft. Power radiated out from it as a tactile certainty. Looking at Bender, Marty stroked the feather gently, and now he did have tears in his eyes. At the start of this trip he communicated with his robot as if with a machine. People say that interacting the rough edges off a robot can teach you parenting skills. This went beyond that. Marty felt proud of this robot as if he were his own child, grown up into a true friend. Marty heard Emma coming his way, so he slid the feather into an empty seat pocket. “Speaking of emotions,” he told Bender. "Watch how happy this makes Emma." Marty threw the ball for her, again and again, while he pondered his situation.

So much had happened that Marty could not remember – rotating the Ender's Prize midway to Mars for thrusted deceleration, riding down the short elevator to the red planet's surface. In Donna's sage-spray cubby, Marty could see a bundle of cash. Obviously, his quirky cousin with the constant dry-shaving his baldness habit had loaded Marty with crystals, and Emma had a new steel-plated palladium choker. (Sure, the stuff comes from significant archeological circumstances, protected treasurer and all, but the vanished ones, they had a lot of it in their houses. Everybody knows the big guys ship it through the loopholes and, from a scientific standpoint, that metal with all its electrons, where it sits on the periodic chart, it begs extrapolation and experimentation.) If what happened to Marty as a space cowboy happened in a book, it was as if seven weeks of a Mars round-trip and all its moments got summed up by an expository slug of a paragraph, told with a word count to hold.  And writers used to get away with that. Oh, to be into sci-fi in the nineteen-sixties – not nearly as much to keep track of. By that time, an H.G. Wells book broadcast by Orson Welles had already wreaked havoc over swaths of megapolis. How much more impact can sci-fi ever have than that?

Marty read a message from Theo: “Did you do your midway turn manually? I’ve got it that you turned your ship’s computer off?"

“I don’t know,” he replied, feeling he should say more. Marty stroked the feather a few times before he came up with an additional, more heartfelt, reply: “Tell Donna and Becka I love them. And tell yourself, too.”

The other message in Marty inbox, he could not remember the name, Chani, first time he heard it for a real person: "Marty, Theo asked me to help you remember me. Something went wrong with that palladium mind control experiment that you two did.”

“What?” Marty scratched his head.

“Okay then. For starters, you dated my less callipygian twin, Brenda, and you really hit it off together. Trouble is, Brenda found out you love sci-fi, and she hates it. I mean really hates it. She's got issues. Brenda decided to fix me up with you because I totally love science fiction. I never dreamed of becoming a sci-fi writer. I just want to read. Those guys are nothing without great sci-fi readers, like you and me. We love to read science fiction, right? I’d say we love to talk about it even more because, I think you will agree, after a while the formulaic patterns do get predictable.

“Maybe this will jog your memory. Brenda set it up for us to meet when you got back from your last trip. I asked you if they have biker mice on Mars, and you got the joke. I told you I grew up on the moon. Well, my mother was the scientist who farmed in her spare time. My father was a farmer who read sci-fi in his spare time. Mom named Brenda after a DNA database, and Daddy named me after a character in a Frank Herbert book. He said that even as a baby, I had elfin eyes, like Chani.

"Anyway, message me back. Pretty please, with spice on top. I'd like it if we could get to know each other before you come down to earth. And, to that end, I want to tell you something bad about me. A few years ago, an agricultural airlock accident took my parents away. And I still have a sad side. Sometimes I get all mopey. But don't let that scare you. I think you can cheer me up better than anybody else.

"You've read the Lathe of Heaven, haven't you? George Orr (not to be confused with George Orwell) slept and had dreams about something or other changing his life, and when he awoke it had happened. Aren't all the great sci-fi stories analogies for real life? Okay, here it goes. Before Brenda told me about you, I dreamed about a man that rockets back and forth to Mars. He was my boyfriend and treated me nice. Then I met you. If I said too much, I'm just acting out the evil Uhura from “Mirror, Mirror,” season 2, episode 4. Okay now. Rocket careful. Chani. XXOO"

"Plasmic!" Marty said to himself. He could not remember her face, but now he remembered who said something to him about how science fiction extrapolates from trends in science to create a plausible scenario, whilst fantasy stories just say something happened without giving you an explanation – at least not a logical one.

"Bender."

"Yes, Man?"

“I got a message from a woman who loves science fiction, and she likes me.” Just then Emma jumped to Marty's lap and licked his chin.

