

**The Truth Hurts
Or
Romancing the Exposition Stone**

Elsie stopped in mid-sentence and got that faraway look in her eyes. Evette waited patiently while her companion reconciled the *Farrago's* hyperspace coordinates with their four-dimensional equivalents. Shifting in and out of hyperspace always made Evette a little bit nervous. Warping the very fabric of the universe just for the sake of being able to travel conveniently was just plain unnatural, and not without risk.

Realizing she was holding her breath, Evette exhaled and chided herself. Three hundred years ago, she'd felt exactly the same way about flying, but she'd gotten over that eventually. She'd learn to deal with this too.

Outside, the stars winked back into existence as the *Farrago* materialized at the edge of the Sphinx system. "...chances of finding a job when we get there?" Elsie asked, finishing the sentence she'd begun some 30 parsecs away.

Evette exhaled and answered in French. "I don't know. Hopefully, we will have better luck as a ship for hire out here on the frontier."

Elsie nodded and replied in French. "Well, the further we are from 'civilization' the better. Do you think anyone's still after us?"

Evette shook her head, her raven locks whipping back and forth as she did. She reached up to push a few strands of hair away from her lips and said, "I don't know. Technically, you and the *Farrago* are still stolen property. But the only people who would care were in no shape to come looking. I don't know how long that will continue to be true."

Elsie noted the worried look in her partner's eyes and a slight jump in vocal stress indicators, so she changed the subject. "Hey, I had an idea about how we can make some money just before we went into hyperspace," she said. "I went ahead and placed the ad already."

Evette got that sinking feeling. Her companion had the wisdom of the ages at her fingertips and was undoubtedly very bright, but she was also terribly naïve sometimes. She tapped the touch panel in front of her to call up the communications they'd sent upon rematerializing in 4D space. She quickly found their usual ad in Galactic Standard text: "Starship *Farrago* and crew for hire. Intra/interstellar. Passengers and/or light cargo. *Gallivant*-class personal cruiser. Pocket-warp capable. Evette du Reve, Elsie co-captains. Contact Reg#765rfrey.net."

No problem there.

Then she scrolled down to the next message: "Hot live girl-girl sex shows. No holes barred. Private shows or small parties. Contact Reg#766rfrey.net."

Evette's first two responses would have been in French. The third would have come out in German. By time the time she worked her way through Russian, English, and Galactic Standard, the blood that had rushed to her cheeks was circulating more or less normally and she felt able to address Elsie without shrieking. "What in God's name were you thinking?"

"Well, we like having sex," explained Elsie, "So I figured, why not make it profitable as well? And we really do need the money."

"But prostitution?"

Elsie laughed. "It's not prostitution if we just do it with each other. I checked; a lot of men are willing to pay to watch attractive women engaging in sexual activities."

"A lot of men are utter perverts," argued Evette switching back to French, "and I don't want them on the *Farrago*."

"Don't be paranoid. It's a very common fantasy," Elsie assured her also speaking in French. "They can't all be perverts."

"Yes they can," insisted Evette. "Go ahead, cross-reference it. I dare you."

"Fine," replied Elsie. She got that faraway look in her eyes again as she accessed her vast databases.

"Well," she said a moment later and blushing slightly. "That was an unexpectedly high area of overlap."

"Told you so," said Evette.

"Nonetheless, I still think we could..."

"No," said Evette firmly. "I'm not doing it. Period."

"Well, I suppose I could..."

"And neither are you. There will be no peepshows on this ship. I'm pulling the ad now," stated Evette. She tapped the touch panel loudly for emphasis.

"You never want to try anything new," sulked Elsie in Galactic Standard.

Evette closed her eyes and massaged the bridge of her nose with her thumb and forefinger. "We are not having this argument again either."

"I'm just saying," complained Elsie in Galactic Standard even though Evette was still speaking French.

"For the last time," snapped Evette. "It's just plain gross. It's cruel to the gerbil. And I won't have rodents on my ship!"

Elsie looked startled and then was silent for a moment. She could have accessed any number of references on lovers' quarrels from Shakespeare to *Men are from Zeta Reticuli*, *Women are from C1176B*, but she just didn't feel like it. "Fine," she said getting up out of the pilot's chair and leaving the bridge. "I was just trying to help. Besides, it's my ship too."

Evette started to call after her but was interrupted by a comm signal from the solar system ahead of them.

"Greetings, *Farrago*," came man's voice in Galactic Standard. "I am calling about your ad."

"Listen, pervert!" snapped Evette. "Zat ad ees canceled so you're just going to 'ave to get your sick, pathetic, voyeuristic thrills somewhere el..." She could speak Galactic Standard (and English, German and Russian) without a French accent if she worked at it, but right now she was too upset to bother.

"She says the ship is not for hire after all," Evette heard the caller tell someone else at the other end.

Evette's brown eyes went wide and she sucked in a hiss of air through her teeth. "Forgive me," she said hurriedly. "I... thought you were someone else. *Zee Farrago* and 'er crew are indeed available for hire."

"How could you have thought I was someone else when you do not yet know who I am?" chided the caller. "Your words have the ring of untruth."

Before Evette could respond, she heard a second voice at the other end. This one was wet and gravelly. “Perhaps she merely misspoke rather than lied. It could be that she thought we were calling for some other purpose.”

“Yes, zat is it,” interjected Evette. “I thought you wanted... Well never mind what I thought you wanted. Just allow me to apologize again and ask ‘ow zee *Farrago* may be of service?”

“We are Seekers of the Truth on a pilgrimage of Holy Discovery,” said the man. “We require transport for four passengers to and from the second planet of the Van Ham system. Can you accommodate a special-needs passenger?”

“We can seal one of the cabins and set up whatever atmospheric, radiological, or gravitational needs your companion may need,” said Evette beginning to relax.

“Nothing so extravagant,” said the wet gravelly voice. “My life support needs are generally quite human-compatible; however, I do favor a warmer temperature and higher humidity. Oh, and a bit of methane. I’ve uploaded the specifications to you. I also have my own self-contained sleeping module.”

Evette glanced at the incoming specs and nodded. “There is nothing simpler,” she assured him.

“Actually, there is a vast number of things that would be simpler,” said the first speaker sternly. “However, we will choose to accept your confident exaggeration in the spirit in which it was offered.”

Evette shifted a bit in her chair. “Er, thank you.” She glanced at the Call Properties window. “I see you are calling from one of the moons of Sphinx-6. I’ve uploaded our fee requirements and standard contract. If they meet with your approval, we can meet you there in about sixty hours, negotiate any outstanding details, and have you on your way to the Van Ham system.”

“That will be fine. I am Brother Santos. We will speak again when you arrive.” With that, he closed the comm link.

Evette swiveled her chair and called down the hall. “Elsie, we’ve got a job! Passenger transport!”

“Good,” came Elsie’s blunt response over the intercom. “Then we won’t have to have sex.”

Evette spent the next couple of hours setting the course and going over the information Brother Santos had uploaded. It was work Elsie could have done in a matter of minutes, while carrying on a conversation at the same time. But since Elsie didn’t seem to be speaking to her anyway, it was a moot point.

