



Illustrated by Kevin Speidell

Detroit Hammersmith, Zero-Gravity Toilet Repairman (Retired)

Suzanne Palmer

The maintenance staff of Aldruna Station were a competent lot—hell, he'd trained most of them himself—but by the third plea for help he knew it meant big trouble. He had his own small flyer, not very fast or fancy but reliable and familiar, and the truth was not much else to do, so he packed his tools and went.

Aldruna had cleared him for docking before he even had the station in sight, and there was a small welcoming committee waiting for him inside the dock's airlock. "Thank you for coming so quickly, Mr. Hammersmith," the station manager said, reaching out to vigorously shake his hand before she introduced the others gathered. "I'm Marla Vissock, this is Administrator Biner from the Alliance Diplomacy Corps, and I think you know the crew."

"Call me Deet," he said. "What's going on?"

"Fourteen of our public toilet facilities are offline, mostly in the conference ring. We believe it's intentional sabotage, but given the sensitive nature of our mission it's been difficult to get any leads."

"There are *no* leads," Administrator Biner corrected. He was a thin scowl of a man, about Detroit's own age.

Detroit rolled his shoulders, cracked his knuckles, and picked up his toolbag. "Well, I'll fix them," he said. "Keeping someone from breaking them again is up to you."

Vissock waved a hand toward the head of the repair crew, a round, quietly competent man named Emmer Ives. Detroit had worked with him years before. "Emmer, he's all yours," she said. "Report as soon as you know anything."

Biner stepped forward. "Let me make this clear: the ambassadorial guests are off-limits. Do not talk to them, or be *seen* at all if you can manage it. There are standards of propriety—"

"No worries, Mr. Biner," Detroit said. "I know where a working man just doesn't belong."

Emmer managed not to smile until they'd left the docking bay. "Glad to see you again, Deet," he said as they crossed through blast doors into the interior halls. "You remember the setup here?"

"Central station hub and two rings, variable gravity."

"We keep the lower ring at around point eight Gee for the staff, but the upper ring is now at zero—we had a huge diplomatic incident a few years back, because some ambassador was convinced the Alliance was skewing the advantage in negotiations by providing more home-like gravity for favored species. Since then, all negotiations take place in zero and everyone gets zero-grav quarters if they stay on-station, no exceptions. Still plenty of complaining, of course."

"Of course," Detroit said.

"I've taken three units apart, but couldn't find the problem in any. Which do you want to see first? A disassembled one, or the most recent to fail?"

"Newest one first, please," Deet said. "And no hints. I just want to start fresh with my own eyes."

"Figured as much," Emmer said. "We're almost in the zero-grav hall. Normal atmo and climate temp."

"Great," Deet said, following Emmer through the airlock into the spoke. "Nothing worse than those heavy-gravity burning swamp-world environment settings." He laughed. "Remember when you first started here, and there was that delegation of spindly glass-like aliens from some frozen-acid world—?"

"Oh, I remember," Emmer said. "I remember *someone* telling me they were from a desert planet and to dress light. . . ."

Deet switched on his magnetic boots as he stepped through the double airlock into the zone. "And I seem to remember someone dumped most of my personal effects in station composting that night."

Emmer bounced off the floor, up to the ceiling, then pushed himself back down just as he turned his own boots on and stuck to the floor with a sharp snap. "Bathroom's up on the right."

The bright out-of-order sign was cycling through the usual written, textural, and sonic languages. It was a single-occupant facility, the model no more than two standards old. "You finally upgraded the old flakey P-Matic90s? Did you have one of those infamous compressor-failure

fireballs?”

“No, lucky for us. You know the old station manager wouldn’t spend a rusty bitcred on the place if he didn’t have to, but when Vissock came in she found all the denied urgent project requests you put in before you retired. Asked me what it was all about, then put up the funds. She said that while there were certainly some planetary representatives she wouldn’t mind seeing blown up ‘in the shitter,’ it would give the station a bad rep.”

Detroit laughed as he let go of his toolkit and began unpacking tools into the air around it. “Vissock seems like a big improvement over old Mel.”

“Yeah. We like her. She treats the staff like we matter,” Emmer said. “These toilet problems? If they’re not resolved soon, that’s going to look bad for us. Especially if we can’t prove it was intentional sabotage, instead of mismanagement.”

The unit was a central concave pod with handles, several flexible suction units, a “comfort attachment” selector and disposal, and a large bank of controls. It was a complex business, dealing with variable to no gravity and a universe’s worth of physiological divergence.

Detroit took the front cover off the control unit and checked the interface mechanics. He tapped the main control processor, and it came back immediately green. “Nothing wrong with the logics,” he said. “The start of the problems—does it time with any new arrivals?”

“Yeah. More than a half-dozen, unfortunately. We’re currently hosting a planetary resource summit, and there are representatives here from over a dozen human colonies, and nine different nonhuman political entities. We can rule out some, but not most.”

Detroit held onto one of the unit’s handlebars and stuck an airflow probe into the pod as he pressed the Go button. Nothing happened. A few moments later, the diagnostic unit flashed up a new green bar. “Well, it thinks it worked,” Deet said. “No suction at all though.”