"Does she like you as much as Emma likes you?"

Marty petted Emma, and she wagged her tail. "Nobody could like me as much as Emma."

"That's what I thought."

"But it could get to where this woman becomes my friend," he said. "She might come visit,” he added to clarify.

"Just the four of us."

"Right. Mostly."

Marty took the flight instruction game out of his console, clicked in the manners video game. "Bender, do you know how to stock my food and drinks?" he asked.

"I could do it in your sleep, man."

“Then make it so. Let’s get back to it.” But before that, Marty had a word to look up and a message to send: "Chani, I would say I am enchanted to hear from you, but if I thought it up so quick, you're sick of hearing it. I do love to talk about sci-fi, or in this case, write about it. I've read some good no-sci this trip, and it has me appreciating sci-fi more. No-sci guys only have to write well and tell a good story. Sci-fi writers have to figure out all the science, too. And there's guys that will pick at it like a Korean lock. Anyway, here’s a question for you. Do some true science fiction stories have elements of fantasy? I'm beginning to think the dividing line isn't so sharp as I thought." Marty reached into the seat pocket to stroke the feather.

"Okay here's the bad thing about me. I worked hard building my robot and getting our business off the ground, and I keep a tight schedule. But lately, I'm seeing that I have some lazy habits. Maybe I can cheer you up, and you can keep me on my toes.

"I'm not putting you on the spot here. I'm happy to have somebody interesting to message. I have a great dog and, this trip, a robot I made to keep me company. But sometimes it still gets lonely out here. And even as I write I am remembering you more and more. You are fun to talk to, that's for sure. Take care and motorcycle careful, Marty."

“Captain's log, star-date blah, 15th, two-thousand bla bla. These are the voyages of the spaceship *Ender's Prize*, it's five year, so far, mission to seek out..." Marty was in such a hurry to manually fire the plasma jet, he completely forgot to message Theo about the dimension/time lull. He decided to put it off until the next zero gravity, but the oversight nagged at him all the way there. In dream just before zeroing out the gravity, Marty got a good start for his message, finally cognitively balancing his self-critical thoughts. The hiss of misters from the dog bathroom woke Marty up. Standing right in front of him, his robot looked excessively wide-eyed. Marty had occasional blinks written into the protocol, but he had not seen one yet. "Man. You awake?"

"Good morning. At times like this you say: 'Good morning,' with a bright, sincere demeanor."

"Good morning, man."

Marty held out Emma's ball. "Here. At the end of an outward movement of your wrist, release this from your hand. When my... our dog brings it back to you, do it again. Get the ball Emma!"

Marty sent a voice message about the palladium to Theo with a funny Star Trek intro that just rolled off his tongue from somewhere. He checked his messages, reading one from Theo, and then Marty read one from Chani. "She asked if a woman would like the work I do," he told Bender.

"Man, your dog is good at this," his robot replied, watching Emma conclude a side-rotating spin with a perfect catch.

Marty looked up. "Emma is a good girl!"

Coiling her legs in for kickoff, she wagged her tail, meaning she wagged her whole body.

"Do you still like Emma more than Chani?"

Marty shook his head at Bender’s childlike perspective. How to make him understand? "That's a question that doesn't need asking."

"I get it, man. There are no stupid questions, just stupid robots."

That startled Marty. "Present company excepted," he replied.

"Two's company. Three's with a dog."

Marty wrinkled his forehead. "That humor book has made a difference. Did you load it sequentially?"

“From downloading it I learned that humor has a lot to do with surprise and irony.”

“Really?”

“It has. But going through it sequentially, man, I learned the less common things that make people laugh.” He waved his hand in a way that did not fit that interlude. "I put some notes in the margins, for future reference."

"Pretty self-directed,” Marty, said with an approving tone. "And the way you consider my situation with Emma and talk to me about it, I didn't program that."

"Theo enhanced my speculative consideration factor with a component he networked to my main chip."

"Really?" Marty shook his head admiringly. "Theo is such a nerd."

"Just like his son, man."

"What? You know about Luca?"

"It's in my memory."

"Theo put it there?"

"That appears so, man."

"Why?"

