## **Norby and the Lost Princess**

## Isaac & Janet Asimov

1

A NEW MISSION

It was peaceful, for the moment, in the apartment of the Wells brothers. Outside, Manhattan taxis on antigrav were not honking much. Inside, Norby, the Wells’s robot, was silently repairing the kitchen computer—once again.

Norby’s small metal barrel of a body hovered above the floor, held up by his personal mini-antigrav. His telescoping legs were fully retracted, his double-palmed hands were busy making adjustments, and his rear pair of eyes were firmly shut.

His owner, Jefferson Wells, was quietly studying at the kitchen table. He was fourteen and tall for his age. Sometimes he felt much older because he so often had to cope with problems caused by a mixed-up robot and an adventurous older brother.

Jeff’s brother, Fargo, was in the living room about to shatter the peace and make concentration impossible.

Bim! Bam! Boom!

Norby spun once on his axis, and all four of his eyes opened wide. The dome of his built-in hat slammed down as his half face retracted into his barrel. Then it popped up and his eyes glared at Jeff from under the brim of his hat.

“Jeff! Tell Fargo his drumming vibrates my microcircuits!”

Bim, boom, bam, bam, thud … “Oh blast, I hit the center again,” said Fargo from the living room. Boom, bim, rumble, rumble, bam …

When Fargo’s penetrating tenor voice began to harmonize with the deep tones of kettledrums, Jeff picked up his ear plugs. He was about to insert them when, over the din of Fargo’s drums and Norby’s grumbling, he heard the phone ring. He jumped up to switch on the kitchen extension. The imposing face that filled the screen was all too familiar.

Admiral Boris Yobo, while not beautiful like Helen of Troy, looked as if he could launch more ships, and he had. “Cadet!” barked the head of Space Command, “what is that horrible noise?”

“Fargo’s composing a tenor tympani concerto with orchestra as a hedge against our not winning the group singing contest….”

“Shut the door! I can’t make out what you’re saying!”

When it was a little quieter in the kitchen, Jeff looked apprehensively at the large face in the holoscreen. After all, the Admiral had final say about the Space Academy and about Jeff’s scholarship there. He was also the confidential employer of a twenty-four-year-old secret agent named Farley Gordon (Fargo) Wells. Jeff was relieved, therefore, to see a broad smile reach the velvet black of Yobo’s high cheekbones.

Unfortunately the smile promptly disappeared. “What? Spending your vacations on a singing contest? A waste of time!”

“Yes, sir. You’re right, sir,” said Jeff.

“You’re more than right, Admiral,” put in Norby. “I disapprove of singing; especially when I’m not allowed to join in.”

“You sing off key,” said Jeff.

“Whether off key or on key, singing is irrelevant to the realities of the situation,” rumbled the Admiral. “I’m thinking about our last joint mission, the one to the planet of the dragons—”

“Jamya,” said Jeff, who liked dragons as long as they were small and civilized.

“—and I have a new mission for you and Fargo—”

“And me!” shouted Norby. “They can’t do without me! They can’t even get beyond the Solar System without me!”

“Yes, yes. You go wherever Jeff goes. That’s understood,” said the Admiral. “Norby, I want you to take Fargo and Jeff on a search for a group of humans who may have been taken from Earth during the Ice Age. Find out if those mysterious aliens, the Others, left any data on the planet Jamya that might reveal where those lost humans were taken.”

“But Admiral,” said Jeff, “You can’t ask us to do that on our vacation. Fargo’s got his heart set on winning the big Federation singing contest. Even if Norby can make the Hopeful work on his hyperdrive again, we wouldn’t have time to go on a search. And besides the contest, I have to be back in the Academy in a week.”

“This is more important than contests or your Academy studies, Jeff. Federation scientists aren’t getting anywhere in cracking the secret of antigrav that is miniaturized like Norby’s. We have the Jamyn antigrav collar you gave to my lab, but we still haven’t figured out how it works. And since mini-antigrav seems to be the key to Norby’s ability to travel in hyperspace, the Federation needs it or we Terrans will remain confined to our own Solar System, deprived of interstellar exploration.”

“I wish I could tell you how I travel in hyperspace,” said Norby, “but I don’t know. I’m sorry I can’t be of more help, Admiral.”

“Humph!” said the Admiral. “Sometimes I’m sorry I’ve kept your secrets. Nobody knows about Norby’s hyperdrive but the three of us and Fargo, and that cop he associates with. Nobody else knows that most of Norby is an alien device from the planet Jamya, manufactured by those enormous Jamyn robots who were made by the Others. We owe it to the Federation to find…”

“But Admiral,” Jeff interrupted, “not even the Jamyn robots know how to make Norby’s special abilities again. The old Terran spacer, MacGillicuddy, must have accidentally created them when he found Norby’s alien parts on one of our asteroids.”

“That’s what I’m getting at,” said the Admiral. “The Others certainly had hyperdrive, and if we can’t catch up with them to find out how they did—or do it, then we must track down anybody who had contact with the Others. Therefore, Cadet, go find those lost humans!”

Jeff realized that the living room was quiet. Was Fargo listening?

“But did the Others actually visit Earth?” asked Jeff, stalling.

“Certainly,” said the Admiral. “Your All-Purpose-Pet, Oola, is proof of that. She was bio-engineered from Ice Age cave bears and saber-tooth tigers or something. Fortunately she was made smaller. And you told me that the Jamyn robots have a legend about Oola’s ancestors and some human beings from Earth who were removed by the Others and taken someplace else.”

Jeff looked around. “Where is Oola, Norby?”

“Under the bed in the bedroom. Or in it, with her head under the pillow,” Norby answered. “She’s not fond of tympani. I wouldn’t be surprised if she grows her leather shell around her and hibernates.”

At the sound of a slight hiss, Jeff looked up to see Fargo’s handsome face poking around the door. Fargo put his finger to his lips; he was not within range of sight from the screen.

“Cadet, are you paying attention to me?” asked Yobo, scowling. “I repeat—I want you to find those missing human beings. Aside from everything else, they may have been enslaved and, considering my African ancestry, I have a particular dislike for the notion of slavery. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s all, then, Wells. You have your orders.”

“Yes, sir.”

When the screen was safely blank, Jeff sighed. “Why am I always sent off an on strange ventures when I’ve planned to do something else?”

“We’ll do both,” said Fargo, drumming his fingers against the wall. “We’ll zip out to look for lost humans and zip back for the contest. No trouble at all.”

Jeff ran his fingers through his curly brown hair in exasperation. His brother could never resist an adventure and never imagined that he’d run into any trouble.

“Fargo, how can we zip out and back when we don’t know where they are?”

“I will find out,” said Norby, who could never resist sounding important. “While you and Fargo are outfitting the Hopeful, I will zip out to Jamya and search the main computer’s memory banks for any data about the lost human beings.”

“And meanwhile,” said Jeff plaintively, “you haven’t even fixed the kitchen computer for our dinner tonight.”

“I have too. Hold out that bowl. Perfectly tossed salad on its way!”

Jeff leaped forward with the salad bowl just in time to get heavily seasoned greens full in the face. “You’ve tossed the salad in the wrong direction, Norby! The funnel has to point down, not up!”

Fargo had disappeared—he always did when there was something to be cleaned up—but as Jeff picked lettuce from his hair, a small green animal resembling a cat trotted into the kitchen and patted him on the leg.

“Wowrr?”

“It’s all yours, Oola,” said Jeff. “Eat away.”

Although bio-engineered from carnivores, Oola was a vegetarian and particularly enjoyed salad, even on the floor. As she went from leaf to leaf munching, the cause of the mess—Norby—telescoped his legs outward as he sank to a standing position between two clumps of lettuce.

“It was only a small mistake, Jeff,” Norby said contritely, “but I’m making a large apology. I’ll go at once to Jamya before anything else spills.” With that, he withdrew the whole way into his barrel, elevated on his antigrav, and suddenly vanished.

Norby’s disappearing act always unnerved Jeff. Hyperspace is the basic fabric of the universe and exists everywhere, so one can move into it from any point at all. But the resulting disappearance from normal space is disconcerting to observers.

During dinner Oola burped ominously while Jeff picked at his food.

“Don’t worry,” said Fargo. “Oola’s just a little under the weather from eating a two-man portion of salad.”

“It’s not Oola I’m worried about, it’s Norby. I forgot to tell him to hurry back. Maybe he’s mad because I yelled at him. Maybe he’ll want to stay on Jamya with the robots there.”

“Norby is part Terran and will be back,” Fargo said firmly.

“If he doesn’t, we can’t go and get him.”

“Not until Yobo’s scientists invent hyperdrive, I’m afraid.”

“Erp,” said Oola, and decided to give a lot of salad back to the floor.

“This time,” said Jeff, ”you clean it up, Fargo. The housekeeping robot is working only spottily since Norby adjusted the circuits.”

“All right,” said Fargo, “but let’s leave Oola home. We’ll get a cat-sitter.”

“We can’t. Anybody who comes to feed her will find out that if you think about any animal long enough, Oola is likely to change into that animal’s form. And who would believe in a vegetarian cat? The zoo officials will pick her up and we’ll never see her again.”

“Then we’ll have to watch her tendency to overeat,” Fargo said, as he reluctantly got to work.

The next day, although Norby had still not appeared, Fargo and Jeff kept reassuring one another that he would return any minute. And they proceeded to ready the Hopeful, which (by special permission of the city under pressure from the Admiral), was parked on the roof of their apartment building.

Just as Jeff had put in the last of the supplies, the door to the roof opened, and Fargo’s cop emerged. Manhattan Police Lieutenant Albany Jones—blonde, beautiful, and incredibly brave—was exactly Fargo’s age. (Worse luck, thought Jeff, who liked her a lot in a bashful way.)

“Hi, Albany,” shouted Fargo, “Come aboard. Jeff, did I remember to tell you that I invited Albany to come with us? Actually, we need a soprano, but Albany’s contralto will just have to substitute.”

“Thanks a lot. It’s so thrilling to be a substitute,” said Albany. She carried her suitcase into the Hopeful. “Where’s Oola?”

“Still in the apartment, recovering from indigestion,” said Jeff. “I’m glad you’re coming, Albany. You’re the only one who can keep Fargo in line, and I’ve got to get back in a week.”

“Don’t listen to Young Man Gloom, Albany,” Fargo said airily. “We’ll be back long before that, in time for the singing contest.”

“And just where is it that we’re going?” asked Albany.

“Nowhere, unless Norby shows up,” muttered Jeff.

“Come into the control room and I’ll explain,” said Fargo.

Jeff, shaking his head, stepped to the roof door and promptly collided with Admiral Yobo in his full dress uniform, medals dangling on his huge chest and a large suitcase in his hand. “Well, Cadet,” he boomed, “is that robot back yet? We’ve got to get on with it.”

“But Admiral—”

“I decided to join the crew. Since you and Fargo are orphans, you need someone older and wiser—”

“But Fargo’s supposed to be my guardian, Admiral.”

“I think that makes my point, Cadet,” said Yobo.

“Yes, sir. You are very welcome, Admiral. Albany Jones is coming with us, too.”

“Ah,” said Yobo, smiling broadly. “Then there will be at least two sane persons aboard. And I’ve brought some interesting music we can practice during the mission. I’ve thought it over and decided to join your group for the singing contest. You need a bass.”

“That’s true,” said Jeff. “I’m a baritone now, but my voice still cracks now and then. You’ll be a useful addition, Admiral.”

They entered the Hopeful and Yobo, staring at a dim corner of the control room said, “What have you got there? Oversized turtles?”

“My tympani,” said Fargo. “I haven’t set them up yet, but when I do, I’ll tune them to your bass voice, Admiral. Perhaps my tympani-tenor masterpiece should be turned into a quartet.”

Without warning, the control room grew more crowded still as a metal barrel and a small green dragon appeared in the middle of it. Jeff gave a cry of relief.

“I’m back,” said Norby. “Mission accomplished. I found coordinates for a planet where the lost humans are supposed to be. All I have to do is feed the coordinates into the Hopeful’s computer and we’ll be off.”

“But why have you brought Zargl?” asked Fargo. “She’s welcome, of course, but—”

“I’m not going with you,” the little dragon said, spreading her leathery green wings and flying (with the assistance of her Jamyn antigrav collar) to Yobo’s big shoulder. Switching to the Jamyn language because Terran Basic was still hard for her, she said, “I asked Norby if I might stay in your apartment while you’re gone so that I can practice your difficult language by watching your holoTV.”

“Do you have your mother’s permission?” Jeff asked in Jamyn.

“She does,” said Norby. “Zi wants Zargl to be able to speak Terran Basic perfectly.”

“I wish I could understand what you’re all saying,” said Albany.

“You will,” said Fargo. “Zargl, give Albany a little nip.”

Surprised but stalwart, Albany stood firm when Zargl flew to her shoulder and gave the back of her neck a slight nip.

“There,” said Jeff. “In a short while, you’ll begin to understand the Jamyn language, Albany. The rest of us were nipped when we visited Jamya. A dragon bite makes you able to talk telepathically to anyone else who’s been bitten, if you touch them while you’re doing it. And the dragons have a way of teaching Jamyn quickly through telepathy. Zargl, take Albany down to the living room and teach her while we get ready.”

Fargo said, “And have Albany teach you how to feed Oola, because I think we ought to leave her behind with you.”

“Okay,” said Zargl in passable Terran Basic. “I’ll send Albany back up when she’s ready, and I’ll say goodbye now. Have a good time, Admiral.”

“Thank you, Zargl.”

“And Jeff,” added Zargl, “don’t let Fargo get into trouble.”

“That’s been said to me all my life,” said Jeff.

2

### THE PLANET, IZZ

“A wandering minstrel I, a thing of shreds and patches, of ballads, songs and—”

“Fargo,” said Admiral Yobo, putting down his sheet music and massaging his bald head, “I do not believe Gilbert and Sullivan intended for that tenor aria to be accompanied by nothing by kettledrums, especially when we’re all tense from watching Norby make three passes at those planetary coordinates and getting each one wrong.”

Albany yawned. “I never realized what it would be like to be stuck in hyperspace. I’m tired of looking at that peculiar gray in the viewscreen.”

“Maybe I’d have found the planet by now,” Norby said peevishly, “if I’d been allowed to relax my emotive circuits by singing too.”

“You’re still as off key as ever,” Fargo said as he fondled a drumstick. “You put our singing off. Way off.”

“That’s just your opinion. I think my electronic voice is very beautiful. Anyway, with that quartet you tried, and that awful tympani-tenor concerto, you have some nerve telling me that I’m off key.”

Before Fargo could continue the argument, Jeff said quickly, “Let’s all be silent while Norby tries for the coordinates one more time. Remember that this hyperspace jump is difficult because the coordinates are just numbers from the data bank of the Jamyn computer. We don’t know anything more about the planet we’re trying to reach.”

Albany brushed back her long hair and said, “There’s one thing that bothers me. Shouldn’t we discuss what we’re going to do when and if we get to this alien planet? All we seem to do is practice for the contest. Surely this mission is a little more important.”

“Urn,” said the Admiral, who had gotten them all on a mission only to absorb himself in music.

“What’s to discuss?” said Fargo, who hated advance planning.

“A great deal,” she said. “The human beings we’re looking for are likely to believe they’re the only humans in the Universe. Unless the Others told them about their origins, these humans will think they originated on the planet they’re on now instead of on Earth. They may consider us alien, and be unfriendly. Shouldn’t we try to learn more about them before we land?”

“Right on, Lieutenant,” said Yobo. “We should have Norby bring the Hopeful just far enough away from their planet so we’ll be unobserved but still able to tune into their broadcasts, if they have that technology by now.”

“The Jamyn dragons have the technology,” said Jeff, “because the Others gave it to them. So I imagine that the lost humans have it too.”

“I wish you’d all stop talking,” said Norby, waving his arms. “Noise, noise, noise. Just leave me to myself and let me try again.”

Everyone became silent, including Norby. He put his hands back on the control panel and seemed to freeze for a moment. Suddenly the ship was no longer enclosed by the gray of hyperspace.

“Ah,” said Yobo with satisfaction.

“Wow!” said Jeff. “Look at that!”

They all crowded to the main viewscreen. In it was a beautiful planet, wreathed in clouds that parted to show patches of blue.

“I told you I could do it,” said Norby.

“You sure did,” said Jeff. “From what we can see, it may be a little like Jamya. One big land mass in the ocean, and—”

“Look!” they all shouted simultaneously.

“Spornes!” said Jeff. “All around us!”

Space-homes, or “spomes,” had been in use as artificial orbital space settlements for many years back home. It was clear that these displaced human beings had them, too.

“I’ve got something on radio—no—holoTV,” cried Norby. “These humans are technologically advanced.”

Jeff turned up the sound and they all studied the screen.

The voice and face on the screen seemed human indeed. The language was a strangely accented Jamyn with many new words. A loose—very loose—translation was something like this: “And now for an update on the news. King Fizzwell has announced that due to the tragic loss of the pioneer interstellar ship, he will not throw out the first gweig at the opening game of the gwo-gwo season this afternoon—”

“What’s he wearing?” asked Albany. “It looks like a nightshirt.”

The announcer was clothed in a shimmering garment that fell loosely from his shoulders, very much like an oldfashioned nightshirt. His hair was braided around his head and his beard was braided, too, with a clip at the end.

“Find us another news broadcast,” said Yobo. “If these people have interstellar travel, then they’re way ahead of the Federation.”

“They used the term ‘pioneer’ ship,” said Fargo. “That may mean ‘first’—or even ‘only’.”

“Here’s another broadcast,” said Norby.

Another face and voice appeared, this one female and of a different hue and shape of eye from the first, indicating that the Others had selected human specimens from different parts of the Earth. “The last broadcast from the missing ship, Challenger, has now been released to the general public. Since the broadcast is of sound only, we will now show Princess Rinda’s favorite portrait of herself.”

The announcer’s face was replaced by that of a beautiful girl with unbraided coils of scarlet hair piled on her head, surmounted by a wedge-shaped hat so jeweled that it was obviously a crown. Her shimmering nightshirt was overlaid by fantastic capes trimmed with jewels. Her cool, aristocratic face was a little fuzzy, as if the painter’s eyes had been filled with reverent tears while he painted.

“Hello, everybody,” said a lilting soprano voice. “This is Princess Rinda, speaking from a newly discovered planet I have named ‘Melodia.’ Captain Erig wants me to tell you that it’s an Izz-type planet—that means we can breathe the air—but it’s not anywhere near as beautiful as Izz, of course. The Captain says she thinks the coordinates for this planet must have been accidentally programmed into the ship’s computer, and would the Court Scientist please determine how this could have happened?

“Oh—what? Oh, yes, I’m also supposed to tell you that this broadcast is being sent by tape-packet jetted beyond the planet’s weird electronic field, which seems to prevent Izztio broadcasts from the planet’s surface, so you can only hear; you can’t see. This is a shame because I’d like you to be able to see the natives, who are very friendly, and who really appreciate my voice. Oh—yes. The fruit and vegetables are edible, too.

“I’m just thrilled to be the first to discover a new planet, and now I have to sign off because we’re going to a concert that will take place around a lovely tree in a sort of courtyard. I expect that I’ll be requested to sing. The library robot can’t make any sense of the native language, but it doesn’t matter because they get their ideas across. This will be a great place for tourists from Izz, and—yes, Captain Erig, I’m almost finished—we’ll be leaving for home in a few days. And now I’ll sign off and go to the concert. Love to—”

The sound broke off abruptly and the announcer’s face came back on the screen. “There is no hint of real danger in that broadcast except for the mention of a strange electronic field that deactivates the usual form of communication. Still, the sound was broken off suddenly, and it has been two weeks since that broadcast was received. Because there have been no further communications, there is great alarm at Court, and the Court Scientist says he is working on another interstellar ship to send on a retrieval mission.

“The planet Izz and its satellite colonies have been plunged into deep concern for our beloved Princess. Proper contemplation of the Infinite will take place before the start of the gwo-gwo game, accompanied by the Izz National Anthem.”

As the music started, the portrait of Princess Rinda came back on the screen.

Fargo said, “A stunner, isn’t she?”

“I am not amused,” said Albany. “She’s beautiful, probably rich, undoubtedly spoiled and thoroughly rotten to live with. On top of that their National Anthem is excessively boring.”

“Rich?” said Fargo. “Now there’s a thought. Did you notice her jewels? All we have to do is rescue her and the Izz royal family no doubt will shower us with rewards.”

“That would help provide funds for the Federation’s scientists to discover hyperdrive,” said Yobo thoughtfully. “Or we might ask for the Izzian system of hyperdrive, directly, as our reward.”

“Wait,” said Norby. “Listen!”

Another newscaster, wearing a plainer nightshirt that shimmered only slightly came on and said, “Attention! It has just been announced that our space patrol has discovered an unknown ship in orbit around Izz. This may have something to do with our lost Princess. Patrol ships are closing in on the unknown ship with gravity grapples—”

“Norby,” said Yobo, “take us into hyperspace at once.”

“Too late,” said Norby. “Whatever those gravity grapples are, they already have a tight grip on the Hopeful’s engine. We’re being drawn toward the planet—see those little cruisers ahead? They’re pulling.us.

Fargo went back to his drums and tuned them carefully. Then he began humming softly a rather pleasant version of the Izz National Anthem, accompanying himself by light tapping on the drums.