Emmer nodded.

Grabbing a new tool, Detroit took out the bolts along one side of the unit front and swung the front panel open. He floated there for long minutes, his eyes slowly tracing out all the machinery and wiring. He noticed Emmer had started holding his breath. “Did you find it, when you looked?” Detroit asked.

Emmer let his breath out. “No,” he said, chagrined. “Tell me what I missed.”

“Nothing. Problem’s not here.” Swapping out tools, he began disassembling the unit, carefully removing one component at a time and examining it before letting it go into the room. At last he reached in and pulled out a large cylindrical device.

“The vacuum exchanger?”

“Yeah.” Detroit turned it around in his hands a few times, then began unscrewing the end.

“I didn’t think we were supposed to open those.”

“You’re not.” He pulled the end off, then peered inside. “There’s a three-centimeter hole in the interior shielding,” he said. “Looks like corrosion, but everything else in here is pristine.”

Emmer peered over Detroit’s shoulder as best he could. “What could do that? Acid?”

“Nothing strong enough should have gotten past the chemical sensors at the funnel intake without being neutralized first.” Detroit carefully slid off the exterior shielding. He used the tip of his screwdriver to indicate, from several inches away, a small cluster of wires and relays painted red. “If you ever do this—and you shouldn’t—don’t touch that, or we’ll be cleaning what’s left of you off the far wall.”

“Noted,” Emmer said. He pointed. “What’s that?”

Detroit turned the cylinder. There was a small blackish-green lump stuck to the metal on the other side of the hole. “Hand me the wooden stick in my bag?” he asked.

Emmer handed it to him, and he very carefully snaked it in between wires. Deftly, he scraped off the lump, which stuck to the stick as he extracted it. He pulled out a magnifier and set it against his eye to peer at it more closely, staring at it for several long, silent minutes.

“So,” Emmer said. “Super alien sabotage-turd?”

“No,” he said at last, hearing the disbelief in his voice. “It’s a *frog*.”

He wrapped the remains of the frog, still stuck to the end of his stick, in a small cloth and tucked it into a pocket so he could free up his hands again. Taking a roll of tape and a spray-tube

out of his kit, he managed to wriggle a small piece of the tape over the outside of the hole. Once satisfied it was tight, he filled the hole on the inside with spray foam. “Once that sets, it’ll be good for a quarter-standard or so. Enough time to get a replacement part out here, anyway.”

“So . . . is that the problem, then?”

“The hole? I expect so.”

“No, the . . . frob or whatever you said it was.”

Detroit chuckled, as he began screwing back on the end cap of the unit. “Frog. Forgot you weren’t an Earther kid.”

“Haudie North, through and through,” Emmer said.

“I used to spend summers at my Nana’s house, lying by the edge of the pond in her back yard, catching frogs and turtles and dragonflies and you name it. She always made me let them all go again at the end of the day, before she’d let me sit down to dinner. Those were the happiest days of my life.”

“The only thing you said that I understood is dinner,” Emmer said, “which I’d like to get some of, sometime tonight.”

Detroit slipped the reassembled vacuum exchanger back into place and closed up the unit. Grabbing his probe from where it bobbed in the middle of the room, he stuck it back into the user pod and pressed the flush button again. This time, he could feel the tug of air on the hairs on his forearm. “One fixed,” he declared. “Damned if it makes any sense to me, though. Next?”

“Just down the hall, third left. I should give Vissock an update and check in with the rest of my crew. You need me for this?”

“I’m good for now. Got a spare comm?”

Emmer patted his pockets, pulled out a small disk with the Aldruna Station logo on it, and handed it over. He started to turn away, then turned back. “Frob?”

“Frog.”

“Frog. Got it. Thanks, Deet.”

Detroit made his way down the corridor toward the next broken facility, nearly colliding as he came around the curve with an elderly woman in gray. She was taking advantage of the zero gravity to fling herself down the corridor like a human cannonball. They both dodged, and she corrected off the wall to go around him. “So sorry!” she called back without slowing down. Only after she was gone did the green teardrop logo on her jacket register. *A Gaian diplomat*, he thought. Gaia Colony was a pacifist religious-scientist colony dedicated to multi-planetary environmental activism.

If she’d been moving slower, he could have asked her if she knew anything about frogs.

He keyed open the next out-of-order bathroom and slung his toolbag in. Following the same diagnostic steps as before, he ended up once again contemplating the vacuum exchanger. This one had three small holes, and on the outside of the inner shielding, four identical froggy lumps, two clustered at the same hole.

“Well, huh,” Detroit said, scratching his forehead.

He grabbed the end of the wooden stick, still in his pocket, and carefully pulled it and the rag he’d wrapped around the end out. Unwrapping the rag, he meant to use it to clear off the first frog body, but as he did, it came off the stick into the rag on its own. To his eye, it was distinctly greener than before. He took out his magnifier again and peered at it, and when it opened one round eye and peered back, he gave a yelp of surprise and let everything go into the air around him.

