

## The Euphorions

“Android 10W40, aboard the *Richard M. Nixon*, calling Galactic Minerals Corporate Control. Come in please.”

The transport droid operating the Galactic Minerals LLC nickel freighter *Richard M. Nixon* had just left the company’s mining colony on the lonely asteroid 37 Jemima in a very distant orbit around the sun. The ship, heavily automated and crewed by a single android, had plied the 600 million kilometer route between Earth and 37 Jemima for several human lifetimes, and was returning with a hold full of ore.

There was usually no need for extraneous communications between droid and base, but 10W40 was programmed to report unusual conditions and was doing so. “Android 10W40, aboard the *Richard M. Nixon*, calling Galactic Minerals Corporate Control. Come in please.”

“Galactic Minerals Corporate Regional Control Station 4, calling the *Richard M. Nixon*, we read you, do you copy? Is there a problem?” a young sounding woman’s voice replied. She was one of the crew on the largest of GM’s half dozen control stations in stationary orbit in proximity to asteroid mining operations.

“Yes and yes.” The droid was perplexed by the tendency of humans to ask a second question before the first inquiry had been dealt with, but it was used to it. “Are you ready to receive my report?”

“Affirmative.”

“There is no problem with the ship. All systems are sufficiently within nominal bounds, the hold contains 232 metric tons of ore, the fuel tanks are at 98% capacity and the consumption rate is normal.

“Upon arrival on 37 Jemima, I discovered that all the inhabitants but six had expired. While the automatic ore storage and handling facility was loading the ship, a party of two adult male humans, three adult female humans, and one infant male human requested permission to board the ship to escape the disease infested mining colony. According to the corporate manual, section three, paragraph 4.5, line 17, ‘...any employee of Galactic Minerals LLC who has supervisory permission to travel from one company site to another, or who requires emergency evacuation from any company facility, may be afforded transport on regularly scheduled freighters...’ the fact that all other personnel on 37 Jemima were deceased constituted an emergency, so I permitted the party to board leaving the facility deserted.

“Six of the seven passengers have since expired, leaving only the human child, age 22 months, who is sitting on the deck only a few feet from this consol and whose screams are now at the 100 decibel level. I am programmed to provide sustenance from the stores to human passengers, but I have no specific programming on how to care for a human infant. Should I bring him to regional headquarters? Please instruct.”

There was a pause while the radio operator consulted her immediate superior. When the radio crackled into life, the voice sounded suddenly tired as it said, “It seems that this plague has swept through all the mining operations under this station’s management. You cannot bring the child here for we are under a quarantine. Earth is where you must go. We will upload detailed programming specific to the care of children.”

As 10W40 was about to acknowledge, it detected a subtle shockwave vibrate the ship. When the disturbance had passed, the robot was unable to reestablish contact with regional control for the antennae array of the *Richard M. Nixon* had been shorn away by a cluster of small meteors.

The android was neither disturbed nor alarmed – it was not in its programming. It simply set the course for Earth, calculated the length of the journey to be sixteen years, and went to reconstitute a meal for the child. That was all the more rearing that the child would receive, the android would place food on a table three times a day and the boy would set upon it like a wild animal. The child received no other nurturing or guidance, roaming the ship like an untamed beast roving through its territory. 10W40 paid little overt attention to the boy, though the child eventually took to the robot and began following it constantly.

To put humans at ease, 10W40 had a humanoid configuration of bilateral symmetry. It ambulated by means of two legs terminating in mechanical feet that contained suction devices for walking on the exterior of the hull to make in-flight repairs, and it had two arms with hands that had fingers far more dexterous than those bestowed on mankind. These appendages were attached to an ellipsoid torso topped by a neck and a curved elongated head, the front of which its designers had made analogous to a human face, with cameras for eyes, a speaker for a mouth, and a red LED “power on” indicator where the nose would be.

The shape of the head was more like an upside down shoehorn than a human head. As odd as this visage was to the ordinary miner traveling from asteroid to asteroid, it became the face of maternity to Elvis.

The android’s titanium frame was covered with plastic panels, that were originally off-white. Being a transport android, little attention was paid to cosmetic maintenance so its finish was slightly battered and some of the panels were fading.

10W40 knew all Earth languages and could communicate audibly using them, but it used English with the boy since the miners who had brought him on board spoke English. Though the child learned to speak, he did so without inflection, and never experienced a hug or caress, nor the warmth of human touch. As the years rolled by, he was less and less human.

He grew up encapsulated in the bubble of life support within the shell of the space ship – an artificial world illuminated by artificial light and fed on artificial food by an artificial being, the android 10W40. The child never knew an affectionate touch or experienced sympathy or love – only the cold, dispassionate, company of the android performing its programmed duties.

Bonding to the android, the boy followed it as it went about its duties – imitating its actions and learning all there was to know about operating an interplanetary space freighter. By the age of five he was skilled at most of the robot’s duties and could navigate the ship through a field of asteroids.

Though adept at piloting and other technical tasks, he was unconscious of hygiene and relieved himself wherever he happened to be. The android, being built to serve, would simply clean it up. One day the boy asked the android what the bathrooms were for and 10W40 explained that is where human passengers would usually go to excrete bodily wastes and to wash.

From then on the space orphan would relieve himself in the middle of the bathroom floor, which was easy enough for the robot to wash down the drain. The child even began washing, though he did this in the toilets. The android, having no relevant programming, did not interfere.

10W40 needed a way to reference the boy in the ship's logs so it decided to invent a name for him by taking the first letter of the first name of all the five deceased adult passenger's who'd come aboard with the child in the order they appeared on the manifest: Elvis.

Being constant companions, communication between the soul inhabitants of the space ship evolved. In the ensuing years, as the boy matured he began to forgo speaking, and communicated with the robot and the ship's computers by imitating the sound of digital signals.

Throughout the sixteen year journey, Elvis was 10W40's shadow, even when the android went into its daily standby-mode for several hours to recharge and allow the ship's computer to do a diagnostic scan. It would crouch down in the Robotics Utility Maintenance Locker, folding its arms and legs beneath its torso into a cubic configuration. During these cycles, Elvis would squeeze into the locker with his mechanical friend, assume similar position, and with the warmth of the android's charging power-packs against his naked skin, he too would go into standby-mode and sleep.

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### *Columbia, Maryland/Fifteen years later*

It wasn't often that Dr. Saloni "Sally" Singh (professor of Xenobiology at the University of Delaware and government consultant) was called to sit in on an autopsy, but this particular cadaver had a bearing on a problem she was working on for two of the president's cabinet secretaries.

There had of late been unsettling reports of people falling prey to a syndrome whereby they lost their senses and became lumbering, drooling zombies until dying some weeks later. Though still relatively rare, these episodes had garnered a great deal of perverse interest on the daily network news broadcasts and were raising public alarm. Because the syndrome was rumored to be the same plague that had ravaged the mining colonies in the asteroid belts, the Departments of Healthcare and Homeland Security began to look into the situation and retained Dr. Singh.

