

Adventures
in

warp dating



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ADVENTURES IN WARP DATING

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The process was simple -- applicants merely entered the windowless interaction chamber, eased into one of the egg-shaped chairs on either side of the matchmaking table (not the one connected to the teleportation turbine, obviously), and waited for their first in a series of matches to materialize and for the romantic sparks to fly. Three minutes was the allotted time given to converse with one's match before they were beamed into the next chamber, whereupon a new one would beam in and the cycle would begin anew. At the end of the evening, the feedback logged by each applicant would be compiled by Luv-O-Tron 6000, contact information between positive matches would be relayed, and matrimonial liaisons would be dispatched.

That was Warp Dating, the universe's hottest romantic extravaganza since *Mating Ritual Swap* -- the only network program where a pair of Ikritian Turdrons might try their slimy festoons at the missionary position while a human couple would simultaneously attempt the reverse plorrngleflorkian inner-goosh quadruple bench-florlp.

If one didn't meet their true love by evening's climax, the Warp Dating advertisements boasted, double the amount of the admission fee would be refunded, because you were clearly grotesque, deranged, and beyond the aid of even the most sophisticated matchmaking A.I.

Anna was beginning to feel like she'd be getting triple.

"What did you say your name was again?" she asked, her stylus wedged in her mouth like a gangster's stogie.

"I am K'lik'tor'ch'k of the Swarm world," replied the seven-foot-tall praying mantis-like alien from the opposite chair. Every flinch

of its insectoid body was accentuated by eerie creaking noises like that of the Bates house swaying in a strong wind, and its speech was interspersed with a series of clicks, clacks, and ticks that sounded like a mad chiropractor's visit to an osteoporosis ward. "One of seven million breeding drones tasked by our almighty queen to disperse through the cosmos and seek out a fertile mate to bear our egg sack."

Anna gave the sort of reflexive smile that masks sheer terror. "Huh. *Well*, I'm not sure I'm ready for that, um, level of commitment..."

K'lik'tor'ch'k swiveled his bulbous eyes incredulously. "A curious statement for one in attendance at a dating venue. Are you not here in the pursuit of a mate? Of, what do you bipeds call it?" He furrowed his exoskeletal brow, somehow. "...*True love?*"

"Sure," Anna said hesitantly. "I mean, eventually..."

"And what is the pursuit of companionship but a single step toward furthering our own species' evolutionary longevity?" The mantis rubbed his antennae together contemplatively. "How does the old jingle go? 'First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes a million fertilized larval spores nestled in your undercarriage?'"

Anna's eyes flashed and she instinctively crossed her legs. "Is that before or after dinner?"

"A most humorous response!" K'lik'tor'ch'k's thorax thrummed. "My hive values humour in its breeders. That and firm eggsack bearing hips."

"Oh, god." Anna rubbed her forehead. "Look, Klickety-klick-klack--"

"*K'lik'tor'ch'k*," the mantis corrected with a flourish of its dominant appendage. "*Of the Swarmworld.*"

"Whatever!" Anna forced herself to smile pleasantly. "All I'm really looking for at the moment is somebody nice to get to know, you know? I'm not on a mission to further the human race or anything. Frankly, the universe is crowded enough and it's pretty easy to feel lost in it..." She sighed wistfully and brushed a rogue

strand of hair off her brow. "Life is lonely, even here on Hyperion, but before I start thinking about marriage or kids or, um, *egg sacks*, I'd like to start with a nice date and see how we work as friends."

"I apologize if I have come on too strong," K'lik'tor'ch'k said with a conciliatory bow. "Permit me to start over. Would you care to share a casual meal and exchange mutual interests? I have several remnants of my previous date left that will no doubt prove nourishing to your guttural tube."

"Um..." Anna dug her teeth into her stylus. Her eyes narrowed. She opened her mouth to say something. Then she closed it. Then she opened it again. "I'll call you."

The digital timer suspended over the table reached zero with a chipper *ding* and the mantis phased away in a cloud of subatomic particles. Anna blew hard through her cheeks, tapped her stylus on the tablet mounted to her armrest, and made a giant red X over K'lik'tor'ch'k's headshot, which had been captured mid-blink.

"Well," she said. "He was still better than that vegan..."