Heart pounding, he watched as the frog-thing floated in the air in front of him, slowly unfurling six legs and waving them feebly.

Not a frog, then, not an Earth thing, but so close as to be nearly unbelievable. Even the two—no, three—round eyes now regarding him could have been conjured from his memories of lying in the reeds waiting for those telltale bumps to break the water surface. Unable to help himself, he slowly extended one finger, not touching but putting it within the frog-thing’s reach. It reached out one leg, its tiny rounded toes splayed, and touched his finger.

In an instant it wrapped itself around his fingertip. Its hue shifted lighter as it warmed, until

he had a bright green alien frog clinging to his index finger, blinking a fourth eye open at him.

I should shake it off, he thought. What if it was dangerous? But he had to admit, he felt irrationally, nostalgically fond of it already.

Careful to keep his occupied finger clear, he hooked the safe end of the cylinder into the crook of his elbow and, one by one, pried off the frogs and transferred them to his rag. Then he filled the holes, reassembled the unit, and turned it back on.

Opening the rag, he peered at the black-green lumps, then carefully leaned over and blew across them. Immediately, the colors began to lighten on three of the four. He loosely closed up the rag and tucked it back into his pocket before pulling out his comm.

"Emmer?" he asked. "Same problem with the second unit. Where's the next down unit?"

"Keep going clockwise," Emmer answered. "You'll find it."

"Okay," Detroit said. "Oh, and can you bring me a small box—something that closes—and a medical heatpack?"

"Whatever you need. On my way in five."

Detroit regarded the thing still clinging to his finger, that was now regarding him back. "Hello, thing," he said.

Peep, it answered. Detroit smiled.

He had just finished pulling apart the housing on the third unit when Emmer entered, swinging a small lidded bucket. Vissock came in behind him and locked the door. At Detroit's raised eyebrow, she rolled her eyes. "Biner has my office bugged," she said.

"Why?"

"It's not beyond the Alliance to decide it'd be easier to ruin one station manager's reputation than potentially embarrass an ambassador or diplomat by accusing them of a crime. I'm not giving them that opportunity. If anyone asks, you're just fixing the toilets and have no opinions on why or how they broke. Speaking of which . . ."

Detroit held out his finger, with the alien perched on it. She peered closely. "It's alive? How did frogs get in my toilets? We're a long seven jumps from Earth. And *why*?"

"The why is beyond me," Detroit said, "but they're not from Earth, and there's six more in this unit."

He took the bucket from Emmer and tacked the heatpack to the bottom, set to a low warm. Then he took the rag out of his pocket and settled it inside, adding the new frogs to the ones already clinging, huddled, together. One remained obstinately dark and unmoving. "I think that one's dead," he said.

He sealed and reassembled the unit. "I have extra tape and bonding sealant, but no more sticks," he said, "Emmer, if you're going poke around in the exchanger, you need something non-conductive."

"I can find something," Emmer said.

"Oh, and I saw a Gaian in the hall earlier," Detroit said. "Maybe she could identify where these things come from?"

"I can try," Vissock said. "Gaia Colony's petition against Skriknat was on the docket for today, but the negotiations between the Sfazili government and Tanduou Dockmasters have run over yet again. May I take the dead one? I also want to consult our chief medic, who's a bit of an alien-species buff."

Detroit picked it up gently and handed it over.

Vissock took it just as carefully. "I'll let you know if I find out anything."

"Thanks," Detroit said, and Vissock left.

Emmer sighed. "So, that's three fixed. How much more of that sealant do you have?"

"One more tube," Detroit said, pulling it out of his bag and sending it drifting through the air to Emmer. "If we find too many more of those holes, it's not going to be enough."

"I'll check to see if we have more," Emmer said, catching it. "Then I'm going to get started at the other end of the zone. It's going to be a long day."

"That it is," Detroit said.

Peep peep, said the frog-thing on his finger.

* * *

He was on his seventh unit when his tube of sealant ran out. “Well, I guess that’s that,” he said.

Peep, said the frog-thing, which had slowly crept from his finger down along his forearm over the course of an hour. *Peep deep*.

“Peep deep at you, too,” he answered. By his count, he had twenty-one live frogs in his bucket and two more probably dead ones. He’d tried twice to coax the one on his finger into joining its kin, but it seemed determined to hang on to him, and it was small enough that he hadn’t wanted to pry too hard. “Time for a break.”

Deep deep deet, it said.

He laughed. “Deet, right,” he said. “That’s me, you got me.”

When he had the unit reassembled and tested, he pinged Emmer on the comms. “I’m out of sealant.”

“I’ve got more coming in with a supply run from Meridan Station, but we won’t see it until early tomorrow. Wash up and dinner?”

“Sounds good,” he said, and it did.

* * *

Vissock cleared out space in one of the supply closets and had a bunk set up for him. “It’s not much,” she said.

“It’s enough,” he said. It even had gravity. He closed the door and set his bucket of frogs down in one corner, his toolbag beside it. The closet was stuffy and warm, so he stripped off his shirt and hung it with the brooms on the back of the door, then fell onto the cot already half asleep.