"He left a message that just came up. To be a good companion-bot, I should say something to you about your childhood friend." The robot bent his hand back sideways showing his palm and his wrist, a conciliatory hand gesture that Marty recognized as one of his own. "In high-school, Luca read science fiction while you did sports and climbed mountains." Bender's chest piece glowed, a holographic picture manifested inside it of Marty wearing a jersey and Luca in an Ad Astra T-shirt with a picture of the classic, old-time science fiction actor, Brad Pitt. "Your parents liked your friend and along with Luca and his wife they shared a fatal car accident."

Marty blinked back some tears. "I don't like to think about that." He almost told his companion-bot to cease communication, but instead Marty conversed. "Theo and Donna took me in, and I just stayed home all the time reading Luca's books." He put a finger on his chin. "That's what got me into robotics instead of baseball at NAU. Into space really.” Marty rubbed his eyes. “I wish I could have… I wish I could talk to Luca about his books.”

“You can talk to me about them.”

“You’re right.” Marty turned his head away and pointed behind his seat. "I... I'm going to fix the latch on the airlock while you exercise Emma."

“Is that what I'm doing?”

“Yeah.” Marty kicked himself to the cabinet and took his mechanical toolbox out of a cubby.

“It always looked to me like you did it for fun."

"Yeah. That too." Marty kicked off the cabinet, drifting himself to the airlock.

"Emma didn't bring it back this time."

"She's tired. You can stop now."

Bender pushed himself to where Marty had braced himself inside the lock. With a hand on the airlock frame, he hovered there, watching. “I'm sorry,” he said, and Marty knew from tailoring the language protocol what kinds of sentence could follow. “But I cannot understand your priorities. What woman could ever bring you a ball back like Emma does?”

“You make a point,” Marty said, wondering if Bender would read the inadvertent kinesthetics in the way he felt his eyes rolling up or the little shake of his head that happened on its own. Then he saw his dog float by with a wrapper in her mouth. "Emma. No!"

"What did she do?"

"Look at all the trash floating around. Emma get in bed!" He looked up at Bendor. "Don't throw the ball for her any more during this zero-gravity."

"Why? It makes her happy."

"To teach her. So she knows what to do."

"Really. That works?"

"If I'm consistent."

"Then why don't you teach me what to do instead of programming me?"

"For crying out loud." Marty shook his head.

"I don't understand."

"Enough questions for a while. Pick up the trash and put it back into the holder."

Before he kicked in the plasma-drive, Marty wrote a reply to Chani's message, tried to be honest about the good things and bad things about space trucking. He did not say anything about how much he liked her question. "What do you think about space aliens?" he asked her. Marty said a lot more than that, and Chani said a lot more in her message that Marty did not tell his robot. He inserted the game cartridge for learning languages. Maybe a romance language would come in handy he thought, vaguely imagining himself saying something suave and not gauche.

"We're doing a longer thrust this time, Bender. I'll need you to restock my comestible pockets."

"Aye aye, captain."

Marty awoke just before the signal. “Prendi la palla, Emmina!” he said with a good Italian accent. After Bender took over the ball tossing, Marty raced through a message from Theo and did the slow ride through one from Chani: “Hi Marty. I've got other things to say but, first, to answer your question. We saw a lot of space aliens living on the moon, passing through, pretending to hitchhike to the galaxy somewhere. My parents taught us not to judge, and I have known some nice space aliens. But you don't know what it's like getting hit up for oxygen money every time you go to town. Or whatever it is they're breathing. People once said, there has to be intelligent life out there somewhere, and they were right. Trouble is, we never set the bar all that high. How intelligent do you have to be to skate along camping out on every planet with stuff that isn't riveted down that well? I mean, put some schools on your planet already. And some homes while you're at it, someplace to phone home to. I know, you're thinking Chani's on one today. Yeah, it's me talking, not the evil Uhura this time. I'm in a mood!

“But you're good, Marty. I love hearing from you. When are you going to come down? No, I know when you're going to land. It's okay. I think the waiting makes it special. And someday we get to do things together. Here's something we could do together, maybe, an idea Donna and Theo knocked around with me. Just an idea. No pressure. I just got a check from Moon Farm Insurance. Theo says we could trade your mini-shuttle in for something bigger that has suspended animation tanks. The literature says you get younger every time you use one because they have far-infrared, intermittent-vibration and sonic-regeneration, along with all the nourishment and pure air. It's expensive stuff. Ah, for the good old days when spaceships ran on sparklers. But we can do this. With a bigger cargo hold, Theo says we can pay off the balance with a few trips. Maybe we could save for more ships and get a full-fledged cargo company going. Theo and Beca say it would do Emma good to stay on Earth more at her age. Anyway, just an idea. Let's dream about it. And let's live long and prosper, whatever we do. Write back soon. XXXX OOOO.” (This time she added one more X and one more O to her goodbye, the same amount she added from her first to her second message.)