The medical examiner had contacted her because the deceased fit a profile that Sally had emailed to coroners across the country. In his response, the coroner had described the subject's bizarre conduct just before his death:

After manifesting the behavior of someone high on narcotics for several days, the deceased began to run amuck smashing windows, striking passerby, and generally creating a spectacular scene in the midst of the busiest intersection in Columbia, Maryland. When the police seized and cuffed him, he went into a catatonic state and held his breath until he died.

The deceased was now having the top of his skull sawed off by Dr. Leland Mathers the medical examiner for Howard County. Dr. Singh wore a sweater under her lab coat, for the lab was kept cool. While he worked, the coroner talked to Singh.

“This is the third case I’ve seen like this. A seemingly upstanding citizen goes off his nut and starts getting into mischief.”

“Mischief?”

“They wreak havoc. The first case I saw came in last week. An electric lineman...solid citizen with twenty years on the job...started acting ‘goofy’ according to his co-workers. He drove his utility truck into a communication tower then began severing cables with a bolt cutter until he ran afoul of a four hundred volt line and fried himself. The other one exhibited equally bizarre behavior. You get the idea...right?”

“Unfortunately, I do. You said the subjects behaved like they were drugged, did you find any traces of narcotics in their blood?”

“Not in this one, not in any of them. I don’t know what caused them to flake out.”

The coroner paused for a second then continued, “I didn’t remove the brains in the other subjects, for the causes of death were very obvious, perhaps we’ll get a clue out of this fellow’s head.” And with that he turned off the saw, set it on a stainless steel cart, and gripping the top of the skull with the tips of his fingers, popped it off exposing the grey mass within.

Mathers lifted out the brain and plopped it into the pan hanging from the scale, and both of them saw the growth at the same time.

“My God that’s the strangest tumor I’ve ever seen,” Mathers said.

He was referring to an elongated mass, about the size and shape of a garden slug, which had attached itself to the top of the brain through a number of fine fibrous filaments that radiated from it like a large amorphous spider

“Have you ever seen anything like this before?” Dr. Mathers asked.

“I’ve heard rumors that the plague which wiped out Galactic Minerals mining colonies exhibited symptoms of this nature.”

“So you think this could be some kind of extra-terrestrial infestation? I’ve never seen anything like this on Earth.”

“I wouldn’t bet against it.”

“I’ll defer to you since you’re the xenobiologist,” Mathers said.

As Sally began taking tissue samples, the coroner started setting up the test for dopamine levels in the brain. While he fiddled with the gas chromatograph/mass spectrometer, she studied the way the filaments were attached to the brain.

When Mathers returned about twenty minutes later Singh asked, “Would you mind if I took this with me to study?”

“Go ahead. If I want another one I’m sure there’s one in each of the other stiffs I told you about. As far as this guy goes, his dopamine levels are off the chart. I’m going to go out on a limb and conjecture that this growth or organism is responsible for this condition and the subsequent fatal behavior.” The coroner paused and looking at the body on the dissecting table said, “At least he died happy.”

Sally rolled her eyes and said, “Of a fatal dose of euphoria.”

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*Slawick Hall, University of Delaware Xenobiology Dept./three months later*

Since sitting in on the autopsy with Dr. Mathers, Sally Singh had confirmed that the growth removed from the cadaver was indeed an alien organism. Given the creatures' effect of causing the production of massive quantities of dopamine in infected brains, the media had dubbed them, "Euphorions" and everyone, even scientists, referred to them by that moniker.

Sally had collected scores of specimens from around the world and devoted countless hours to research on the Euphorions. Though she'd gained an intimate knowledge of their physiology and life cycle, no progress had been made in finding a way to effect a cure or prevention.

She'd been pushing herself harder than usual because of the mounting pressure being applied from the White House about the public hysteria that was arising out of the outlandish and irresponsible press coverage.

It was almost noon, and Sally had been in her lab since nine the previous morning. She had worked all night testing a chemical that had seemed promising for interfering with the Euphorion's reproductive cycle, but to no avail. After reviewing the data for several hours, she was at her computer writing a summary in the lab log. She was barely able to keep her eyes open despite the horrendous, but strong, coffee her secretary brewed.

The phone rang and her secretary buzzed onto the intercom, "Dr. Singh, there's a Marty Keefer, Manager for Human Resources at Galactic Minerals, on the line asking for you."

"I'm busy. Ask him what he wants and I'll get back to him."

"He insists on talking to no one but you."

"He does, does he? Ask him, 'why should I interrupt the vital research we're doing in the interest of the national good?'"

There was a pause of some fifteen seconds before the secretary's voice returned to the intercom, "He says there's two reasons. Galactic Minerals will become a permanent underwriter for your funding, and they have a young man on their hands who just arrived after a sixteen year voyage and is the only survivor of the plague which wiped out their mining colonies in the asteroid belts."

Without hesitating, Sally punched the button which connected her to the line Keefer was holding on and said, "Marty, this is Sally Singh. How soon can you get him here?"

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*The White House cabinet room/Three days later*

"So now that you've told us what we already know about these Euphorions, tell us something we don't know," President Lincoln Logg said to Dr. Singh. She had just finished her presentation to the Chief Executive and his cabinet and had given what she'd thought was a comprehensive summation of the known facts regarding the alien organisms and their infection of humans.

It was true that the president had seen some of the information, for she'd sent preliminary reports to the secretaries of Health and Homeland Security, and they'd passed the highlights on to the president. But she'd been asked by President Logg to bring everyone else up to speed and felt that his rebuking her was a cheap shot.

Rather than respond to the less than cerebral and mean spirited politician, she swallowed the bile rising in her throat, thought about the good of humanity, and proceeded to continue after making a disclaimer, "Ladies and gentlemen, I have told you everything that I have discovered about this organism. Even though the media reports are quite alarming, the rate of infection is still relatively low so we have some time for research.

"The population of Earth is so numerous and dispersed that it should take a while for the level of infection to reach the critical mass necessary for a more widespread and virulent epidemic. We have some leads, but they are not proved out yet. As a scientist I must work with verifiable data and am uncomfortable making a surmise, but we are in an emergency situation so I will give you my best conjecture."

"What are your leads?" asked President Logg.

The president had a way of getting under Sally's skin – this was one of the issues she was about to address.

She shot him a look and said, "About six months – as I was *about* to say in my presentation. If you would allow me to continue, you'll probably hear the answers to many of your questions. In fact I'd prefer not taking any more questions until the end."

"No need to get snippy," President Logg said with a slight smile, pleased that he was irritating her. "Continue."