He awoke in the morning to find his chest covered with frogs, one tucked neatly in an armpit. “Okay,” he said, peeling them off one by one and putting them back in the bucket. “That’s just going too far.”

Deet deet deet, the last one said as he shook it free. *Deet deet bom bom*.

He put the lid back on the bucket, made sure it was on tightly this time, then threw his shirt back on and picked up his tools. Vissock and Emmer had arranged to meet in one of the staff bathrooms, so he headed that way first. He was thinking about coffee and breakfast and home when he turned a corner and ran straight into Administrator Biner.

“Mr. Hammersmith,” Biner said. “Good morning.”

“Good morning to you,” Detroit said. He smiled and tried to step around him, but Biner slid sideways right into his path again.

“I’d like to hear your assessment of the situation,” Biner said.

“Vissock will report—”

“I want to hear it directly,” Biner said. “If this is deliberate sabotage, the situation will need to be *managed*, Mr. Hammersmith, and by someone who understands the priorities of both the Alliance and the mission of this station.”

Detroit leaned forward. “I fix toilets,” he said, “and I have several more to go. If I have any conclusions, then ask me when I’m done.” He brushed past Biner and continued down the hall without looking back.

He found the designated bathroom, unlocked it, went inside, and locked it again. Vissock and Emmer were mid-argument when he walked in. “Am I interrupting?” he asked.

“No,” Vissock said. “Biner cornered Emmer and threatened him.”

“I told him to fuck off,” Emmer said. “If she wants me to be diplomatic to him I better get paid a lot more.”

“He stopped me too, wanting information,” Detroit said. “Can’t say as how I gave him any. What’s our status?”

Emmer held out a tube of sealant. “I’ve got two more, so that should cover us,” he said.

“Even one should be more than enough—”

“Three more down today, including one you fixed yesterday,” Vissock said. She looked dejected. “Still no idea who’s responsible.”

“Did we find out anything about the frogs?”

“No. The Sfazili-Tanduou negotiations broke down again and the Gaia-Skriknat meet has started. We only have the one Gaian rep on board, and she’ll be in there for a while. This whole Bom situation is complicated.”

“Bom?” Detroit’s eyebrows shot up. *Deet deet bom*, the frog had said.

“It’s a planet just inside the Bounds. Skriknat has laid claim it, but Gaia is pressing for it to be reclassified as protected,” Vissock said.

Emmer frowned. “What’s wrong, Detroit?”

“I’m just thinking,” Detroit said. “I bet Bom is wet, and that if we investigate the quarters of the Skriknatti ambassador and the Gaian representative, one of them will have a broken bathroom.”

“Yeah?” Emmer asked. “What did you find?”

Detroit didn’t want to say: *the frog spoke to me*. “Just a hunch,” he said instead.

“There’s no way we’ll get permission to search anyone’s quarters until after they’ve left the station,” Vissock said. “Biner would have my head for suggesting it, even *with* proof. And if you’re not sure . . . I’m sorry.”

“What if there was some other reason we needed to go in there?” Emmer asked.

“What are you thinking?”

“Do you trust me?” Emmer asked.

Vissock met Emmer’s gaze and held it, then nodded. “Yes,” she said. “But I also like you, so don’t do anything that’ll make me have to fire you. A bunch of broken toilets just aren’t that important.”

“Then I suggest you go have a nice breakfast and spend some solid plausible-deniability time on datawork,” Emmer said.

Vissock stood up from where she’d been leaning on a wall. “Absolutely no fire,” she said. “Got it?”

“No fire. Got it,” Emmer said. Vissock left the room.

“So, what’s your plan?” Detroit asked.

Emmer frowned. “Well, it *was* fire,” he admitted. “We need an excuse to check all the quarters in the ambassadorial ring; if we enter them all, the Skriknatti can’t claim they were singled out. Resetting the smoke sensors after a small hall blaze would do it, but . . .”

Detroit shook his head. “You have access to the kitchen?”

“Yeah.”

“Then let’s go. I have an idea.”

Detroit followed Emmer through the halls to the back doors of the station kitchen. As they walked in, there were two cooks at the prep counter dicing up vegetables, and another one by a small desk, staring at his handpad. He looked up. “Emmer?” he asked.

“Don’t mind us, Nicko,” Emmer said. “We just came to borrow . . . urm. Detroit, what did we need to borrow again?”

Detroit glanced at Emmer, uncertain about trusting the cook. Noticing the exchange, Nicko stood and turned to his prep cooks. “You two!” he bellowed. “Go inventory the protein bricks. Now.”

Grumbling, both men put down their knives and headed off. “So, what do you need?” Nicko asked.

“Do you have any gsesi seed?” Detroit asked.

“Yeah,” Nicko said. He walked over to the wide pantry cabinets lining the back of the kitchen. “We only use it when there are Gnetsians on station—bitter, gritty shit, but they want it on everything.” He made a face. Opening the cabinet doors, he stared at the chaos for about thirty seconds, then reached in and plucked a single, small, black-tinted jar from the depths and handed it to Emmer.