Evette sighed and wished. She wished Elsie would come back to the bridge so she could apologize. She wished just once Elsie would ask her before trying whatever goofy crap she stumbled across in her databases. She had never known anyone with so much knowledge, but so little life experience. The vigor with which she attempted to compensate for that lack of experience was at once exhausting, endearing, and often amusing. She’d find things in her databases and immediately need to try them. It didn’t matter whether it was cybermime, zero-g extreme shuffleboard, or cooking mastodon steaks with a flame-thrower; everything interested Elsie and, honestly, that was part of what Evette loved about her. If only she wasn’t so damned impulsive. But then, Evette supposed that was part of her charm as well. She wondered whether Elsie’s impulsiveness

had been programmed into her personality on purpose or if had been some sort of self-generating fuzzy logic character trait.

Evette stretched, checked the control panel one more time and got up to go find Elsie. The *Farrago's* cool plasteel deck felt good against her bare feet as she padded the short distance down the hall from the bridge to the captain's cabin she shared with Elsie.

Sliding the door open, Evette first noticed Elsie's boots and form-fitting uniform in a crumpled heap on the floor. She sighed again. Had no one ever programmed her to hang up her damn clothes? She picked up the uniform, quickly folded it up and stuffed it in the bottom drawer of a three-drawer chest of drawers beside the bed. She tossed the boots into Elsie's closet where they landed with a thump and a twang of the banjo that had come into her possession following yet another one of her database excursions.

Evette listened but didn't hear Elsie in the sonic shower. The only other place she'd be without her clothes was the rec room. Evette had no shortage for appreciation of Elsie's preference for exercising in the nude despite the fact that it had scandalized (and delighted) some of their passengers on previous jobs. This might be a good opportunity for them to make up in the time-honored manner.

The recreation room was at the end of the hall past the *Farrago's* four passenger cabins. It has originally been the smaller of two upper cargo bays but Elsie and Evette had modified it with some exercise equipment and a virtual reality entertainment center they'd acquired on a job some months back.

Evette was disappointed to find that Elsie was not exercising nude today. Instead, she was wearing a simple brown robe tied around the waist with a piece of rope she'd retrieved from storage. Tragically, it concealed everything except Elsie's head, hands, and feet. Also from storage was the five-foot length of plasteel pipe in her hands that she was using as a quarterstaff. The VREC was on and was projecting a hologram to make the balance beam she was perched on look like a log fallen across a small stream in a forest.

Evette watched as Elsie dueled an imaginary opponent, her robe flapping and fluttering with her movements. She had tied a bandanna around her head to keep her thick blonde hair out of her face. Elsie's face, from her wide blue eyes to the dimple in her chin, had been built to the precise specifications of the man who had originally owned (and who, in fact, legally still did, Evette reminded herself) her and the *Farrago*. Despite that, it was the face she was in love with, and Evette couldn't have imagined choosing any differently even if she'd had any say in the matter.

"So, how come we don't rob from the rich and give to the poor?" asked Elsie spotting Evette's reflection in the wall-to-wall mirror across the room. She swung her staff in a smooth arc, then ducked, pivoted and delivered a graceful kick arcing in the opposite direction.

"We are poor," Evette reminded her. Elsie was still speaking Galactic Standard and Evette responded in kind.

"So were Robin Hood and his merry men," said Elsie.

"Ah, that explains the Friar Tuck outfit," nodded Evette.

Elsie leaped, spun, jabbed with her staff and landed on the balance beam. "How or why anyone would attempt real hand-to-hand combat in an outfit like this is beyond me," she said. "All the sources I've researched so far advise against it, though I've only cross-referenced a few hundred documents so far."

“Well,” suggested Evette, “Friar Tuck was a monk, so maybe he was more concerned with spiritual matters than his fighting prowess.”

“I’ll factor that in,” said Elsie. With that, she used her staff to vault over her imaginary foe, land on the beam, and strike from behind. “See?” she said. “In a real fight, the robe would have slowed me down enough for my opponent to knock me out of the air. Its aerodynamic properties are virtually non-existent. Now, those tights the merry men wore in some of the references I’ve found make more sense. Besides, Errol Flynn: Yum. Although, I wonder: is ‘merry’ a euphemism for ‘homosexual’ in this context?”

“I have no idea,” said Evette. “Anyway, I came to...” She hesitated.

“Apologize?” finished Elsie. “Don’t worry about it. I checked the entire Ann Landers, Dear Abbey, and Miss Manners archives, and they all seem to agree that volunteering you to participate in amateur porn without first obtaining your permission was improper. So, my bad.” She did a double flip off the beam with a snap kick in the middle and landed next to the VREC controls. “Not a bad little workout,” she said checking the system’s review of her performance. “The robe will have to go, of course, but the staff’s got some good versatility.” She switched the VREC off and did a few cool-down stretches.

“I...” began Evette. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

Elsie shrugged. “I need a shower. I don’t really have feelings, you know, so there’s no need to feel bad.”

Evette knew both statements to be false. First of all, Elsie sweated an odor-optional saline solution whose chief function was to make her seem more human, although various scents, pheromones, and/or aphrodisiacs could be added. Besides, they both hated the *Farrago*’s sonic showers. As far as Elsie’s feelings were concerned, they were as real and legitimate as anyone else’s. She’d never treated Elsie as anything less than human. How could she?

Evette wanted to raise these points as she followed Elsie back up the hall to their quarters, but Elsie was chattering on about Robin Hood in Galactic Standard. Once in their cabin, Elsie slipped out of her robe – leaving it on the floor – and went into the bathroom. Evette heard the soft hum of the sonic shower as Elsie stepped into the chamber and slid the door shut. There had been no trace of a suggestion that Evette should join her, so Evette hung up Elsie’s robe and sat on the bed dejectedly.

“Hey, listen,” said Elsie from the shower. “I did some follow-up on our passengers to-be. Turns out the ‘Seekers of Truth’ are a religious organization devoted to living lives of complete honesty. They’ve got a few hundred thousand human and non-human believers scattered across the sector. Anyway, they equate telling a lie with sin. The most extreme sects consider dishonesty a killing offense.”

“So, you’re saying that Brother Santos didn’t necessarily have a broomstick up his ass, he was just acting according to the dictates of his faith?”

“Well, while acts of sodomy involving sweeping implements are generally frowned upon by the Seekers of Truth, it’s still not as bad as lying.”

Sphinx-6 was a gas giant with a pair of Mars-sized moons and several dozen smaller ones attempting to bask in its meager heat. It was around the largest that Elsie put the *Farrago* into orbit. Evette had considered greeting their clients in her dress uniform,

but decided on her working uniform instead. Navy blue with silver trim at the collar and its many pockets, it was more comfortable, more practical and, hopefully, conveyed the competence of a longtime spacefarer.

Elsie wore her usual skin-tight uniform. Made of nanofabric, it was self-cleaning, self-repairing and could change colors. In many ways it was like a second skin. It only lacked pockets. Elsie wore a gray vest over her uniform that made up for the latter deficiency.

The two women rode in the elevator down from the *Farrago's* living/working deck to the lower deck where the *Farrago's* main cargo holds, pocket-warp deck, engine room, and workshop was. Between the two cargo holds was a small control room housing the *Farrago's* pocket-warp facilities, which tapped into the ship's engines to create small, handy warps in the space-time fabric. The practical result of this capability was that the *Farrago* could open a portal to any point within a thousand kilometers or so.

"You should let me greet our passengers," Elsie told Evette. "I've read up on all their customs, including *The Book of Truth*."

"Is that what you've been up to all this time?" asked Evette knowing full well that Elsie could have reviewed everything in her database about the Seekers of Truth within the space of a minute or two. Elsie had been distant since their argument.