“Aren’t you even a little bit worried?” asked Jeff.

“Not at all,” said Fargo. “We, you see, have the goods—the only working intersteller ship in the vicinity—”

“Only because you’ve got a robot whose hyperdrive makes it work,” said Norby.

“Correct, my little metal barrel,” said Fargo. “But they don’t know that, do they? We have something to sell—a rescue mission. This won’t be just an Adventure—it will also be a business venture.”

Once on the planet, Jeff wondered if Fargo’s optimism had been justified. The welcoming committee, if that was what it was, wore shimmering nightshirts that seemed as stiffly formal as uniforms. Perhaps they were uniforms. And the committee members didn’t look friendly, either.

“Shall I open the airlock?” asked Norby, after a bumpy landing on what looked like lavender moss. They were in a town square bordered by odd buildings. A strange looking edifice at the far side could only be the Royal Palace, judging from the lavish gardens in its front yard.

“Certainly,” said Fargo. “How else are we going to sell ourselves as rescuers of the fair Princess?”

“Don’t think you get to keep her after the rescue,” said Albany.

“And the decision on opening the airlock is mine to make,” said the Admiral. “I am the senior officer present—”

“Interlopers!” shouted a voice in Izzian, through the loudspeaker system of the Hopeful. “We are the planetary police. We have control of your ship. Emerge at once! You are under arrest in the name of Queen Tizz and King Fizzwell.”

“Arrests are my department,” said Albany, serenely, tightening the belt of her dress uniform. “Once we get out I’ll handle it.”

Fargo said, “All right, Lieutenant Jones, my love. It’s your party if you want it.”

As usual, Jeff was the only one who seemed deeply concerned over their plight. He wondered whether the Izzians would thaw out if the Terrans sang their contest songs. How do you make friends with long-lost relatives—human beings who don’t know the Earth exists?

When they had all emerged from the airlock and were standing at attention—Albany in front—Fargo said, “Look at that palace again. Doesn’t that look like gold paint?”

“Not paint,” rumbled Yobo. “Sheets of yellow metal—and if that’s gold—”

“It is gold,” said Norby. “The ship’s scanners figured that out. Didn’t I tell you?”

“You did not,” Yobo said grimly.

“Sorry. There’s lots of gold all over the place. Even the holsters holding the weapons of the police are gold.”

“Weapons?” Jeff saw that what he had thought were decorative sets of straps on each of the Izzian police were indeed holsters containing weapons. Each police officer wore a gold helmet, too.

Fargo said, “We’ll be rich. If we walk off with a few of those helmets—”

“Silence,” rapped out the female leader of the police—in Izzian, of course. Her hair stuck out from under her helmet in tiny pigtails. “Communication in code is against the law. You are also breaking the law in the way you wear your hair. Unbraided hair is a royal prerogative.” She pointed to Yobo, “And shaving the hair is no one’s prerogative.”

Albany took a step forward, coming to a halt with a loud click of heels and a snappy salute.

“Greetings,” she said in passable Jamyn, which resembled Izzian sufficiently to be comprehensible. “I am—” she searched for a suitable Jamyn word “—an unbraided lieutenant representing the armed forces of Manhattan. We have come to speak to Their Majesties about the Princess Rinda.”

The police chief looked astonished. “Are you from the planet Melodia? We were not given to understand that the Melodians were Izzoid in appearance.”

“We are not Izzoid,” said Albany frostily. “We are as Izzian as you are, but of another tribe, a lost Izzian tribe from another planet in another part of the Galaxy, far away.”

“That’s impossible,” said the Izzian police chief. “We are the only Izzians. You are under arrest for additional infractions—spacing without a license, arriving under false pretences, impersonating unbraided Izzians, carrying contraband goods—”

“What contraband goods?” Albany asked scornfully.

“In that barrel,” said the Izzian police person, pointing to Norby. Norby was, of course, entirely closed up and in Jeff’s arms—the standard way of hiding his robotic nature.

“Seize them,” commanded the Izzian police chief, and her underlings surrounded the Terrans. They drew out chains that were golden but, under the circumstances, ugly. They had strange but serviceable locks.

“Handcuffs,” muttered Yobo. “How humiliating.”

“Stop, stop!” A gravelly voice cried out from the direction of the palace. “In the name of Queen Tizz—and King Fizzwell, of course—I insist that you stop arresting these people!” The man leaped over a bed of orange flowers and headed straight for the Izzian chief of police.

He was very tall and very thin, with pale yellow hair in a long pigtail. His thin yellow beard hung limply beneath his chin in two braids. On his oddly short nightshirt was a gold medallion containing a bright red gem and, emerging from under the stiff gown was a pair of baggy pants that fitted inside his pointed shoes. He was followed by a robot, more human-looking than ordinary Terran work-robots, but just as blank-faced.

“What is he?” whispered Fargo, “the palace clown? Why does he have a robot?”

“I don’t know,” said Jeff, “but have you noticed that the gardeners are robots?”

The Izzian police chief, who was almost as tall as the newcomer, looked at him with an obvious lack of friendliness. “Do you have written permission from the Queen, Scientist Einkan?”

“Court Scientist Einkan,” said the Izzian with the pants. “In this emergency, I need none. I have brought one of my robots to help escort these strangers to the palace.”

“Without written orders from the Queen, I cannot release these dangerous criminals.”

“Stupid!” hissed Einkan. “These are obviously Izzians, and they come here with a hyperdrive ship. My new hyperdrive ship is not yet ready. We need this ship to rescue the Princess, and we need these Izzians to pilot that ship. If you impede this mission, Officer Luka, you are endangering the Princess’s life. The Queen will be displeased.”

The emphasis on the last word made it sound deadly, and Officer Luka blinked. “Very well. Take them to the Queen, but witness that I have released them reluctantly, without written permission.”

Einkan strode up to Albany. “You are in charge, of course?”

Albany stifled a grin. “Of course.”

“Permit me to introduce myself. I am Einkan, Court Scientist, and I will escort you to the Queen.” He smiled and took Albany’s arm.

Officer Luka and her police stepped aside, and the Terran expeditionary force followed Einkan and Albany. Fargo frowned and looked annoyed as Einkan drew Albany close to himself. Fargo moved forward to listen.

Einkan said, “Luka’s a good police person, but we do not get along. I was one of her early husbands and it was no good. I was much too dominant for her tastes. You are very beautiful, my dear … what did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t. I’m Albany Jones. Lieutenant Albany Jones.”

“Albany. A romantic name. Do you disapprove of a strong strain of dominance in a male?”

Albany unwrapped Einkan’s arm as it ventured around her waist. “What I disapprove of are males who do not answer my questions. First, I would like to know how many interstellar ships you have.”

“Only the one, the Challenger that, alas, our beloved Princess insisted on accompanying during its maiden voyage. I invented the hyperdrive for the ship, but I have not yet put together another engine for the next ship. How could I know that the Princess—and the Challenger—would not return?”

“How indeed?” said Albany. “Then it will be necessary for you to take our ship and find the Princess?”

“Indubitably.”

Yobo intervened angrily, “Do you think we will permit that?”

Einkan looked back at Yobo, who was his same height but twice as wide. “How did you get permission to do without hair on your head, sir?”

“Do without?” roared Yobo. “Do you think I shave my head?

“How else would you not have hair?” said Einkan, skirting a bed of flowers in shades of pink.

“Admiral,” said Jeff, switching to Terran Basic. “These humans may have descended from people lacking genes for baldness.”

“That is their loss, Cadet. Baldness is cleaner and more impressive.”

Jeff said, “Yes, sir.” He turned to the Izzian robot walking stolidly at his side. “Do you help the Court Scientist in his laboratory?” he asked.

“I do what I am told.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“I do not feel. I serve.”

“Did you help invent the hyperdrive engine?”

“I helped install it.”

“Did you watch the Court Scientist invent it?”

“I do not watch. I serve.”

The robot walked away into a small doorway off to the side of the broad marble steps leading to the double front doors of the Palace. Einkan headed that way, too.

“Just a minute,” said Yobo. “Why are we not going up the front steps? Is this the way visiting dignitaries are treated?”

“We must first have a conference on hyperdrive in my laboratory,” said Einkan. “You know, of course, how to work a hyperdrive engine, beautiful Lieutenant Jones.”

“Umm,” said Albany, who didn’t really know.

“Good,” said Einkan. “You and I will confer while these others wait. Then you and I will go to rescue the Princess, while these others stay behind.”

“That will be impossible,” said Albany. “My colleagues are all essential to the running of the ship.”

Einkan looked disappointed. “Are you sure? Oh, that’s too bad.”

A disembodied voice suddenly assailed their eardrums.

“Einkan, you numbskull. How dare you take matters into your own hands? Bring those strangers to the throne room at once or I will send you to the Courtyard of Guilt to be immersed for several days in the Pool of Plurf!”

Einkan sighed. “Yes, your Queenness.”

3

A QUESTION OF RESCUE

The matter of the Queen’s disembodied voice did not long remain a mystery, for along the walls of the Royal Palace were decorative gold trumpets that were clearly loudspeakers.

Einkan and the Terrans, with Jeff still holding Norby, marched up the wide front palace steps to the huge front door, where purple-nightshirted robots stood stolidly on’ each side. The gold-panelled door slid open.

“Hasten,” said the Queen, from a gold bas-relief of a lion on the ceiling of the entrance hall.

This time there was not even a moment’s delay in detecting the source of the voice.

“A lion?” Jeff remarked, looking up. “The Others must have brought some of Earth’s animals here, too.”

“Silence!” said Einkan. “Do not use that non-Izzian communication code, and keep quiet altogether if you know what’s good for you.” Clasping Albany’s arm in a possessive grip, the Court Scientist hurried down the hall to a set of double doors that slid open at his approach.

Two more purple-clad robot guards were just inside the doors, and they lifted their arms as the Terrans approached.

“Hail to the Queen!” they shouted.

“Bow your heads,” muttered Einkan, bending his own neck and moving forward slowly.

The Terrans followed, their heads bowed so that they could see only their feet.

Norby, who was in physical contact with Jeff, finally dared to attempt telepathic contact with him.

—I don’t like her. She’s the only Izzian I’ve seen with short hair and a nasty scowl.

—Have you got your hat up, Norby?

—Just a little, Jeff. Enough to see Their Miserable Majesties. They’re sitting on what look like solid gold thrones.

Einkan stopped abruptly, jerking Albany to a stop, too. The three Terrans, walking abreast behind them, promptly bumped into the two ahead, and Jeff tripped over Einkan’s feet. All five fell to the ground.

In the process, Jeff, not surprisingly, dropped Norby. There was, however, no resulting sound of a thump. Norby managed to get his personal antigrav into operation before he hit the ground, and as he hovered in the air, one extensible arm stretched out toward Jeff. Norby’s fingers clutched his owner’s ear.

“You dropped me!” Norby cried out, oblivious to all else in his indignation. “I might have been dented.”

“Aha!” said a deep, female voice. “What has been masquerading as a metallic container is actually an oddly shaped undersized robot. There is not much chance of fooling me with such charades. Bring that object to me.”

Jeff clambered to his feet and gazed at the thrones over the prone bodies of the others.

On the throne to Jeff’s right was a mild-faced man with no beard, his curly red hair, unbraided, reaching to his shoulders. He wore a plain gold crown topped with little spikes and he looked tired. Jeff was sure he was King Fizzwell.

On the other throne sat a woman who was somewhat larger than the King in every direction. Her brown hair reached only to her ears, and there wasn’t a braid in sight. She had prominent brown eyes, an immense array of jewels on her shimmering nightshirt, and an unpleasant expression on her regally handsome face.

As Jeff bowed to Their Majesties, he leaned slightly more to his left because he had the distinct feeling that Queen Tizz ran the show. Norby had by now settled back into Jeff’s arms and was doing his best to look like an innocent barrel that had never been anything else. But, of course, he was fooling no one but himself, and not even himself very much.

“So, Einkan,” said the Queen in a nasty nasal tone, “you were planning to hide these odd strangers from me; and their strange little robot, too.”

“Not at all, Your Graciousness. I was merely planning to interview them before introducing them to Your Royal Majesties. Better that they should waste my insignificant time than yours that is so vitally important.”

“I’ll bet,” said the Queen. “And I suppose you have forgotten I disapprove of garments that enclose each leg separately?”

“My humble apologies and most sincere regrets. It was an experiment that has clearly failed. I will remove them—”

“Not here, you fool! Your tunic is too short.” The Queen leaned forward and frowned. “Is it true that these odd Izzians have a hyperdrive ship?”

“Quite true, Your Izziness.”

“Where did they get it?”

Einkan’s pointed-toe shoes seemed to curl a bit further. He turned to Albany and tugged nervously at his braided beard. “Explain the situation, Lieutenant.”

Albany bowed to the King, which brought a deeper frown on the Queen’s face. She said, “Your Highnesses, we come from far away—”

“I have been told where you come from,” said the Queen, “and I disapprove of having any section of Izz possess so idiotic a name as Manhattan.”

“Manhattan is an island, Your Highness,” said Albany.

“And far, far away,” added Fargo.

“Quiet!” shouted the Queen. “I am talking to your leader.”

Admiral Yobo growled.

“It really doesn’t matter where we are from or where we got our ship,” said Albany. “We are offering our services and you dare not refuse them if you love your daughter. We can rescue Princess Rinda.”

“And we are the only ones who can,” said Yobo.

“Indubitably,” said Fargo in a passable imitation of Einkan’s voice.

Jeff grinned and at once tried to suppress it.

“Then go and do it,” said the Queen. “Don’t stand here and talk about it. Which reminds me—did I, or did I not, at least one hour ago, order that the small robot be brought to me? Why is it, then, that I do not have it? Guards, seize that robot at once. It will serve as hostage and it will be released to you after you return with the Princess—and not before.”

As two robot guards converged on Jeff, Norby shot up to the high domed ceiling—but so did the guards. They seized him and brought him down.

“Mini-antigrav!” said Yobo. “These blasted Izzians have it, too! No wonder they were able to make an interstellar ship.”

“But Admiral,” whispered Fargo, “why did they only make one ship?”

“Stop that whispering!” commanded the Queen. “Leave at once to rescue the Princess while the Court Scientist studies the internal workings of your robot.”

“No!” cried Jeff.

Albany turned back to Yobo and Fargo and spoke in Terran Basic. “I’m going to have to tell them that Norby is what makes our interstellar ship work.”

“No!” said Fargo. “I’ll think of something. Let me reason with this woman.”

“She’s not reasonable,” said Jeff. “She’s awful.”

“Queenness,” said the two robot guards simultaneously. “The new robot has disappeared from our very grip.”

“Where did she go?” asked the King, speaking for the first time and looking more wide awake than before. Perhaps it was not often that he saw the Queen’s wishes thwarted.

“Well, you heard the King,” said the Queen to Jeff. “Tell him where the robot went.”

Jeff could not help smiling. “He must have gone out the door, Your Highness. And Norby’s a ‘he’, not a ‘she’.”

“Nonsense,” said the Queen haughtily. “By my decree, all robots are female.”

Einkan bowed. “Your Graciousness, perhaps it would be best if we leave the robot be for a while, since it is clearly only a toy of this impertinent youth. Why not keep the youth as hostage in place of the robot, and study his internal workings? Meanwhile, I will accompany these people on their rescue mission—”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said the Queen. “You have to work on the second hyperdrive ship.”

“My laboratory robots are doing that,” Einkan said suavely. “If I am on the rescue mission, and it turns out that something has gone wrong with the Challenger’s engines, only I can repair them. Besides, you wouldn’t want to rely on these strangers to treat your daughter with appropriate respect. Who knows what they might do to her before they bring her back if I am not with them to prevent it.”

“Well—” the Queen demurred. “There is something to that. Royal dignity and decorum must be preserved. Very well, go with them. But go at once.”

Queen Tizz settled back on her throne and closed her eyes. In a moment she was snoring.

King Fizzwell beamed at Jeff and whispered, “Better go at once, brave youth, before she wakes and changes her mind. Please bring back my daughter unharmed, because I love her dearly. And do remember she is an Izzian Princess. Treat her appropriately.”

“What is appropriate treatment?”

The King looked nervously at the sleeping Queen. “No doubt Einkan will tell you. Just be careful.” With that, he waved a royal hand in dismissal. Einkan bowed in response, then motioned for everyone to follow him out of the throne room.

The Terrans had to take Einkan, for a troop of guards escorted them to the Hopeful, which was still watched over by Officer Luka and her police. In the control room, Einkan tried to look unimpressed, while Jeff tried to be unobtrusive about searching for Norby.

He met Fargo in the corridor.

“Still missing?” asked Fargo in a low voice.

“He’s not anywhere in the ship. I’m worried.”

“There’s nothing to worry about, Jeff. Norby did the only sensible thing—he went into hyperspace. It’s a good thing, too, because that’s where he can fuel himself for a trip such as the one we’re about to take.”

“But Fargo,” said Jeff, “nobody seems to care that we don’t have the faintest idea where the Princess is. I’ll bet Einkan doesn’t either. That’s probably why he insisted on going with us. You heard the Princess say that the coordinates to the planet Melodia must have been put into the ship’s computer accidentally. That could mean no one knows what the coordinates are.”

“I can’t believe that. Known coordinates can be put in accidentally. Being put in accidentally is not the same thing as being put in randomly. I’m sure Einkan can tell us something about it, if he can ever get around to doing anything but goggle at my girlfriend. I may have to cure him of this tendency pretty soon by bouncing him off the wall. Well, is the airlock shut?”

“Yes, and every Izzian in the city must be outside waiting for us to leave on our mission of mercy. And even if we get the coordinates, we still can’t go because Norby isn’t here.”

“Patience, little brother. Norby will come. Let’s tackle Einkan.”

They found Einkan already being grilled by the formidable Yobo and the seductive Albany.

“You had better talk,” growled Yobo, flexing his arms meaningfully.

“We’ll get along much better if you do,” murmured Albany, lowering her eyes just as meaningfully.

“Pounding me or cajoling me won’t help,” said Einkan. “The hyperdrive engine is my secret on Izz, and I intend to keep it that way. As you may have noticed, the Queen is in charge of everything. You may also have noticed that she has no consideration for anyone. How long do you suppose I would last in one piece if it weren’t for my superior intellect? That, and that alone, has enabled me to rise to my present position of penultimate importance, and it is only the fact that I alone have the secret of the hyperdrive that gives me freedom. I couldn’t even wear my beloved pants otherwise.”

“How is it,” said Albany, “that you don’t ask us about our hyperdrive? Are you anxious that we have secrets, too?”

“But, lovely woman, my hyperdrive is surely superior to anything your people can possess. I needn’t concern myself with your clumsy engines.”

“Talking about clumsy engines,” said Yobo to Jeff in Terran Basic, “is Norby in good shape?”

“I hope so,” Jeff said in the same language, “but he’s still missing.”

“You must not speak in your code,” Einkan said weakly.

“On our ship,” said Yobo, in his deepest bass, “we can do as we wish. Who will stop us? You?”

Einkan said, “Why are we waiting? My fellow Izzians are getting impatient. If we don’t leave soon, the Queen is likely to pay your ship a visit and then we will see what you can and can’t do here.”

Albany said, “I think I will guard the airlock, just in case. I can handle that woman.”

Einkan shuddered. “You people are strange. I can’t imagine what part of Izz you come from. I have not heard that there are any undiscovered islands. And you had better not frustrate the Queen. You surely want a large reward and you can only get that if you bring back the Princess. Even then, you will be in her power again and, if she is in a bad humor, she will take the Princess and refuse a reward. I assure you that you will get an ample reward only if I arrange it. That’s why I came with you—to make sure you get the reward. In return, I get sixty percent, of course.”

“What is the reward?” asked Fargo.

“Two cupots of bling,” said Einkan.

“And what is bling?” said Albany.

Einkan stared at her, for the first time in surprise rather than in longing. “Come now, surely you are joking—no, I see you are not. I can almost believe you don’t come from any part of Izz.”

“Just tell us what bling is,” said Yobo, “and don’t chatter.”

Einkan reached into a pocket of his tunic and brought out five coins. Three were silvery and sizable, while two were orange and very small.

Fargo picked out a small orange coin. “Bling?”

Einkan snatched it back. “One of these is my pay for a month, so don’t think I can let you have it.”

“Copper!” said Fargo in Terran Basic. “These people have a great deal of gold and very little copper, so they use copper for casting their most valuable coins and for prizes.”

Einkan drew himself to his full height and pulled at his braided beard. He said, in a troubled voice, “Can it be that you are aliens who have adopted an Izzoid appearance? Come, I see through you. What is your true form?”

“I assure you,” said Jeff, who was growing more and more anxious, “that we are as completely Izzian as you are. Come, let us talk about things other than the hyperdrive. Tell us about the robots of Izz. How intelligent are they?” Jeff thought of the unsatisfactory conversation he had had with one of them when walking to the Palace.

“Why should you be interested in our robots? They were left us by the Others—”

“Aha!” said Yobo. “The Others were here.”

“If you aliens know about the Others, then I suppose you are Izzians. But have you been isolated so long that you’ve forgotten the legends? The Others started Izz on the road to civilization, providing us with robots to help. The robots proved so successful that they are honored by being considered female, since females, as you know, are stronger and more capable manually.”