Sally cleared her throat and said, "I believe that these Euphorions are related to the plague that swept through the asteroid mining colonies with nearly one hundred percent mortality. These organisms go through multiple phases not unlike the egg, larva, and pupae of a moth, and they send their spores into the gut of their hosts to be eliminated as human waste. So it spreads in a similar fashion to many diseases we already know and one might draw the conclusion that using the same prophylactic and hygienic precautions so familiar to us already, like washing one's hands often and covering one's mouth when sneezing, will help slow and possibly prevent the spread of the disease.

"One vector of infection we have identified is the heated exhaust of wall mounted blow dryers so common in public restrooms. A septic aerosol is generated when a toilet is flushed – microscopic particles of water spray, are launched into the air by the force of the water that flushes the bowl. These particles, along with entrained Euphorion spores, are drawn into the dryer intake where thermophilic bacteria that thrive in the warm, moist conditions provide a host to the incubation of the larval stage of the organism.

"This intermediate host is crucial to the infection of humans, and the same process I've just described can occur even under the fingernails of someone with poor hygiene skills.

"Why Euphorions go to great lengths to stimulate dopamine production is still a mystery, and its genetic makeup is, as you might imagine, is completely...alien..."

Despite her request that everyone hold their questions until she'd finished, Dick Sizemore, the Secretary of Homeland Security interrupted to ask, "Can you predict when the infection will reach what you called *critical mass* and start to spread in a more virulent fashion?"

Though not happy to have her train of thought and orderly presentation interrupted, she tried to keep the displeasure out of her voice as she replied, “No, the mining colonies were so small they came almost immediately to critical mass, so the data is useless as a model for predicting what will happen here.”

Since she’d taken one question, it seemed the floodgates were opened, as the Secretary of Interplanetary Commerce spoke before she hardly finished, “What’s the mortality rate?”

“In regards to the mining colonies: ninety-nine point ninety-five percent.”

“Don’t you mean one hundred percent?” asked the President. “Everyone we’ve heard of here on Earth who gets it winds up dead.”

“The reason I use that percentage is that I’ve recently learned of a survivor from the mining colonies – a man of some eighteen years who is being transported to my lab in Delaware as we speak.”

Everyone began speaking at once until President Logg shouted everyone to order. Besides the authority of his office, the president was an imposing man, tall and thin, with a thick head of salt and pepper wavy hair off-setting the light brown skin that covered his craggy and angular face. If not for the hard predatory glint of steel in his eye, he would have looked avuncular.

When everyone had quieted down he said, “This is indeed a pleasant surprise. It would seem to indicate there may be hope of finding a cure after all. Would it not, Dr. Singh?”

“One might think so, but until I’ve run tests and...”

“Of course you’ll have to run tests,” the president said. “But just humor me by making a wild ass guess about whether this young man of yours can help us beat this thing.”

Sally paused, cleared her throat and said, “Though I can’t predict how long it will take to discover exactly why he alone survived, I would be surprised if there was not something crucial to be learned about the infection from him.”

When Dr. Singh paused, President Logg said, “Does anyone else have anything to ask before I open the floor to see what suggestions my brain trust has to offer?”

The Secretary of Climate Change asked, “Could this somehow be related to global warming? As you know, the mean temperature of the Earth has risen three-fifths of a degree in the last two hundred years.”

“Shut up you imbecile,” President Logg said. “Congress only created your stupid department because of mass hysteria brought on by the hyenas in the media. Does anyone else have anything relevant to ask?”

After the president’s outburst, no one else tendered a question, so President Logg said, “Since there are no more questions, I’m opening the floor for suggestions. We’ll go around the table starting with the Secretary of Defense.”

The Secretary of Defense cleared his throat and said, “We obviously need to wipe these things out as soon and completely as possible. When anyone is found to be infected, they should be immediately quarantined. We should start building camps now and install crematoriums.”

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, whom the Secretary of Defense had brought with him, added, “Perhaps we should nuke areas that have high concentrations of infection?”

“I think your uniform collar is a little tight general,” said President Logg, “Right now one of the highest rates of infection is in the Washington D.C. area...or are you suicidal?”

The Secretary of Healthcare opined, “We need to study these organisms, rather than destroy them. We might find a cure or a vaccine. Perhaps we could give government funding to some of the larger pharmaceutical companies so they can start the process.”

“This will not do,” the Secretary of State said indignantly, “If these are aliens turn out to be sentient beings, then any move to destroy them, confine them to a lab for vivisection, or circumvent their life cycle with a vaccine, would constitute hostile action and could be considered an act of war. I say we treat this as first contact with an alien species and begin negotiations.”

This attracted a rebuke from Logg who slammed his fist to the table and said, “Shut up you nincompoop, that’s dumber than when one of my predecessors signed a peace treaty with Al Qaeda and they used the access they gained to plant nukes in New York and Los Angeles.” He was referring to the missionaries Al Qaeda was allowed to bring into the country under the Kennedy Act to give mandatory sensitivity training to American college students.

The Secretary of Homeland Security, Roscoe Meyer, said, “We should include funding, in any bill that arises out of this, for hiring one hundred thousand restroom safety inspectors to scrutinize every bathroom, public and private in the country for compliance with standards we will set that will minimize the chances of the spread of infection. Perhaps we should institute the temporary closing of all public restrooms and ban these blow hand dryers – or at least mandate that they operate at lower temperatures.”

“Or maybe we should have them blow refrigerated air,” President Logg said sarcastically, and was disgusted when he realized that the Secretary of Homeland Security had taken him seriously and was writing the suggestion down. “Put your pen down, Roscoe, my chief of staff will take care of it when something’s important enough for you to write down.”

The secretary for the Department of Immigration said, “These aliens are in the country illegally so we should deport them, and we should make it illegal for anyone to be infected for they would be aiding and abetting law breakers.”

President Logg gave an audible moan and said, “I can’t stand listening to anymore of this.” So he stopped debate and issued his directives. “Dr. Singh will study her alleged survivor while we work up a bill that will take certain measures to slow the spread of this potential pandemic. I will address the nation and tell them we have a new form of virulent infection and that we are about to mobilize means to stop its spread – though people may not believe us after all the fuss about the supposed avian flu crisis years back that never materialized. I won’t mention the alien connection. We’ll refer to the agents of infection by the name Dr. Singh used – Euphorions.”

The Secretary of Healthcare spoke up and said, “And we could call the condition, ES, for Euphorion Syndrome.”

“That’s the first intelligent thing I’ve heard you say all day,” Logg replied. “Not too scary...something we can sell. The main thing is, we don’t want the public blaming us and venting their wrath at the polls – we need a spin that makes us look caring and helpful. Like we’re actually accomplishing something whether we are or not.”

Sally Singh listened to the leaders of the country agonizing over how to proceed and was shocked to realize that, even after hearing her report, they were hoping they could blow smoke at a terrified public to pacify them until the crisis blew over. But this crisis was not going to disappear like some sleazy sex scandal.