Elsie just shrugged and set the coordinates for the pocket-warp portal then transferred the controls to a hand unit so she could close the portal once their guests were aboard but still greet them in person.

Evette and Elsie stepped into the large airlock that separated the pocket-warp deck from the rest of the ship.

"Warning!" grated a loud and unpleasant voice as Elsie activated the pocket-warp. "Coordinates set to deep space! Hard vacuum hazard! Warning!"

"We have really got to get this thing fixed," complained Evette covering her ears.

Elsie punched the command override code. "Even if we do all the work ourselves, it would still mean at least three days in drydock, and we don't have the money. Maybe after this job."

Evette shook her head. "We're not getting much cash up front. They don't have much," she said. "They're hoping to discover some artifacts on Van Ham-2, which they can use toward our fee. It's pretty iffy. Unfortunately, no one else expressed any interest in hiring us at all, so we're stuck with each other."

"Oh well, seeking out the lost artifacts of Truth should at least be interesting," said Elsie. She pressed the 'Go' key on her remote control and the air in the center of the pocket-warp deck began to shimmer and ripple. Then a transparent bubble inflated out of nothing, somehow appearing convex and concave at the same time. When it reached its full diameter of about four meters, Elsie and Evette could see three humans in gold-and-purple robes waiting on landing pad at a spaceport on the moon below them. A fourth member of the group was a large, tentacled amphibian whose glistening blue skin was mottled with flecks of fiery orange. There was a soft 'whump' of thunder as the atmosphere of the *Farrago* and that of the moon met and tried to achieve some sort of equilibrium. Elsie had made sure that the air pressure on the pocket-warp bay was less than that on the other side of the portal. After all, there was no sense in letting the *Farrago's* valuable air bleed out onto some planet. Especially one that made them pick up their passengers from a spaceport in order to charge the *Farrago* a full landing fee.

“I bid you greetings, Seekers of Truth, and welcome you aboard the *Farrago*,” Elsie called through the portal.

One of the humans stepped forward through the portal and into the *Farrago*'s pocket-warp bay. Behind him, the others gathered up the group's luggage and followed. The alien wheeled a metal box large enough to contain a quartet of refrigerators through in addition to the dozen or so cargo containers it dragged behind it. As soon as everyone was aboard, Elsie closed the portal.

The lead man threw back the hood of his robe, touched his fingertips together, and gave Elsie and Evette a slow nod. He was a balding middle-aged man, and his eyes, hair, and complexion all seemed to be gray, but perhaps it was just the light. “I am Brother Santos,” he said. “I lead my fellow Seekers on the expedition in search of Holy Artifacts of Truth. My companions are Brother Karl, Brother Zanzibar, and Brother Thoo-Loo.”

Brother Karl looked to be in his early twenties with dark hair, green eyes and a thin mustache. Even in his robes, he looked broad-shouldered and athletic. In contrast, Brother Zanzibar was a slightly built man in his thirties. He wore his brown hair cropped close to his narrow skull. Both Seekers bowed to Elsie and Evette.

Nearly three meters tall and about as wide, Brother Thoo-Loo dwarfed his fellow Seekers. His size, proportions, and the half-dozen ropy tentacles ringing his torso precluded wearing a robe like his fellow Seekers of Truth, but he did wear a purple-and-gold collar around his thick neck and matching bands around each of his tentacles. He squatted on three powerful legs with webbed feet. His head was frog-like, complete with bulging lime-green eyes and a meter-wide mouth. A forest of fine wriggling feelers surrounded the latter. Instead of bowing, Brother Thoo-Loo merely bobbed his great head and blinked at Elsie and Evette.

Elsie mirrored Brother Santos' gesture and Evette followed suit. “I am LC-3, but I prefer to be called Elsie. My co-captain is Evette du Reve,” said Elsie.

“We will address you by your *true* name,” sniffed Brother Santos.

Evette noted her companion's features clouding briefly, but before either woman could respond, Brother Thoo-Loo spoke up. His voice was like a load of wet gravel being poured from a great height into a plastic trash bag.

“There is no deceit inherent in preferring a nickname,” Brother Thoo-Loo told Brother Santos. “After all, you do not address me by my true name, which is Thoo-Loozulligullg Gugglazobb Uthlaalozobb Thullzocataal Zanthaluun Gullubaloth.”

“Call me whatever you want, just don't call me late for dinner,” smiled Elsie bowing again and turning to leave. “I'll go upstairs and get us underway, Evette will show you to your cabins and help you get settled.”

As Elsie left, Evette noticed Brother Karl's eyes fixated on Elsie's posterior. She sighed. “Gather up your personal belongings,” she instructed the passengers. “I'll have the cargo bots store the rest of your gear here until we reach Van Ham-2.”

“What about my habitat module?” asked Brother Thoo-Loo indicating the giant metal box.

Evette frowned. “Well, we could use the freight elevator to take it to one of the upper cargo bays, but I think we'd have to disassemble it to install it in one of the cabins.”

Brother Thoo-Loo nodded. “I don't mind using the cargo bay if you do not object to me doing so. I only use the module for sleep, feeding, and meditation.”

“All right,” said Evette. “Why don’t we set you up in Bay 2 then? We’ve converted it into a recreation room and that will give you the best access to your fellow Seekers.”

“That will be satisfactory,” said Brother Santos.

Evette led them to an elevator large enough to accommodate them all and Brother Thoo-Loo’s module comfortably. As they left, a small cargo bot wheeled out of its cubby and began stowing the rest of the Seekers’ gear.

The module fit easily in the corner of the rec room that had been cleared as a dance floor. She then showed Brothers Santos, Karl and Zanzibar to their cabins. “The galley/dining room is adjacent to the bridge, across from the captains’ quarters. Elsie and I generally dine at 1800. You’re welcome to join us, just let us know ahead of time so that we can cook enough for everyone,” said Evette.

Brother Santos scowled. “Your android co-captain does not need to eat. Eating merely for the sake of appearing more human is deceitful,” he said. “I disapprove.”

Evette looked at Brother Santos levelly. “I,” she said, “don’t recall asking for your approval. If there is nothing else you need, I will go assist Elsie on the bridge.”

“What’s our ETA?” asked Evette when she took her seat next to Elsie at the *Farrago*’s controls.

“Seventy hours to clear the Sphinx system, no time to warp to the Van Ham system, and another 120 hours to reach Van Ham-2,” replied Elsie.

“I don’t know if Brother Santos is going to live that long,” grumbled Evette.

“We’ve had worse,” Elsie reminded her. “At least there hasn’t been any gunplay so far this time.”

The day’s still young, thought Evette pessimistically.

Evette was surprised to find that all their passengers chose to join them for dinner. She and Elsie sat together at the head of the table while Brothers Santos and Zanzibar sat to their left with Brother Karl across from them. Brother Thoo-Loo squeezed into the room, at the far end of the table near the door to the hall.

“I ate several days ago and will be digesting for several more,” the alien told them. “I am here for companionship.” He paused. “And perhaps a bit to drink. You wouldn’t happen to have cold, fresh water with some old coffee grounds?”

“I think I can manage that,” replied Elsie brightly. “How much would you like?”

“Three or four liters will be plenty, otherwise I’ll have trouble sleeping.”

Elsie went into the galley and returned with drinks for everyone. Brother Santos and Brother Zanzibar both chose ice water. Brother Karl asked for a beer, which earned him a slight disapproving look from Brother Santos. Evette and Elsie both had soft drinks. Dinner was an old Earth delicacy from Elsie’s database; ‘Spaghetti-o’s and franks’ from scratch.