“I assume whoever you’re pranking, it’s not any of my people, and they deserve it,” the cook said.

Emmer nodded. “You know nothing about this, right?”

“Right. Hey!” Nicko screamed toward the back of the room. “You done yet? Celery isn’t

going to chop itself!”

Emmer and Detroit let themselves back out. In the hall, Emmer handed over the jar. “And what are we doing with this?” he asked.

Detroit shook the jar, listening to the satisfying rattle of tiny seeds, then tucked it into his tool-bag. “Gsesi seed has some unique properties beyond taste,” he answered. “One not commonly known is that it scans as a false positive for IGGYs.”

“IGGYs?”

“I’m Gonna Get You’s,” Detroit said. “Prank nanos? Smartdust?”

“Oh, right,” Emmer said. “Didn’t someone once turn an entire moonbase of people blue and hairy with them?”

“Yeah,” Detroit said. “Not all IGGYs are benign, so they’re considered a Class-A security hazard. If we dump the seed into the main waste-system fluid pressure lines, it should set off a dozen or more alarms and necessitate an inspection of all systems for contamination. Even better, the fluid itself will dissolve the seed, leaving no trace.”

“Biner’s going to pucker vacuum,” Emmer said. “As much as that appeals to me, is Vissock right? Are we taking this too far?”

Detroit shrugged. “It’s your call. But there’s more going on here, and I don’t know if we’re going to figure it out without knowing who’s breaking the toilets.”

“I never did like vandals,” Emmer said. “Let’s do it.”

* * *

The first station alarm sounded exactly twelve minutes after they’d dumped the small jar of seed into central systems. Emmer and Detroit had both gone back to work on a broken unit, business as usual.

Vissock called, her expression haggard. “Security systems are detecting malicious tech in the pressure systems in the ambassadorial ring,” she said.

“What?” Emmer said. He let go of his tools quickly, plucking his handpad out of the air. “Can you send me what data you’ve got?”

Biner’s face crowded into the small screen. “I need to know if someone is trying to sabotage our negotiations,” he said. “I need to know right now. And I need to know exactly whose security lapse on this station led to this situation.”

“Hold your static,” Emmer said. “We need to look at the data first.”

Detroit checked the pad. “Smartdust,” he said.

“I *know* that,” Biner growled. “But what kind? What does it do? Who put it there?”

“Can’t tell ya,” Emmer said. “But I’d advise you to evacuate the ambassadorial ring and conference zone until we’ve cleared it. We’ll need full access.”

“You got it,” Vissock said, before Biner could argue. “Be fast, and be discreet.”

“Always,” Emmer said. “We’ll check in as soon as we find anything.” He disconnected just as Biner was opening his mouth to speak. “I think we’re going to owe Vissock a drink,” he added.

“I think we’re going to owe her a whole damned bottle,” Detroit said. “So: take them in order?”

“Yep. You take the left, I’ll take the right. If the occupant is still at home, call security and skip ahead.”

There were twenty-one guests currently on-station, not including Biner who had quarters in the same ring. Detroit worked his way up his side, checking one by one, dutifully scanning the plumbing systems for smartdust even as he checked that each system was still operating. The Yuaknari ambassador had flooded his room, leaving large blobs of water slowly coalescing midair in the zero gravity. The E’zon ambassador had taken all the cushions from the grippy chairs and sofas, turning them into pillow-fort-style burrow anchored to a light fixture. Biner’s quarters were so neat Detroit almost thought it was a vacant room until he found the closet stacked with two dozen pairs of identical Alliance dress shoes. Neither the Sfazili or Tanduoan quarters—both human worlds—had anything remarkable about them.

He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and swiped his newly empowered pass for the Skriknatti suite. He’d met one once and was not eager to repeat the experience; the

Skriknatti were like bright red, upright, scaly pillbugs, except instead of faces they had what appeared to be an anemone plastered there, with an eyeball on the end of each wavy tentacle. To his relief, the door opened on an empty room.

Or, almost empty. There were cages floating around the room, filled with tiny, crayfish-like creatures. *Food?* he wondered. *Pets? Offspring?* Whatever they were, they were terrified of him, and pressed themselves to the back of their cages squealing as he floated into the room.

The bathroom was at the rear of the unit; he kicked off the wall beside the door and drifted back. He ran his wand over the unit first, getting the obligatory scans for smartdust out of the way. Then, like all the others before, he stuck his airflow meter down into the pod and was not at all surprised when it registered nothing. “Gotcha,” he said. He picked up his comm. “Emmer, how much time do I have? I want to disassemble the Skriknatti toilet.”

“I don’t think we have time for that. Biner will be counting the seconds ‘til we report in.”

“Five minutes,” Detroit said. He was already taking off the front plate. “Where are you?”

“Just finishing checking the Haudie South quarters, found plenty of interesting stuff but nothing I was looking for. Heading to the Gaian suite next. I can check the Dourelian rooms for you, and then we’re done, but we *both* have to be done.”