Leaping to her feet, she shouted, “This is not something that’s possible to contain, not something you can put a *spin* on. You, we, have to take instantaneous, overwhelming, and effective action if we are to avoid becoming extinct.”

The president shushed her in a condescending manner and turned to Senator Jasper Shakes, who as chairman of the Homeland Security committee would be in charge of the formulation of the bill which will govern the official plan of action. “Senator Shakes is already on top of this Sally, his entire staff will be working around the clock until we get a bill hammered out.”

The oversight of the bill which would define the nation’s response to this crisis was in the hands of a seventy year old Baptist who would believe in Creationism to his dying day and who had never paid an iota of attention to matters scientific. The senator acknowledged the president saying, “If the Lord’s willing, and the creek don’t rise we should have a comprehensive bill in a matter days.”

Sally was incredulous, “How is that possible when we have a dearth of real data on the organisms?”

“Don’t worry your pretty little head,” Senator Shakes said with a patronizing syrupy southern accent, “we’ll figure something out little lady.”

Before Sally could erupt with the Krakatoan fury that was building within her, President Logg intervened saying, “Please Sally, we heard your report now let us do our job. You should return to your lab and do what you do best and let us handle the rest. This is our area of expertise. We know how government works, so let your elected representatives do their jobs”

Dr. Singh stormed out of the room without saying another word to anyone, and the politicians returned to their labors. A week later the bill was passed by both houses and signed into law with much fanfare by President Logg.

The resultant bill, commonly known as the Euphorion Act, created, among other things, a corps of restroom inspectors, a national registry of infected persons to be rounded up, and iconic thermometers to be placed on billboards illustrating an area’s level of infection. It also granted hundreds of billions in subsidies to the nation’s pharmaceutical companies and mandated that all Euphorions report to the Department of Immigration for deportation.

Though the ES infestation was a national catastrophe in the making, the politicians looked on it as a boon to expand the bureaucracy, funnel graft money to their cronies, provide the unskilled masses with jobs as toilet inspectors, government janitors, and security personnel. The high level of public concern with this looming crisis took the voting public’s mind off of the recent sex and embezzlement scandals that had plagued the administration and its party members in congress. With so many agents charged with public welfare, unemployment hit an all time low.

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*Newark, Delaware/The next day*

Dr. Singh had been in her laboratory at the University of Delaware since four a.m. and it was now nearly noon. She had been disgusted by the cabinet meeting, but now she was disgusted nearly to nausea at the rank odor emanating from the hope of the world, the youthful plague survivor who had arrived the day before while she was in D.C.

As far as she could tell, Elvis had never had a proper bath or shower and his smell reminded her of the lower caste people back in India – the ones who collected offal, night-soil, or who worked in tanneries.

He was tall, gangly, and unabashedly naked. Though his red hair came down to his waist, he was still too young to grow a beard. Weak because he was unaccustomed to Earth's gravity, he leaned on the android for support and seemed disoriented like a person on a three day acid binge.

He would not speak to anyone except 10w40. Elvis even imitated the android's ungainly motions and walked with the same awkward gait, mimicking the slight electro-mechanical sounds of clicks and whirring that could be heard when 10W40 performed certain functions.

Completely ignorant of rules of department, Elvis exhibited such egregious behavior that some of Sally's staff thought him to be retarded. And he was, socially – but not intellectually. He was like a badly behaved dog.

His aversion to clothes and shamelessness about displaying his bare physical person caused a great deal of joking and giggling among the mostly female grad assistants, one of whom had even written in her notes, which Dr. Singh always reviewed,

...it is possible that the years subject spent in zero gravity are responsible for his abnormally elongated limbs and member...

This was written that way in jest, but was absolutely true. The youth often became aroused in the company of female staff, but he had no idea what to do about it.

Dr. Singh reprimanded the assistants to cease being 'silly' about the youth's arousal, and to take a clinical approach, as did she. "Remember, you're professionals," she told the young women working for her. And everyone returned to their work and maintained their professional detachment – for the time.

Sally wanted an MRI of him, but dared not send him to the imaging lab until he was cleaned up. Singh's grad students and professional assistants had been trying to wash him since he'd arrived, but to no avail, for he would not respond or make eye contact with any of them and would curl up in the fetal position and scream hideously if touched.

"He only pays attention to the robot and won't listen to any of us," Sally's most senior graduate assistant complained. "Since I couldn't get him in the shower, I thought I'd give him a once over with a soapy wash cloth, but he freaked so bad whenever I touched him, that I backed off."

Sally took a few moments to soak all this in then got on the phone to the chairman of the Bio-Mechanical Engineering Department. When he answered she said, "Hello Lipton, this is Sally Singh..." she explained what she had in mind and in less than an hour the grad student most gifted at programming logic controllers was standing in her lab.

"Whaddaya got?" asked the sandy haired youth who looked like he should be delivering pizzas.

“Do you think you can program that robot to take a shower?” Sally replied.

Without even the least hint of surprise at the request he shrugged and said, “Sure. The design for this model is ancient – undergraduate stuff. Its chassis should still be watertight, they really used to build these things tough.”

In fifteen minutes 10W40 was in the shower, lathering himself beneath one of several shower heads with Elvis right beside him.

The engineering student said, “Monkey see, monkey do, eh? Are you done with me?”

“Not even close. Next, I want you to program the robot to submit to an MRI.” Sally kept the engineering student busy for hours programming all the behaviors she might want Elvis to imitate – not the least of which was getting dressed.

Now, twenty four hours later, she was still in the lab, but was studying the images from the MRI while 10W40 donned a sweat suit so that Elvis would too.

Shriveled up inside of Elvis’s skull, were organisms like the ones she and Dr. Mathers had found, except they had died in an early stage of development and shrunken like mummies. When she realized that Elvis must be immune, even toxic, to Euphorions, she sedated the youth and took tissue samples from each of his major organs, both for genetic research and the chance of discovering an antibody to create a vaccine.

She wrote in her lab notebook:

...Elvis most likely has a rare genetic predisposition to immunity to the Euphorions – the anecdotal evidence of dead Euphorions in his brain being fairly convincing. Given that both parents died of the plague, it had to be a recessive gene and Elvis has beaten long odds to have natural resistance.

As she read what she’d written out loud to the assistants working nearby, she was really talking to herself when she added, “...this suggests that not everyone who is infected will die.”

“So some of us might already be immune?” asked a grad student.

“That’s right. Hundreds, maybe even thousands of people might survive, so there’s no need to worry,” Sally replied with unusually sardonic humor. “So even without a cure, this doesn’t have to be the end of mankind, just civilization as we know it.”

With that, she gave her assistants her ‘back to work look’ and they returned to preparing the tissue samples for delivery to the University of Delaware’s genetic lab and to a private firm she used to corroborate results.