“Evette told me that you had expressed some reservations regarding my need to eat,” Elsie said to Brother Santos once she had served everyone.

“Actually, I expressed my disapproval,” clarified Brother Santos.

“I’d heard that,” continued Elsie. “I was trying to be polite.”

“*The Book of Truth* teaches us that even small deceits kindly meant are stepping stones to greater sins,” offered Brother Zanzibar. “*Little white lies are like a snow flurry that can turn into a blinding blizzard.* (Findller 03:03).”

“Truth is neither polite nor impolite,” continued Brother Santos. “It simply is. For example, in order to walk the Path of Truth faithfully, I must tell you that the orange sauce in this dish is far too sweet for my tastes and I find the meat rubbery.”

Elsie bit her lip. “I could prepare you a sandwich, if you prefer.”

“That won’t be necessary,” said Brother Santos.

Evette shot Brother Santos a withering glance. While it was true that some of Elsie’s cooking experiments had proven to be barely edible or worse, this was not one of them. And even if it was, it certainly wasn’t Brother Santos’ place to say so.

“I like it,” volunteered Brother Karl. It was apparent that he was walking the Path of Truth faithfully; he had cleaned his bowl. “I’ll have yours if you don’t want it.” He reached across the table for Brother Santos’ bowl.

Elsie favored Brother Karl with a grateful smile. “Anyway,” she continued, “I was going to say that my construction incorporates a number of organic components that benefit from the nutrients contained in human food, although eating isn’t the most efficient way to get them.”

“Am I or am I not correct in my understanding that the reason you are dining with us is so that you will appear more human?” asked Brother Santos.

“You are correct,” allowed Elsie. “However, in order to be true to my design specifications and core programming directives, I must act as human as possible at all times. That is why I eat, sleep, breathe, and even use the toilet. To do anything less would be dishonest.”

“An interesting paradox,” mused Brother Zanzibar. “You were designed to deceive those around you into believing you human. To not deceive, in your case, would, in fact, be deceitful.”

“Deceive is a strong word,” said Elsie. “I only mimic human behavior. Any low-level security check or bio-scan would reveal that I’m an android. Also, you could just ask me.”

Brother Santos nodded. “I appreciate your candor.”

“So, what are your primary functions?” asked Brother Karl.

“Librarian, bodyguard, and interactive sex toy,” answered Elsie. Evette winced. “I’ve recently added operation and maintenance of the *Farrago*.”

“Tell us a bit about your expedition,” suggested Evette before Brother Karl could engage Elsie in a detailed conversation about their sex life.

“We seek the Stone of Honesty, one of the Holy Artifacts of Truth described in *The Book of Truth*,” said Brother Zanzibar. “It tells of a mission of Seekers of Truth who colonized a hostile and uncharted world. There, they discovered or created the Stone of Truth. ‘*And the light of the Stone of Honesty shined upon the Seekers and set them free, for at its heart was the physical element of pure Truth*’ (Findller 30:27).”

“Brother Zanzibar is our librarian and archivist,” explained Brother Karl. “He and Brother Santos have been working for years piecing together clues in *The Book of Truth* and other holy works to lead us to the Stone of Truth.”

“And you believe it is on Van Ham-2?” asked Evette.

Brother Karl shrugged. “We don’t have enough evidence to believe one way or another. There are ruins on Van Ham-2 that may be the remains of a lost colony of Seekers. Once we get there, as mission xeno-archaeologist, it will be my job to evaluate if the colony is the same one described in *The Book of Truth* and whether anything we find there turns out to be the Stone of Truth.”

“My job,” volunteered Brother Thoo-Loo, “is to make sure my fellow Seekers do not get eaten by giant bug-eyed aliens. It takes one to know one.” The feelers around his mouth wriggled in a smile.

“So, if Brother Thoo-Loo’s the bodyguard and Brother Zanzibar is the librarian, does that make Brother San...”

Evette reached under the table and tapped ‘SHUT UP’ on Elsie’s knee in Morse code. “Why don’t we clear the dinner dishes?” she hissed.

Elsie sighed. “There’s sherbet for dessert, if anyone cares for any.”

“What did I do wrong this time?” Elsie wanted to know as soon as she and Evette were alone in the galley.

“You were about to suggest that Brother Santos must be the interactive sex toy of the group,” Evette replied loading the dishwasher.

“It was only a joke,” said Elsie.

“One that would not have been well received,” said Evette. “Brother Santos has no sense of humor.”

“That’s an exaggeration,” said Elsie scooping orange sherbet into bowls. “Everyone has a sense of humor.”

“Some more than others,” said Evette. “Go ahead. Check your observations of Brother Santos against any references you have on similar personality types and tell me the most likely reactions.”

Elsie’s blue eyes got that faraway look for a couple of seconds.

“Well?” asked Evette knowing Elsie had had more than enough time to run her analysis.

“Don’t you ever get tired of being right?” grumbled Elsie. “There was a ninety-nine point some ridiculous number of decimal places percent chance that he would’ve stalked out of the room in a huff and spent the rest of the trip glaring and muttering under his breath at us. Anything else?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” said Evette. “Will you stop telling everyone you’re an interactive sex toy?”

Elsie stiffened. “I *am* an interactive sex toy. It’s one of my primary functions.”

“It’s just that a lot of people may be caught off-guard by such a frank admission so early on,” explained Evette.

“Are you ashamed of me?” Elsie wanted to know.

“Elsie, you know I love you, but...” began Evette.

“There’s always a ‘but,’” said Elsie shaking her head. “Well, you can kiss my ‘but.’”

“Elsie,” Evette tried.

“I don’t think I want to hear it,” interrupted Elsie. “You should serve our passengers their dessert. I’ll be down in the engine room with the rest of the machines.” If there had been any way to slam the galley door when she left, Elsie would have done so. Instead, the galley door merely slid smoothly shut with a soft click.

Evette started to go after her, but then stopped. A big scene in front of their passengers would be about the least helpful thing that could occur at this point. Instead, she loaded the rest of the dishes into the ultrasonic dishwasher and then took coffee and dessert out to her guests.

By the time Evette returned to the dining room, Brothers Santos and Karl had excused themselves. Brother Zanzibar and Brother Thoo-Loo were talking quietly.

“You look upset,” observed Brother Zanzibar as Evette served them.

She started to deny it, but then decided it was better not to risk offending the Seekers of Truth by lying. “I am upset,” she sighed. “But I don’t believe it’s anything you can help me with.”

Brother Zanzibar reached into his robe and pulled out a small, plastic-bound book. “Perhaps *The Book of Truth* contains the answers that will ease your troubles,” he suggested gently. “I’ve found the solutions to a great many of my woes within these blessed pages.”

Evette stared at the proffered book as if it was something covered with furry blue mold. “I am sorry,” she told the Seeker of Truth. “Perhaps some other time.”

“Very well,” said Brother Zanzibar standing and bowing. He added some cream and sugar to his coffee and picked up his cup. “I will retire to my cabin, and in this evening’s meditations, I will pray that the Light of Truth finds you and guides you to piece of mind.”

“*Merci*,” said Evette.

“May Truth guide you,” said Brother Zanzibar leaving carefully so as not to spill his coffee.

“Perhaps you can help me,” requested Brother Thoo-Loo.

“What do you need?” asked Evette.