Albany grinned.

“Do the robots perform all the work on Izz?” asked Jeff.

“Of course. Don’t robots do so on your island of Manhattan?”

Jeff ignored the question. “Then what do Izzians do?”

“Art, music, literature, science. I myself do science.”

“Did you invent the spomes—I mean the orbital satellites and the ships that take Izzians back and forth to them?”

“Ah, no,” said Einkan. “We have always had those ships and satellites, and they have always been serviced by robots.”

“Do the robots teach you how to do any of that work?”

“Certainly not”—Einkan stopped, as though he felt that he might have given something away. Then he puffed out his skinny chest and said, “I have learned what I know by myself.”

“Which,” said Fargo in Terran Basic, “I’ll bet not many Izzians have tried to do. You have to hand it to this guy. He’s got more gumption than most of them on this planet.”

“Well, he told us he had a dominating personality,” said Albany.

“If people are going to talk in this code,” Einkan said, “I must say that I believe you are not only impolite, but up to tricks. Perhaps you do not intend to rescue our fair Princess.”

“You are right,” said Jeff. “It is impolite to cut you out of the conversation. And we will rescue your Princess.”

“Why do you not start, then? Why aren’t we in space? Don’t think I don’t realize you are engaging me in conversation merely as a strategy of delay.”

“You are right there, too,” said Jeff. “We are waiting for my little robot, who is dear to me. And I don’t want to leave without him—especially if the Queen wishes to investigate his internal workings. However, he will be here any minute. And meanwhile you can give us the coordinates of the planet Melodia.”

“The coordinates?” Einkan looked flabbergasted. “I thought you had them. Why would you offer to rescue the Princess unless you knew where she was?”

“Well, we don’t know!” Yobo said sharply. “We offered to do the rescue job because we assumed you had the coordinates.”

“Well, I don’t. I assumed you had them.”

“I knew it,” muttered Jeff. “I knew it.”

All five stared at each other helplessly.

Einkan said, “Do you know what’s going to happen to us now? If we don’t leave, and right away, the Queen will consider it an insult and she’ll send the entire army against us. This ship will be cut open like a can of zitzbar and we’ll be removed and taken to the Courtyard of Guilt. Do you know what Plurf smells like—and tastes like—and what it’s like to be put into it up to your chin? That’s what will happen to us.”

4

### THWARTING THE QUEEN

For a while no one said anything. Jeff shut his eyes and tried to reach Norby by telepathy. Long-distance mind contact was almost impossible unless Norby was trying hard also, and Norby couldn’t have been, because Jeff felt nothing. He strained every telepathic nerve until he felt himself aching all over with tension.

—Norby!—Norby, come back!

Nothing!

Jeff thought, It never takes Norby this long to refuel in hyperspace. Where is he? What is he doing? Has he mixed up the coordinates for Izz and landed someplace else?

He wished that he could trust Norby not to make a mistake, but he knew very well that a mistake was precisely what Norby was most likely to make.

“Admiral!” said Albany. “Fargo—Jeff—look in the viewscreen!”

Einkan, who was already looking, said in despair, “Well, I told you. Now it begins. The Queen is coming.”

Marching toward the ship, right through the flower beds, was the Queen of Izz, followed by her husband, the mild King of Izz, who skirted the flower beds and then had to run to catch up. The Queen was clearly furious.

“How muscular do you think those guards of hers are?” asked Fargo, clenching and unclenching his fists as if practicing.

Albany took off her dress-uniform jacket. “All of you stay here and be ready for a quick takeoff in case Norby shows up. I’ll go outside and show this Queen a thing or two about karate.”

“Lieutenant,” said the Admiral, “I am in charge here as senior officer, and I—”

“I’m in charge,” cried Fargo. “The Hopeful is mine and as its captain—”

“The Hopeful belongs to you and me jointly, Fargo,” said Jeff, “and since Norby is my robot, I have the right to—”

“No! No!,” shrieked Einkan, sitting down and mopping his forehead with the sleeve of his tunic. “You have not grasped the essential point of Izz. The Queen is in charge.”

“And she’s charging here,” said Fargo. “What do we do about it?”

“Take off, you fools,” said Einkan.

The Terrans were silent. They could take off, but they couldn’t get away from pursuit by Izzian spaceships without Norby. The silence was broken by a loud banging on the airlock door.

A look of hope crossed Albany’s beautiful face as she raised her eyebrows at Jeff.

Jeff shook his head. “If it were Norby, the banging would be in code—TGAF.”

“The Game’s A-Foot,” muttered Yobo, “and we’ll be footing it to the Courtyard of Guilt if that miserable barrel doesn’t show up.”

“Take off,” screamed Einkan as the pounding continued. “That’s the Queen. Take off! What’s all this talk about Norby? Is that your dwarfish robot?”

“I’m afraid it is,” said Jeff. “My pet robot was given the—ah—key to the ship’s engine. We thought that would be the best way of keeping it out of the Queen’s hands. You know—who would think of searching a harmless barrel? How were we to know my robot would disappear. Now we have to wait for him to come back.”

“Oh, oh,” groaned Einkan, “what a stupid way to run a ship. So you all get in here and can’t do a thing till an idiot barrel manages to find its way here. It never will. It never will. Oh, I can smell the plurf now.”

“Open up, or we’ll blast our way in!” came the Queen’s loud voice.

“She’s using one of her nasty loudspeakers,” said Fargo. “Well, we might as well hook up one of our own.”

Through the Hopeful’s loud-speaker system, Fargo said, “If you destroy this ship, Your Foolishness, you destroy the only object that can rescue your daughter.”

“Since you are not leaving,” the Queen retorted, “you are not planning a rescue in any case. And Einkan will build another ship in a matter of days or he will be plunged in plurf. Or else he will repair your ship once we’ve forced it open and then pilot it to the rescue—or be plunged in plurf head downward till he swallows every drop.”

“Please take off,” pleaded Einkan weakly. “Surely there must be a duplicate key somewhere. How can you rely on a single key?”

“I’m going out,” said Albany. “It’s the only way.”

“Look!” said Fargo, pointing to the viewscreen.

A small barrel, running on long, jointed legs, knocked into the Queen, who sat down and went “Ooff!”

Before the Queen could catch her breath, Norby knocked the code for TGAF, quite unnecessarily, and yelled, “Let me in!”

Jeff ran to the airlock, opened it, and admitted Norby. The guards did not try to interfere, for court etiquette apparently demanded that every one of the dozens of guards on the scene try to help the Queen. With the natural interference that resulted, it took ten times as long to get her upright than it would have if only one guardsman had tried, and twenty times as long than if she had been left to herself.

The Queen was finally on her feet, quite unsteady, with her crown askew. She panted hoarsely, and it seemed impossible for her to make an understandable sound.

The airlock closed before the guards could complete their bowing and their backward retreat from offended Majesty.

“Where on Earth have you been, Norby?” Jeff asked.

“Nowhere on Earth. I have been exercising my brains, which none of you are likely to have been doing. Let’s leave this miserable planet immediately.”

“But we have to rescue the Princess. We promised.”

“A promise to that Queen is foolish. And dangerous. Let’s go home to the singing contest.”

“You know what I think, Norby—”

“I don’t care what you think, Jeff. The Queen is having big guns and other weapons dragged up. We’re going to be destroyed.”

“It will take her some time,” Fargo said. “I’d judge we have about fifteen minutes. Plenty of time. Plenty of time. What do you think, Jeff?”

“I think that what Norby means by exercising his brains is that he’s spent his time finding the coordinates of Melodia, but he doesn’t want to go there. He’s scared.”

“I’m not scared,” Norby said defensively.

“If you’re not scared, what’s bothering you?”

“I just don’t like Izz. Or Izzians. The robots here aren’t anything like the ones on Jamya. These robots are slaves, and they only do what they were programmed to do long ago at the very start. Even the main computer has no mind of its own.”

“Oh, there’s a main computer?”

“Yes, and it read the computer on the Challenger so it knows—” Norby stopped and sucked in his head.

“It knows where the Princess is.” Jeff pounded on Norby’s hat. “That means you know and it means you’re going to tell me.”

“Oh, well, if you take that attitude, I’ll tell you. But I don’t like Izzians, especially that Einkan.”

“I don’t think he’ll bother us, Norby. Come on to the control room and hear what I have to say. We’ve only got a few minutes before the Queen may decide to open fire.”

When Jeff walked into the control room hand in hand with Norby, all but Einkan greeted them enthusiastically. Einkan’s curled upper lip suggested that the very idea of being friends with a robot was shameful. Jeff ignored him.

“Positions, everybody. Norby’s here with the engine key, so we can leave. I’ll be the pilot this time—”

“You mean, you know where the Princess is?” asked Einkan, looking stupefied.

“Of course. You would, too, if you’d bothered to search the data banks of your own main computer. Norby thought to do that, which isn’t bad for a pet robot. He found the coordinates of Melodia in information obtained from your ship, Einkan. Yet you claimed not to have that information. How do you explain that?”

The smile Einkan bestowed on Jeff was not friendly. “That is none of your business. I disapprove of your sending a machine to search my computer. I would certainly have found where the Princess is when it was necessary for me to do so.”

“Oh, sure,” said Fargo. He looked absently at the viewscreen, where the Queen had apparently recovered her voice and was shouting again. Albany had turned off the sound, but the contortions of the Queen’s face were fearful and the banging on the ship’s hull was steady.

“You know,” said Fargo, “I think she’s bluffing. She’s making a lot of noise but doesn’t dare do anything. She wouldn’t mind killing us and I think she would enjoy killing Einkan, but she doesn’t really want to damage the ship which may be the only way of rescuing her daughter.”

“I don’t know,” said Norby. “Those weapons don’t look friendly. Please let’s go, Jeff.”

“I agree,” said Jeff. “I don’t want to call the Queen’s bluff because it might not be a bluff. I don’t have Fargo’s silly optimism. However, since none of us trusts Einkan, I suggest he be locked in my cabin and kept there till we get to Melodia. I’ll sleep in the control room.”

“I certainly do not intend to allow anything of that sort—” began Einkan.

Yobo grasped him by his shoulders and lifted him clear off the ground. “Surely you don’t mean to refuse young Jeff’s excellent suggestion.”

Einkan gulped. “Not at all. Please lead me to the cabin.”

Yobo led him out and Fargo said, “A good point, Jeff. We certainly don’t want Einkan to see Norby plug himself into the ship’s computer. He mustn’t know that Norby doesn’t have the key to hyperspace but is the key. Let’s go, Norby. Hurry up, before they damage the airlock.”

“Hurry, hurry,” grumbled Norby. “First it’s a bluff and then it’s hurry, hurry.” But Norby was anxious to get away, too, so it didn’t take long.

As soon as the Hopeful began to rise on antigrav, the Izzians surrounding her fell back. Jeff took the ship beyond the atmosphere and past the orbital spomes as quickly as sub-light speed would manage. Izzian cruisers lying in wait as the Hopeful raced past the spome orbits, were not nearly as maneuverable as the Hopeful. Jeff wove in and out at accelerations that had everyone clinging desperately to the wallstraps. They could hear Einkan yelling as he crashed into the walls of Jeff’s cabin.

Then, when the Hopeful was far enough from Izz, it moved into hyperspace. The friendly gray enclosed it protectively, and Fargo began to play softly on his tympani while Albany kissed him lightly on his right cheek.

5

### THE PLANET, MELODIA

“There it is, Court Scientist,” said Albany, pointing to the viewscreen, “the planet your Princess has named Melodia.”

After only a few hours of hyperspace travel, Einkan had been released from Jeff’s cabin for the occasion, but he was not reacting with joy.

“I am one continuous bruise from my right ear to my left little toe,” the scientist raged, totally ignoring the viewscreen. “What kind of way is that to pilot a spaceship?”

“I had to evade your fellow Izzians,” Jeff said indignantly. “You shouldn’t have been hurt. There’s not a sharp angle or point anywhere in this ship.”

“It isn’t lined with sponge rubber either.”

“You should have held on.”

“To what? And I wasn’t warned.”

“Come on,” Albany said. “There was bad acceleration only at first. Once we were in hyperspace, we had absolute quiet. Now there is the planet and soon we’ll have your Princess. Why don’t you have something to eat, Court Scientist, and let your bruises heal?”

Fargo and Yobo were not watching the viewscreen either. Their argument over a tenor-bass duet threatened to become a battle, each singing little snatches of his own part to illustrate this point or that.

Albany smiled at Jeff. “Well, that leaves you and me to enjoy the scenery, Jeff. It’s wonderful that Nor—that the Hopeful brought us here so quickly. I love the gentleness of hyperspace travel, even though it isn’t scenic.”

“No,” said Einkan with a shudder. “I never expected such gray nothingness.”

“Oh?” said Jeff, wondering absently why the planet below was such a dull color, “you never expected it? Haven’t you ever experienced hyperspace before? And you an important hyperdrive inventor.”

Einkan said indignantly, “I had no chance to test my own invention. Princess Rinda has a lot of her mother in her and when she makes up her mind, well, she makes up her mind. She wanted to go, so she ordered me off my own ship to make room for herself.”

“Just looking at her,” said Albany loudly, and talking in Fargo’s direction, “I guessed that the Princess would be that kind of person—selfish, willful, greedy, and impossible.” Each adjective was louder than the one before, but Fargo apparently heard nothing but the fact that Yobo’s singing was a semitone flat.

“Well, of course,” said Einkan. “She’s a Crown Princess, the next to succeed to the throne. She has to be trained for all those necessary characteristics. Anyway, she said she was taking my ship for just a short preliminary voyage circling our stellar system, but, of course, she touched a button I told her to leave strictly alone, because I suspected—or, rather, knew it was the button for hyperspace travel, with coordinates already prog—” Einkan stopped speaking, clearly flustered.

“Programmed, you were about to say,” said Jeff, “but obviously not by you. You didn’t invent the Challenger’s engines and computer. No way. So who did?”

Einkan’s jaw clamped shut.

“Please,” said Albany, bestowing a beatific smile upon the hapless Court Scientist. “Do tell us the truth while we make a nice lunch for you. We’re sure you must be in trouble and we’ll try to help you. I’ll try to help you.”

“Looks very muddy down there, doesn’t it?” said Einkan, avoiding Albany’s eyes and looking into the viewscreen for the first time.

“That’s because it’s mostly mud,” said Norby, from the control panel. “That planet doesn’t look at all appetizing. Do we have to go down there?”

“Yes,” said Jeff, “but only after Court Scientist Einkan tells us the truth so we can help him.”

“What truth?” asked Yobo, moving closer. And Fargo said, almost simultaneously, “What’s this about truth?”

Albany said sweetly, “Oh, are you gentlemen going to stop serenading us? If you are, you might listen to the Court Scientist’s troubles. Go on, dear Mr. Einkan, you were going to tell us—”

“Nothing,” Einkan said stubbornly. “You are enemy aliens.”

“Do I look like an enemy alien?” said Albany, pouting.

“To be truthful, my dear, you seem a perfect example of an Izzian female—” Einkan began.

“How unkind!”

“—at her best.”

“That’s better,” said Albany, smiling brilliantly, “and I agree with you. So you see, we are Izzians.”

“I admit it seems so, but this ship is suspiciously strange and there is that odd code of communication you use among yourselves.” He stroked his beard meditatively. “Can it really be that you are Izzians that have been displaced to some other planet in our Galaxy?”

“Something like that, yes,” said Jeff. “Now what’s the truth about the Challenger?”

“You must be very powerful to have come so far on a visit,” said Einkan, his long fingers laced together. “In fact, why come on a visit? Possibly you are spying us out with a mind to conquer.”

“Come, come. Do we look like conquerors?” asked Albany.

“He does,” said Einkan, pointing to Yobo. “Perhaps you plan to take our planet for its stores of bling. You,” pointing to Fargo, “fondled my bling coin with obvious greed.”

All four of the Terrans laughed at the thought of stealing Izz’s copper when it had such stores of gold available.

But then Yobo said gravely. “I am not a conqueror, sir. Just an ordinary military leader of great skill who acts on the defensive. Not only would we not dream of taking your world, we would scorn to take your bling. We wouldn’t want to upset the economy of your world. That would be against our ethical principles.”

“This is all very boring,” shouted Norby from the control panel. “I thought you were here to rescue the Princess. Let’s do it now so we can leave this nasty place.”

“We will, as soon as Einkan tells us the truth,” said Yobo. “Where did you get your hyperdrive ship? Look, if you force us, we’ll go down to the planet, pick up the Princess and your ship, leave you on the planet while we go back to Izz. You’ll just have to spend the rest of your life in the mud down there—but then, you won’t live long and what a comfort that will be for you.”

Einkan squirmed. “You wouldn’t do that. It’s—it’s unIzzian.”

“We say ‘inhuman’,” said Fargo, grinning, “but we’ll do it.”

“No, they won’t,” said Albany. “I won’t let them, if you’ll just tell us.”

“Well,” said Einkan, “I was exploring the asteroid belt in a small rented ship, the sort that goes back and forth between the satellite worlds of the Queendom—it was during my vacation time so the Queen wouldn’t find out what I was doing. I found a wrecked and empty ship that had clearly never been built by Izzians, and I salvaged the engine and brought it back. I had never been able to invent hyperdrive myself, but I’d learned enough about it to see that that engine might have hyperdrive capacity.

“I brought it back to Izz and, of course, I told the Queen I had invented it myself and that it was hyperdrive. I was taking a risk, for it might not have been hyperdrive, but if it was, then my job was secure and I would be so famous that even the Queen wouldn’t dare be rude to me. Anyway, I installed the engine in her new cruise ship, and the Princess got interested, and now I have to build a new engine with which to rescue her, and I can’t—and it’s the plurf pit for me.

“And that’s why you insisted on coming with us,” Jeff said. “If you help rescue the Princess, your deceit might be forgiven; while if you had stayed on Izz, you would have—”

Einkan shuddered. “Don’t talk about it, please.” He looked at Jeff sharply, “That wrecked ship wasn’t one that was built by your people, was it? No, it couldn’t be. Its controls were not suitable for Izzian hands, either mine or yours.”

“Actually,” Einkan went on, “what I’ve been thinking ever since I found that ship was that it had been abandoned by an early un-Izzian species of star-traveler long before we Izzians had been settled on Izz.”

Jeff said, “You say before Izzians had been settled on Izz? Then you know that Izzians did not evolve on the planet they now live on; that they came from somewhere else.”

“Of course. According to our old histories, we were especially selected for our superior genes by the Others for training in advanced civilization. We do not know our planet of origin—” He smote his forehead. “Of course! That explains everything! You people are from the planet of origin! You are descended from the Izzians, who were not selected.”

Fargo said, “You know, this scientist isn’t as dumb as he looks.”

“Shut up, Fargo,” said Jeff. “This is serious. Yes, Court Scientists, we are Terrans, from Terra, the planet of origin. Izzians are descendants of Terrans and that is why, as we keep saying, we ourselves are Izzians after a fashion.”

“Where is Terra, then? Is Manhattan another name for it?”

“No. Manhattan is the name of a small portion of it; and as we’ve said, it’s far, far away, to be reached only by hyperdrive.”

“And until we learn to trust the Izzians more than we do,” growled Yobo, “its location will remain a secret.”

“On Terra,” said Fargo, “we have done away with monarchies. I mean Queendoms.”

Einkan gasped, then shouted, “Infidels! Heretics! I must loudly express my utter disapproval of such anarchy.”

“Don’t worry,” said Fargo dryly. “The Queen isn’t listening. She can’t hear you.”

Einkan relaxed. “In that case,” he said in a low voice, “I suppose it could be wonderful having no Queen. Does it really work?”

“It really works,” said Albany, “though it does make sense to have women in charge in an elected way.”

The Hopeful was moving downward now toward the surface of Melodia, which continued to appear dull brown. As the ship circled the planet, the computer scanner confirmed the original impression that it was mostly mud with a few islands of vegetation.

And then Jeff remembered what had happened to the Izzian ship. “Norby,” he said, “stay above the atmosphere!”

“Why?” asked Einkan. “We can’t rescue the Princess longdistance. We have to get down to the surface.”

“Yes, but first we have to decide what to do about the electronic field around the planet. The Challenger reported that it couldn’t send visible images through the field, and perhaps it is the field that has grounded the Challenger and put it out of communication altogether.”

“Ask the computer, Norby,” said Fargo. “Find out what sort of field surrounds that planet.”

“Unknown,” said Norby promptly, after plugging in. “It detects nothing that would interfere with normal ship functioning, however.”

“Then descend, descend,” cried Einkan. “We can’t go back without the Princess.”

“And we can’t get any reward without the Princess,” Fargo pointed out.

Jeff’s call for caution was voted down loudly, and he had no choice but to pilot the ship to a landing, while the others went back to their singing practice. Einkan, who was, apparently tone-deaf, sat as far away from the kettledrums as possible—which obviously wasn’t far enough for his comfort, for he held his hands over his ears and contorted his face into a mask of misery.

Jeff, still deeply disturbed, talked to Norby telepathically:

—I want you to stay in the ship, Norby. The mere fact that the field is unknown may mean it is dangerous, whatever the computer says.

—The field enters the ship, Jeff. It won’t matter whether I stay in the ship or not. The field already surrounds us, in fact, and I feel fíne. Besides, I have to go with you. Who’ll protect you if I’m not there?