Anna dimmed her tablet's screen and swiveled it for a quick reflection check. She tucked that wayward hair strand back into her scrunchy and practiced smiling a few times, which was coming about as naturally to her tonight as tap dancing comes to a hippo -- ever since the Tap Dancing Hippo became extinct. She was nearly thirty, trim, fair, and in possession of the sort of frizzy hair that suggested her birth had been blessed by some extra-terrestrial deity who represented electrical currents. This mess of hair was currently pulled back into a ponytail away from piercing copper eyes, which were accentuated by prim eyebrows that made her look like she was glaring even when she wasn't.

Warp Dating wasn't something she would normally step out of her comfort zone for, especially since the admission fee had drained several months of her salary. However, in the two years she'd been on Hyperion she hadn't even made a friend, much less met somebody truly special. She wasn't desperate by any stretch of the imagination, only tired of flying solo at office luncheons and dodging increasingly persistent offers from her mother to custom-

order her a man from the Build-a-Boyfriend Cloning Factory.

Before her next match could beam in, she tapped a bright yellow button on her armrest and scooted forward.

"Um, Luv-O-Tron?" she called at the ceiling. "Can we pause for a sec?"

"Sure thing, kiddo!" sang out the perky, metallic voice of Luv-O-Tron 6000 from overhead. "Are you enjoying your matches?"

"Um..." Anna scanned the long line of X'd-out headshots on her tablet -- three of which were giant insectoids -- and bit her lower lip. "I don't think this is working for me..."

"Aw, don't give up just yet, slugger!" Luv-O-Tron said cheerily. "We wouldn't offer a double-refund if our Warp Dating brand wasn't a guarantee!"

Anna glanced at the Warp Dating access stamp that had been laser-branded onto the back of her hand. She winced and rubbed it, strongly suspecting that it wasn't going to fade anytime soon. "Here's the thing, I have a hard enough time finding commonalities with other *humans*, not to mention aliens and, um, bugs. Meeting new people just isn't my strong suit, I guess. Are there any, I don't know, pointers you could give me, or anything?"

"Why, I've never been asked to give advice before!" Luv-O-Tron's voice swelled with elation. "Looks like we both get to try new things tonight, don't we? Let's see..." The A.I. hummed contemplatively for a moment. "Ah! How's this? 'Love comes from unexpected places.' Not bad, hey?"

Anna frowned. "But, people come here *expecting* to find love. It's the whole point of paying the admission fee." She tapped her stylus on her access stamp pointedly. "That advice completely nullifies your money-back guarantee and implies that I'll leave here single..."

Silence filled the interaction chamber.

Anna scanned the ceiling expectantly. "Hello?"

"Still here," came the deflated reply. "Boy, trying new things is plonking *awful!* See if I ever do *that* again. Tell you what, sport, just try smiling harder. Can you handle that?"

"Thanks." Anna huffed and waved her hand dismissively. "Send the next one in, please."

"You got it!" Luv-O-Tron chirped. "May the forces of love be with you!"

With that, the teleporation turbine revved to life and the opposite chair began to glow. Anna sat up a little straighter and forced a smile as her next match materialized. It was the shortest smile of her life.

"Hey doll-face!" her match practically howled. "Banana Sam, playboy extraordinaire. What's yours?"

"Anna..." Anna's lip curled as she looked over her diminutive but dapper match. Tufts of coarse hair protruded from the cuffs of his red velvet suit, gold rings adorned most of his fingers and toes, a long cigarette holder was inserted between his polished teeth, and a pulsating glass dome capped his head like a cyberpunk yarmulke.

"Are... are you a chimp?" she asked.

"Better," Banana Sam replied with a wide grin. "I'm a chimp with a cybernetic brain!" He tapped his domed scalp, which flashed and fizzled like a plasma globe. "It was a scientific experiment, see. The goal was to give a chimpanzee a brain that could be programmed to be anything in the universe."

Anna's jaw bounced up and down a couple times. "So, what are you programmed to be?"

"A *talkin'* chimp." Banana Sam took a long draw on his cigarette and blew a smoke ring in a perfect heart shape. "But enough about me and my forty-two million omnibuck noggin'. What's your story, honey bunches?"