“I’ve set up my habitat module as best I could,” explained the giant alien. “Unfortunately, it was designed by someone with opposable thumbs and, as you can see, I have a decided deficit in that category.” He held his tentacles up to make his point. “If you could help me with some minor adjustments, I could retire for the night.”

Evette followed Brother Thoo-Loo as he plodded down the corridor to the rec room. His tentacles waved to and fro, gently touching the walls, floor and ceiling as if he was feeling his way along.

The metal doors of Brother Thoo-Loo’s habitat module stood open and inside was a softly lit padded chamber. A large panel had been slid open in the back revealing a control board and a mass of pipes, tanks, and wires behind it. “I always have a bit of difficulty with these dials,” explained Brother Thoo-Loo showing Evette the controls. “One of these days, I’ll have to take it in and have a more species-appropriate set of controls installed. In the meantime, I thank you for your assistance.”

“No problem,” said Evette stepping inside. There was plenty of room for her, and maybe one or two other people besides, but it seemed a tight squeeze for Brother Thoo-Loo.

“I don’t need to move around much during my rest periods,” explained Brother Thoo-Loo. “I find the dimensions comfortably cozy. Now then, could you please increase the temperature by twenty degrees and quadruple the humidity?”

The controls had not been designed for human hands any more than they had been designed for Brother Thoo-Loo's tentacles. The knobs were large, hard to turn, and had short spiky things sticking out of the sides.

"Wonderful," gushed Brother Thoo-Loo once Evette had made the adjustment. "Now, could you turn the gravity to 2.75? I've been feeling like I'm in danger of floating away all day."

"We keep the gravity on the *Farrago* at 1.15," Evette told him wrenching the awkward knob to the desired setting. Already feeling hot and sticky from the temperature and humidity change, Evette held off on activating the new gravity setting immediately. This turned out to be just as well, as Brother Thoo-Loo still had a long list of other adjustments: He wanted the lighting a little redder with a little more ultraviolet radiation, a little more methane (which Evette also held off on activating), a little less oxygen, and so on. Brother Thoo-Loo's habitat module did have one feature Evette found herself coveting, however. It was equipped with sprayers and nozzles that could turn the interior from anything from a sauna to a jacuzzi. It had been ages since Evette had last had a genuine water shower. The sonic showers that were all the rage these days were more efficient and more effective than water, but there was something lacking.

Meanwhile, Elsie was in the small workshop adjacent to the *Farrago's* engine room reviewing maintenance logs that really didn't need reviewing. At the same time, she was reading the scripts from a mid-Twenty-Second Century sitcom in her database, occasionally chuckling at the funny bits. To top it all off, she was sitting nude at a workbench tuning up one of the *Farrago's* little utility bots. The versatile little machine had been wearing out some of its joints and needed a thorough lubing and had checked itself into the workshop for maintenance.

Elsie generally preferred being nude. She idly wondered whether this preference was something that had been hard programmed or if it was another one of those personality markers that had developed by itself after she'd been activated. Finding an answer would have required a complete self-diagnostic and review of her personal history logs. She didn't have the time or inclination to shut herself down for the long days it would take to do that.

The problem with nudity was that most humans – Evette included – equated it with sex. Not that Elsie had a problem with that; after all, it was one of her primary functions. But Evette swore that she just couldn't concentrate with Elsie running around the ship naked. Other humans (and certain non-humans) also suffered from the same or often much greater levels of distractibility, so Elsie yielded to the prevailing societal norms and kept herself clothed unless it was appropriate to do otherwise.

In this case, she was making an exception because it would have annoyed Evette, had she known. Unfortunately, Evette had not made the effort to come find her and be annoyed. Instead, Brother Karl had come to call.

"This area of the ship is normally off-limits to passengers," Elsie advised him without looking up.

Brother Karl did that little bowing thing with his fingertips touched together. "I apologize, but the Path of Truth has led me here to you."

Somewhere within Elsie's plasteel skull, several series of specific-function nanochips activated. *Warning*, they indicated, *pick-up line approaching*.

"I enjoyed our conversation at dinner," said Brother Karl.

Elsie cross-referenced the statement against her master list of standard openings and found it quickly. Nothing special. She finished with the utility bot and sent it on its way. The little machine half-scuttled, half-rolled off to resume its job list.

Brother Karl helped himself to an eyeful as Elsie got up to put her toolkit back in its cabinet. Elsie giggled a bit at a particularly goofy running gag in the sitcom script she was mentally reviewing.

Mistakenly believing Elsie was laughing at him, Brother Karl momentarily forgot what he was going to say, bowed again, fiddled with his robe, and then self-consciously stopped fiddling with his robe. He persevered. “*The Book of Truth* teaches that we must be honest first with ourselves,” he said, “and to do so, I must be honest with you and state my passionate desire to make love to you.”

Pick-up line has arrived. Elsie cross-referenced it first against her master list of unusually direct pick-up lines, then against the file on use and misuse of religious scripture to obtain sex.

“Actually,” replied Elsie, “*The Book of Truth* counsels discretion in volunteering such truths. But I’m flattered. I’m also curious.”

“About what?” asked Brother Karl stepping into the workshop.

“Has that line ever worked for you?”

He looked chagrined and took a step back toward the doorway. He had to answer honestly: “No.”

“Yet you keep using it? Now if that’s not religious faith, nothing is.” She filed it under religion, faith, and obsessive compulsions.

“Uh, thank you?”

“Now then, in regard to your ‘passionate desire,’” continued Elsie. “I’m currently involved in a monogamous relationship with my co-captain, so any lovemaking that involves me would have to be cleared through her first.”

“Oh,” said Brother Karl thoroughly outmaneuvered. “Well. I should let you get back to your work then.”

They used that silly gag about the cat and the cyborg frog *again* and Elsie chuckled. That bit got funnier every time!

“I’ll show myself back upstairs,” volunteered Brother Karl.

By the time the *Farrago* achieved orbit around Van Ham 2, Evette was just about at her wits’ end. Elsie showed up to do her duties, such as calculating the jump through hyperspace, but otherwise kept to herself in the workshop or engine room. To make matters worse, Brother Karl, realizing Elsie was out of his league, decided that he would seek consolation in Evette’s tender arms. And he didn’t seem to be able to take “get lost” for an answer. Though he made his desires clear, Brother Karl was always polite, always helpful, always charming, and always present. Yet somehow he had a knack for stopping just short of the point at which Evette would have felt justified in stunning him and pushing him out an airlock.

The rest of the passengers had their own quirks, but at least were fairly predictable. Brother Santos could be counted on to disapprove of everything. Brother Zanzibar stayed in his cabin except for meals. Brother Thoo-Loo was as affable as ever, but whenever he emerged from his habitat module, he stank so bad it made Evette’s eyes run. She

surreptitiously checked the controls on the module to make sure nothing was amiss, but everything checked out normal. None of the other Seekers of Truth seemed to notice or care.

It all made for a long week and Evette felt lonelier than she had in years.

Elsie had set the *Farrago* in a geosynchronous orbit over a ruined city on the shore of a dried-up ocean. Van Ham 2 supported meager plant and animal life, but that life was no more than a generation or two from extinction. The air was thin and let through ultraviolet and traces of other less savory forms of solar radiation. And it was hot. Really hot.

Elsie and the Seekers of Truth had all gathered in the pocket-warp bay in full gear for their expedition. Evette would have preferred to stay aboard the *Farrago*, but after 190-plus hours with the Seekers, Evette felt vaguely uncomfortable with the idea of her best friend alone on a strange planet with them. For Elsie's part, of course, there was no question that she was going to join the expedition and explore the deserted city. It would be a novel experience; therefore, Elsie would be a part of it.