—Who’ll protect me? Why, you’re just afraid to—

The computer spoke: “The largest island has a metal object on it that may be a ship.”

“I’ll head for it,” said Jeff. “It must be the Challenger.”

On its way, the Hopeful passed over smaller islands of greenery in the planetary sea of mud. Some held little wooden huts shaped like upside-down baskets. There was no sign of a technological civilization of any kind.

“Ah-ah yookh-nyem!” sang Yobo in a rolling base.

“Not that one, Admiral,” said Fargo, “‘Shenandoah’ is much more sentimentally effective, especially with my tenor singing the melody.”

“But I insist on Russian music. My African great-great grandmother was very good friends with a Russian.”

“We are approaching the main island,” said Norby. “I am checking with the ship’s computer to make certain that the strange electronic field is not affecting it or the ship. Negative, so far.”

“Excellent,” said Yobo. “All we have to do is pick up the Princess and take her back to Izz.”

“We’ll have to patch up the Challenger, too. We can’t leave its crew stranded,” said the ever practical Jeff.

“Certainly. That, too.”

“The air was breathable for the Challenger crew,” said Fargo, “but let’s double check. Norby, ask the computer—”

“My stars and gaskets, Fargo,” said Norby, “how can you treat a computer so? You know that even the dumbest ship’s computer would never allow its crew to enter an unbreathable atmosphere without the appropriate warning. If the Hopeful computer had emotive circuits, you would have hurt its feelings.”

“Look!” said Jeff.

A small ship, newer and shinier than the Izzian ships they’d seen, was lying on the ground of the island. Next to it was a dense grove of trees and inside the grove was an open space containing a bigger hut than the others.

Norby reported again. “The scanners indicate that the Challenger is inactive. Its engine and electricity are off. What’s more, the ship seems to be the only hunk of free metal on the planetary surface. There might be metal deep in the planet that could account for the inhibitory field but I don’t know what it is.”

Norby was silent for a moment. Then he said, “The scanners report there are robots in the Challenger.”

“Of course there are,” said Einkan. “Five of them, part of the crew. Where are the Izzians?”

“Not inside the ship. Only robots. And they don’t move.”

“Are they deactivated, Norby?” asked Fargo, his forehead creasing.

“No, but they’re not moving. I don’t understand it.”

“If it’s dangerous for robots down there, you must not leave the ship, Norby,” said Yobo.

“What’s the good of that?” said Norby nervously. “The Challenger is closed, yet the robots still don’t move. What’s going to happen to me?”

“Nothing at all,” said Einkan, scornfully. “The explanation is simple. The Izzians left the ship and told the robots to wait—so they’re waiting.”

“Without moving? Or trying to rescue the Izzians?” asked Fargo.

“Our robots do as they’re told,” said Einkan. “Nothing else.”

“Stupid creatures,” said Norby scornfully. “Our Terran housekeeping robots might be that stupid, but not real robots. Now I am an asset, not a liability. I have frequently rescued Jeff and others. And now I’m going to rescue a Princess.” The Hopeful was hovering over a landing spot.

“No, you’re not,” said Einkan. “I’ve been waiting for this moment. I’ve endured your manhandling until now, but no longer.” From a hidden fold of his pants he suddenly drew out a weapon. “I am now in charge. Land this ship. Then one of you can go out, get the Princess and bring her back. The rest of you will serve as hostages.”

“Ah,” said Yobo, “then when the Princess comes back, you will force us out of the ship and go back with the Princess alone, stranding us and the Challenger crew and collecting all the credit yourself…. And how do you expect to pilot this ship?”

“I will not force all of you out. Dear Albany will stay, of course, and so will that robot of yours. He can pilot the ship, and if he won’t cooperate, I can insert a wire in the same place that he does. After all, I know the coordinates of Izz. They, at least, are no mystery to me. Now quickly.”

He waved his weapon threateningly.

6

### THE SLITHERS

“Dear Einkan,” said Albany, moving closer and waggling her finger near his beard, “it is so kind of you not to want to leave me behind. And it is brave of you to face us down by yourself, but it is foolish, too. In Manhattan, we arrest people who pull guns on the police.”

“Arrest?” said Einkan, stumbling over the pronunciation, for she had used the Terran word.

“Like this!” Albany flicked her finger across the base of his nose, and when he flinched backward, she seized his gun arm. In a moment he was flat on his back, and Albany was holding his gun.

“Ouch,” he said. “That wasn’t fair. You’re just like Sergeant Luka.”

“A cop is a cop,” said Albany.

Norby, knowing Albany’s capabilities, had paid little attention to Einkan’s threats. “The scanners report life forms moving under those trees and in the mud about them,” he said.

“Land the ship,” said Yobo, grandly, “and we’ll investigate those life forms. Perhaps we will leave Einkan to get along with them in the future. He obviously can’t get along with us.”

The Hopeful sank gracefully downward on its antigrav, landing on what seemed to be a hard patch of ground next to the Challenger.

There was a sudden metallic screech from Norby.

“What’s the matter?” everyone yelled.

“Don’t yell at me,” said Norby, fiddling with the control board. “That just makes things worse. The stupid ship’s computer amplified the sound from outside too strongly, and I was tuned into it.”

“What sound?” asked Albany.

“A serenade. That’s what it sounds like. Listen.” Norby turned on the loudspeaker.

“That’s a beautiful chorus,” said Fargo. “Perfectly on key, every note. And I’ve heard that music before.”

“It’s the Izzian national anthem,” said Einkan grumpily, getting up and dusting himself off. “There are too many voices for it to be just the crew of the Challenger, which consists of two males and a female, plus the Captain—a female, of course—and our beloved Princess.”

Fargo said, “Are you speaking to us? Well, stand up and face the wall. I’m searching you for any other weapons you might have.”

“The indignity!” gasped Einkan.

“If you prefer, just take your clothes off and toss them here.”

At a loss for words, Einkan faced the wall. After a brief search Fargo said, “All right. You’ll pull no further surprises.”

Meanwhile, on the viewscreen, there was movement visible near the line of trees just in front of the two ships. Out moved a double line of orange creatures, slithering along on snail-like feet and waving what looked like old-time mops.

A closer look made it clear the mops were heads of the creatures, and the strings of the mops were tentacles. On top of each mop was an opening which moved. At the neck of each mop were two more openings, one on each side.

“They’re singing through those openings,” said Fargo. “Three to a creature. I wonder if it means that each Melodian sings with three voices—in parts.”

“You’re correct, Fargo,” said Norby. “The scanners confirm it. Do you want to open the airlock?”

“Well, we came on a rescue mission, didn’t we?” said Fargo, raising his black eyebrows at the sound of uncertainty in Norby’s voice. “Don’t tell me you think those things look dangerous.”

“I don’t think so,” said Yobo. “They don’t have enough technology to be dangerous, and the singing must be friendly since it is so beautiful. We will be friendly, too. I shall lead the way.”

Norby grabbed Jeff’s hand to speak telepathically.

—I don’t like these creatures, Jeff.

—You’d be scared of a mouse, Norby, if you’d never seen one before.

—I’m not scared. I’m just being intuitive. I don’t like their voices.

—You’re just jealous of anyone who can sing on key.

Norby tore his hand away from Jeff and spoke aloud angrily. “Go ahead, then. You humans are too stupid to recognize danger and too cowardly to dare seem like cowards. And you’re always dragging me into danger with you. Don’t think I won’t say ‘I told you so.’ Go out to those ugly Slithers, then, because that’s what they should be called. Ugh!”

“Don’t be a wet blanket, Norby,” said Fargo. “Their voices are beautiful…. But Slithers does seem a good name for them.”

As they stepped out of the airlock onto the brown soil of Melodia, Einkan’s head jerked in surprise. “Listen—can you hear it? Farther away. A soprano.”

“Umm,” said Fargo. “It’s a beautiful voice.”

“It is not merely beautiful. It is a perfect Izzian voice and it’s singing the words to our National Anthem, while these natives are not. It must be the voice of the Crown Princess.” Einkan’s voice shook with excitement.

Fargo said, “It does seem as if the Slithers are not singing words at all, only musical notes and chords. Maybe they have no language other than musical sounds. With my absolute pitch, I should be able to learn such a musical language easily.”

“Well, go ahead and try,” said Yobo, “but in the meantime, I suggest we march briskly, heads up, chins out, between the rows of Slithers to the place where the Crown Princess is. Onward, troops!”

Einkan, paying no attention—or perhaps stimulated by the nearness of his Princess—dashed ahead and disappeared into the trees.

Fargo shrugged his shoulders and said, “Let him go. If he gets into trouble, it won’t bother me a bit.”

Jeff marched along with Norby, worried about the little robot’s anger and about his intuition of danger from the Slithers. Surely, he thought, such danger wasn’t likely. The Slithers were small and fragile, had no visible weapons, no clothes to hide them in, and no sign of hostility. There were just the spherical orange bodies, the brown snail feet, and the mop-heads on top.

The Terrans came to a clearing where there was a large and solid wooden fence. They turned and walked beside the fence until they came to an opening, through which they could see another fence, made of lattice-work. Its door was not open.

The little Slithers chirped musically and changed their tune to something resembling a baroque symphony with emphasis on the horns. They scampered ahead and sang to the door. Instantly, an orange wave of additional Slithers poured out of the narrow passage between the two fences. The new Slithers sang to the first group, who sang back. Then they swarmed to the inner door, did something to open it, and clustered on each side of the gateway, bowing and singing to the Terrans.

“Perhaps,” said Jeff, “we should peek inside and find out what’s in there before we go charging forward.”

“There are humans in there,” said Norby. “I think five, according to my scanners.”

“According to Einkan, there were five Izzians on board the Challenger, and if he got there, that makes six,” said Fargo.

Yobo said, “Jeff, you and Norby go back to the ship. It was stupid of me not to leave someone on guard. I was mesmerized by the singing.”

“I don’t think that can be done without a bit of trouble,” said Jeff. He pointed to their rear where a clot of Slithers had completely filled the path, blocking the exit through the first fence.

“I told you so,” Norby said in a very low voice.

The Slithers waved their mop-heads and bowed. Then they fell silent. When none of the Terrans responded, they sang—a rising passage that sounded as though it might be a question.

“Do they want to know what we want?” asked Yobo.

“They obviously don’t understand our language any more than we understand theirs,” said Fargo. “Maybe we aren’t fulfilling a courtesy ritual.”

“That’s it,” said Albany. “They must want us to sing back.”

“Harrumph,” said Yobo, clearing his throat. His deep voice then rolled out as he sang to the tune of The Volga Boatmen, “We-ee greet thee; we-ee come here; we come only in peace; we-ee greet thee.”

The Slithers turned brighter orange and rocked back and forth on their lower extremities. As the Admiral continued, Fargo’s tenor joined in harmoniously and the Slithers appeared to sway in ecstasy. When Albany and Jeff added their voices, the Slithers were clearly delirious with joy.

Jeff could hear the soprano voice in the distance, with Izzian words rising high and clear, making itself heard above all other sounds: “Don’t be dumb, now; have a care, now; don’t you move through the fence; stay outside, now.”

Jeff stopped singing and looked at the others to see if the words had registered, but they appeared to be mesmerized by their own voices. The Slithers joined in, singing a multitude of parts and even Jeff got so caught up in the symphony of perfectly blended voices that he forgot the soprano’s words.

The singing came to a natural end and, at its conclusion, Yobo, and then the others, bowed low. In response, the Slithers sang The Volga Boatmen softly and very simply, but without words. They then repeated it, adding trills, transposing the key, and introducing intricate modulations. Yobo continued to bow, smiling broadly.

Fargo nudged Jeff. “The Admiral will be insufferable after this. He’ll insist on rowing those boatmen into the music contest.”

“It’s not fair,” shouted Norby. “Everyone sings but me.” And he launched into his own peculiar version of the Space Cadets’ marching song.

The Slithers made a queer hissing noise, drew back, turned chartreuse, and waved their tentacles wildly.

“Norby, you’re off key as usual,” said Fargo, “and they don’t like it. If we’re going to be diplomatic, we mustn’t offend the natives, so shut up.”

Fargo then sang a few bars of a melting love song, hoping it would restore their good humor, and since they all promptly turned orange again, he assumed it did.

One of the little Slithers handed Fargo what looked like a blue fruit. Norby poked at it and said in a sulky voice, “If I had my way, I’d let them poison you insulting human beings, but my circuits make it necessary to protect you instead. And you can believe me when I tell you this object is safe to eat.”

“It’s bland but edible,” pronounced Fargo, sampling the fruit. “On to dinner and to the Princess.”

The Terrans were each given fruit, even Norby, but he tossed his aside. The others made various polite sounds indicating pleasure and, almost absently, stepped through the door. Norby gloomily followed.

The door shut behind them, and the soprano voice came in four angry notes, each higher in pitch than the one before, “You id-i-ots!”

It was Jeff who first realized they were in a cage. Surrounding them was the lattice-work fence, and above them was a roof of bars. The openings in the fence and ceiling were too small for any of them—even Norby—to pass through.

Off to the left was a door to a smaller cage, with solid walls and roof. At the farthest end of the main cage was a section of roof that bulged upward to accommodate a small but particularly beautiful tree with a short thick trunk and long leaves that shone silver on one side and gold on the other.

Einkan emerged from the smaller cage on the left. He was followed by four Izzians in tattered uniforms. Einkan’s expression was one of misery. “The Princess tried to warn you not to come in, but you didn’t listen.”

“Silence!” The word was a loud whisper from the tallest Izzian, whose gold braid had a faint gleam of copper thread across one shoulder of her shimmering nightshirt-like uniform. She had long, braided black hair and she was obviously angry. “I am Captain Erig. You must either sing or whisper. Apparently the little creatures cannot hear you whisper. If you speak loudly enough to be heard—speak, that is, not sing—they will sting you until you stop.”

“The Slithers will sting us?” said Jeff, astonished.

“Shh. Not so loud. Yes, those tentacles hurt badly, and there are millions of them.”

“I told you so!” shouted Norby. “I told you so. And I don’t care if they sting me. I won’t feel it.”

Several Slithers squirmed through the bars into the cage and made slowly for Norby, who retired into his barrel.

“Fascinating,” whispered Fargo. “The Slithers have such perfect pitch that the random noise of speech must hurt their eardrums, or whatever they hear with.”

Albany pointed at the Slithers who were swarming over Norby and flicking at the steel of his body with their tentacles. “Look,” she whispered, “their brown feet are turning orange.”

The Slithers soon gave up their attack on Norby and moved away, leaving oily marks on him. Jeff wiped him off carefully with his hankerchief, which he then threw away, suspecting that the oil would sting on contact with his skin. He picked up Norby and tucked him under his arm.

“Notice that their feet are covered with brown mud,” whispered Fargo. “When the mud dries, it flakes off, exposing the orange beneath. You can see the flaking if you look.”

“The Slithers forage in the mud of this planet,” whispered Captain Erig. “I imagine that their ancestors lived in the seas that formerly covered Melodia and that they evolved to this form as the seas dried up.”

“And we think they are as ugly as mud,” said the other female crew member. The two males—one old, one young—nodded and groaned.

“Where is the Princess?” asked Yobo in as near a whisper as his bass voice could produce.

A ripple of silvery laughter echoed in the cage, and the Terrans spun around looking for the source. There was no one else in sight.

“Silly idiots,” came the soprano voice, not bothering to whisper. “A fine rescue party you are. I recognize Einkan, but who are these others, especially that handsome one with the curly brown hair, the one carrying a barrel?”

“Me?” asked Jeff out loud and in surprise, becase no woman had ever before noticed him when his handsome brother was around. “Ouch,” he yelled as a Slither stung him with one of its tentacles. It did hurt. It hurt a lot. He rubbed his hand, then whispered, “But where is she?”

“There,” whispered Captain Erig. “The tree. That’s the Princess. At least, that was the Princess.”

7

### THE TREE PRINCESS

The soprano voice rang out imperiously. “Don’t think for a minute that this was the Princess. This is the Princess. I am still Princess Rinda whatever I look like, and you will all still obey my orders!”

The voice was accompanied by an ominous rustling sound as it said, sharply. “You, come here at once!”

Jeff saw the leaves of the silvery-gold tree moving. “Do you mean me?” His voice quavered a bit.

“Of course she means you,” Yobo said in a deep whisper. “Get over there.”

Jeff walked over to the tree, but drew back a step as a branch reached out to touch his hair.

“No braids,” the voice said. “In questionable, if not illegal, taste.” And now Jeff saw that there were speaking apertures near the base of each major limb. “Who are you?”

“I’m Jeff Wells. I’m sorry that I must whisper, but I don’t want to be stung. The dark-haired man with blue eyes.is my brother, Fargo. The woman in the blue uniform is Albany Jones, a police officer, and our leader is Admiral Boris Yobo, the tallest and biggest, the one with medals on his chest.”

“Ridiculous. Leaders are always female. This Albany Jones is your leader.”

“Hear, hear,” said Albany in a loud voice, followed immediately by “Ow!” as she rubbed the sting on her ankle.

“You speak Izzian abominably. Where are you people from?”

“The island of Manhattan, a self-governing member of the Federation.”

“And where is this Federation? What part of Izz dares to set itself apart from my mother’s glorious Queendom?”

“We are not part of Izz, Your Highness.”

Einkan moved quickly to Jeff’s side and bowed low. “Your Highness,” he whispered. “I have come to rescue you. I had to commandeer the ship of these—uh—insignificant aliens because my second hyperdrive ship was not yet read—”

“All this is your fault, Einkan,” said the tree. “You must have programmed the coordinates for this accursed planet into the ship’s computer. You wanted me stranded here so that you could gain power and wealth out of my misfortune.”

“But, Princess, you insisted! I begged you not to—”

“Silence, wretch!”

“He didn’t invent the ship,” Jeff whispered urgently, “he found it with the coordinates for this world already in its computer. He doesn’t know how to make or use a hyperdrive engine, but we do. We will rescue you and return you to Izz.”

“And just how are you going to do that, Handsome? You are trapped inside a cage and I am trapped inside this tree.”

“We’ll get out somehow, and get you out of the tree.”

The tree began to sound as if it were crying.

Captain Erig tapped Jeff’s arm. “Don’t upset her,” she whispered. “You can’t get her out of the tree, because she is the tree.”

“What!”

“The Slithers fed the Princess to the tree. She’s part of it now.”

The tree cried harder, while the Terrans looked stunned. Jeff could feel Norby, inside his barrel, bounce a little in his arms.

“Why are you carrying that barrel?” whispered Captain Erig. “Is there anything in it that can help us escape?”

“Certainly,” said Norby, popping his head up. “I am an escape expert.”

“Whisper,” whispered Captain Erig.

“I don’t want to,” said Norby. “Besides, I can’t.”

Jeff put Norby on the ground hastily, just in time to keep a bunch of Slithers from stinging his legs as they moved toward the little robot. Norby used his antigrav to take himself to a branch of the tree, out of the reach of the Slithers.

“Get this peculiar robot off my branch,” said the Princess. “I am the sacred tree of Melodia, in addition to being the Crown Princess Rinda.”

Norby rose higher until he floated just under the top of the cage. The Slithers scuttled back to their guard positions along the edges of the cage, and Norby sank slowly into Jeff’s arms.

Yobo strode over to Captain Erig, who was as tall as he. The high Slavic cheekbones under his dark skin made him look impressively handsome as he smiled.

She smiled, too.

He whispered, “Captain, please tell us everything you can about this planet and our position here.”

“There isn’t a great deal to tell. The Challenger brought us here on our first stop through hyperspace. We had no control over the direction the ship took. When we saw it was an inhabited planet, with a breathable atmosphere, it seemed natural to land and explore. The Princess was charmed by the musical ability of the natives, and we came to this area for a feast and a concert, during which the Princess gave an impressive recital—”

“You bet I did,” sang the Tree Princess.

“The Slithers didn’t sting us at first, or we’d have retreated to the Challenger, but after we’d eaten and sung, we found ourselves surrounded and vastly outnumbered. They began to sting us each time we’d speak instead of sing or whisper, and then they forced us into this cage. After they had fed the Princess to the tree, we tried desperately to kill them, but we couldn’t. There are too many of them, and if you touch one, it stings and the rest come to sting, too. And if that isn’t enough, they attack vocally.”

“Vocally?” asked Yobo.

“Thousands of Slithers singing in unison at the top of their triple voices can stupefy anyone with the vibration. The Princess says there are Slithers on each of the small islands, and that they communicate from island to island through vocal vibrations. She says they are all converging on this central island in order to hear the newcomers sing. I hope you do it well, because it keeps them in a good mood and then they will continue to feed us.”

“What’s the food like?”

Erig grimaced. “Only their fruits and vegetables are fit to eat. The animal food they served us was worm-like creatures they find in the mud and they serve them raw since they have no fire.”

“Horrible,” rumbled the shocked Yobo aloud, who was promptly stung.

Norby popped out of Jeff’s arms, sank to the ground, and extruded his legs. “I’m bigger than any Slither,” he announced loudly, “and I will rescue all of you. They can’t sting me.”

Ten Slithers rushed to Norby and whipped him with their tentacles. Norby elevated at once on his antigrav, screeching metallically. “That’s not fair,” he yelled. “They found out they couldn’t sting me the usual way, so they’re using electric shocks. They could disorganize my microcircuits.”