Since the genetic sleuthing would be a long process, she knuckled down to working with Elvis directly, extracting only small sample’s of blood and lymphatic fluid so as not to cause him harm. And once a potential vaccine was found, she would need to test it on human subjects since Euphorions did not infect other species.

President Logg had offered assistance with this obstacle by supplying her with condemned criminals for test subjects, but this ran counter to Sally’s personal code of ethics. So when she had a vaccine in hand, she inoculated herself then exposed herself to the alien infection.

Stoically resigned to her fate, she settled down to getting to know Elvis on a personal level. Now she was as much a test subject as one of the rabbits, dogs, or guinea pigs in cages in another part of the lab.

Every day laid heavy upon her, except when she scanned her daily MRI's for the creeping tendrils that would announce the onset of infection, and she filled the long hours trying to get close to Elvis, but with little effect. She began on a purely professional basis, of the scientist examining the subject, but gradually she began to react to his complete indifference on a deeper, personal level. She determined to break through his shell.

The only constant sign that anyone was getting through to him at all was that he continued to respond to the proximity of female staff, including Dr. Singh, with an erection.

Frustrated in her attempt to reach him on some level other than a hormonal one, she began following 10W40 about, just as Elvis did, and emulating the robot's actions.

During one of the robot's periods of stasis, she climbed into the maintenance locker with the android as it recharged. She fell asleep to the left of the android, while Elvis crouched to the right. But when she awoke, Elvis had moved from the other side of the robot and was right beside her, in actual physical contact.

She saw that Elvis was awake too, though he was averting his gaze. When she glanced downward, Sally noticed that his member was turgid, and without thinking, reached over and ran her fingertips lightly down its length. When she looked up, Elvis was making eye contact for the first time.

Sally wondered if the boy even thought of himself as human rather than an android. Since arousal was the only human behavior he freely exhibited, she would have to make that the key to achieving true communication with the youth.

He was looking to her for an example – for guidance. And, in his confused and highly emotional state, the example he needed was guidance in what to do about the almost painful erection that reached rigidly towards Sally. Surprised at herself for the ease with which sloughed off her professional detachment, she decided that she would make the necessary sacrifice to initiate the young man into what would probably be his first human interaction.

This was the first time he'd reached out to anyone besides the android, and rather than have his first attempt to understand being human turned away out of squeamishness, she, who had studied Kama Sutra Yoga, would bring him as far into her world as she could.

*Besides, Sally thought to herself, I have not had a proper lover in several years.*

That night, while Elvis was undergoing another MRI, Dr. Singh sat alone in her office with the door shut for the first time in months. Conflicted about her motivation in abandoning her professional detachment, though elated in finally achieving some level of success in breaking through to Elvis, she mulled over the events of that day.

She'd never been in such constraining circumstances – every moment was critical now. Sally couldn't afford the Kabuki dance of professional detachment that ruled relationships between scientists and their subjects. Having thrown all caution to the wind by taking the experimental vaccine and then exposing herself to otherwise certain death, she would die within days if the vaccine didn't work. And if the vaccine was ineffective,

her proposed gene therapy would be worthless, and human life on earth would radically change if not simply cease to be.

For the first time in her life she was living in the minute and her future was simply what she chose to do next.

She considered the events of that day a major breakthrough, but she decided not to report on the encounter in the maintenance locker to her assistants or to reveal to them that she had exposed herself to the disease. *They can read about it in my notes if I die*, she thought.

Closing her notebook she laid on her couch for a much needed nap.

In the ensuing days the youth's behavior and deportment continued to improve, culminated by success in toilet training that was cause for the lab techs and research assistants to throw a boisterous impromptu party.

Before long, Elvis began to assimilate new human behaviors without having to be given an example from 10W40. He even began to speak without prompting to her and the lab staff, which swelled Sally's heart with a mother's pride at the breakthrough. Besides a lover, she had become a maternal figure to Elvis and appreciated the irony of their present relationship.

Despite the twenty plus year difference in their ages, the two reveled in each other. Where he was white as a fish's belly, tall, and lean – she had *café au lait* colored skin, was short and slightly heavy-set, but athletic with large breasts. Her oval face looked carved with its aquiline nose and pronounced cheeks.

Though Elvis was not an earthling, he was still a human youth, and like so many young men he fell head over heels in love with his first sexual partner. And Dr. Sally Singh was beginning to take a less clinical view of her partnering with Elvis and began looking forward fondly to her time alone with him. She volunteered to take the night shift, allowing her assistants a pleasant recess from caring for their subject.

If she was to die soon, she would die sated.

Five days after exposing herself to the infection, the MRI showed that Euphorions were beginning to grow in Sally's skull. She became quite upset and worried about whether or not the vaccination would work, but she rejoiced when Elvis showed empathy by noticing her restiveness and comforting her.

Over the next three days, though, the imaging showed the Euphorions were shriveling until they were like the one's in Elvis's skull.

"Gotcha," she said when she viewed the results.

\* \* \* \*

*Washington D.C./Three days later*

Sally had her 'war' clothes on, as she called any of her many coordinated designer suit and shoes outfits. They were all very expensive and precisely accessorized, but understated, and put together by her favorite New York designer, Pomodoro Pelati, to say, "...I am someone to reckon with."

The setting was the subterranean Situation Room reachable from the White House and the Capitol building by tunnel. It was a large room, about the size of the recreation hall of a medium size church. The lighting was subdued to prevent glare on the giant

display screens that covered two walls and showed readouts from sources/situations that needed to be monitored (*the big boards* as President Logg called them which was a reference to the 1964 movie *Dr. Strangelove*). There was an area of fixed seating that faced a lectern and a podium upon which Sally stood.

Despite wearing her personal sartorial armor, Dr. Saloni Singh was just the least bit apprehensive in front of this crowd – far exceeding the White House Cabinet meetings for muckity-mucks per square foot. Instead of the purely national level she'd been working on, she was stepping onto the stage of world politics with her report – granted in a supporting role.

Nerves on edge, she tried to prepare herself. The survival of mankind was at stake, and she was doubtful that the thick-browed, short-sighted, self-centered boobs who constituted the world's political class could be convinced there was actually something wrong that demanded instant action from them. The most popular tactic in politics is to wait and see what happens.

As she stood at the podium and waited for the late arrivals to be seated she looked at her audience. Besides the familiar faces of the United States government, Sally knew there were representatives from the United Nations as well as the European Union, Russia, China, and several other countries. Many had brought military advisors in uniforms amply plastered with brass, braid and medals.

*More skeptics waiting to be convinced*, Sally thought. She had no hopes that the politicians of other nations were any more enlightened than her own, but these were the people in charge of the world and if anyone was going to do something about the threat, it would have to be them. She was sure they all had to be worried, if not about the disease itself, then of the potential for economic and political disruption if things got out of hand. And the citizens of their respective countries were becoming uneasy about the threat now that the Euphorion infection could no longer be ignored.