“Got it.”

Detroit pulled out the vacuum exchanger, unscrewed it, and stared. The entire interior of the unit was pocked with holes, and in the casing he counted at least two dozen frogs. *Shit*, he thought. *I forgot my bucket.* With his stick, he scraped frogs from the exchanger directly into his toolbag.

“Deet! Time’s up,” Emmer called over the comms.

No time to fix the exchanger. He locked it back into place, closed up the cabinet, and shoved himself off the wall and out the door, breathing hard. Behind him, the caged creatures were a wailing chorus of despair.

Emmer was in the hall. “Biner wants a full report,” he said, “What are we going to tell him?”

“That it’s the Skriknatti who’ve been sabot—”

“What are we going to tell him about the IGGYs?” Emmer interrupted. “He’s still not going to care about the toilets, and besides, it’s not that simple.”

“What do you mean, not that simple?”

Emmer reached into his pocket and pulled out a trio of frogs. “They were in the Gaian quarters too. Right on the damned walls.”

“That makes no sense!”

“Well, while you’re thinking about it, can you first figure out what we’re going to tell Biner? Because I don’t think he’s going to believe us that the IGGY disappeared without a trace, or that we had nothing to do with it.”

Detroit stuck his hand into his toolbag, momentarily startled to find squishy cold frogs in there, and emerged with five of them stuck to his arm and a small vial between thumb and forefinger. “Here’s our sample,” he said. “Scan and log it now.”

“An IGGY? You *have* one?! What’s it do?”

“Multi-species calming agent.”

“Why do you even have this?”

“I once had to service a unit with a nine-hundred-pound Nurum Cha stuck in it. It kicked out two of my teeth and broke three ribs before I got it free enough for it to stop panicking. Ever since then I’ve kept this, just in case.”

“Well,” Emmer said. He took the vial, and in the same motion managed to dump his frogs into Detroit’s hands. “What? You’re the frog keeper, Earth boy. Put them away and meet me in Vissock’s office in four minutes.”

Detroit slung his toolbag over his back and grabbed a wallbar, propelling himself down the ring toward a connecting spoke to Central. Once through, he dropped into the administrative wing and the sweet relief of gravity. He headed to his closet, but when he pulled the lid off instead of the two dozen or so frogs he expected, there was just a giant ball the size of a cantaloupe stuck to the inside of the lid, legs sticking out and wiggling from all over the surface,

a dozen eyes peering up at him.

He reached in, poked at the ball, but the frogs were so tightly stuck together he was afraid he'd hurt them if he tried harder to separate them. "Okay, that's just weird and maybe a little gross, you guys," he said. He wasn't at all sure he wanted to add more frogs to that mess, so he put the lid back down over the frog-ball and carefully closed up his toolbox with the new frogs safely inside. Then he picked up the bucket and made haste toward Vissock's office.

She was sitting at her desk, Biner standing beside her, almost looming. Emmer had sunk into a chair. "About damned time," Biner said as soon as Detroit entered the room.

Detroit handed his scanner to Vissock. She set it atop the readeye on her desk and waited as the data downloaded to her systems. Emmer's wand sat beside it. Biner leaned forward, impatient. "What was it? Who did it?"

"Most of it had cleared the system before we could detect it," Emmer said. "I did get one sample from the Dourelian suite, but that's probably coincidence."

"Coincidence?" Biner said.

"That suite is farthest from the system filters. Circulation is slightly less efficient the farther away you are from central." Emmer took the vial out of his pocket and set it on the desk.

Biner stepped back in alarm. "It's inert now," Emmer added after a few seconds, and Biner's scowl deepened.

"Do we know what it is?" Vissock asked.

"No idea," Detroit said. "We don't have the tech to deep-scan IGGYs."

"The Alliance does," Biner said. "You're certain it's inert?" He picked up the vial carefully.

"Almost entirely, yes," Emmer said.

Biner dropped it hastily into his personal case. "I'm not done with the three of you," he said and stomped out of Vissock's office. Emmer tipped his chair backward and reached out, sliding the door shut after him.

Vissock put her chin in her hand and stared at the two of them. "So this is something I shouldn't worry about?" she asked.

"I'm sure Biner is entirely competent at handling this himself, and that no more such incidents are likely," Emmer said.

"I need to know about Bom," Detroit blurted out.

"What?" Vissock asked.

"The planet the Gaians and the Skriknatti are negotiating over."

"It's hardly negotiating. It's in the Alliance Treaty with Skriknat that if there's a competing claim against a Bounds world, they'll participate in moderated talks. The Gaians want the planet preserved because of its unique ecosystem, the Skriknatti aren't going to give it to them, and after today's session they'll have met their obligation according to the treaty and will leave. Biner could push for a compromise of some sort, but he can't afford to alienate Skriknat right now."

"And what happens to Bom if the Skriknatti keep it?"

"They're going to strip it of atmosphere, water, and any valuable elements. Whatever's left will be up for grabs to anyone who still wants it," Vissock said.