“Well, then,” whispered Fargo, “stay in the air, you idiot, where they can’t get at you. And if you have a plan for rescuing us, get started at once.—No,” he added, with a rather uncharacteristic attack of caution, “tell us your plan first.”

“It’s simple,” said Norby. “I will go into hyperspace and re-emerge on the outside of the cage. Then, with the Hopeful, I’ll smash this whole building, including the cage, and we can all go back to Izz.”

“And what about me,” said the tree.

“Oh, yes, I forgot—I mean, I was just coming to you. We’ll dig you up and get you back to Izz with us.”

“And I,” said Einkan, slapping his chest, “will work on the problem of restoring you to human form.”

“Shut up, Einkan,” said the Princess. “Listen, you’re likely to kill the tree if you dig it up, and that means killing me. It will then be perpetual plurf for all of you, so think of something better at once!”

Jeff said, “Whatever we do depends on Norby being out of here and using the Hopeful to smash the Slithers. After that we can decide on the next step. So—go ahead, Norby.”

They all waited for Norby to disappear.

He didn’t.

“Oh, that thing can’t help me. No one can help me,” cried the Princess, rustling her branches. “If I’m going to be here all my life, you’re going to have to stay here with me. Don’t any of you dare be rescued without me.”

Then she was silent, too, and they continued to wait for Norby to disappear. In the silence, Jeff became aware of the incessant soft humming of the Slithers. It was getting on his nerves.

The Princess spoke again, “The Slithers are getting impatient.”

“How do you know?” asked Fargo.

“Because the tree tells me so. It’s the sacred tree, and the Slithers don’t dare touch it. That’s why I can talk instead of whisper. I’ve got at least that much.” She sniffled. “At least I can talk like an Izzian. I don’t have to whisper.”

“How does the tree tell you?”

“The tree understands the musical communication of the Slithers and, and when it understands, somehow I do, too. I’m part of the tree. For instance, the Slithers are getting impatient because they want you new Izzoid people to give them a concert, and they want to take your nasty robot and bury him deep in the mud.”

“Nasty!” Norby’s eyes opened to their widest.

“Certainly, you’re nasty,” said the tree. “You said something about going into hyperspace and you’re still here. You and your big talk about rescue. You’re good for nothing.”

“I’m good for more than a talking tree is,” Norby said indignantly.

“No, you’re not,” said the tree. “Can you sing like this?” She opened several more flaps in the odd snaky bark and proceeded to sing with several voices at once, all of them a high soprano. She accompanied herself by violin-like sounds from her branches.

The Slithers joined in so loudly that further whispered conversation was impossible. Jeff reached up to take Norby’s hand and they spoke telepathically.

—Norby, what’s the matter? Why didn’t you move into hyperspace? Do it now and take me with you. We can at least rescue the humans and then decide what to do with the Princess.

—We can’t.

—Why not?

—I’ve failed.

—Are you out of energy? Didn’t you refuel in hyperspace?

—Yes, but my supply won’t last forever.

—All the more reason to get into hyperspace. Come on—

—I can’t get into hyperspace. This inhibitory field prevents me. If you and I were in the Hopeful, we could go into space at sub-light speeds till we were far enough away to be outside the field, and then we could move into hyperspace. But we can’t get to the Hopeful.

—Come on, Norby. Use your brain. Get beyond the field by your own antigrav.

—Use your own brain, Jeff. How do I get out of this cage to do that?

—Oh, my goodness!

The two looked at each other helplessly.

8

### BEFORE MELODIA

The others listened to Jeff’s whispered explanation of Norby’s failure, and the atmosphere became unrelieved gloom. Even the arrival of a meal of assorted vegetables did not cheer them up. The vegetables did not taste terrible, to be sure, but neither did they taste good.

“Trying to digest this food while pondering imprisonment is upsetting my gastro-intestinal system,” said Admiral Yobo, examining a twisted rootlike item that crunched like celery and tasted like oysters.

“Nothing upsets your gastro-intestinal system, Admiral,” whispered Fargo.

“Talking about a gastro-intestinal system,” whispered Albany, “what do you mean, Captain Erig, about the Princess having been fed to tree. Does it eat?”

“Yes,” whispered the Captain. “There is a large opening at the top of the trunk where it splits into two main branches.”

The tree leaned forward as the Captain spoke and the two branches parted.

“Ugh,” whispered Albany, “how terrible to be stuffed in there.”

“Yes,” trilled the tree. “The Slithers stunned us all with vibrations and then they lifted me up, a whole lot of them, sort of standing one on top of another, and shoved me in. I couldn’t stop them.”

“I’m glad it didn’t kill you,” whispered Yobo.

“Maybe, but now I’m part of the tree, and that’s hardly any better. The tree has to eat animal protein every so often to stay healthy. Usually they feed it worms. Sometimes a Slither or two jumps into it. But this time they used me to feed it.”

Albany whispered, “Why you? Why not one of the other Izzians?”

There was a moment of silence and then the tree said, “Because I’m the Princess. I’m the most beautiful.” She broke into shrill sobs. ‘I’ll just never be rescued.”

The gloom got worse. “I wish I had a pair of earplugs,” whispered Yobo. “This perpetual singing by the Slithers is getting to me.”

Captain Erig whispered, “It’s a little better at night when they crawl into the mud. It gets quiet then, and you can sleep. I hope none of you snore, though. That would wake them and make them irritable.”

“Well,” whispered Yobo, dubiously, “I’ll try not to snore.”

“Uh-oh,” whispered Erig. “The Slithers are approaching again. They may expect you newcomers to sing. If so, you’d better do it.”

“Well,” whispered Fargo, “we’ll be able to run through our songs for the contest back home, and it will be a pleasure not to have to whisper for a while. After a while, whispering rasps the throat somehow.”

They did sing. Albany and Fargo sang a romantic duet from an old musical; Jeff sang a short marching song of the Cadets; and Yobo pleased the natives immensely with his rendition of “Spacemen All to the Fray” in deep bass Martian Swahili.

The singing didn’t stop Jeff from worrying about Norby, however, who was still tightly closed in his barrel. Was he getting weaker?

“I envy your robot,” whispered the other female Izzian, during a pause in the singing, “She can close out the noise.”

“She’s a he,” whispered Jeff morosely.

“That’s impossible. All robots are ‘she’.”

“Not where I come from.”

She sniffed, possibly in disbelief, and moved away from Jeff—and closer to Fargo. That might have been accidental, but Jeff didn’t think so. The older Izzian male scowled but looked too tired to object.

The younger Izzian male whispered to Jeff, “There’s a latrine in a little side cage over there. You can wash at a small pool in the corner, but don’t stir up the mud too much. There’s a spring of fresh water from that rock by the sacred tree. It seems to be safe to drink.”

“Thanks,” said Jeff. It was his turn to sing again, and he hesitated over his choice until a branch of the sacred tree reached over and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Sing a love song,” demanded the Princess. “I will join in after I hear it once.”

Jeff decided on “When You’re Your True Love’s True Love,” a song hit of about five years before, which he translated into Izzian as he sang it. The Slithers seemed delighted. So was the Princess. She joined in the second time around.

“My true love,” sighed Rinda, her leaves a-quiver, “perhaps he has arrived.”

As the daylight began to disappear into darkness, there was general exhaustion among the group of prisoners, and they all lay down on woven-leaf mats provided for them.

Fargo, still unconcerned about their imprisonment, was sleepily enthusiastic over the musical possibilities of Melodia. “Think of it—a gigantic cantata—or perhaps I could train them to do opera—amazing how they all have perfect pitch—miracles of counterpoint—intricately perfect—”

“We’d have to get out of this predicament first,” grumbled Yobo. “And dissonance has its musical value, too.”

“Don’t mention dissonance,” whispered Erig. “It means stings.”

Jeff could think only of Norby. Even after falling asleep, he dreamed that Norby was permanently closed in his barrel, and he woke in a fright. Could that be true? Norby hadn’t answered his last few telepathic contacts. He had to try again. The barrel was by his side and Jeff had an arm over it.

—Norby?

—Hello, Jeff. Are the Slithers asleep?

A wave of relief swept over Jeff.

—Why didn’t you answer before, Norby?

—I was pretending to be non-existent so the Slithers wouldn’t bury me in the mud. I don’t want to be buried, Jeff.

—You won’t be. Are you all right otherwise?

—Of course, I’m not all right. I’m a failure.

—You are not. You’re my friend and I have faith in you.

—You do, Jeff?

—Yes. You’re very smart. You’ve proved that over and over.

—Thank you, Jeff. I will try to be intelligent. I will spend the rest of the night thinking hard.

—Good, wake me anytime, especially if you come up with a solution.

Jeff turned over, placed his other arm about the little barrel, and fell asleep.

Jeff woke just before dawn feeling oddly refreshed. It seemed to him that he had dreamed a solution.

Some of the Slithers were coming out of the mud, and he could hear their humming in the distance. The other Terrans and the Izzians were alseep. Suddenly he had an inspiration. He rubbed the barrel and said telepathically,

—I’ve got the solution, Norby. If we can’t move out of space into hyperspace, we can move out of this portion of normal space by going back in time. Let’s go back to a time before this cage was built. Then we can move half a mile away, come back to the present and, presto! we’re outside the cage.

—I thought of that, Jeff, but suppose the planet’s field stops my time travel ability as well as my hyperspace travel. I couldn’t bear a second failure.

—I’m suggesting it, Norby, so if it fails, it’s my failure, not yours. We’ll never know unless we try. And take me with you.

Norby’s half a head emerged from his barrel and, in the dim light of dawn, Jeff could see the robot’s eyes open and gleaming. One arm emerged.

—Hang on tightly, Jeff, so my personal protection field keeps us both in a bubble of normal conditions.

Nothing happened. The Slithers sounded louder and nearer.

—Think, Norby. Think of going back into the past.

—I can’t, Jeff. It won’t work.

—We have to try harder. Let’s both think.

They shut their eyes and concentrated. Suddenly there was absolute silence. Jeff opened his eyes.

—Norby, where are we?

—I’m not sure.

They seemed to be floating in a dark cloud, but Jeff couldn’t tell what kind it was. At least Norby’s personal protective shield gave Jeff breathable air—for as long as the supply inside the shield would last.

—Did we get above Melodia, Norby?

—Jeff, there’s no planet here. We’re in space and I think this is one of those clouds of dust and gas that lie between the stars.

—How did we get between the stars?

—I think it’s because we went billions of years into the past, and Melodia’s sun and planetary system haven’t formed yet.

Billions of years into the past? A few hundred would have been enough.

—I know Jeff. I just got mixed-up again. I’m sorry.

—No, no, Norby. I told you. It’s my idea and anything that goes wrong is my fault. At least we’re out of the cage. Am I right, or is the cloud thicker over in that direction?

—You’re right, Jeff. My sensors tell me that a star is forming there. Melodia’s sun, I suppose. It hasn’t ignited yet.

—When will that happen?

—I can’t say. Maybe a million years or so. And, Jeff, there’s something strange in the direction opposite to that in which the star is forming. Whatever it is, it gives rise to the same strange electronic field that came from Melodia. There’s something there.

—Maybe it is Melodia.

—It can’t be. The planet hasn’t formed yet. The object is only a few thousand miles away. I’m heading over there. Hang on, Jeff.

There was no sensation of speed, but it took only a few minutes for Norby to cross the void that separated them and the source of the field.

—Look, it’s a spaceship, Jeff.

Jeff saw it straight ahead. Judging from the size of its partially dilated round door, the entire ship must have been as big as the island of Manhattan. It had no lights.

—Is it dead, Norby?

—Not if the inhibitory field is being generated by it. Shall we go in?

—Yes. Perhaps it’s a ship of the Others. I won’t be able to see anything in the dark, though.

—I’ll use my sensors, Jeff, and describe things to you.

There was no artificial gravity in the ship, but beyond the first two compartments inside the door there was still a breathable atmosphere, according to Norby’s sensors. Cautiously, Norby lowered his personal protective screen. The air seemed stale but with enough oxygen.

All the corridors were tubular, and the adjoining rooms were filled with strange, silent equipment that seemed dead. Phosphorescent paint spotted the walls in odd patterns bright enough to enable Jeff to see a little.

Jeff felt himself to be almost in a dream as he was pulled by Norby through the long tubes whose shining patterns undulated in different colors. The patterns seemed to be giving a message that no one was left to read.

9

### THE STRANGER ON THE SHIP

“It’s a relief not to have to depend on your protective field, Norby,” Jeff said. “I mean, it’s wonderful to have it, but it’s nice to have a less limited supply of air to breathe. And it’s wonderful to be able to talk without having to worry about being stung.”

“We’ll need my screen again when we leave the ship, you know.”

“I know. Do you think this is a ship left by the Others, Norby?”

“No, I’m pretty sure it isn’t. Judging from the ship left by the Others on Jamya, it isn’t built in their style. They used corridors like ours, with artificial gravity.”

“Without artificial gravity, I suppose you’d want tubular corridors and spherical rooms,” Jeff said. “It wouldn’t matter which way is up. The aliens of this ship may have been space travelers for so long that they’ve evolved into creatures without the ability to live under gravity conditions.”

“I’ve sensed no aliens, Jeff; not even anything like a robot. I don’t sense any intelligence, not even devices that might be watching us and recording what we do. The ship seems unguarded and I think it’s empty.”

“But what happened to the occupants?”

“I don’t know. Of course, we’re still miles from the other end of the ship and we don’t know where the control rooms are. That’s where the field must come from. Maybe we’ll find out more about the aliens there.”

They moved on carefully as Norby propelled himself and Jeff through corridors that wound on and on like snakes that had eaten a robot and a boy without digesting them.

Suddenly Norby shot through a round door into a huge spherical chamber. Here, Jeff’s eyesight failed altogether, for there were no phosphorescent patterns on the wall. “What a pity,” he said. “Maybe this part is so old that the phosphoresence faded away.”

Norby said, “I don’t think there ever were any of those markings here. I hate to use my light, Jeff, because my energy supply is low. And as long as the inhibitory field is being generated I can’t get into hyperspace. Just the same, there are no Slithers to keep us from moving outside the field whenever we need to, so I’ll take the chance.”

His little light gleamed and barely pierced the darkness. He and Jeff drifted through cavernous space until Norby almost jerked Jeff’s arm from its socket as he pulled back.

“A force barrier!” cried Norby. “Invisible, and protecting—that.”

What Norby was pointing to was an enormous metal ball in the exact center of the chamber. They could approach it no closer, being held off by a powerful force they could feel but not see.

“The inhibitory field sent out by the ship comes from that ball,” said Norby, “and so does the force barrier. The ball seems to contain machinery to create both and—yes—” Norby paused, his sensor wire quivering as it projected out of his hat. “The ball is also shielded by tons of metal treated in some way I can’t make out. And Jeff—”

Norby’s hat slammed down abruptly, closing his head inside his barrel. His hand let go of Jeff’s and his whole arm disappeared into the barrel, too.

Jeff thumped Norby. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Norby’s hat went up part way, his eyes peeping over the edge of the barrel. He said in a tiny voice, “I just detected something else in this room. Something that’s thinking

Jeff looked around but could see nothing. “Is it in the ball?”

“I don’t know.”

Jeff was hanging by himself in the air of the circular room. He tried swimming motions to maneuver around the ball, outside the force barrier, so that he could examine the entire room. Norby followed him timorously, shining his light.

After much effort, they made it to the other side of the ball but saw nothing.

“I think it’s following us, Jeff. It keeps the ball between us so we can’t see it, and I can’t scan it.”

“It must be as afraid of us as you are of it, Norby, so let’s split up. I’ll go one way and you go the other. If either one sees anything, he yells for the other.”

They parted and started in opposite directions around the ball, watching it. As Norby and his light moved away, Jeff could see less and less. Jeff had almost decided that his inability to see made the whole project useless, when he heard Norby yell.

“Help, Jeff!”

Frantically, Jeff propelled himself toward Norby, although not very rapidly, for the method of propulsion was clumsy. Norby was jiggling up and down in midair—except that there wasn’t any true up or down in the room.

“Here I am, Norby. What’s the matter?”

“There!” Norby sucked his head in and out. “Peeking around the ball at us!”

Jeff glimpsed something—an eye? two eyes?—before whatever it was drew back behind the ball. It occurred to him that in a gravity-free room, two hunters were not enough to trap their prey since it could always move at right angles to the direction in which the hunters were moving away from each other. It would take at least three hunters to pin it down.

“Hey!” shouted Jeff, “come out, come out wherever you are!”

Nothing appeared.

“I doubt if it understands us,” said Jeff.

“Maybe it’s dangerous,” quavered Norby. “I don’t like it here, Jeff. Let’s go home.”

“We can’t go home! We’ve got to get back to Melodia, remember? And you’ve got to get away from this inhibitory field and into hyperspace to refuel. How weak are you?”

“I’m still strong enough to get us out of here, past the field. But I won’t be for much longer. We can’t afford to get trapped in here.”

“Just one more try,” said Jeff. “I’ll speak in Izzian.—Stranger, reveal yourself. We are friends.”

“Friends?” said a small high voice in a form of Izzian. “I do not know you. I have never seen creatures like you before. How is it you speak the language of the Others?”

“We are friendly. We speak your language because we have visited two planets where the Others, or robots left by them, taught their language to those they found or settled there.”

Then from around the giant ball a small object appeared. It was a metal ball slightly smaller than Norby, with a bulge in one place. On the bulge were three eyes remarkably similar to those of the robots of Jamya, the world of the dragons. The little ball turned and Jeff could see three more eyes on the other side of the bulge.

As he watched, little arms similar to those of Norby emerged from dilated openings as the small robot came closer.

“Is it true? Are you connected with the Others?”

Norby, who had suddenly gained courage as he found himself the larger of the two, said, “My friend here has never seen the Others. Neither have I, but some of my inner workings were made by robots left by the Others on a planet named Jamya.”

“A planet? I have never seen a planet, but I will be part of one some day.”

“What are you?” asked Jeff.

“Who are you is the better question,” said the robot. “You seem to be a protoplasmic creature. I have heard of such. In fact, the Others may be protoplasmic.”

“Then you have never seen the Others either?” Jeff asked.

“No. They activated me by remote control after they visited this ship.”

“Are you still in touch with the Others?” asked Jeff eagerly.

“No. They activated me in such a way that I came equipped with memory banks full of instructions for my job, and some data to explain how I got here. But nothing gives me any information about the Others. Tell me, who are you, protoplasmic one? You ask me for information, but you give none. That is scarcely polite.”

“I’m sorry,” said Jeff. “I got excited when I thought we had finally met someone who might have seen the Others. I am indeed protoplasmic. I am Jeff Wells from a planet circling a star far, far away. This is my robot, Norby. We are attempting to rescue some of our friends who are in trouble.” Jeff cautiously refrained from saying that the friends were separated from him in time rather than in space. Then he asked, “What is your name?”

“I am female in personality, and I am called Perceiver. I watch and record and wait.”

“For the return of the Others?”

“No, they will not be back. The original makers of this alien ship will not be back, either. They are apparently a very old species who travel from galaxy to galaxy, leaving ships like this behind…. Perhaps only a very few per galaxy, for this is a very expensive and difficult operation.”

“But what and why are you observing?” asked Jeff. “And what is the purpose of this ship?”

The little robot waved her arms. “The ship is to become the nucleus of a planet. Soon a star will form the dust cloud in this area of space and its stellar wind will sweep away most of the gas and dust. The larger pieces remaining behind will come together about the ship, and after millions of years, will form a planet.”

“But the ship will be crushed.”

“The ship will, but not that structure,” said the robot, pointing to the huge ball. “At least it’s not supposed to. It is protected by treated metal and a force barrier. Its purpose is to produce an inhibitory field that will make hypertravel almost impossible.”

“You mean the builders of this ship want to construct planets from which any intelligences that evolve will not easily be able to leave, except the slow way through normal space?”

“I think so, but I do not know why. Nevertheless, I have recorded much already, and I will continue to record much, much more as the new star ignites and as the planet begins to shape itself.”

“But that might take as long as a million years,” said Jeff, “and in the end, you’ll be crushed as the planet forms. What good will that do the Others? How will they get your information?”

“This way,” said the robot, opening a section of her middle. “Inside here is a small package of equipment recording all I observe. The package has a neutralizing device that permits it to enter hyperspace at once in spite of the inhibiting field. Where it goes after that, I do not know. I cannot follow. I am not equipped to enter hyperspace.”

“Then you’ll be crushed?”

“As soon as this package enters hyperspace and the ship is crushed, I will die and become an infinitesimal part of the planet that will form. Surely that will be a noble end.”

“And the planet will be Melodia,” said Jeff in a low voice, “complete with its inhibiting field.”

“I do not understand,” said Perceiver.

“It is not important. Will you come with us? It isn’t right that you should wait here alone for so many ages, only to be crushed in the end.”

“It is my job,” said Perceiver. “Would you have me not do my job? That would be inconceivable. Please go.”

Norby plucked at Jeff’s sleeve. “Yes, let’s go now. I must get out into hyperspace—”

“Yes, Norby, we’re going—But, Perceiver, don’t put us in your record. We do not wish to be included.”