She was going to offer them hope – yes, there was a survivor and, yes, he could provide a short term antidote on a small scale, but to reach the billions of other earthlings who were susceptible might take months maybe even years.

Sally thought about Elvis and how the fate of the world resided in the youth. She thought, *It's a miracle he had come along when he did and a miracle he came to me, of all people.*

So stepping forward to the microphone at the lectern, she cleared her throat as a signal for the quiet conversations to cease.

Touching the controls that operated the viewing screens, Dr. Singh began her talk.

It took no more than twenty minutes for Dr. Singh to explain the immunity of Elvis and to lay out her idea for using it to deal with the Euphorions. She summed up by saying, "...I know that the test subject has true immunity. I was inoculated with a vaccine developed from his living tissue, then exposed myself to the Euphorion infection...and I have not succumbed."

This caused quite a stir, which continued as she projected a series of images on the screen that documented how the incipient infection and its subsequent decline and final death.

"The long term solution is to isolate the gene that provides the subject's immunity and through gene therapy, treat everyone on Earth. I have two of the foremost labs already at work on this and though I dislike making predictions, we should be able to

start mass treatments within nine months.” Sally paused to let this sink in, for the implications were obvious.

“Do we have time for this?” the ambassador from China asked. “Will the plague not kill us all before then?”

“It won’t kill us all in that time period,” Sally replied then added, “just tens of millions of us.” That put the room in dead silence, so she went on, “It’s true many will die, but in the long run, humanity and civilization will be saved. If we didn’t have this avenue available to us I’m sure there’d be so few survivors that in a few years humanity would be back to roaming in bands and living off the land.”

“But you made a vaccine for yourself from the tissues of the subject, why could you not just do that now instead of waiting for gene therapy to become viable?” the Russian President asked.

“Because it would be harmful to Elvis...the subject...to take enough tissue to make more than a few score doses of vaccine at a time...” Sally was saying when interrupted by the Russian again.

“You could get more than you are saying, though.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Yes, but I can only extract so much without killing him. Working within those guidelines I could treat a few selected persons a month...that is why we need the gene therapy.”

The Russian asked, “Hypothetically, how many doses could be obtained if you were to...*sacrifice* the subject?”

Sally blanched, but recovered enough to answer, “Far less in the long run than if we kept him alive. It would be foolish to eliminate the only known immune subject just to vaccinate a few hundred people at once.”

“If one person’s immune maybe there are others?”

“Undoubtedly there are, but there is no simple way to test for them until we’ve isolated the gene.”

President Logg spoke, “Sally, no one wants to harm your subject...Elvis you said was his name? We’re all humane, moral people here.” His voice was smooth as oiled silk as he continued, “But just for argument’s sake, how long would it take for you to create enough vaccine from this boy, without harming him, to immunize everyone in the august body gathered in this room?”

“It would take two, maybe three months doing a dozen or two at a time,” Sally said.

The room was quiet, and as Sally looked to President Logg, he nodded imperceptibly which indicated she was no longer needed so she said, “Thank you.”

There was a polite round of applause as she gathered her papers and stepped back from the lectern. From his seat on the podium, President Logg thanked Singh for her invaluable assistance. She acknowledged him with a nod, then made for the door.

There was silence for a second after the door clunked shut behind her, then the president of Russia pressed a button on the arm of his chair that indicated he wished to address the group, and President Logg invited him to the podium.

Andre Kropotkin gripped the sides of the lectern, leaned into the microphone and said, “To all the esteemed excellencies gathered here, I say that it is obvious that the most important, vital, and essential people in the world are gathered here in this room and that if we can all be protected immediately through sacrificing this Elvis person, I’m willing

to endure that consequence. Without us, there will be chaos in the world. We can award special honors to the memory and deeds of this wonderful person who made a noble sacrifice. Besides, the search for a genetic solution can continue whether this boy is alive or not..."

It was resolved unanimously, that Elvis would be dissected to provide an immediate vaccine for everyone present.

President Lincoln Logg called for order then announced, "So be it. I will procure the subject from Dr. Singh. Our aides can work out the details in the mean time."

And so it was that a common peril brought all the leaders of the great nations of Earth together in a rare show of harmonious and total cooperation.

\* \* \* \*

*Camp David, Maryland/The next day*

The president had the Justice Department investigate if Elvis had any legal rights. "Hell, I reckon that boy might not even be considered an Earthling," Logg had said to the attorney general.

The angle that the attorney general came back with was that since it could not be proven that either of the boy's parents had been born on Earth, in accordance with the Omnibus Space Commerce Act of 2033, he was to be classified an alien with absolutely no rights at all. This made it legal for the government to seize Elvis.

President Lincoln Logg was a cunning man, who had not failed to notice Sally's face turn ashen at the conference when the Russian president had inquired about sacrificing Elvis to make vaccine. She would never wittingly give him up. To throw her off guard he called Sally personally and blew smoke up her ass by telling her that the world leaders at the Euphorion Conference had been moved by her presentation and had voted to faithfully follow her advice in their plan of action.

Only a few hours after calling her, he had contrived what he thought was a believable ruse that would get the boy away from her lab and onto his turf. The idea had leapt full blown into his mind when his personal secretary had mentioned that he was to attend the inaugural launch of the U. S. Skyforce's latest space frigate.

Sally was surprised when she answered her phone and heard the president on the line for the second time that day. "To what do I owe the honor of another call?" she asked.

"I remember you saying how your boy Elvis likes space ships and computers and what not, so I thought y'all might like to be on hand for the inaugural launch of the *William J. Clinton*...it's the fastest and longest range space ship ever and it'll be taking off from the Dover Aerospace Base just a hop, skip, and a jump from the U. of D. Whaddaya say?" he asked. "You both could stand to get out of that lab...I'm going to be there and I'd love to meet the boy. I'll send a limo for you. You'll be my honored guests and have dinner with me."

"Sure," replied Sally. Sally was delighted, not only had the most powerful people on Earth adopted her advice, but now she was to be the guest of the President of the United States.

\* \* \* \*

*Dover, Delaware/Two days later*

When Sally and Elvis arrived at the Dover Aerospace Base along with 10W40, security personnel took Elvis and the android in hand, saying they would show them to rooms reserved for them in the guest quarters, while President Logg's personal secretary showed Dr. Singh to the anteroom outside the office that the president was using while on the base, and offered her a chair. The secretary sat down at a desk and said, "The president is meeting with his chief of staff. He'll just be a few minutes, then he'll see you."