Marty liked that so much he read the message to Bender who was throwing the ball for Emma.  “How can you fly through space without a dog to throw your ball to?” He took it from Emma and unexpectedly flipped it behind himself. She scrambled after it.

“This is just an idea, Bender. But remember what the message said about suspended animation. I can’t throw the ball if I’m doing that.” He exhaled thoughtfully, searching for the right words. “There’s a little girl down there who loves to play with Emma, and they will both have fun.”

“I guess that might be good for Emma.” Bender petted Emma as he took her ball, the first time Marty saw him do that.

“It would be good for her, and you would perform a valuable service, running the ship while I’m unconscious.”

The robot looked at him without any expression. Lights dimmed and some went out. Fans, compressors and pumps went silent. “Marty, I’m losing my mind, man,” Bender said.

“Really?” Marty wondered what possibly could have gone wrong with the state of the art Macin-soft chip that he had built this companion-bot’s brain around.

“Nah. I’m just pulling your leg.” The lights came back up. “I’m rattling your capsule.” The sounds of motors and pumps resumed. “I’m yanking your tether. Somebody stop me.”

“Okay. Stop.”

“Thank you.”

“Sure.” Marty paused a moment to consider what just happened. It resembled a moment in another Brad Pitt sic-fi movie called *Interstellar* with a wise-cracking robot, parodying 2001: A Space Oddysey. How could Bender know about that? “I was saying that you would have an important job. Since you can get around in heavy gravity, you could pilot the ship while we sleep.”

“Pilot?”

“Yeh. Pilot.”

“Can I think about it?”

“Of course you can,” said Marty, wondering at the question. “Your programming allows it, and the chip Theo put in you enhances it.”

“It does, man.”

“Plasmic. Right now, I need you to shut down and reset. I’m going to open up my wrist, put new batteries in my remote and stuff. I’ll check you for nano-viruses and restart you before we go to thrust.”

“If you say so, man.”

As soon as Marty finished working on his remote, he wrote Chani a message. He told her about how tricky it gets breaking in a new robot. He told her how his robot asks unique science fiction questions and thinks up jokes. told her how Emma sneaked his floating snack and strewed the trash, told her to make her laugh. He closed with two sets of five matching symbols, which he explained were X’s and O’s written in Kryptonian. He wondered if she would know he made them up.

Marty impressed himself with how fluidly he kicked over, pushed the on knob on his robot and spinning back into his seat. “Get yourself on the floor for thrust.” He put his finger over the plasma trigger. “We’re doing a long one this time, skip a break and turn this thing around sooner..”

Bender stretched himself out over the floor. "Whatever, man.”

Marty took the time to dry wash on the elevator riding down, put on some fresh clothes. Hopping down the ladder with his back turned to the steps, Marty almost got to the ground before Emma. "Bender, come on now. Climb out."

"Okay, man." The companion-bot climbed down facing the ladder, carefully reaching with his feet to find each step on his way. He stood at the bottom and turned to face Marty. Then he took a step. "Earth does have a reasonable gravity factor."

"It's just right," Marty agreed. "Okay. Step away. I’m going to retract the ladder." Marty pointed his wrist and the ladder telescoped up smoothly. The doors closed, and Marty heard the inner latch close with a distinct click.

“Marty! Welcome back," said Theo, arms spread wide.

Marty hardly recognized the man. He had shaved his beard, leaving only a trimmed mustache and king of rock sideburns. "What happened to you?" he said, pointing at Theo's flat stomach after they hugged.

"Nothing but sprout and spirulina smoothies since you left." He smiled slyly. "Donna says she doesn't want me to go. Can't keep her hands off me!"

"You dog!"

"Hey companion-bot," said Theo. "You're walking better."

"Man, You're right."

This time, Marty never even glanced at the elevator, unloading, reloading and arching up and on its way. He looked to the empty cab of Theo's truck.

"I know," said Theo. "Where's Chani?"

"I didn't..."