"I--" Anna glanced up at the timer, which seemed to have randomly synchronized to a dimension where time had no meaning. "Well, I moved to Hyperion two years ago--"

"Yeah?" Banana Sam said with the sort of disinterest that implied he was disappointed she wasn't naked yet. "Where from?"

"Um..." Anna hesitated. "New Skuzzmore--"

Banana Sam chortled. "Is that a *planet*?"

"Yes." Anna quickly brushed away the hair strand again, which

was proving itself to be an escape artist. "Well, kind of. Its status as a planet is currently under review. I think it's actually getting downgraded to 'astro turd.'"

Banana Sam picked his nose. "You tell people that?"

"Not usually." Anna glanced at the timer again, which was definitely caught in a temporal singularity -- or just out of batteries. "Anyway, now I'm an editor at a publishing house." For the first time all evening she smiled for real. "Actually, I'm working on a fantastic book series called 'Star Crossers'..." She eyed her match in an effort to gauge his interest. "Do you want to see a copy?"

Banana Sam extinguished his cigarette on his armrest. "Clock's tickin', baby doll."

Anna reached into her handbag and withdrew a traditional paperback novel, which was dog-eared, creased, and clearly loved. She looked fondly over the cover before handing it to Banana Sam, who examined it with an arched eyebrow. Underneath the 'Star Crossers' banner, a valiant pair of Lunar Knights -- a man and a woman -- stood poised for battle. Their pure white suits of armour shimmered as brilliantly as diamonds and their glowing laser broadswords were raised high, trisecting a dazzling sunrise. Despite the horde of vampiric demons surrounding them, their smoldering eyes were locked only on each other.

"This is the first volume I worked on," Anna said with a surge of enthusiasm. "I mean, they're pretty cheesy, but there's something so sweet and charming about them just the same. The earlier ones always centered on a male knight rescuing a princess, which was pretty lame, but the one's I've edited focus on an unlikely pair going on adventures across the stars and slowly falling in love--"

The sound of the novel slapping on the table's surface made Anna start, and Banana Sam's rapturous laughter made her stop again.

"What's... what's so funny?" Anna asked, taken aback.

"This!" Banana Sam guffawed, practically falling out of his chair. "Toots, romance books are manufactured *garbage*, and that's coming from somebody who's brain used to power a trash

compactor! These things are dumber than, than *science fiction!*"

"I, I *like* them!" Anna said, flushing. "There's nothing wrong with traditional romance--"

Banana Sam gave the back cover a fleeting look and guffawed even harder. "*In space, love burns brightest?! Who came up with that ball of sap?!*"

Anna twisted her stylus between her teeth so hard it made shavings. "*I did.*"

The chimp doubled-over and spun around like a breakdancer on a merry-go-round inside a Super Collider. The lights under his dome flashed and sparked like cutlery in a microwave. "And here I thought everyone just came to this thing for some quick poon, but here's you looking for 'true love!'" Banana Sam made exaggerated quotation gestures with his toes. "Lemme guess, you think you're going to find a 'nice guy' and sail across the cosmos and live happily ever after together, is that it?"

Anna's prim eyebrows twisted into a real glare. "I'm going to hit you."

"Hey! Maybe *I'm* your true love?" Banana Sam leaned across the table and puckered his lips. "Right here, doll fa--!"

Banana Sam's jaw never truly healed, nor did he ever recover the three teeth he left behind when the timer finally *dinged*.

Anna massaged her throbbing knuckles and made a giant X over Banana Sam's headshot, which was making a duck face. Then she scribbled over his entire head and stabbed it several times for good measure. When she was finished she jammed her deformed stylus into the yellow button. "Luv-O-Tron, I need a time out."

"Hey there, champ!" If the A.I. had been monitoring that match, his jaunty voice betrayed no knowledge of it. "Are you in love yet?"

"That... was the worst experience of my life," Anna said, rubbing her temples. "And I once got hit in the head by an asteroid."

Luv-O-Tron mulled that over for a second and then said "May I ask how you're still alive?"

"It was a *small* asteroid," Anna mumbled, holding her forefinger and thumb a marble's width apart. "It still made a hairline fracture

and put me in a coma for a month. Made me miss my senior dance, actually." She retrieved her book from the table and ran her hand over it affectionately. "So, when I leave here single, do I get that double-refund immediately or do I have to file for it?"