In the bathroom of the office, President Logg was readying himself to meet with Sally. Since Elvis was probably already being shoved into a helicopter, he needed a story to tell Sally about how something unfortunate had just happened to Elvis in the short time since they arrived. Something she would believe so she'd keep working with the government. Logg practiced several lies, letting them roll off his tongue so he could judge which were the most believable as he talked into the mirror, "I'm truly sorry Sally, he's just vanished. We have no idea where he's gone." *Naww*, Lincoln thought, then he cleared his throat and said, "Sally, I'm truly sorry, but a forklift ran over boy as he was walking and turned him into a grease-spot. We disposed of the body already to save you grief," the president said into the restroom mirror as sweat beaded up on his forehead as he strained to put integrity into his expression.

He was interrupted by his chief of staff, Wendell Simmons bursting into the bathroom without knocking.

From where Sally sat, she heard a barely audible conversation coming through the door from the office, but it was not loud enough for her to understand what was being said. When the secretary excused herself to go down the hall to the powder room, Sally stepped briskly, but quietly, across the room and put her ear to the door.

"God damn it, Simmons, you're my chief of staff and I expect when I say something needs to be done, you see that it gets done. Now I've done my part and gotten that dot-head doctor to bring that freak onto a military base, where we can control him, and now you tell me he's disappeared?"

"Yes, sir. Vanished."

"For Chris'sakes! They've only been here for a quarter hour. How does some half-wit space brat give the slip to the United States Aerospace Force?" the president barked.

"Well the guards escorting the boy to the heli-pad were not precisely Aerospace Force personnel sir, they were operatives of the security firm we hire to take care of lower echelon security concerns..."

"You mean Rent-A-Cops?" Logg was livid. "This is only the only hope for mankind against this here alien plague, and you call it lower echelon? Jesus help me."

"You said to keep it low profile, and I thought it would spook Dr. Singh if we had the heavies playing bellhop to the boy. It's not my fault, I was just following your instructions." A veteran mandarin, Simmons was unfazed by the president's vitriol.

The president snarled, "The plan was to separate Singh from the boy, then put the boy on a helicopter and fly him to Washington, where the Ruskies have a doctor waiting

to carve him up like a Christmas ham. Now we don't know where the hell he is. Find him. Try not to kill him yet. Just immobilize the son of a bitch and get him to the lab in the Russian embassy."

Singh moved away from the door with revulsion. Not only at what she had heard, but at herself for not seeing this betrayal coming. Without hesitation Sally left the room to begin searching for Elvis – at least she knew he was still alive. She almost cracked a smile when she thought of how typical it was for Elvis to disappear like that.

But he was innocent of knowledge about the type of evil represented by the president and his ilk. So he was in danger and probably didn't know it. Sally realized she truly loved him as she hurried down the corridor and exited into the sunlight, running across the tarmac towards where the spaceship was housed. If there was somewhere Elvis was likely to go, it would be to a spaceship.

\* \* \* \*

After Dr. Singh and Elvis had been separated, the two guards walked with the youth between them on their way to the helicopter, with 10W40 following slightly behind. As they walked, the youth fell back to join the robot, but since Elvis followed behind the guards keeping exact pace with them, they thought nothing of it.

As they passed the hanger housing the new space ship, the one guard said to the other, "Hey, ain't this where they keep that fancy new space ship they're getting ready to launch?"

"It's ready to go except for them supplies on those pallets we just passed. And when they're loaded in a few minutes, it'll be ready to go." said the other guard knowingly.

While the two guards continued to walk and converse, their attention had not been on the android and youth following them. 10W40's energy pack had been somewhat depleted, so when it had detected the presence of a three bay robot maintenance locker on the pallet of supplies, it exited the procession and folded itself into bay one and tapped into the self-contained fusion charger. Elvis climbed in next to his artificial companion.

By the time the two guards noticed their charge was missing, he was already out of sight.

\* \* \* \*

While Sally Singh was arguing with a guard to let her into the hanger, one of his cohorts called their supervisor. In less than a minute, a stern but calm man in a black suit with a wire running into his ear said, "Dr Singh? The president is looking for you. Please come this way." Then he mumbled something into his lapel, placed his hand on her elbow to direct her and politely escorted her back to the office she had just fled.

Lincoln Logg stood in greeting as she was escorted into his presence, and putting on a look of sympathetic concerns said sincerely, "Sally, I'm truly sorry, but the boy, Elvis, has just up and disappeared. I have no idea what might have happened, but I have the whole base looking for him, for I want to find him just as much as you do."

Instead of denouncing him for his foul intentions, Sally sat down and kept a pleasant face. She could not afford to tip her hand and lose the only advantage she had over this man.

Logg looked intently into her eyes. “Do you know where the dear boy is,” he said with exaggerated concern.

“I didn’t know he was missing. As far as I knew he was to be taken on a tour of the facility,” she said calmly. Sally felt totally helpless. Once Elvis was found he would be sacrificed. She could only play for time and try to find an opportunity of some sort.

The president’s phone rang and he picked it up and listened for a bit, then broke into a broad smile. Covering the mouth piece, he looked to Sally and said, “One of my people reporting in. They think they’ve found the boy.” He then went back to the phone and continued listening, then said, “Wait until you hear from me.”

He hung up the phone and said, “That was Simmons, my chief of staff. He calls to report that mission control reports that the *William J. Clinton’s* on-board sensors report a human life form where none should be – so we can presume this is our Elvis.”

“Yes, I’m so glad we’ve located him. But what now?” she was the nonchalant soul of insouciance as she locked eyes with Logg.

Without hesitation Logg asked, “Would you try and convince him to come out? That way we won’t have to delay the launching of the new ship by unloading the hold. And heaven forbid, that the boy might come to any harm by messing with the wrong thing...the *Clinton* is a warship, after all.”

His sugar sweet approach was transparent, but she replied sincerely, “Of course I’ll need to go and see him face to face.” Once aboard, she might find an opportunity, even if only slim, to effect an escape. But she had to be with him to rescue him. “Let me go in the ship alone...he spooks easy...and I will get him to come out.”

And if they couldn’t escape, if he was going to be killed she would give up her life too. So holding onto the hope of escape for the pair of them, she went along resolutely with a half dozen Skyforce M.P.’s, followed by a brace of Secret Service men, to the hanger housing the *Clinton*.

Back in the office, the president reclined in the swivel chair and took a congratulatory puff on a cigar as his chief of staff came into the room.

“I was listening. What’s to stop the pair of them from just flying off in the space ship?” Simmons asked acidly.

“Relax, Wendall,” the president said. “I’ve got ironclad assurances from the geniuses that designed that ship that no one can activate it without a secret special access code – it’s controlled by advanced artificial intelligence. You just can’t jump in one and fly it like it was one of those old time airplanes. Even if someone could crack the code, that ship is too complicated for a human to operate it. That’s why we spent twelve billion dollars to develop the next generation of android pilots...and those things won’t be put on-board until the last minute.”