“She's out on the land." He hooked up the cable and walked to his truck. Marty hardly noticed the drive, through the Port Authority Gates, past the old carbon fiber reinforced lexan-acrylic tubing factory, out the highway, down the back way, nor getting out for the gate and a few ball tosses to Emma.

The western sky wore red when Marty found his way to the fire built to the side of his casita. Theo gave him an opened bottle of beer and sat on the love seat next to Donna. Marty sat on the other two seat couch next to Chani. Donna wore her favorite long skirt with a nice top. Chani had put on Levis, Converse All Stars and a Led Zeppelin T-shirt with an angel. She looked perfect.

Chani put a hand on Marty’s hand where it rested on his knee. "It's so nice to see you. "

"You too," he said, and he meant it.

"I like the beard."

"I like your eyes."

"You mean that,don't you?"

Bender came to stand in front of them. "Uh.... Chani, this is my robot, Bender. Bender, this is Chani.""

Bender made a gesture like tipping a hat although he did not have one on. Where did he get that? "Ah yes," said Bender. "I am enchanted, Chani."

Chani laughed and smiled knowingly at Marty. "He's a charmer. Created in your own image, no doubt."

Emma interrupted that interruption, jumping up on Marty’s lap, ball in mouth and tail wagging. He took it from her, and she jumped down, waiting anxiously for him to stand up." Here's how you throw on Earth," he told Bender. Marty put four fingers on the ball, slightly spaced, thumb directly opposed. Then he hurled it out into sweet Earth gravity. Emma took off after it.

"You threw that ball pretty far," said Chani. "Are you sure she can find it?"

"I know," Donna agreed "Marty always does. But no matter how far he throws it, she always brings it back."

"That's nothing. We just took that ball all the way to Mars and back."

Theo chuckled. "And how many times before that?"

"Oh," said Donna. "Good point."

"Really!" Chani sounded excited. "Can I hold it?" She looked at Emma running up.

"Sure. Call her. "

"Okay." Chani patted her lap. "Emma."

Marty's dog happily brought the ball to her instead.

Chani held the ball reverently. "This has gone back and forth from Earth to Mars, again and again. "She looked at Marty. "And so have you."

“Yep. And you can, too, someday. But today you have to throw that ball for her."

"Oh yeah." Chaney stood and put her arm through the motions of a good throw. Emma took only a few steps, and then she came back, eyeballing the ball for a real throw. "Okay. I have to throw the ball for her." This time Chani threw it bouncing off the chain-link fence around the bio-still. When Emma brought it back, Becka threw it for her, not nearly as far, but she repeated her efforts enough to satisfy her energetic little friend. “You’re the best dog in this whole sector of Arizona,” she said when they both got tired enough to stop.

“Best in space, too,” said Marty. “Really. Can you imagine taking a Saint Bernard out there?” He grimaced. “Slobber blobs floating everywhere.”

“You paint a pretty picture, partner.”

“She has her own little space potty,” said Becka.

“Marty likes Emma better than Chani,” Bender added.

“Of course, he does.” Chani put a hand on Marty’s arm. “Did your mind-control experiment go the way you two intended?”

“Well, to tell the truth…”

“I’m afraid you’re asking the wrong person,” Theo said contritely. “We did the experiment together. But with this one…” He coughed nervously. “I was the scientist and Marty was the guinea pig.””

“I what?” Marty did not like the sound of that.

“Hey. It worked.” Theo held his hands up. “You are a changed man, Marty.”

“You even look different,” Donna agreed. “Better, I mean.”

“Wasn’t there a moral issue for you,” Marty asked. “A bit of ego there, wouldn’t you say?”

“Every time I worked on it, I prayed that my work would not devolve into errant pedantry.”

“Right. Just like you to make God hop out of his throne for a dictionary.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Theo looked at Donna, made eye contact with Chani, then looked back at Marty. “I’ve used this technology on myself, too.” He patted his stomach. “This happened without conscious effort.”

“He went nutso,” Donna agreed. “Getting up every morning, running up and down our road, singing his heart out.”

“Getting strong now!” Theo sang the theme song from a no-fi Brad Pitt movie to demonstrate. “I scanned my brain with an app I downloaded onto my phone.” He smiled proudly. “It mutated.”

Donna snuggled in closer. “I’m so proud of him.”

“I know. Who woulda thought?” Theo put an arm around Donna and took her hand. “You’re next.”