"Can I talk to the Gaian representative?"

"Without Biner's permission and presence? No," Vissock said. "I can't authorize that over broken toilets."

"What if it's more than that?"

"Like what? The frogs? We don't have any idea where they came from! They might have nothing to do with Bom, or any of this."

"They were in both the Gaian and Skriknatti quarters," Emmer chipped in. "No other private suites. That does seem to point to a connection."

"I just want to ask," Detroit said. "I'm not going to accuse anyone of anything. I need to know if they're going to get wiped out."

Vissock looked unhappy. "The last round of talks started five minutes ago, and I can't justify interrupting for a nuisance problem. It's too late."

Detroit sighed. "I think it's best if I resign my employment now, so that I am no longer your responsibility," he said. He grabbed his toolbag and reached for his bucket, then froze. "— Shit."

"Now what?!" Vissock stood up.

Detroit pulled the lid off his bucket and held it up. There was a fist-sized circular hole in it, and the ball of frogs was gone. Emmer grabbed his wand off the desk and waved it over the lid. "Whoa!" he said. "Unknown organic traces. Off the charts corrosive."

"That," Vissock said, "is no longer a nuisance. What if one burnt its way through the hull? Or into a critical system like life support? We need to know where these things came from and how to neutralize them before they hit something vital."

Detroit and Emmer followed Vissock out of her office. She moved at a half-run until she hit the security station outside the spoke to the conference zone. "They're with me," Vissock said before the guard could even speak.

"I still need to call Commander Biner, Ma'am," the guard said. "If negotiations are in progress—"

"This is a station security problem, and last I knew, you worked for the station, not the Alliance," Vissock said. "Wherever *Administrator* Biner is, you can tell him to meet us in the Gaia-Skriknat talks."

"He is already there, Ma'am," the guard said.

"That'll simplify things," Vissock said and pushed past him.

Gravity grew lighter until they were moving horizontally by pulling themselves along wall-bars. Detroit glanced up and saw a frog on the ceiling above them. He plucked it free as he passed, tucking it into his toolbag with the others. He collected six more along the walls, before the corridor let them out into the conference zone. All the frogs had been heading in the same direction.

Vissock stopped in front of a conference room. "Let me do the talking," she said and used her pass and handprint to override the door lock.

Biner was floundering to get out of his grippy chair, his face beet-red as they floated through the door. The Gaian representative stared at them from her seat, while the most that Detroit could say definitively about the Skriknatti is that it seemed to be facing them. "This is an outrage!" Biner shouted.

"There is a security situation," Vissock said.

"I hear no alarms!"

"It hasn't reached that point," Vissock said. "Yet. We're trying to stop it before it does."

The Skriknatti made an unpleasant squeaky sound and a small orb-shaped device hovering in front of it lit up. "There is no point in continuing regardless," it said. "We have met our obligation to listen and we are not compelled to yield."

"There is a potential for sentient life on Bom!" the Gaian said.

"It holds no value," the Skriknatti answered.

"There already *is* sentient life," Detroit spoke up from where he floated beside the door.

"Mr. Hammersmith, you are a *toilet repairman*," Biner said. "You are neither qualified to speak nor welcome to do so. Open your mouth again, and I'll have you fired."

"I've already quit," Detroit said. He reached into his toolbag and pulled out one of the frogs. "And I'm not speaking for myself."

The Skriknatti hissed. "Pests," it said. "Parasites." It stuck a claw up under a red scale and flung a small green shape toward the wall flash recycler. "They *burn*."

Emmer kicked off from the wall, managing to grab the frog before it could go into the incinerator.

"What is that thing?" Biner asked. "Is that a *frog*?"

"They're from Bom," Detroit said. "Someone's been flushing them down the toilets, probably because *they burn*."

Biner stared at Vissock. "This is your security situation? *Frogs*?"

"They secrete an incredibly corrosive substance," Vissock said. "If any of them had gotten

into something more vital than the toilets . . .”

Biner seemed to accept that point. “How did they get here?” He looked at the Skriknatti.

“We did not bring them,” the Skriknatti said.

Everyone looked at the Gaian. She shrunk in her seat a little. “It wasn’t intentional,” she said. “I conducted our final survey there myself and then came straight here. We didn’t detect anything on our ship, but . . . I don’t know. Suddenly they were everywhere. I tried to contain them, but they kept making holes in everything I put them in.”

“And you didn’t warn us?” Vissock said. “Didn’t you think that might be dangerous?”

“I didn’t want to risk weakening our position,” she said.

“You have no position to weaken,” the Skriknatti said. “We are done with these talks, and the sooner we have scraped that planet down to bare rock the more satisfied we will be. Our claim has *not* been challenged.”

“I challenge it!” the Gaian said.

The Skriknatti puffed up, scales standing out like a pinecone having a temper tantrum. “You would fight us for it? Combat, you and I?”

“We do not fight!” The Gaian said. “We are a peaceful assembly of civilized people!”

The Skriknatti’s scales settled again. “Then our claim has not been challenged.”