“I record only conditions of the formation of stars and planets. You will not be included. However, it has been pleasant to meet other beings and to communicate. I will be able to exercise my brain thinking about you and making songs about you.”

“Songs?” asked Norby and Jeff simultaneously.

“I like to sing.” Then Perceiver demonstrated. Her music was soft and sweet and sad, with a sound unlike anything they had heard on Melodia. Jeff liked it.

“Though I hate to leave you alone here, Perceiver, I know you feel you must do your job. I will remember you.”

“Come on, Jeff,” said Norby, pulling at his arm. “Goodbye, Perceiver. You’re doing a job no one else could do. I congratulate you.”

“Thank you. Your words mean much to me. Goodbye.”

As he and Norby sped through the ship toward the exit, Jeff found himself brooding.

“It’s wrong,” he said. “Wrong of the Others to leave a robot here alone to die, especially one with emotive circuits, one who can feel as well as think.”

“Still,” said Norby, “they must have had a reason. The future may in some way depend upon the recordings that Perceiver is making. Therefore we couldn’t have taken her away now without changing the future, perhaps much for the worse. Yet I, too, wish it were not so, for she is a robot very like me, and I don’t want her to die, either.”

Norby activated his personal protective shield for Jeff as they left the air-filled corridors behind. Soon they were outside the ship, speeding as fast as possible away from the field preventing Norby from entering hyperspace, the dimension that makes it possible to bypass the speed-of-light limit to travel in ordinary space.

—Past the field, Jeff. I can go into hyperspace now. Hang on!

10

### OUT OF THE PAST

The grayness of hyperspace enclosed Jeff. Now there was no ship to keep him safely in a bubble of normal space. There was only Norby’s protective field, which was invisible, so that Jeff felt utterly lost, surrounded by opague gray.

Nothing was up, nothing was down, nothing was here, nothing was there—and how long would the nothingness last? Jeff didn’t know how long it took Norby to refuel in hyperspace, for the robot had done it alone before. Inside this nothingness beyond nothingness, was it possible to tell how much time was passing? Or did time pass? Jeff had no answers.

A feeling of panic engulfed him when he began to wonder if the meager supply of oxygen trapped inside Norby’s personal field would last. He realized that he was panting anxiously, using up the oxygen supply that much more quickly.

“I’ve got to use one of the meditation techniques that Fargo taught me years ago,” Jeff said to himself, and felt another wave of panic when he heard no sound, not even inside his throat, and could not see his own body. Hyperspace had never frightened him so much before.

He forced himself to breathe quietly, his facial muscles shaped into a calming smile. He relaxed his feet, his legs and arms, his body and neck. Ignoring the awful feeling that he had lost the entire Universe, he said his solstice litany:

“I am part of the Universe, part of life. I am a Terran creature, from the life that evolved on Earth.” He stopped and changed the rest to fit the situation. “No matter how far away I am from Earth in space and time, I will remember her. I will respect all life and know that we are all part of the Oneness. Whatever danger I am in, the Universe is One.”

He felt calm, and then something squeezed his hand. He remembered he was holding onto Norby in the loneliness of hyperspace, and then the robot’s telepathic thought came to him with piercing clarity.

—That was good, Jeff. It made me feel better, too.

—You’re okay?

—I’m all refueled, in perfect working order, and ready to go.

—Let’s go forward in time. I’ve decided that I want to rescue Pera. She’s part of life, too. At least she is alive to me, just as you are, Norby.

—Pera is a good name for her. Small and feminine, as she is. I also don’t like to think of her being crushed, but what if rescue changes the future somehow?

—I hope it won’t if we do it right. We’ll go back inside the alien ship and time-travel up to the moment when the planet is forming but before the ship is being crushed. That’s when Pera will send out her packet of information. She will fulfill her mission, so the future of that won’t be changed. Her mass will be missing from the planet once it forms, but that’s insignificant.

—Good thinking, Jeff. I’m glad we’re going back. I like her.

With a sudden internal jolt, Norby took them out of hyperspace and plunged so fast toward the huge ship with Jeff in tow, that when they entered the door and got inside the first air-filled corridor, Jeff was gasping for breath.

“Whoa!” said Jeff. “Let me think. I guess this is going to be more dangerous than I thought. We’ve got to move forward in time to the point when the planet is forming but the ship is still intact. Do you think you can manage this, Norby?”

“I’ll have to. We can’t arrive too soon before Pera does her job, and we can’t arrive too late. You’d better help me, Jeff. Hold my hand tightly and concentrate with me.”

Jeff shut his eyes to the coruscating images on the corridor walls and concentrated, trying to link his mind with Norby’s. It seemed to him that for a long time nothing at all happened, and then suddenly it felt as if he were in an earthquake.

He opened his eyes and saw that the walls were shaking so much that the iridescent patterns seemed to dance wildly. The entire ship sounded as if it were groaning aloud under the pressure on the hull.

“We’re awfully close to the danger point, Norby! Hurry! We’ve got to get to the central chamber immediately!” Norby’s response was to pull Jeff so fast that this time he wasn’t sure he was breathing at all.

Pera floated serenely in the central chamber just outside the force barrier surrounding the enormous ball. “You’re back!” she said. “I’ve had so many years of pleasant remembrance of you, making songs about you. But now you should leave again, for soon the ship will collapse and before that, I must send my package into hyperspace.”

The vibration was getting louder and louder and Jeff gritted his teeth to keep from losing his ability to think clearly. “Send your package now. Then Norby will take us both out of the ship and into hyperspace. You don’t have to die.”

“Jeff!” yelled Norby, “I can’t get out of the ship. None of us can. My sensors tell me the outer part of the ship is already crushed. I’m trapped here by the inhibitory field. We’re all trapped.”

Jeff’s hands and feet turned ice cold, but he kept his voice steady. “Then take us back further into time, anywhere, to get out.”

“I can’t! The forces are too strong. Oh, Jeff, I’ve failed you! Pera, I’m sorry. This is the end for us.”

Pera hovered near them. “I like your new name for me and I am sorry that you are trapped here since it makes you unhappy. Remember we will all be part of the planet in death, never separated from each other again.” She paused and opened the compartment in her body that concealed the package of information. “I will send this now.”

“Wait,” said Jeff. “Will it go into hyperspace right from here?”

“Yes. That is the plan. It bypasses the inhibitory field.”

“Then as you activate it, hold onto it and we’ll hold onto you. Maybe it will take us with it into hyperspace.”

“I would like to do that, but it is not as I have been instructed.”

“Pera,” said Jeff solemnly, “you were instructed by the Others, who did not know that Norby and I would be here. They were protoplasmic beings, and so am I, and I order you to change the arrangement. Take us with you and the package into hyperspace.”

“I do not have to obey your commands,” said Pera in a small voice, “but I will because I would not have either of you die.”

Jeff held the hands of the two little robots, who hovered close to him. The two-way thumb of Pera’s free hand stayed poised over the switch of the record package, while Norby extended his protective field to its limits, enclosing both Jeff and Pera.

All around them, the walls of the central chamber rattled and creaked ominously as the thundering noise of the collapsing outer structure of the ship came closer and closer. Just as Jeff thought he could stand the noise no longer, the chamber walls suddenly gave way and moved toward him with a great roar.

Pera pressed the switch.

Jeff was in hyperspace once more, but this time he concentrated on the sensory knowledge that his hands were holding those of Norby and Pera. He could not see the robots, but he knew the robots were there, and he did not feel alone and lost.

Norby’s thought came to him.—Jeff, we’re in hyperspace but the record package that brought us here got away from Pera. I don’t know where it’s gone—or when.

—When?

—My sensors tell me it moved us through time as well as into hyper space.

—How much time? And how far have we come in hyperspace?

—I don’t know.

Pera spoke telepathically for the first time.—How comforting it is to be able to hear your thoughts in this strange place. This is a new experience for me. I also do not know how far the package brought us in time, but I have discovered that I am able to sense how far we have traveled away from the alien ship.

Jeff felt a wave of hope.—Pera, are we far enough away so that if Norby takes us out of hyperspace and back into normal space, we won’t be trapped inside the planet?

—I think so.

—Aha!—I’m not the only robot that isn’t absolutely certain about everything (said Norby).

Jeff grinned in spite of the danger.—Fargo says that absolute certainty is not compatible with high intelligence, so we’ll have to take a chance. Take us out of here, Norby, so we can find out where—and when—we are.

While Jeff waited, he tried not to feel panic again at the thought that Pera might be wrong, and they might appear inside a planet or, worse, a sun. The next thing he felt was warmth on his body, and he opened his eyes to sunlight.

There was a muddy planet nearby and it seemed to be moving toward them rapidly. Jeff felt air on his face, and then it was cold wind.

“Norby!”shouted Jeff. “Antigrav! We’re falling through the atmosphere!”

With an uncomfortable jerk they stopped falling as Norby turned on his antigrav.

“Is this a planet?” asked Pera. “I’ve never seen one. Is it one of the best?”

“It’s a planet,” said Jeff, “but not one of the best. It’s Melodia, and since it’s now mostly mud on the surface, that means we’ve arrived near the right time.”

“What is the right time?” asked Pera.

“Shortly after Norby and I left our friends and the Izzians in the Slithers’ cage. Pull us through the atmosphere, Norby, low enough to find that main island.”

“I can help pull,” said Pera. “I too have antigrav and the ability to travel in normal space.”

“Okay,” said Jeff. “I feel as if I had two motors to help me fly, but don’t go too fast. It knocks the wind out of me and we won’t be able to scan the surface carefully.

As they dropped closer to the mud of Melodia, Jeff told Pera all that had happened since the Hopeful left Manhattan on its search for the lost humans. He was particularly enthusiastic when he came to describing the Tree Princess.

“I understand that you think she is beautiful,” said Pera. “I do not know anything about the beauty of protoplasmics.”

“Wait till you’ve seen Rinda. Of course, I’ve only seen her in a tree, but according to her portrait, she’s also one of the most beautiful human females in the Universe. I wish I could see her as she is.”

“Perhaps you will,” said Pera.

“There’s the main island,” said Norby. “And we must be at the right time. I can see the top of the big cage.”

“What odd creatures the Slithers are,” said Pera, looking down.

“Odd and very dangerous,” said Jeff. “But why aren’t they singing?”

The trio descended to the top of the central cage. Jeff let go of the robots and sat on the bars to think. “Nobody’s there!”

“Look, Jeff,” said Pera. “The Slithers did not come to attack you when you spoke aloud, instead of singing.”

It was true. The Slithers peeped out from behind bushes and trees, maintaining a careful distance.

“I don’t understand it,” said Jeff. “Since nobody’s in the cage, we must have arrived much too early. But then why are the Slithers acting afraid of us?”

“Try singing, Jeff,” said Norby.

Jeff cleared his throat. “Good morrow, good Slithers; good Slithers, good morrow,” he sang.

The little creatures hissed and turned chartreuse.

“I didn’t think my voice was that bad today,” said Jeff. “Hey, come back here!”

With every word of his voice, the Slithers quivered all over and backed away, singing eerie music in a minor key that was almost a chant. Even without words, the music seemed to say, “Go away! Go away!”

“Why are they afraid of you?” asked Pera. “I thought you said you were afraid of them.”

“I don’t understand any of this,” Jeff said. “When we first arrived on Melodia, the Slithers were friendly, and they were never afraid of us even after we became their prisoners.”

“Jeff,” said Norby, tugging at Jeff’s shirt. “Look—there’s a big hole in the side of the cage.”

The hole was large, and the lattice at its edges was charred. Jeff swung down and through the hole into the cage. He saw a metal object on the ground and picked it up.

“This is one of Admiral Yobo’s favorite metals,” he said. “I know what’s happened. Pera’s package brought us so far forward in time that we’ve arrived after everyone left Melodia.”

“They must have escaped through that hole,” said Pera.

“The tree!” shouted Norby. He and Pera flew down to join Jeff inside the cage.

Jeff whirled. In the spot where the sacred tree of Melodia had grown there was only a tiny seedling with delicate gold and silver leaves. Around it were piles of decaying branches, some almost turned to dust.

“Are the Slithers afraid of you because their sacred tree is gone and it gave them courage?”

“I don’t know, Pera,” said Jeff. “I don’t know how the Izzians and our friends escaped, because what could have made that hole? And how did they take the Hopeful, or the Challenger, away from Melodia and into hyperspace without Norby’s help?”

“I’d have to be here!” said Norby, blinking all four of his eyes in agitation. “I’m necessary!”

“Of course you are, Norby,” said Pera soothingly. “Perhaps you were here. You and Jeff.

“What do you mean?” asked Jeff.

“I don’t understand time travel,” said Pera, “but it seems to me that somehow you and Norby did arrive and help everyone escape. I wonder if I was with you.”

“You mean it hasn’t happened yet—but it did happen—and we were there—and we haven’t been yet, so we don’t know about it yet, and—” Norby paused, retracted his head into his barrel, and popped it up again. “I think I’m confused.”

“We all are,” said Jeff, “but I think Pera’s got something. We must go back in time and do whatever it was that helped everyone escape.”

“Whatever it was,” said Norby, glaring at the quivering little Slithers, “we sure showed them who’s boss. I just wish I could remember what it was.”

“It hasn’t happened yet—to you,” said Jeff patiently. “We’re here in the future—our future—by mistake. We’ve got to go back.”

“Maybe we can’t go back,” fumed Norby. “Maybe we’ve messed up the past by rescuing Pera and now the future has changed. We might even be in a different universe.”

“I should never have let you take me out of the alien ship,” said Pera sadly. “It has endangered you.”

“We had to rescue you, Pera,” Norby said as if it had been his idea. “You see, the thing is, I’m like you—I mean, I like you—I mean, it wasn’t right for you to die….”

“Correct,” said Jeff quickly, before Norby got any more embarrassed. “I’m sure this is the same universe, and that everything will be all right if we can go back in time.” He wasn’t at all sure, but he had to calm the emotive circuits of two excited robots, one of whom was absolutely necessary for traveling in that tricky thing, time. “Let’s hold hands, all of us, and concentrate on going back to the time just after Norby and I left.”

As Jeff reached out his hands to Norby and Pera, he discovered that he was still holding the Admiral’s lost medal. He put it in his pocket without thinking anything but how pleased Yobo would be to have it back.

“Concentrate, everybody,” said Norby.

“I can’t,” said Pera. “I’m worried. Won’t you meet yourselves in the past if you don’t hit it right?”

“No,” said Norby. “I can’t travel through time to where I already am. It’s impossible to meet oneself. We’ll get back to the time after we left. I hope.”

“Don’t just hope, Norby,” said Jeff. “I want accuracy.”

“I’m always accurate. Well, mostly accurate.”

“Norby!” said Jeff warningly.

“I can’t see that I’m getting any help from anyone.” Norby jiggled up and down with his telescoping feet. “Hold hands and concentrate.”

“Do it right, Norby,” said Jeff.

“I’ll try, but I certainly need help.”

As the three vanished, the Slithers began to sing happily.

11

### THE CAGE AGAIN

“Ow!” said Jeff.

“You keep saying that,” Norby said. “You’d think a Slither had stung you.”

“Oola’s welcoming embrace is inclined to be prickly,” said Jeff as he disengaged the claws of his All-Purpose-Pet from his arms and tried to grasp the fact that he was not on Melodia but in his own Manhattan living room.

Zargl flapped her leathery wings and said, “Why have you returned without my beloved Fargo?” She turned off the holoTV screen she’d been studying and confronted Jeff again. “And where are the Admiral and Lieutenant Jones? And who is this strange new robot?”

“This is Pera. She’s a robot left by the Others to observe and record the beginnings of a planetary system. It’s a long story, Zargl.”

“But Jeff,” said Zargl, the tiny green scales on her forehead curving into a wrinkle of puzzlement, “all of you left in the Hopeful only a few hours ago. How can your adventure have been a long one?”

“Norby!” yelled Jeff. “We’ve messed up time again! You’ve messed it up! Why have you brought us back home?”

Norby retracted his arms until only the double-palmed hands showed, and they drooped as if to emphasize humility. “I’m only a simple little robot, Jeff, and it’s you who should be intelligent. You’re supposed to be my owner—I mean my partner—and the least you can be is very intelligent.”

“I don’t feel bright. I feel battered and stung and my ears hurt. I’m also hungry and scared. What am I supposed to be intelligent about?”

“Zargl, get Jeff something to eat,” Norby said. “He’s a growing boy, and he thinks better when his stomach is full. I want him to think about why I came here.”

“I suspect, Norby, that you came here because you’re afraid to go back to where you were, and because you’ve given up on the rescue, and because you don’t care about the Princess, and because you’re terrified of her domineering mother, who punishes first and talks later.”

“Please explain,” said Zargl, placing a bowl of peanuts and her scaly green tail upon the living room floor near Jeff.

Jeff listened to Norby’s explanations, which seemed to emphasize Norby’s own skill, daring, and genius. Pera’s hands were clasped and she looked at Norby with what seemed to be reverent attention.

Jeff munched at the peanuts. They were a great improvement on Melodian vegetation. “No one’s going to believe you’re a hero, Norby,” he said. “We haven’t yet done what we set out to do, and you haven’t explained why you brought me back to my Manhattan apartment.”

“I was hoping you’d figure it out, Jeff.”

Jeff had a sudden deep suspicion that Norby didn’t know how or why he had come back to the apartment, but was hoping Jeff would rescue him with an idea.

Jeff said, “Were you saying something about getting help, Norby?”

Norby blinked. “That’s right. We need a special kind of help.”

“And you came to get me, of course,” said Zargl.

“That couldn’t be,” said Jeff. “You’re only a dragon-child and your mother wouldn’t approve—”

“She doesn’t know,” said Zargl complacently, “and, besides, I’m very useful.” She took a deep breath and blew it outward, producing a long flame from her mouth. Pera jumped back, while Oola howled like a dog and then slunk under the sofa.

“See,” said Zargl, “I may be little, but I can easily burn a hole in the cage where everyone is a prisoner.”

“That’s it!” said Norby, “now we know how the hole came to be. Wasn’t I right to come back here?” He soared upward and whirled in glee.

Zargl said, “I’m very good at flaming, actually—too good, mother says. The other day she scolded me for being so primitive when I flamed and singed the hem of the Grand Dragon’s favorite cape.”

“Also, Jeff,” said Norby happily, “Zargl is small enough for me to surround with my protective shield along with you and Pera. I can’t surround an elephant, you know. Furthermore, Zargl has wings and an antigrav collar, so she can avoid being stung by the Slithers if she doesn’t sing properly. I tell you I’ve thought it all out.”

“What do you mean, not sing properly,” demanded Zargl. “I have an excellent voice.”

“All right, Norby,” said Jeff in resignation, “I admit it sounds workable, but don’t let it go to your head. Let’s get back to Melodia and try to get everyone out of the cage and into the Hopeful—though I still don’t see how we can manage the Tree Princess.”

He placed Pera under one arm, Norby under the other, and Zargl settled herself on his shoulders.

“Ready?” asked Norby.

“Worrww?” said Oola, coming out from under the sofa.

“I forgot about Oola,” said Jeff. “She’ll be all alone.”

“The automatic feeder is full of food and water,” said Zargl. “She’ll be all right if we don’t stay away too long. She strikes me as a very self-contained and self-assured creature.”

“Actually, she’s not,” said Jeff, “but let’s be off—no, wait! Norby, please find the earplugs in my bedroom drawer.”

When Norby came back with the earplugs and was tucked once more under Jeff’s arm, Oola approached them with her back stiff and a look of outrage in her eyes. It was obvious that she expected to go along, and Jeff had to shove her back with his foot.

“Meow,” said Oola plaintively, looking more cat-like than ever in an effort to please. Her whiskers twitched and the pupils of her eyes were like slits. The All-Purpose-Pet was, at that moment, totally a cat—a cat sensing she was about to be abandoned.

“Now,” said Norby.

“Wowrr!” growled Oola, her tail waving angrily. Then she launched herself.

Just before he saw the grayness of hyperspace, Jeff felt a furry body hit his chest, its forelegs tightly clasping his neck.

“I must say,” said Captain Erig, staring up at them through the roof of the cage, “that after being gone a week, you have come back with a peculiar rescue party. You have a small green furry animal, a small green scaly animal, and a small roundish robot with six eyes. Add those to yourself and Norby, and you don’t resemble my idea of a rescue force. Furthermore I don’t find your plan at all satisfactory.”

“Nor do I,” said Princess Rinda, rubbing her twigs together in irritation.

“I must say,” said Fargo peevishly, “that I don’t follow your reasoning either, Jeff. But perhaps my brain is not working in clear linear logic ever since we were forced yesterday to sing complicated fugues for five hours.”

It was night time and it was therefore possible to talk openly without getting stung, but dawn was already beginning to silver the edge of the sky.

“The least you could have done was to bring non-vegetable food,” said Yobo. “I suppose you ate yourself silly when you were home.” The Admiral looked less imposingly massive through the middle.

“I only had a few peanuts,” said Jeff, “and Oola never got her dinner. There’s a limit to how much Norby can carry, you know. We didn’t plan to bring Oola; she just hung on and that, as it was, stretched poor Norby to the limit.”

“Yes,” whimpered Norby, “but who cares about me? I’m just old workhorse Norby.”

Oola was sniffing and growling softly.

“She doesn’t like this planet,” said Albany.