The city had once been home to some fifteen thousand souls and was built around a giant trapezoidal temple. Brother Karl was of the opinion that the most valuable artifacts would be inside the temple, probably underground. That would be the best place to begin their explorations in the several remaining hours before sunset and the beginning of the cold thirty-hour night.

Brothers Santos and Karl had left their robes in their cabins and were dressed in heavy pants and shirts. They wore large backpacks and fully equipped utility belts. They also had lightweight plasteel helmets that provided eye protection, breathers, and water, as needed. Brother Zanzibar wore his robe, but it was a different and heavier material than the one he'd been wearing on the ship. He also had a helmet, a lighter backpack, and utility belt.

Brother Thoo-Loo's outfit included exploration gear appropriate to his size and strength. Plastic tubing ran along each of his limbs, including two that inserted at the corners of his wide mouth. An umbrella-like device over his head sprayed a fine mist down on him.

For their parts, Elsie and Evette had equipped themselves with standard planetary exploration/survival kits from the *Farrago's* supply room. Elsie had armed herself with a two-meter staff.

"I'm setting the pocket warp to open in a shady portion of the courtyard outside the temple," Elsie told Evette and the Seekers of Truth. "Everybody ready?"

Receiving affirmatives all around, Elsie activated the pocket-warp field using the hand control. "Warning! Coordinates set to deep space! Hard vacuum hazard! Warning!"

Evette and the Seekers of Truth covered their ears as Elsie overrode the warning and opened the portal to the planet surface.

"It lies," accused Brother Santos, scandalized.

"It is broken," corrected Evette tiredly as the *Farrago's* atmosphere met that of Van Ham-2. An orangish dust devil swirled into the chamber and dispersed.

"Would you care to do the honors, Brother Santos?" offered Evette.

The elder Seeker of Truth nodded and stepped through the portal. Brother Thoo-Loo followed him, followed by Brothers Karl and Zanzibar. Evette glanced at Elsie who

returned her gaze for a moment and then returned her attention to the remote control in her hand.

“This is the Van Ham 2 Temple of Truth,” Brother Karl was saying as Evette and Elsie stepped through the portal and closed it behind them. Brother Zanzibar was recording him with a helmet-mounted video camera.

Brother Karl gestured toward a tall sun-scorched statue out in the courtyard. “The statue of Revered Seeker of Truth Findlller suggests that this is one of the six colonies he helped to found. We’re hopeful that we may find, among other things here, clues to the great Seeker’s final fate,” narrated Brother Karl.

The interior of the Temple of Truth was a vast affair done up in black and white marble. A massive crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling and four more lay in shards on the stone floor.

“Glorious,” breathed Brother Zanzibar.

“More like a tomb,” whispered Evette.

“That would explain the bodies,” suggested Elsie.

Rows of stone pews surrounded the center of the chamber where a circular skylight had been cut at the pinnacle of the temple so that the Light of Truth could shine down upon the congregation. Dozens of mummified corpses, their mouths agape, occupied the pews.

Brother Thoo-Loo approached the closest one and gently touched it with a tentacle. The remains crumbled to dust with a soft “whoof.”

Brother Karl gestured to everyone else to stay away from the bodies and pulled a scanning device from his utility belt. Brothers Zanzibar and Santos quietly intoned the Prayer of Truth for the Dead.

“I count the remains of 47 humans, twelve Winslans, and a Chadriil,” said Brother Karl turning a slow circle holding the small gray scanner in his hand. Then he methodically scanned each body. “They’ve been here over fifty standard years. When we get back to the ship, I can order a DNA match so we can find out who they were.”

“Cause of death?” asked Brother Thoo-Loo.

Brother Karl shook his head. “It’s hard to tell. No signs of physical trauma. No apparent traces of chemical poisons or other telltales. Animals have been at some of them too. I can run a more complete analysis on these data later.”

“What kind of animals?” Brother Thoo-Loo and Elsie both wanted to know.

“Small-to-medium, judging by the teeth marks,” said Brother Karl. “Probably harmless. Local equivalent of rodents and insects, I’d guess.”

“Uh-huh,” said Evette doubtfully. She was several paces closer to the center of the chamber. “And these?” In the dust before her were several sets of heavy paw prints the size of her hand with its fingers spread. Whatever had left the tracks had six toes and very long claws.

Brother Karl examined the tracks. They seemed to meander throughout the great chamber. “Obviously something much bigger,” allowed Brother Karl, “and more recent. Doesn’t look like they were around when the bodies were still fresh.”

“I don’t have any exact matches to these paw prints in my database,” said Elsie. “But then I don’t have much on this planet to begin with.”

There was the soft growl of stone sliding against stone. "Truth be praised!" gasped Brother Zanzibar. The floor directly beneath the skylight had irised down into a spiral staircase.

"I whispered the names of the Prophets of Truth and the path was opened before me," explained Brother Zanzibar.

"In other words, you guessed the password," said Brother Thoo-Loo, his tendrils writhing in a laugh.

"Well, this looks promising," said Brother Karl.

Brother Thoo-Loo led the way down the stairs followed by Brothers Santos, Karl, and Zanzibar with Elsie and Evette bringing up the rear.

The stairs led to a long corridor which, in turn, ended in another great round room. Around the room's circumference, towering statues of the Prophets of Truth stared impassively at a point in the center of the room.

"Truth be praised," breathed Brother Santos nodding his head in reverence.

"The Holy Circle of Truth," added Brother Zanzibar.

"Do you guys hear that?" wondered Elsie.

"*The Book of Truth* says that the Truth will be granted to anyone whose heart is free of deceit who stands in the center of the Circle of Truth before the Prophets of Truth," said Brother Zanzibar softly.

"Hear what?" asked Evette.

"Perhaps my faith is not all that it should be," admitted Brother Karl, "but I've often wondered why Findller never bothered to explain exactly what he meant by the Truth being granted to someone."

"It's a very low-frequency modulated growl," said Elsie. "It seems to be coming from all around us." She indicated the other corridors leading into the room.

"I hear it too," said Brother Thoo-Loo, the tips of his facial tendrils twitching to hear the sound better.

"Well, there's only one way to find out for sure," said Brother Santos. With that, he strode into the center of the circle and stood before the Prophets of Truth.

Nothing happened.

"Could it be a message of some sort?" suggested Evette. "I can't hear it myself. It must be below the range of human hearing."

"Perhaps your heart is not sufficiently free of deceit," suggested Brother Karl bluntly.

"What?!" Brothers Santos and Zanzibar stared at him appalled.

Elsie ran the noise through several translation subroutines. "Huh. 'We are several large carnivores and we have surrounded you in order to kill and eat you,'" translated Elsie.

"What?" exclaimed Brother Thoo-Loo flipping his blasters from 'charging' mode to 'ready' mode.

"I-I am sorry," apologized Brother Karl. "I don't know why I said that aloud."

"As you should be," snapped Brother Zanzibar. "How dare you question the Honesty of our spiritual leader when you yourself are only interested in having sex with Elsie."

"That's not true," returned Brother Karl. "I happen to think Evette's pretty hot too."

“What?” said Evette.

“I think we’ve got trouble,” said Elsie.

“What?” asked Brother Santos.