"Oh, don't be such a Negative Neelix!" Luv-O-Tron said, as upbeat as ever. "In the billion matches I've moderated, I've never, ever *once* processed a double-refund."

"Really?" Anna felt her spirits raise slightly. "Never?"

"Never, ever, ever!" Luv-O-Tron paused and then added hastily "...Except that one time I did."

Anna blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it's sort of embarrassing for me, being a state-of-the-art romantic A.I. and all..." Luv-O-Tron sighed melodramatically. "But there was this *one* applicant I failed to find a match for. But that was a hopeless, pathetic, desperate case that defied all reason and logic."

"Like me?" Anna asked, half-smiling.

"Hey now, don't lose heart," Luv-O-Tron said warmly. "That was *one* applicant out of a *billion*. Those are pretty good odds."

"One-in-a-billion," Anna repeated. "Those are the exact same odds of getting hit in the head by a marble-sized asteroid."

"Huh." Luv-O-Tron made a contemplative sound that was not unlike a tongue slurping saliva across a top row of teeth. "Well, maybe God just doesn't like you."

Anna exhaled and forced another smile as the teleportation turbine revved up. When her match appeared, her smile morphed into the sort of open-mouthed look of astonishment reserved for truly unusual sights, such as anthropomorphic potatoes caught dancing in moonlit meadows.

The alien blinked solid white eyes and smiled placidly. "Greetings, female."

"Hi..." Anna said, waving awkwardly. She wasn't entirely sure what to make of the pale, hairless, muscular humanoid sitting across from her -- not because he wasn't halfway handsome or even friendly-looking, but because he was draped in a checkered bed

sheet and nothing else.

"I'm Anna," she ventured.

"I am nameless," replied the alien cordially.

Anna felt uneasy, like she was about to get inducted into a bizarre sex cult. "How can you not have a name?"

The alien looked perplexed, and then gave a tidy little smile. "Forgive me, sweet female, but you misunderstood. My name is, in fact, *Naameluss*. *N-A-A-M-E-L-U-S-S*."

"Oh!" Anna laughed with relief. "That's certainly an exotic name."

"Thank you," Naameluss said. "It was given to me by the high priest when I joined the Order of Cosmovah."

Anna's relief vanished in a theatrical poof. "Oh. What does it mean?"

Naameluss smiled again. "It means 'One Who Does Not Have a Name.' Every Witness in the Order of Cosmovah is known by it."

Anna raised her eyebrows. "That must be fun at roll call."

"A joke," Naameluss said evenly. "I would laugh, but I do not have a sense of humour. It too was placed on the altar of Cosmovah when I donned the cloak of a Witness."

Anna gave one of those half-squints that says you're mentally calculating the number of zips it takes to get out that can of mace in your handbag. "Along with your name?"

"Along with everything." Naameluss would have said this emphatically had he not also given up the ability to speak with exclamation points. "Cosmovah's Witnesses willingly relinquish our names, assets, clothing, emotions, and non-vital organs when we join the Order. It is an easy sacrifice considering what we receive in exchange."

Anna bit her stylus, more so from an overwhelming sense of tedium than irritation. "Bed sheets?"

"Love," Naameluss said. "I was like you once, sad female, searching for love in all the wrong places. Dating venues, holo-brothels, rehab centers..." He sighed in mock dolefulness. "Love, however, eluded me, until the day a priest introduced me to the

loving aura of Cosmovah. Do you know what I learned that fateful day?"

Anna threw her hands up. "That, uh, love comes from unexpected places?"

"Cosmovah be praised, for he has led me to you." Naameluss raised his arms triumphantly yet emotionlessly, spreading his bed sheet like theater curtains. Even from her seat Anna observed the full extent of what he had willingly placed on Cosmovah's altar. "You are the acolyte that was foretold."

Anna winced. "Huh?"

"I was told in a prophetic dream that I would find another Witness here who would bring a bountiful increase to our numbers," Naameless said. "Do you not see? It is *you* the dream spoke of. You need not search for love any longer, desperate female, for it is at last upon you."