“What would fighting you include?” Detroit asked, trying to remember if he had his good pipe-clamp in his bag. “I mean, would we use weapons?”

“It would be pure body combat, no weapons, no rules except to be superior. But you have no basis for a claim,” the Skriknatti said. It clicked its claws together. “Nor would you win.”

“Well, shit,” Detroit said. He figured the Skriknatti was right on that; even though Detroit was a full half-meter taller, the alien had armor and *claws*.

Biner tapped his pad, angrily. “We should conclude this, so we can let Station Commander Vissock and her team get back to the important business of trying to contain this infestation,” he said. “I am sending the closing text to each of your systems . . .”

Detroit stared down sadly at the frog on his hand. “I’m sorry,” he said.

Deet, it said. *Bom*.

As if in echo, tiny voices chirped up from his toolbox. *Deet deet bom deet!*

Biner glanced over at him, frowning. Outside the door came a sudden, deafening chorus of *DEET DEET BOM BOM BOM DEET BOM*.

Detroit opened the door.

Frogs streamed into the room, along the walls and ceiling and floor. In the center was the frog ball that had escaped his bucket, easily ten times its previous size, and the seething mass of legs and eyes had taken on the rough semblance of a single giant frog. It leapt, landing on the center of the desk and sticking there. “BOM,” it said in perfectly synchronized chorus. A hundred eyes blinked, fixing at last on the Skriknatti. Distinctly, it said, “BOM. SHALLENDIS.”

The Skriknatti let out a squeal that the orb translated into laughter. “The parasite would challenge us?” it said.

“That’s not fair—” Detroit said.

“It is a valid claim,” the Skriknatti said. It raised one thick forelimb, bunching its cluster of claws together into a shape like an ice pick.

Frogs jumped onto the desk around the big one. They pressed against it, adding themselves to the mass. The frog-shape grew bigger. The frogs from Detroit’s toolbox, the one on his finger, the one in Emmer’s hand, all leapt to the desk and joined in. In less than a minute, no single frogs remained unattached, and their collective form was now nearly as large as the Skriknatti itself.

The Skriknatti raised its other three arms, braced itself against the far desk, and began to lunge.

The multi-frog moved faster. It sprang forward, a crude approximation of a mouth appearing and opening wide, and engulfed the entire head of the Skriknatti. The alien flailed, the translation orb rendering terrible sounds into equally terrible sounds, as its claws hacked at the frog. Where it hit, small frogs fell out of the mass, then leapt back on.

The Skriknatti gave one last, violent twitch, then went still.

The giant frog dissolved into a rain of tiny frogs, spreading in a pool around the Skriknatti. When Detroit could see through the mass, he winced and turned away; the part of the Skriknatti that had been inside the frog's mouth was just gone, a melted brown-black goo enveloping the stubby top of its body.

"Ew," Emmer said.

Biner stared at it, then at Detroit, the Gaian, then back at it. "The provisions for combat were dictated by the leadership of Skriknat," he said at last, his voice hoarse. "By those terms, I think we can declare the native life of Bom has successfully asserted its superior claim to its own planet. You will all be listed as witnesses to this sequence of events. I expect there will be questions."

"Does this mean we'll be granted conservatorship of Bom?" the Gaian asked.

"No," Biner said. "You want it, you take it up with them." He jerked his thumb towards the frogs, who were managing to drift to various surfaces in the room. "In the meantime, be grateful I'm not locking you up for smuggling dangerous, unauthorized life forms onto the station."

"Deet," the frogs said. "Deet deet deet bom freend."

"Freend?" Detroit asked.

"Friend, I think?" Vissock said.

Biner coughed. "I have the personal authority to compel any citizen into service in emergency situations, and I am doing so. Congratulations, Mr. Hammersmith. I am officially appointing you acting Alliance liaison to Bom."

"I'm a toilet repairman!" Detroit protested. "And I'm retired!"

"Then you should have stuck with toilets and retirement, shouldn't you?" Biner retorted. "Thanks to your friends, after I explain to the Skriknatti that their senior ambassador got his head eaten in combat and they've lost an entire planet's resource as a result, I'm going to have to start trade negotiations over from scratch. I'm sure you aren't sympathetic to this, but it took me *years* to get our late ambassador as pleasantly socialized as he was. So while I try to figure out how to pick up the pieces from this mess, you can get all these frogs *off* this station and back where they belong."

"What if I refuse? Or if I contest the post?" Detroit said. He crossed his arms over his chest, doing his best to look adamant and unmovable. One by one, frogs began leaping from the desk and attaching themselves to his shirt.

"Then I can certainly find some other people here on the station to blame for this disaster," Biner said, looking meaningfully over at Vissock and Emmer. "Shall I start listing the potential charges?"

Detroit winced. "How long?" he said.

Biner picked up his pad. "I have three-quarters of a standard left until I retire myself," he said. "After that, take it up with my replacement. Oh, and Mr. Hammersmith?"

"Yes?" he asked.

"Get the hell out of my conference room."

"Bom go," the frog added, and damned if the thing didn't sound smug about it.