The answer to his question came in the form of a roar and a dun-colored blur. The creature that bounded into the chamber from one of the corridors was roughly lion-sized and shaped, but gaunt-bordering-on-skeletal. A matted black mane ran the length of its spine from its knobby head to its bare tail. Its face was mostly a bad combination of tusks and fangs along with a single snorting nostril and a trio of dull yellow eyes. With a hiss, it leaped over Elsie and Evette, pounced on Brother Thoo-Loo, and sank its mismatched teeth into one of his thick tentacles.

Swearing (To Elsie, whose translation subroutine was still running, this came out as a statement about the predator’s parent having been hatched from eggs laid in polluted water), Brother Thoo-Loo blasted the creature full in the face before it could rake him with its sickle-like talons. The alien predator went up like a sack full of dry leaves and fell back thrashing and shrieking until it lay still and smoking.

Brother Thoo-Loo glared bug-eyed at the creature; a meter of one of his tentacles still clenched in its mouth. “I hate it when that happens,” muttered Brother Thoo-Loo using one of his good tentacles as a tourniquet. “Take me weeks to grow it back.”

“We may not have that long,” Elsie warned him. Many trios of yellowish eyes were visible down each of the darkened corridors leading into the chamber. Evette, Elsie, and Brother Thoo-Loo formed a defensive ring around the unarmed Brothers. They could all hear the creatures’ growling now.

“How high a charge?” asked Evette drawing her pistol and working its energy setting with her thumb.

“Seven minimum to drop one the size of the one we just saw,” advised Elsie. She was holding her staff ready and there came the soft hum of a power pack charging from somewhere within it.

Brother Thoo-Loo raised one of the two heavy blaster rifles he was holding and flexed his tentacle against the firing mechanism. A flash of blue-white light erupted from the weapon’s muzzle and, simultaneously, one of the creatures down the hall burst into flame with a scream. Four others rushed past it and charged Brother Thoo-Loo.

At the same time, three charged at Elsie and two came at Evette’s position. A stun bolt from the tip of Elsie’s staff dropped one of the beasts while Evette downed one of hers with her own weapon.

Brother Thoo-Loo had time to shoot one more of the creatures before using his three powerful legs to leap high in the air. He came down hard enough on the back of the next creature to snap its spine and then lashed out with two free tentacles to snare the last one.

Elsie braced her staff against the floor and caught one of the creatures square in the solar plexus with the tip as it leaped. She unloaded a stun charge directly into its chest as it involuntarily pole vaulted over her. “Clear behind me!” Elsie warned Brothers Santos, Karl, and Zanzibar. The Brothers scrambled out of the way as the creature landed, barely alive in the center of the Holy Circle of Truth. Even as the beast gasped its last and collapsed, the statues of the Prophets of Truth around them opened their mouths and sang out a single note.

In the air above the melee, a fist-sized fragment of rock appeared surrounded by a soft orange glow.

“The Stone of Truth!” exclaimed Brother Karl. “Also known as the Exposition Stone. Only the predator’s heart was sufficiently free of deceit for the Prophets of Truth to reveal it to us. After all, its only thought was its honest desire to kill and eat us.”

“Watch out!” warned Evette as the creature she hadn’t stunned scrambled past her. “One’s gotten past me!”

As it skidded across the stone floor on its clawed feet, it snapped its head and grabbed a mouthful of Brother Zanzibar’s robe. “Help! One of them got my robe as it skidded across the stone floor on its clawed feet!” cried Brother Zanzibar as he was pulled off his feet.

“I can’t help you; I’m busy grappling with a beast of my own,” shouted Brother Thoo-Loo wrestling with the creature he had ensnared in his tentacles.

“I’ve got him!” shouted Evette spinning and letting off a shot. A glancing stun bolt caught the beast’s hindquarters and it released Brother Zanzibar’s robe and turned toward Evette in irritation.

“Thank the Truth,” cried Brother Zanzibar as Brother Santos pulled him to safety. “You’ve distracted it!”

“It’s coming toward me!” exclaimed Evette as the beast crouched to pounce on her.

Elsie used her staff to vault over another creature and landed straddling the shoulders of the one menacing Evette. She grabbed its mane and held on for dear life as it bucked and rolled trying to shake her loose.

“Look out!” called Evette. “I’ve got a shot at it!”

Elsie released her grip and jumped clear.

“Has anyone else noticed how chatty everyone’s gotten all of a sudden?” asked Evette stunning the beast.

“Not really,” replied Brother Thoo-Loo who was busy throttling one creature with his tentacles and fending off a second one with the butt of one of his blaster rifles. “But I’ve been too busy throttling this creature with my tentacles and fending off this other one with the butt of one of my blaster rifles.”

“And Brother Zanzibar and I have been busy trying to scramble out of harm’s way,” added Brother Santos.

“And I am grateful for your aid,” Brother Zanzibar told Brother Santos. “Really, really grateful.”

“To tell the truth – which I am bound to do by oath, as everyone here knows,” said Brother Karl hiding behind one of the statues of the Prophets of Truth, “I’ve been hiding back here behind this statue of Zollas and watching Elsie bounce around in her skintight jumpsuit and becoming inappropriately aroused. Plus, Evette looks pretty good too.”

“Do you ever think about anything else?” complained Evette dodging out of the way as a new creature leaped over the one she had just stunned.

“Well, of course,” said Brother Karl. “I think about lots of other things. For example, right now, I’m wondering who’s going to survive this mess. I’m also wondering if we’re going back to the ship later or if we’ll have to eat the explorers’ rations we packed because they give me gas and I’m already having enough trouble impressing you and

Elsie without having to worry about letting off a loud smelly one after dinner. Also, I'm not sure whether or not I turned off the CD player in my cabin before we left. I was listening to some dance remixes of Bholphosian cyberopera."

"Actually," said Elsie grabbing her staff off the floor and swinging it at the predator menacing her lover, "I'm scanning incredible levels of neuro-anti-inhibitors on telepathic wavelengths originating from the Stone of Truth. It's causing us to say whatever's on our minds."

"Of course!" exclaimed Brother Santos. "Those in the presence of the Stone of Truth can't help but to tell the truth!"

"You mean, if I were to ask Evette what color underwear she's wearing, she'd have to tell me?" asked Brother Karl. "By the way, I'm wearing snakeskin pattern bikini briefs."

Evette spared Brother Karl a withering glance. "I'm wearing the lacy black bra and panties that Elsie said are her favorites," she was obliged to answer.

Elsie jammed the stun charge in the tip of her staff into the spine of the creature in front of her and it collapsed like a *zuthskid* with its strings cut. Evette looked up at her. "I'm sorry if I gave you the impression I was ashamed of you," she told Elsie. "Because I've never been more proud to know anyone. You have the ability to find joy and wonder in everything." She paused to shoot at a snarling beast that had arrived late. "Because of you, my heart – my life – is full of joy and wonder. I'd do anything to have you not be mad at me anymore."

Elsie blinked back some saline solution and smiled at Evette as she ducked under one of the creatures the Brother Thoo-Loo had managed to shake off. "I love you too," she said. "And I'm not mad. It's just that I can't believe you ever thought I was serious about the gerbils."

Evette's jaw dropped. "You mean you were only kidding?"

"Of course," replied Elsie stunning the last standing creature unconscious. "Come on, the cost of the cloning facilities and the nanotech alone would be astronomical, plus who knows how long it would take us to find a regulation trampoline in this part of the galaxy?" She paused. "Oh, and I'm not wearing any underwear at all."