“Who does?” said Fargo. “Jeff, can you concentrate and make her turn herself into a Slither-eating sabertoothed tiger or something like that?”

Jeff said, “It’s hard to make her deliberately turn into something you want. She tends to tune in on you when you’re not actually thinking of her. She’s not very bright, you know. And even if she ate Slithers, how many could she eat before filling herself to the ears?”

Albany stroked Oola, who had squeezed through the roof and jumped into her arms. “Nice kitty doesn’t want to be a tiger, does she?”

“At least you’ve brought a useful dragon,” said Fargo. “Hurry and burn the cage, Zargl, because my voice won’t last another day and my arms are cramped from playing my tympani through the bars.”

His kettledrums had been placed against the outside of the cage where Fargo could reach them—but not comfortably.

“That was my idea,” said the sacred tree. “I thought if I told the Slithers to bring those drums, they would have to open the door, but they didn’t. And look here, dragon, if you burn the cage, do it on the side away from my branches.”

Zargl flew to the side of the cage most distant from the tree and began to breathe flame.

“It was almost amusing,” said Yobo. “First the Slithers tried the drumsticks themselves, but since they don’t know how to play, the noise horrified them and they turned all the colors you could imagine. Then they made poor Fargo drum for hours, demonstrating that it didn’t have to be just noise.”

“And in the meantime,” said the tree, “I have been singing and singing, trying to keep the Slithers happy while this heroic and handsome young man was risking unimaginable horrors in the cosmos trying to find a way of rescuing us.”

Jeff perked up. Someone appreciated him.

“I ache all over,” said Einkan. “I hate this planet and having to be silent all day while the rest of you sing. It would serve all of you right if I left you stranded here.”

“That,” said Albany frostily, “is probably what you’d planned to do if I hadn’t taken away your weapon.”

“The sun’s coming up,” warned Yobo. “I can hear the Slithers begin to hum as they emerge from the mud. You should have arrived earlier, Norby. It’s taking Zargl too much time to burn a hole…. Of course, if she’d come day before yesterday when it rained, she couldn’t have done a thing. We all got very wet, too.”

“The wood’s thick and tough and still a little damp,” said Zargl, pausing for breath. “It doesn’t really burn, it just chars—but I’m making progress.”

Oola jumped down from Albany’s arms and began to pace the floor of the cage, growling fiercely, her fangs longer then usual. “It’s a good thing she’s a vegetarian,” said Albany, “or she’d get pretty hungry. Not that the Melodian plants are particularly nourishing. I’m beginning to feel too weak to sing.”

“Don’t say that,” said Yobo. “If you stop singing, they’ll sting you into paralysis and feed you to the sacred tree.”

“No!” cried the Tree Princess, waving her branches in agitation, “that must not happen! Her personality and mine will intermingle, and she’s a commoner. Her father may be, as you say, the mayor of Manhattan, wherever that is, but mayors don’t sound like royalty to me. Besides, I won’t be—me anymore.” The branches sagged listlessly until the Princess said angrily, “If you dilute my royalty, my mother will think up new punishments you won’t like. Mother’s good at that.”

“Harumph,” said Yobo. “It occurs to me, Cadet, that you might have thought to bring a weapon.”

“Zargl is a weapon, Admiral, but I hope she doesn’t have to burn the Slithers. After all, the Slithers didn’t ask us to come to Melodia.”

Captain Erig frowned. “We Izzians came here against our will, which you strangers did not. I suspect that when Einkan found the alien ship, the coordinates of this horrible planet were in its data banks so that its owners would know where not to go. It’s too bad Princess Rinda pressed the wrong switch by mistake.”

“It certainly is,” said Fargo. “Hurry, Zargl. I want to leave Melodia as soon as possible.”

“I thought it appealed to your musical instincts,” said Jeff.

“Little brother, my musical instincts have totally burned out.”

Zargl stepped back. “Somebody push!” She had produced a large area of thoroughly blackened wood.

Yobo, from inside, heaved at the charred wood with his broad shoulders and it gave way. One by one, the humans stepped out of the cage. Oola, emerging last, jumped into Jeff’s arms.

“Wait,” cried the tree. “You can’t go without me! I am the Crown Princess of Izz. You can’t leave me here!”

“But your Highness,” said Einkan, “If we dig you up, it will kill the tree—and you.”

From the tree came the sound of wild weeping. And at that point, the Slithers arrived, singing an aggressive, angrysounding song.

“Run for the ships!” shouted Yobo, kicking out at the oncoming Slithers, “and then we’ll think of some way to get the tree out without killing it.”

It was too late. The sun was up and the Slithers were upon them, driving them back into the cage.

The tree, still weeping said, “Now they’re going to feed you one by one to the tree. We’ll become a terrible mixture.”

“Why do they want to do that?” gasped Albany.

“They’re angry because you aren’t good zoo animals. You’re trying to get away instead of staying behind bars and singing.” Her branches shook and her leaves rustled mournfully.

“You didn’t warn the Slithers we were leaving, did you, Princess?”

“No. Honestly! I wouldn’t care if the others left, just as long as you stayed with me, Jeff.”

Jeff said uneasily. “I’m sorry, Princess, I can’t. I’ve got to get back to the Academy.”

“Well, if I’ve got to stay here forever, kill all the Slithers and bring the Academy here. Then you can stay with me.”

“We can’t do that either,” said Jeff, his back against the cage as the unbroken line of Slithers approached, cutting off escape. “The Slithers evolved on this planet—it’s theirs. We shouldn’t take it from them for our own use, even to make life better lor the Crown Princess of Izz in her tree. We have to go away and leave the Slithers alone so they can develop by themselves.”

“Then eventually I’ll forget who I am and just be a tree and not a Princess,” Rinda cried harder then ever.

“Watch out, Jeff!” Norby ascended on antigrav, dragging Jeff out of the way of a stinging Slither.

Zargl, who had been gasping on top of the cage since her task was done, now flew up in the air and dive bombed, her flame forcing the natives back.

“Good dragon,” said Yobo. “Open a path to the ship.”

“I can’t” panted Zargl. “I don’t have much flame left. I need at least several hours of rest and some good, nourishing food.”

The Slithers used another weapon. Squatting down on their snail feet, they sang with such extraordinary vibrations that Jeff instantly stuffed his earplugs in. They didn’t block out all the sound, but they cut down the spinning sensation in his head that was induced by the vibration. Everyone else dropped to the ground, their hands covering their ears. Terrans and Izzians were dragged into the cage.

“Take me to the Hopeful, Norby!”

Above the seething mass of natives, with both Jeff and Pera in tow, Norby sped on antigrav.

This failed, too, however. The Slithers blocked the airlock and there was no way of reaching the ship without being stung. While Pera remained on high, Jeff and Norby stormed the lock over and over till Jeff was in dreadful pain and Norby was staggering oddly.

Finally Norby began to run away, followed by Jeff. The Slithers opened a path for them, one that led directly into the cage.

Pera hovered above them, still on antigrav. “Ascend, Norby!”

“I can’t,” shrieked Norby. “The stings have upset my microcircuits and I can’t antigrav.”

“I’ll try to carry both of you up,” said Pera.

“You’re too small, Pera. Take Norby,” Jeff yelled.

Pera plunged to pick up Norby just as the Slithers overwhelmed Jeff and pushed him into the cage, slamming the door after him. The escape hole was guarded by countless Slithers. Jeff tried to ignore the pain he felt. Maybe we could try again at night, he thought to himself.

Then he remembered. The Slithers would probably feed them to the tree before it was night.

“Meow,” said Oola. She was obviously not as sensitive to the Slithers’ vibrations as the humans were, but she was not happy. She meowed plaintively and clung to Jeff when he picked her up.

“Oola, couldn’t you turn into something useful? Try taking the shape of a Slither. Maybe they’ll think I’m special and let me go.”

“Meooow!” said Oola, her fangs lengthening a little, and her tail growing shorter to compensate for the shift in mass.

“She’s no help,” said Norby from where he and Pera were sitting on top of the cage. They were joined by Zargl, who shook her head.

“My flame’s gone out altogether. I must eat to restore my energy, but Oola ate all the vegetables while everyone was trying to escape. I’ll have to go foraging.”

“Better not, Zargl,” said Norby. “The Slithers might capture you.”

“The situation is hopeless, isn’t it?” asked the sacred tree, her leaves quivering.

“No,” whispered Jeff. “There must be some way out. In the future we will be all gone and the Slithers will be afraid of us.”

Jeff whispered as clearly as he could, “Norby! Go into time.”

“I’ve already tried. I can’t. I’ve got to calm my microcircuits.”

“Then, Pera, antigrav yourself and Norby into space beyond the inhibitory field, and help him into hyperspace.”

“Not while my microcircuits are jangling,” said Norby.

The Slithers continued to surge around the cage, plastering over the burnt-out section of the wall with their bodies.

“I’ve given up hope,” wept the Princess. “Thank you, Jeff, for trying. I did so want to go home to Izz and be a better person. I’ve been selfish and willful all my life, and now I want to try to be more like you.”

“Keep hoping, Princess. Maybe Norby can recover, and then he and Pera could try again to get into one of the ships. The ship’s weapons could frighten away the Slithers and demolish the cage and then we’ll think of some way of taking you with us.”

The Slithers were easing up on their mind-boggling vibrations, and the humans were waking up. They moaned when they saw they were back inside the cage, with only Zargl and the two robots outside.

“All I want,” whispered Fargo, “is a soundproof padded cell.”

The tip of a branch tickled the back of Jeff’s neck and snaked around to hang in front of his face. He found himself looking into a tiny blue eye that blinked at him from the end of the last twig.

“I’m sorry, Princess,” whispered Jeff.

“You’re still my hero, Jeff.” The twig turned to look at Oola, who reached up to bat it the way cats do when they feel playful. Apparently, with a full stomach, and with the Slithers merely singing, Oola had decided Melodia wasn’t such a bad place for a vegetarian cat.

The twig tickled Oola behind the ears.

“Meow,” said Oola, rubbing against it.

“Oh, please help me,” sighed the Princess.

“Worrwrrow!” said Oola, jumping to the place where the short main trunk of the tree divided into its heavy lower branches. She promptly vanished from sight.

It was at that fork that the tree’s feeding mouth was located, Jeff realized with a sickening horror. “Oola,” he called out, not caring whether he was stung or not.

She did not answer.

“Princess!”

There was silence from the tree, too.

No Slither moved to sting Jeff and, although it was broad daylight, all the Slithers stopped singing.

12

### MUSIC TO THE RESCUE

A day later they were as trapped as ever, the cage surrounded by silent Slithers who pointed their sting tentacles at any human who walked near the lattice-work walls.

Oola had not reappeared, and the sacred tree was also silent, its leaves drooping and faded.

“Now that we’re back in their blasted zoo,” whispered Fargo, “Why don’t they feed us when we sing to them? I’m starving.”

No one answered, because no one knew.

Jeff sat on the ground inside the cage, grieving for Oola. He watched the Slithers come and go to their feeding grounds in the mud, always in relays so the cages remained guarded, its charred hole covered by the bodies of many Slithers.

I’ve got to try to find a way out of this mess, Jeff thought. I must have—somebody must have—because in the future of Melodia, the cage is empty and all of us have gone, even the ships.

Norby’s antigrav had returned feebly, so he couldn’t yet carry any human away from the cage even if the hole could be reopened. Pera was willing to try, but everyone felt she was too small to be able to lift herself and anyone else, even Norby, for as long as it might take to get to the ships. Jeff wanted Pera to take Norby above the planet’s inhibitory field so he could get into hyperspace, but Norby refused, saying his hyperspatial ability wouldn’t return until his antigrav was back in full force.

It is a mess, thought Jeff.

Zargl, exhausted, lay on top of the cage with Norby and Pera. She beckoned to Jeff. “I wish Norby’s hyperspace ability would come back,” she said. “He could go to Jamya and get my mother—her flame is bigger than mine—or bring back one of the Jamyn robots to help you escape.”

“He hasn’t the strength, and even if he had, the Slithers might be able to disorient the Jamyn robots too. And if you or your mother could burn another hole and frighten the Slithers, I still don’t see how we could make it to the ships or get inside them.”

“How about having Norby—when he’s recovered—go back to our own Solar System and alert the Federation to the Admiral’s danger?” whispered Albany.

“Oh, no,” whispered Fargo. “Before rescuing the Admiral, those Federation scientists would take Norby apart to find out how he made it through hyperspace. We’ve got to keep him a secret.”

Jeff groaned loudly, and the clot of Slithers nearest his section of the cage stirred ominously.

Admiral Yobo, who had been asleep, woke up and said in a hoarse whisper, “If you must groan, Cadet, do it musically. Those Slithers are so angry about the tree that with any more provocation they may kill us.”

As if in confirmation of this, a long section of bark peeled from the tree, and a bushel of leaves fluttered to the ground, causing the Slithers to hiss like an army of snakes.

Captain Erig’s black braids had come undone, and she didn’t seem to care. She sat next to Einkan as if to protect him and whispered softly, “I wonder why the tree got indigestion from that strange pet, yet accepted the Princess without harm to itself.”

“Captain,” said Jeff, “how long did it take the tree to become the Princess after she was fed to it?”

“A day.”

“A day!” whispered Yobo. “Will it start meowing like Oola today?”

“Who knows?” said Erig. “Perhaps the addition of Oola’s protein was enough to cause a natural change of state in the tree—look—it’s changing again!”

Jeff stared at the tree, half expecting to hear it meow but instead he saw a large crack develop at the top of the short trunk, where the mouth had been. The crack spread downward but the two halves of the trunk remained together, each swelling slightly. Above, the branches curled and withered, and all the leaves fell to the ground as if winter had come.

The Slithers began to whistle in very high notes and turned yellow. When the last leaf had fallen, they bobbed up and down like demented toadstools with fringed tops, whistling ascending and descending scales that sounded as if they had more than twelve tones.

“Nothing like this happened when our Princess was forced into it,” said the older male Izzian. The others nodded in agreement.

Then, as the prisoners watched in astonishment, the tree shivered and its divided trunk fell completely apart, crashing to the ground. Each half of the trunk constricted at the top and bottom, pinching off branches and roots to leave two large smooth objects.

“The halves of the trunk look like giant pea pods,” whispered Yobo, who was inclined to think in terms of food when he was hungry.

Fargo grunted. “Now, I suppose, the Slithers will plant the pods and use us as fertilizer. This is not the fate I had planned for myself and I don’t appreciate it.”

Albany gasped. “Oh, Jeff! Perhaps the seedling you saw in the future came from the pods. And we weren’t in the cage because we’d already been made into…”

“No, no Lieutenant,” whispered Yobo, patting her hand. “If that were going to happen, Jeff would have seen the ships, and they were gone. Hold on to that thought—somehow we’re going to get away.”

“Well, I wish that stupid animal of yours had not jumped into the tree,” said Einkan sourly.

“She was just being friendly,” said Norby from the top of the cage, “which is more than you’ve ever been.”

“That’s right,” whispered Jeff. “The tree tickled Oola and she jumped into what she thought was the tree’s lap, not its mouth.”

“Oh, oh,” whispered the young male Izzian. “They’re coming in!”

The Slithers were sending in an extra contingent, headed for the “pods,” as the humans thought of them. The prisoners backed out of their way and watched while the Slithers tried to lift the pods with their little tentacles.

“We can’t let them do that,” whispered Jeff, suddenly anxious. “Those pods are all that’s left of—of—well, a mixture of the Princess and Oola. I don’t want the Slithers to plant them here. We’ve got to get the pods back to Izz somehow.”

“It won’t matter,” said Einkan testily, “because when the Queen finds out that her daughter is part of a tree that either sings or meows or both, she will revive the ancient custom of boiling in oil. There is absolutely no point in planting the pods on Izz.”

“I don’t agree,” said Jeff. “Norby, Pera—try to break into the cage and rescue the pods.”

While Norby hesitated, trying out his antigrav, Pera swooped down and pushed through the Slithers who guarded the opening. She looked like a silvery cannon ball with a bulge on one side and two sets of three eyes. She grabbed a pod and although it was unwieldly, elevated it on antigrav and pushed back through the opening to place it on the roof.

“I think I can do it!” said Norby, plunging toward the opening.

“Wait,” said Zargl, “my flame’s back a little. I’ll frighten them so they won’t sting you, Norby.”

Together they managed to get the other pod onto the top of the cage, but the humans inside had no chance to escape for the Slithers immediately recovered the hole.

“Shall I try to scare them so the rest of you can get out?” asked Zargl.

“No,” said Yobo, whose bulk offered many opportunities for the Slithers to practice stinging. “We’ve got to think of something safer.”

“I don’t feel at all safe here,” said Fardo. “Sooner or later it’s going to occur to the Slithers that all they have to do is sting us into unconsciousness, bury us in the mud, and then go after Norby and Pera and Zargl en masse, to take back their pods.”

“No they won’t!” shouted Norby. “My strength is reviving! My circuits have calmed down! I’m going to try to take the Hopeful away from the Slithers and bring it over the cage to rescue you.”

“Be careful!” said Jeff. “If the Slithers sting you badly again, they’ll knock out your antigrav. They might even destroy your mind!”

“Bah!” said Norby, elevating on antigrav. “I’m not afraid anymore. I’m going to show these muddy nasties what a hero can do!”

“Norby, be careful! Don’t get hurt,” said Pera, elevating with him.

The Slithers waved their tentacles uselessly in the direction of the two little robots, their keening song turning to an angry, loud chant.

“Yah, yah, you can’t get me!” yelled Norby, zooming down as Pera remained hovering above him protectingly.

“Norby, you’re making them furious,” said Jeff. “Their song is probably spreading over the whole island, letting the Slithers guarding the ships know that they’re supposed to sting you.”

Norby paid no attention. Flapping his arms, he sailed tantalizingly close to their tentacles. He soared back and forth, driving the Slithers to distraction. And then he began to sing, just as off key as ever,

“Norby to the rescue!

Hero of the Fleet!

I’m the Terran robot

Nobody can beat!”

There was more to the song, but Norby’s talents at composing and singing left much to be desired. In his excitement, his voice became ever more off key, and it cracked several times. His musical shortcomings seemed to increase his own excitement so that he sang louder and louder, totally ignoring Jeff’s shouted pleas to stop teasing the Slithers.

But it was more than teasing. As Norby continued to sing, the Slithers cowered. Their tentacles sank lower and contracted tightly upon their mop-heads. They turned pale chartreuse and their snail-like feet curled at the edges.

Jeff understood at last. “We’ve got another weapon!” he called out excitedly. “We noticed it the first day and paid no attention. They can’t stand listening to music that’s off key. Let’s give it to them! Norby, keep on singing.”

Fargo shrugged. “It goes against my grain to sing off key, considering my sense of absolute pitch. But if it must be done, it must be done. All right, everybody,” the light of battle gleamed in his eyes, “sing loudly and off key!”

He rubbed his hands together and took up his drumsticks. He reached through the bars of the cage and banged heavily on the dull middle of his tympani. The Slithers shuddered and drew back. Fargo tuned the drums at random so they’d be discordant. He began to play and sing his tympani-tenor concerto as badly as he could bring himself to do.

“Come on, Einkan, sing!” said Albany. “You have an even better talent at bad singing than Norby has.”

The Izzian Court Scientist burst into song. It was hard to tell, but it might have been his own national anthem. Wincing, the rest of the Izzians nodded to each other and bravely tore into—and apart—their anthem, each in a different key.

Zargl flew in circles over the Slithers, singing an incredibly speeded-up version of several Jamyn lullabies (which are difficult to sing even slowly). From time to time she managed a short burst of flame, which further disorganized the Slithers.

“Ah, sweet mystery of life!” screeched Albany, who was not, after all, a soprano.

Yobo’s falsetto version of the Volga Boatmen was worst of all. He yelled it directly at the Slithers covering the hole in the side of the cage. They soon moved away in obvious retreat.

Fargo paused at the end of his concerto. He said meditatively, “This needs work. I think it should have a bass and a female voice, too.”

“Fargo!” said Albany. “Don’t get artistic. The Slithers at your end are barely upset. Stay off key, won’t you?”

“All right, but it will ruin my gorgeous voice, my lady,” said Fargo, and he began to sing in a gravelly voice:

“Onward, Outward, Fleet Patrol!

Brave men ever so true—

Blast off to danger; follow that stranger;

And tell her you think she will do.”

At that point Albany threw a sleeping mat at him, causing a discordant yelp that sent the Slithers scuttling. After that, Fargo switched to singing in Italian from “Pagliacci.” Between his hamming and his faulty Italian, he sounded ferociously bad.

Jeff, whose voice always cracked when he tried to be a tenor, had no trouble. He chose Kilmer’s “Trees,” which he had never liked before. This time, his voice cracked with emotion as he sang, “I think that I shall never see, a Princess lovely as a tree—”

“Excellent, excellent,” boomed the Admiral. “We’ve beaten them back.”

“But they’ve still got us encircled,” said Erig. “They’re too far away to sting us, but how could we get through them? We can’t keep on singing off key forever.”

“I’ll bring the Hopeful,” shouted Norby, “now that I can scare away the guards with my powerful and heroic voice.” He flew off in the direction of the ship.

“I’ll go with him,” said Zargl. “If I eat some of the food in the ship, my flame will get stronger.” The little dragon followed Norby.