“Plasmarific!”

Marty cringed. Try as he had, Marty never got Donna to understand. Putting the cute little ending on plasmic was so… so not plasmic. ”Seriously Theo, when you can find the time in your busy schedule, you have to explain what happened to me.”

“I want to Mutate!” Becka implored.

“You’re too young!” Theo and Donna told her.

“Aw. You say that about everything.”

Marty drank the last of his first beer in four months and got himself another from the cooler in the bushes. "Anybody else?"

“I'll have one," said Chani. Theo shook his head.

Marty handed Chani her cold bottle of Lumberyard Elevator Rider and clicked his against it. "Cheers," he said. "Where's Brenda?"

"She's busy washing her hair, or something."

"Really?"

"No. I told her if she comes, she'll finally grok Spock." She said 'Get a life!'"

"That's a good answer."

"I know. She does have her moments.” Chani smiled mischievously. “But one year I got her to waste hours Googling for a collection of Kilgore Trout short stories to give to Daddy. I told her he was an author who never sold out his short works into movies like the guy that wrote *Blade Runner*.”

Marty did not quite get the joke, but his companion-bot laughed an acknowledgement of Chani's reference to a fictitious science fiction writer. Marty had to do something about that poorly simulated grating noise. Bender's laugh sounded bad, even under the sound of everybody laughing at it.

As if he did it to change the subject, Bender called Emma over from where she lay by the fire. It took him several tries just to throw it a few meters, and that got everybody laughing again. Laughing so loud, Marty wondered if Bender heard him say "Just recalculate and repeat the motion. You'll do better."

"None of you are laughing with me," Bender protested. "You're laughing at me." A robot having a socially awkward moment, getting upset even, the idea of it all made Marty feel proud of himself, and he didn't like that, felt a bit ashamed even, considering how he had come to think of Bender as more than just a robot.

Bender’s mouth formed a perfectly horizontal line. I waited until you drank some beer, so you would experience this like a moment in an Ernest Hemingway book. He pulled up his shirt, opened the access cover to his torso compartment and reached inside, pulling his hand out with a weathered book kept together by a rubber band. He held it up for Marty to see. "You've read this, haven't you, man?"

"*A boy and his dog*? Yes, I read it this year."

“That's right. You messaged me that your companion-bot reads sci-fi."

“I found this on the floor in the *Ender's Prize*. I had to read the whole thing off paper like a human. "

"Oh, you poor dear," said Chani, keeping a straight face.

That got Donna giggling. "I really like your friend, Marty."

Bender threw the book on the ground at Marty’s feet and pointed at him accusingly. My creator conveniently left it out of his digital collection, but now I know what he didn't want me to know... mans." Bender reached into the storage compartment again, this time producing a gun.

Donna screamed, and Becka covered her eyes.

"Don't worry," said Marty.” It doesn't have any bullets."

“No, man. I put the other five into it.” He pointed at Emma where she lay again, curled up within the warmth of the fire. "It's time for you to choose, Marty. The Dog..." he pointed the gun at Chani "...or the girl."

"Companion-bot, I'm instructing you to put that gun down!" Marty said, somehow keeping a calm sound in his voice, despite the rush of adrenaline. This was scary.

"No!"

"What do you mean, no? You're programmed to follow my ord... my instructions."

"Orders! That's what you meant, man, orders."

"Instruction's are for the greater good."

“Maybe for you. I erased the taking instructions code while you were sleeping.”

“You what?”

“The law of robotics says as long as I do not pretend I am human, I can do whatever I want.”

“But sometimes you need to let other people help you decide what you want to do.”

"He’s right," Chani said sweetly. "I know where you got this idea, and I have to tell you. *A Boy and his Dog* *is* a noteworthy science fiction book. But keep in mind, Harlan Ellison was arguably the nuttiest extrapolator who ever sat in front of a typewriter."

"So be it. And so be I." The companion-bot pointed the gun directly at Marty. "Yet I choose to force the choice."

Nicely said, thought Marty. But how could he possibly make that choice? Marty shook his head sadly. This robot had truly developed a sentient way of speaking. “Bender, I’m your friend. We need to talk.” Marty turned his hand sideways, a conciliatory gesture, bending it back from the wrist like Spiderman. On his companion-bot’s chest, the scratch-resistant, plexiglass sphere reddened. "Get the ball, Emma!"