\* \* \* \*

Inside the compartment of the maintenance locker, Elvis crouched asleep at 10W40’s side. The slight vibration of the automatic data update, that the ship’s computer performed every time a piece of equipment was docked in the locker, was a lullaby to the youth leaning against 10W40’s plastic casing. The familiar aroma of ozone as the android recharged was a tonic to the youth. The ship’s computer, assuming that the android in its

maintenance locker was one of the pilot androids designed for that particular ship, downloaded all pertinent information and codes for the *Clinton's* maiden voyage.

It had been comfortingly quiet inside the ship's hold, with Elvis snoozing while his digital alter ego was in standby mode, but the racket that accompanied the opening of the main hatch jolted him awake. This was followed by human sounds, which normally the youth would have ignored, but he recognized the voice of the one person who had managed to touch his humanity.

"Elvis, come out dear. I want to play yum-yum with you," which was the name Sally had given to the act of fellatio. Elvis exited the locker before 10W40, then the android terminated the maintenance cycle and followed him.

"Can we play yum-yum now?" Elvis asked

"In just a minute, first we have to shut the hatch," Sally said. "Do you know how to do that?"

Elvis turned to 10W40 and began to vocalize a series of clicks and static sounds that the android heard as digital code, and it answered in kind. The exchange lasted less than ten seconds and the youth turned to Sally and said, "10W40 was programmed with the access codes and operating instructions for the ship. I told him to close the hatch." They heard a great disturbance from outside the ship in the chaos that ensued when the M.P.'s and Secret Service agents saw the hatch unexpectedly begin to close. But none were quick enough to enter the ship before the hatch shut.

When President Logg was informed, he launched into a scatological paroxysm as he railed at his chief of staff, "God damn it, Simmons! How did they close the hatch without the codes? Now we're going to have to go through a big ordeal to get them out of there. I can't believe that little bitch doctor double crossed me like that! We'll probably have to postpone the inaugural launch...very costly to national prestige. The world is watching, and its leaders are counting on us to deliver this boy up so we can squeeze the antibodies out of him."

"We can't afford to take drastic action, for we dare not damage either the ship or the boy," Simmons said.

"This is too much. I might as well go back to Minnesota and hang up my law shingle again," Logg said. "At least there'd be less chance of getting infected out there."

"You're sure they can't take off in that thing?" Simmons asked.

"Abso-fuckin'-lutely, according to the brainiac douche bags who designed the thing. They swear there's no way to operate the ship without the access codes or the specialized androids. This thing was designed to foil all of our potential enemies: Greenpeace, Al Qaeda, The Mexican Resistance League, all of them..." Logg paused for breath.

"Then how'd they close the hatch?" Simmons asked.

"Shit!" Logg said, beginning to suspect that things were beginning to go terribly wrong.

Inside the control room, Sally fulfilled her promise to play yum-yum. After reaching the apex of their game, Elvis pulled Sally down to the floor, yanked down her khakis, mounted her like a stallion, then drove her across the room until her head was butting against the bulkhead and he'd exhausted, with extreme urgency, both his and Sally's amorous reserves.

No more than a very intense five minutes had elapsed, during which she'd forgotten their peril, but she was brought back to reality by the muffled sounds of pounding on the hull. Pulling up her pants she fastened them and said, "I'm glad to see you too, but we have a situation to deal with."

Elvis laid on the deck looking at her uncomprehendingly – oblivious to the machinations and designs swirling about him. He asked, "What situation?"

"We need to get out of here."

"You mean leave the ship?" Elvis asked by way of a reply.

"Yes, but more so. We need to get out off of this base."

"We could take the ship?"

"Can we do that?"

"Sure, that would be fun."

"Then let's get out of here before they break out the cutting torches."

"What destination should I specify?"

"It doesn't matter where, we just have to get out of here." Seeing that Elvis was yet to get his mind around this sort of imprecise thinking, she added, "Let's go to Jupiter."

"Where on Jupiter?"

"In orbit about it's equator."

That did the trick for Elvis turned to 10W40 and once again began his vocalized digital transfer.

By this time the president himself had arrived at the hanger and had taken charge of the crowd of security guards, Secret Service agents, and Skyforce M. P.'s. He was directing them to attach the cable from a winch to the hatch in order to force it open, when several electric motors whirred into life above them and the roof of the hanger began emitting a metallic screech as it retracted in two sections until there was nothing but blue sky above.

When the ship's engines began to hum in their warm-up cycle, the chief engineer of the project began frantically urging everyone to vacate the building, "You don't want to get hit with a blast of plasma exhaust. It's a terrible way to die."

Everyone scrambled out of the building and rushed to the ground control bunker. Once inside, the president started kicking inanimate objects and lambasting the chief engineer as they watched the ship slowly rise straight up until it was a hundred feet or so above the ground. "Call missile control, we got to shoot it down! We can't just let them take off in this thing..."

The *William J. Clinton* glimmered brightly for a second then disappeared from sight, "What's happening now?" Logg exclaimed.

"The plasmonic field that renders the ship invisible to sight and radar has been activated," the chief engineer said. "There's no way to shoot it down now with the cloaking field engaged. For all we know, the ship may have already left the Earth's atmosphere."

Logg sputtered but could not speak as he tore the front of the engineer's shirt off then commenced slapping him with abandon.

As Elvis and Sally reclined in one of the ship's lounges, they watched Mars going by the observation port and talked about what they might ultimately do besides just flying

around the galaxy forever. Sally had adopted Elvis's habit of not wearing clothes aboard ship. Now she was pregnant and wanted a home on solid ground, even if it wasn't Earth, so they'd decided to return to the mining colony where Elvis had been born. They were both immune to the Euphorions, so they could live there without fear, and if their child was not born with a natural immunity, Sally could vaccinate her with a small donation from Elvis.

On the mining base, there was still shelter and life support infrastructure in place. 10W40 had been in contact with the computers who were monitoring the situation back on 37 Jemima and all systems were still functional, though on standby, and there were supplies enough to keep a family of humans alive for ages. And in their fancy new ship, they could make the trip in a fraction of the time that the plodding ore freighter had carried Elvis to Earth.

"What about those people back on Earth that we were going to help?" Elvis asked Sally.

"Humanity will survive, thanks to your tissue samples I sent to the genetic labs, there'll just be a lot fewer of them. Maybe we'll decide to return to Earth once things have run their course and see how humanity fared."

Back on Earth, in the police impoundment lot in Newark, Delaware, the sun baked a delivery truck that had been seized when the driver had been pulled over for a traffic infraction. The unfortunate driver had smoked a joint on his rounds and when stopped, the officer mistook his erratic behavior for symptoms of the notorious alien infection. So the driver was arrested and quarantined under the Euphorion Act, and while he rotted in camp, the tissue samples from Elvis perished in the oven-like heat within the impounded truck.