“What about our ship?” asked Captain Erig. “Can the small robot, Pera, carry the Court Scientist to the Challenger? His voice will drive away the guard and Einkan can adjust the engine to the home coordinates of Izz.”

“Captain,” said Einkan, his face red. “I must confess that not only is the engine an alien one, but I do not know how to run it. My air of knowledge was all a—harumph—necessary pretense. You are the Captain and I defer to you.”

Captain Erig reddened in her turn. “I confess that I can’t handle the Challenger’s engines, either. The Princess touched the panel accidentally and set it off. Afterward all that the rest of us could do was sit and wait. I’m as much a fraud as you are, Einkan, and just as helpless.”

The two tall Izzians suddenly grasped each other’s hands.

“Einkan, you fake!”

“Erig, you fraud!”

They embraced.

Yobo’s deep bass rumbled in what sounded like the growl of a lion, “While we stop singing to watch the burgeoning of love, the Slithers are beginning to recover. I suggest we sing again until Norby comes back with the Hopeful.”

“Wait,” said Pera. “I will go to the Challenger and see if anything in my data bank will make it possible for me to tune into the engine and make it work. If I can, I will then bring it here. And if you tell me the coordinates of Izz, I may be able to introduce that into the ship’s navigation system.”

“Hurry,” said Fargo. “Take a pod with you for safekeeping, and keep on screeching at the guards.”

Jeff stepped through the burned hole in the fence and picked up one of Fargo’s tympani. He thumped it randomly and shouted, “Wrong key, everyone. Stick to dissonance.”

By the time the Challenger and the Hopeful were hovering above, the prisoners were all hoarse. Albany climbed to the top of the cage and waved at the ships.

From the Challenger, the Izzian robots descended on personal antigrav as impassively as if it had been Captain Erig instead of little Pera, who was giving them orders. First they carried the Izzians to their ship, and then the Terrans to the Hopeful. Finally they brought one pod to each ship.

Jeff shook his head at the thought of strong robots equipped with antigrav sitting placidly in their ship and not coming to the rescue of their masters—but, then, that was all Izzian robots could do. They had been given their orders to wait, and would wait till doomsday or till new orders were given, whichever came first.

Jeff was glad that Norby and Pera were not like them.

Jeff was the last up, and as he closed the airlock, he looked down through the slats of the main cage. He could see the sacred tree of Melodia, lying dead on the ground. It seemed to be disintegrating. There, too, was the gleam of Admiral Yobo’s favorite medal lying in the dirt at the doorway to the cage.

Surely, he had the medal in his pocket! … He felt for it and it was gone. With a shiver, Jeff decided to let it stay where it was.

Norby was at the controls of the Hopeful, speaking by intercom to Pera on the Challenger. “Can you work the hyperdrive to take the Izzians home, Pera?”

“I think I can, Norby. You and I seem to have similar, though not identical talents. I can’t get into hyperspace without a ship as you can, and you can’t sing with perfect pitch as I can.”

“I can too sing with perfect pitch,” said Norby.

“Yes, Norby,” said Pera diplomatically.

In a corner of the control room next to Fargo’s tympani, Albany began humming a little tune.

Fargo turned on her. “Please don’t sing. I love you, but at the moment I hate music.”

“What about the Federation singing contest?”

“Forget it! I wouldn’t enter it for a million credits, taxfree.”

Yobo said, his voice booming, “What a pleasure it is to be able to speak freely. But, in any case, we’re too late for the Federation singing contest. I propose that we go home at once. I don’t want to face the Queen again. She reminds me of my older sister—not as dark or as good-looking, but of a similar personality.”

“I would love to go home,” said Albany wistfully. “I need a shower and some real food and a lot of silence. Besides father must be frantic by now.”

“And one shouldn’t upset the Mayor of Manhattan,” said Fargo. “I’ve had enough of Izz, too. What’s the good of a reward? If their plentiful gold destroyed Federation economy, I’d have to move out of my Manhattan apartment and into a cubicle in Luna City.”

Norby said, “I think we ought to go home, too.”

Yobo said, “And what says our heroic dragon?”

“I must go to Earth to continue my study of it,” said Zargl.

“Well, I disagree,” said Jeff. “For one thing, look at that.” He pointed to an object near the control room door. It was shaped like a silvery-gold giant pea pod.

“You mean we shouldn’t take it with us and plant it?” said Albany. “The sacred tree would look lovely in Central Park.”

“But it may be partly Oola,” said Jeff. “Do you want a tree in Central Park that meows? I can’t abandon Oola to such a fate.”

“For that matter,” said Fargo. “The tree could be part Princess, too, and we should take her back to Izz. You’re right, Jeff, our honor is at stake.”

Norby’s hat popped up and he glared at everybody with both sets of his eyes. Then he put his hands firmly on the control board. “As a matter of fact,” he said, “I haven’t said good-bye to Pera.” He plugged his sensor wire into the computer.

“On to Izz,” said Norby, taking the ship beyond Melodia’s inhibitory field.

Then the ship winked into hyperspace, the is that is everything.

13

### The Found Princess

The would-be rescuers of the lost Princess sat on the gold seats in the throne room of Izz, waiting for the Royal decision as to their fate. They sat in pairs.

Einkan and Captain Erig held hands and smiled shyly at each other. Pera and Norby held hands and must have been engaged in telepathic communications, for occasionally Norby’s head would jiggle up and down rather emotionally. Albany and Fargo were holding hands, too, but, then, they usually did.

Admiral Yobo was holding no one’s hand, but he was holding something else—a long, whispered conversation with Zargl about the dragons of Terran legends. He had gotten over his dismay at discovering that his favorite medal was missing.

Only Jeff was thinking of consequences. He stared at the two silvery-gold pods lying in front of the thrones, thought about the impossibility of bringing the Princess and Oola back to life and what it would feel like to be boiled in oil.

He also kept trying to think of a suitable way of apologizing to the Queen for the fact that her daughter was now a large seed of a tree, and probably mixed thoroughly with AllPurpose-Pet. Of course, Oola’s shape-changing ability might be used to make the seed into a tree that resembled the Princess, but Oola was probably not intelligent enough to do it, and even if she did it, the Princess would be green.

As Jeff stared thoughtfully at the pods, it began to seem to him that they were no longer the same size. One had surely shrunk and was rounder, and greener, and—

“Fargo,” said Jeff, “one of the pods is getting to look—”

Fargo was paying no attention, for the Queen swept into the room followed by the shimmering train of her long nightshirt and the King.

“So!” said the Queen, sitting heavily on her throne. “I understand that you have lost my daughter.”

“Not entirely, Your Highness,” said Yobo, bowing with dignity, despite the fact that his dress uniform looked much the worse for wear and that there was a vacant place in his row of medals.

“Partly is just as bad,” said the Queen, while the King looked very sad and wiped away a tear as he looked at the two pods from the sacred tree of Melodia.

“The explanation you have given about the tree is highly unsatisfactory,” said the Queen. “I blame you aliens for my daughter’s transformation and probable demise.”

“But, Your Majesty,” said Fargo, still hoarse, “she was fed to the tree before we got there!”

“As a tree, according to your own tale, she was still my daughter. Now she is a vegetable pod because of the action of a creature belonging to you.”

“Fargo,” whispered Jeff in Terran Basic, “look at the small pod. Doesn’t it resemble Oola’s shell now, the one that looks like a hassock which she grows around herself when she’s under stress?”

“Hmm.”

“Sing the song that opens Oola’s shell.”

“I can’t. My voice is shot.”

“So what if you’re hoarse. You can still hit the right notes. Try it.”

The Queen rapped her knuckles on the arms of her throne. “Silence in the throne room!”

“Please, Ma’am,” said Jeff, rising and bowing low. “We wish to demonstrate the power of our alien science to correct the present sad situation. My brother will now sing.”

As Fargo began, the Queen interrupted. “Your voice is bad enough to deserve the dungeon, and you with it.”

“At least it isn’t oil, yet,” whispered Albany cheerfully.

“Please,” said Jeff. “It is not the voice, but the song.”

Fargo cleared his throat and began again.

“Not only the dungeon,” said the Queen impatiently, “but the darkest dungeon.”

The King tugged at her sleeve. “My dear, let him try. Perhaps the Princess—”

“Well. Once more and that’s all.”

Fargo tried a third time, and this time the smaller pod—which was now distinctly hassock-shaped—began to crack. The crack widened and Jeff saw whiskers and a green paw. Oola pushed the halves of the hassock apart and bounded toward Jeff, purring like a hive of bees. He picked her up.

“That is not my daughter,” said the Queen in a deep voice, “unless you have changed her into a repulsive green creature given to unseemly displays of affection to strangers. Alien strangers.”

“But if we can free my pet from one pod, perhaps we can free the Princess from—” Jeff stopped as Einkan strode toward him and bent to speak softly in his ear.

“No secrets, you traitor,” said the Queen, stamping her foot.

“It is part of the ritual of release that the boy has not yet learned, Your Majesty. He is not as familiar as I am with the special requirements of Crown Princesses,” said Einkan smoothly.

“Umm. Hurry up about it.”

Einkan whispered to Jeff. “Do you think the Princess is in the remaining pod? If another green animal comes out, the consequences will be disastrous.”

“It must be the Princess.”

“Do you know the right song?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Certainly you do. It would have to be the beloved National Anthem of Izz. If it works, please let me have the credit. I know you don’t think highly of me, but I’ve fallen in love and I have changed—I am now thoroughly honest and reliable.”

Jeff’s eyebrows rose quizzically.

“I will be,” said. Einkan earnestly. “I am going to be a genuine, hard-working scientist. Erig would be pleased, and I desperately want to please Erig. Please maintain that I have coached you in this singing business.”

“If the National Anthem works, then you have coached me,” said Jeff. Raising his voice, he said, “Thank you, Court Scientist. Your plan seems a wise one. Your Highness, I will now attempt to save your daughter. If I succeed, it will be due to Einkan’s genius.”

Jeff sang the music, but not the words, of the Izzian National Anthem, his voice cracking once. Nothing happened.

Einkan at once marched to the pod, moved it to the center of the floor next to Jeff, closed his eyes, and spread his hands over it.

“The danger is deep,” he slowly intoned. “The Princess is being held in the grip of powerful forces. She may not return to us in her former shape. We shall face the forces and no matter what the Princess has become, the total experience will teach Izzians that we must learn more. We must experiment. We must understand the forces of the Universe and go beyond the feeble knowledge our robots possess. We Izzians will advance, and we shall not allow any left-over branch of our noble species, stranded on some other planetary system far away, flaut their technology at us. We will overcome—”

“Get on with it,” shouted the Queen.

“I would like my daughter back,” said the King wistfully.

“Proceed, Jeff,” said Einkan, “and if the ritual does not succeed, let the fault rest with those who interrupt.”

“Be quiet, my love,” said the King as the Queen opened her mouth. Startled, she shut it.

Jeff sang again and this time his voice didn’t crack. Oola purred. Yobo seemed to swell with held breath, and the other humans paled with tension. Norby and Pera rose slowly on antigrav, hovering near a pillar in case they had to get away from the guards and remain free to rescue the rest.

The pod didn’t open slowly as Oola’s hassock had. It opened with a bang, and in a blur of motion, something got out of it.

“Hello, everybody,” said the Princess.

She was not green. She had curly red hair, blue eyes, and a million freckles. She was also very thin and small and was about ten years old. She was not beautiful though she might be some day.

Jeff stared with astonishment. He thought: Space and time! The tree has changed the beautiful Princess into a little girl.

He waited for the wrath of the Queen to descend upon him, along with guards and gold handcuffs.

Jeff’s astonishment was nothing compared to the emotions that swirled over Fargo’s face as he stared at the little Princess. He turned to Albany with his mouth open, and she burst out into wild laughter. “She’s all yours, Fargo,” she said.

But the greatest excitement emanated from the thrones. “Rinda, my child!” cried the King, rushing off his throne to clasp her in his arms. She waved over his shoulder. “Hi, Mom. I made it!”

The Queen rose majestically and then burst into tears. “My darling daughter! You’ve come back to us!”

Jeff whispered to Einkan. “Then that is really the Princess? She doesn’t look anything like her portrait.”

Einkan said, “The Princess wanted the portrait to look grown-up and beautiful, and what the Princess wants, the Princess gets. Since you never saw the real Princess, you were misled, I suppose.”

“No wonder she thought I was handsome.” Jeff grinned sheepishly.

Meanwhile Admiral Yobo had advanced grandly to the throne, bowing low. “Your Majesties, having completed our task successfully, we now must consider the pressing business we have on our own planet, and we must take leave of you, taking with us, of course, any small reward you may feel we have earned.”

“Or large reward, Your Majesties,” added Fargo hastily.

“The reward will be taken care of, after the six months of celebrations, feasts—”

“Feasts? Well—” said Yobo.

“No, Admiral,” said Jeff. “I’ve got to get back to the Academy. I’m already late.”

“And I’m overdue at the police station,” said Albany, “besides having to reassure my father, the Mayor, that I’m still alive.”

“For myself, I feel in urgent need of a rest cure,” said Fargo.

“And I’m going with them,” said Norby.

The Princess looked up at Pera, hovering with Norby. “I would like one of you to stay. I supposed handsome Jeff can’t stay, but perhaps I can keep Pera. Izz could use a robot like her.”

“I will stay with you, Princess. We are both little and female and we can be together.”

“I will grow, Pera. I won’t remain little.”

“I will grow, too, Princess, in mind and experience.”

“We can use our hyperdrive ship if you stay with us,” said the Princess, “until the Court Scientist invents a hyperdrive of our own.”

“You won’t use it at all,” said the Queen firmly, “until you can stop it from going to that dreadful planet, which I declare off bounds to all Izzians.”

“Hear, hear,” said the King.

“And I declare it off bounds to all Terrans,” said Yobo.

“Princess,” said Jeff, “you must not treat Pera as a servant. She thinks for herself and she is therefore an equal.”

“I know,” said the Princess, her eyes downcast. “I am not the same person I was. I learned a great deal on Melodia. We shall be friends, Pera.”

“Yes, we shall,” said the little robot and sailed down to the little girl, “but there remains one thing…. Norby.”

“Yes, Pera,” said Norby.

“We are friends, too. Will you come and visit me now and then?”

“As often as I can…. But now we must leave.” He sailed upward and said, “Come on, Terrans. I’ll go ahead and get the Hopeful ready for departure.” He zoomed out of the throne room.

The Queen sidled up to Fargo, “Must you go, too? You are by far the most handsome—”

“That will do, my love,” said the King, taking her arm. “This alien must leave at once, or I shall be seriously annoyed.”

“Annoyed?” said the Queen, her chin in the air. “With the Queen?”

“Annoyed!” said the King. “With my wife!”

“Why, Fizzy! You’re jealous, you old silly,” said the Queen, suddenly revealing a dimple in her cheek. They left the throne room hand in hand.

The Princess was patting Oola, who was purring loudly while Pera stood close by. Rinda said, “Could I have a few words with Jeff? … Alone?”

“Sure,” said Fargo, grinning. “Let’s all be tactful.”

When they were alone, Jeff smiled down into the Princess’s thin, eager little face. “I’m glad you’re safe now, Your Highness.”

“I want to thank you personally,” she said. “You don’t really think I’m beautiful, do you?”

“I think you will be some day, if—” he stopped.

“If I become a better person? Is that it?”

“I’m sure you will become a better person, day by day, as I hope we all will.”

“Being a tree taught me a bit about helplessness. And I was able to watch how you were. You were very brave and you never gave up and you always thought of others. How old are you?”

“Fourteen.”

“Really? Only fourteen? You must be tall for your age.”

“I can’t help it.”

“I’m glad. You won’t forget me?”

“Never, Your Highness.”

“Promise that you’ll visit me some time.”

“Of course, Your Highness. Whenever Norby visits Pera, I will be with him to visit you.” He bowed and started to walk out.

“Make it soon,” said the Princess. Then she said, so softly that he wasn’t sure he caught the words. “Maybe you’ll wait for me to grow up before you get married.”

14

### RECOVERY

The control room of the Hopeful was once again crowded with Terrans, tympani, a small dragon, and a green AllPurpose-Pet. Norby was at the controls, with his back eyes shut. Hyperspace was as gray as ever, and they were all safely away from Izz.

Norby’s back eyes opened. “It’s so silent. What’s going on?”

“It’s dinner time,” Yobo said with pleasure. “Or is it lunch? I’ve lost track.”

Jeff said, “I’m afraid we didn’t find out anything about the Others, Admiral, or about how to get hyperspatial travel without Norby.”

“Well, well,” said Yobo. “Another time.”

“The food is good,” said Zargl. “Soon I’ll practice flaming.

“Not in the Hopeful, you won’t,” said Fargo.

“Speaking of practicing,” said Norby, “why aren’t you all singing? Don’t you want to win the Federation contest?”

“It’s too late,” said Albany, taking the last sip of her chocolate drink. “We’ve missed it.”

“The contest ended days ago,” said Yobo.

“But I can take care of that,” Norby said. “If I travel a little backward in time, we can arrive before the contest begins.”

“That would be dangerous, Norby,” said Jeff.

Norby waved an arm pompously. “I am an expert. While it is true that I can’t hyperjump into a time and place where I already exist, I’m not going to be on Earth and on Izz at the same time. Relativistically speaking, as your Terran scientist, Einstein, would have put it, time on Izz is relatively not quite congruent with Earth time if you allow for the curvature of space and the speed of light and—”

“How sad,” said Zargl. “I’ve been trying so hard to master Terran Basic, but I see I still cannot understand it.”

“I think what Norby means,” said Jeff, “is that we can emerge from hyperspace before our Federation starts its singing contest. Is that it, Norby?”

“Exactly.”

“Never,” roared Yobo, “Do not fool around with time, Norby. I’ve travelled in time with you before, and I know you’re too mixed-up to be trusted. You’ll get me to Earth in the middle of the Ice Age, or when America has not yet been discovered by Europeans, or when African slaves are still being sold. I don’t intend to be subjected to that.” He wiped his brow and muttered something dire in Martian Swahili. Then he realized he still had part of a sandwich in his hand and returned to his dinner.

Fargo kicked the tympani. “I don’t want to arrive before the singing contest, anyway. I have no desire to sing. No more music. Never again.”

“But Fargo, think of it as an adventure,” said Albany.

“I don’t feel adventurous,” said Fargo. “I may never again feel adventurous. Now that I’ve given up singing, I’m going to be a coward.”

“Not you,” said Albany, “I won’t believe that.”

“It’s true. Not even your mellifluous contralto could move me.”

Yobo sighed and nodded to Jeff. “I hate to agree to time travel or whatever is needed to get back before the contest, but I think it is necessary to get Fargo out of this mood. But be careful, Norby!”

Jeff touched Norby and thought:

—Not too careful, Norby. Fargo needs to know he still wants adventure.

—Okay, I’ll be just a little mixed-up. Join minds with me.

The Hopeful shivered out of the gray of hyperspace and Norby said, proudly, “There it is—Earth! Right on target!”

“Indeed?” Admiral Yobo glared at the viewscreen. “Would you please explain why our receivers detect no radiation from our lunar colonies or from our spomes? If that’s Earth, when are we?”

The Hopeful moved closer to the planet. Through rifts in the cloud cover, Jeff could see that continents were a little distorted and not in their usual positions. Norby had outdone himself.

“The Hopeful skimmed the surface, whistling through the atmosphere. Albany said, “I have always suspected that some dinosaurs came in shades of purple.”

“Norby!” roared Yobo. “What have you done?”

Fargo sprang to his feet. “Listen! Keep the Hopeful hovering, and, Norby, take me down on your antigrav. There are soaring pteranodons down there, and I want to take a ride on one. With antigrav, Norby and I wouldn’t be too heavy for one to carry us and—”

Albany, Yobo, and Jeff pounced on him and dragged him back to the tympani, where Oola jumped in his lap and licked his chin.

“Oh Fargo,” said Zargl. “I don’t think dinosaurs are safe”

“And I don’t want to ride a pteranodon,” wailed Norby.

“You won’t,” said Albany. “Mr. No-Adventure isn’t leaving the ship. He’s going to practice for the singing contest.”

Fargo said, “We really need a soprano.”

“Are you still hankering after that Princess?” asked Albany. “All ten years of her?”

“She’ll be quite beautiful some day,” said Fargo. “You’ll see. Anyway, I’m not going to sing. Definitely not.”

“Give me some men who are stout-hearted men,” sang Albany. Yobo and Zargl joined in and Oola howled musically. Albany placed the drumsticks in Fargo’s hands.

“But I hate music, I tell you,” said Fargo.

Yobo thumped the various drums in turn with his fist.

Fargo winced. “They need tuning.” He bent over to tune the drums, humming softly as Albany finished her song, while Norby, in a spasm of efficiency, returned to a time a few days before the contest.

“Good,” said Fargo. “I need time to recover from my hoarseness.”

Fargo and his group won the contest, of course, and Fargo was becomingly modest about it.

“After all,” he said, “the Admiral is the best bass in the Galaxy, Albany’s contralto would melt the heart of any judge, and Jeff was almost adequate. Combine all that with my musical genius, and we couldn’t lose.”

Norby chuckled metallically. “Of course you couldn’t lose. Think of all the practicing you managed to do.”