"I'm not wearing any underwear either," volunteered Brother Santos venturing back into the open. "But that's because I have this rash on my genitals that the autodoc says is a result of an improperly sterilized laundrobot subroutine rather than due to my illicit encounter with..."

"Why can we not stop talking?" complained Brother Thoo-Loo. "I am feeling very nervous that I might betray my hidden agenda."

"It's the Stone of Truth," explained Brother Karl. "It's still compelling us to tell the truth, which I find fascinating. However, I'm much more interested in hearing more about Evette and Elsie's underwear or lack thereof."

"Have you any idea how utterly remote your chances of getting anywhere with either of us are?" snapped Evette.

"Prophets of Truth preserve us!" breathed Brother Zanzibar. "Don't you see? This is what happened to the colony! Under the influence of the Stone of Truth, they kept on telling the truth, not stopping to eat or drink or sleep."

"You mean they talked themselves to death?" said Evette. "How horrible-yet-ironic."

“You know what else is interesting?” mused Elsie as she watched Brother Thoo-Loo slowly move toward the Stone of Truth. “We’re all telling the truth but none of us is really listening to each other.”

“Well, I for one am still hoping to turn the conversation back to Elsie and Evette’s underwear,” said Brother Karl. “Although the philosophical implications are intriguing: What is the value of Truth if none hear it?”

“Perhaps our more immediate concern should be freeing ourselves of the effects of this artifact,” suggested Evette.

“I think that we will be able to shut up once we return to the *Farrago*,” said Elsie. “However, we have a more immediate problem.” She whirled to point her staff at Brother Thoo-Loo. At the same time, Brother Thoo-Loo reached up and snared the Stone of Truth with one tentacle, pointed his blaster at Elsie with another, and grabbed Brother Karl by the throat with a third.

“Gack!” complained Brother Karl. “You’re choking me!”

“Put your weapons on the ground or I will kill Brother Karl,” Brother Thoo-Loo warned Elsie and Evette.

“You had better do as he says,” Evette told Elsie. “Even with your enhanced reflexes, you won’t be able to drop him before he snaps Brother Karl’s neck. While Brother Karl has been a nuisance this entire trip, I’d still regret his unnecessary demise if it were in my power to prevent it.”

“I appreciate that,” wheezed Brother Karl. “And I’d like to add that I find compassion an attractive if underrated characteristic in my potential sex partners.”

“Elsie and I are not your sex partners, potential or otherwise,” complained Evette loudly. “Will you get it through your...”

“Could we please focus on me and my nefarious scheme to sell the Exposition Stone as a device of galactic espionage?” complained Brother Thoo-Loo.

“You fiend!” accused Brother Santos. “You betray all we believe in!”

“Bah!” snorted Brother Thoo-Loo. “You all deceive. You all keep secrets.”

“I’m really a woman,” admitted Brother Zanzibar. “I’ve only been pretending to be a man to be closer to Brother Santos.”

Brother Thoo-Loo blinked. “Good example. Now then, I will trade Elsie Brother Karl for the portal remote control, then take the Exposition Stone and the *Farrago* and abandon you here to your collective fate.”

“That doesn’t sound like much of a deal,” complained Evette.

“I believe you will prefer it to the alternative, which involves my shooting you and taking the Exposition Stone and the *Farrago* anyway.”

“That’s true,” admitted Brother Karl. “Besides, being marooned here will only help improve my chances with Elsie and/or Evette. Plus, I’m kind of curious about Brother Zanzibar now.”

“I will leave you to work that out amongst yourselves as I have no interest in human reproductive rituals,” said Brother Thoo-Loo. “The remote, please.”

Elsie tossed the hand unit to Brother Thoo-Loo and Brother Thoo-Loo shoved Brother Karl at them. He leveled his rifles at the group. “Everyone step back into the corridor,” the alien instructed them. “If you attempt to follow me, I’ll kill you.”

“You’ll never get away with this!” warned Brother Santos.

Brother Thoo-Loo's facial tendrils wriggled in the equivalent of a shrug and he squeezed the 'Go' key on the hand unit.

"Warning! Coordinates set to deep space! Hard vacuum hazard! Warning!"

Brother Thoo-Loo had time for a startled gasp as he and the Exposition Stone were blasted through the portal to a point in orbit some 500 meters off the *Farrago's* port bow.

"The device spoke the Truth this time," guessed Brother Santos once the portal had winked shut.

"I changed the coordinates as I handed him the unit," explained Elsie.

"But we're still stuck here," said Brother Karl eyeing Elsie, Brother Zanzibar, and Evette.

"The *Farrago* will automatically open a portal for us in six hours," said Evette.

"Oh," said Brother Karl, crestfallen.

"But what of the Exposition Stone?" asked Brother Zanzibar sparing a nervous glance at Brother Santos.

"You're welcome to hire another ship to come retrieve it from orbit," said Evette. "Personally, I prefer it where it is."

"After all," added Elsie, "in space, no one can hear you exposit."

The trip back to Sphinx-6 was uneventful due to Evette's insistence that the Exposition Stone not accompany them back. It was Elsie's argument that the Stone could be considered a mind-altering substance and that they were not licensed for such cargo that finally swayed Brother Santos. Besides, Evette added, the Stone was in a stable orbit (along with Brother Thoo-Loo) and it wasn't going to go anywhere until the Church of Truth could mount a second expedition to retrieve it.

Evette was never quite sure whether Brother Santos had come to terms with 'Brother' Zanzibar's deception and the reason for it. In any event, Brother Santos and Zanzibar spend most of the trip home locked in Brother Santos' cabin. Whether they were bonding romantically or praying for forgiveness for their various deceptions was none of Evette's business. Evette suspected it was the latter though, especially considering the rash on Brother Santos' genitals.

Brother Karl kept to his own cabin and took a lot of cold sonic showers.

Now that the truth was out between them, Evette and Elsie made good use of their own sonic shower. In ordinary use, the sonic showerheads used ultra-high frequency sound to vibrate dirt particles from the skin. It was a highly effective method of cleaning oneself. However, there were also other vibratory settings that were a lot more fun. Granted, it still wasn't the same as a nice steamy H₂O shower, but it wasn't bad.

"I have a surprise for you," Elsie told Evette once they had dropped off the Seekers of Truth at Sphinx-6 and had broken orbit.

Evette arched an eyebrow at her partner. Elsie's surprises spanned the entire range from pleasant to apocalyptic. Still, after all they'd been through, Evette was not about to pre-judge one of Elsie's ideas if she could help it.

“Follow me,” Elsie said taking her by the hand.

She led her downstairs to the cargo bay where Brother Thoo-Loo’s habitat module sat in the corner.

“I thought we offloaded that with the Seekers,” said Evette.

“They didn’t really have any use for it,” said Elsie, “And I quoted them a high price for moving it for them. So they let us keep it.” Elsie opened the door and a cloud of steam wafted out. “I chucked the methane and ammonia canisters, made a few other tweaks, and *voila!* You like?”

“I love it!” cried Evette.

Elsie had already kicked off her boots and was stepping out of her uniform. She gave her partner an inviting look as she stepped into the module.

Evette tore off her clothes like they were on fire and leaped in after Elsie. There was a splash and a giggle as the module door slammed shut behind her.

“You know what would be cool?” suggested Elsie some time later.

“What?” panted Evette soaking in the warm water.

“We could fill this thing with green Jell-o.”

Evette started to say something and then decided against it. “Yes, that would be fun to try sometime,” she decided.