Anna shuffled in her seat. She wasn't sure what was making her more uneasy -- that she'd just been accepted into a genderless cult without application or that Naameluss' voice would have lent itself well to an Apple speech app. "Look, nameless--"

"*Naameluss*," came the flat correction. "You must deemphasize *both* syllables."

"WHATEVER!" Anna gritted her teeth and tried to conjure her sense of humour. "Look, as *tempting* as all that is, I have a pending offer to carry an egg sack, so I think I'll pass on joining your, um, religious order for the time being." She twirled her hair strand and shrugged. "I'll hit you up when I'm forty."

Naameless nodded solemnly. "I too declined the priest's initial offer, but that was before I tasted the sweet nectar that is Cosmovah's Love." He swiftly withdrew a gleaming orb of sparkling liquid from somewhere inside his sheet. "Here, drink deep from the Vessel of Consummation..."

Naameluss leaned forward to offer the orb to Anna, who leaned so far back into her chair that she started to slide down to the floor. At that moment the timer *dinged* and Naameluss, caught off-guard, fazed away, uttering a single "Fu--" as the orb slipped from

his hands and shattered on the tabletop. The liquid bubbled, hissed, and trickled down to the floor and over to a vent with uncannily deliberate movements.

"How you doing, kiddo?" Luv-O-Tron asked before Anna could tap the button. "Hey, if I beam in a sponge and bucket, do you think you could clean that up? That Love Nectar is like bleach."

Anna stared forlornly at the stream of love juice as it escaped down the vent with a *slurp*. "Luv-O-Tron, I don't know if I'm normal and everyone else in the universe is weird, or if I'm secretly the weird one and everyone else is normal. Either way, I'm alone. I'm tired of waking up alone and going home alone and eating alone and nerding out over books *alone*." She looked down at her stylus, which looked like it had been through a meat grinder. "Is there something, I don't know, *wrong* with me?"

"Aw, don't give up yet, baby!" Luv-O-Tron said sympathetically. "I haven't processed a double refund yet!" He paused. "Except--"

Anna rolled her eyes. "--for that one time--"

--I did," Luv-O-Tron finished. "Exactly! Now chin up. We're all through your closest matches, so now we need to see if you have any chemistry with the rest."

Anna's countenance plummeted. "You're telling me that giant bugs, talking chimps, and space eunuchs are the best matches I can hope for tonight?!"

"Hey, I don't control who enrolls!" Luv-O-Tron said with sudden sharpness. "Wait. I have complete control over this entire operation, including applicants. How awkward..." The A.I. made a throat-clearing noise. "Don't worry, kid, I'll match you with someone even if it's the last thing I do!"

Anna slumped deeper into her seat as the teleportation turbine revved up. She barely acknowledged her subsequent array of matches, such as the giant floating eyeball who spent the entire three minutes staring silently into her soul, the slovenly sloth-creature who moaned about how selfish and stupid girls were, and the yellow gaseous entity who attempted to woo her through song before getting dissipated by the air conditioner. Match after match

blended together until she wished someone would just beam her back to her flat so she could have a shot of 'Jim, Beam Me Up!' bourbon and forget this miserable night ever happened.

By the time Luv-O-Tron informed her that she was on her final match of the evening -- a last-minute applicant who had signed up just moments ago -- her stylus had been sharpened into something that she wouldn't have been able to get on a star shuttle without raising a few alarms, not to mention the hands of every passenger on board. She didn't acknowledge the acceleration of the turbine, nor did she bother greeting her match when he finally materialized. Instead she started silently counting down the three minutes and planning how she might misspend her double-refund.

"Hello there," came the eventual salutation in a voice as smooth as honey.

Anna stopped counting and lifted her eyes. Then she straightened up and squared her shoulders. Finally, she smiled. "Hello yourself."

He was beautiful, to put it mildly -- tall and angular with the sort of high cheekbones, chiseled jawline, and full lips that were often associated with the male cover models of 'Celestial Bodies Quarterly.' His skin was a purple hue that seemed to sparkle from deep within. He had four arms, long and lithe, and his head was adorned by rows of cranial tentacles that were slicked back behind pointed ears. His suit was white and chic and wrought from fabric so fine it seemed to ripple over his body like liquid. In fact, it was reminiscent of the sheen armour of a Lunar Knight. However, all these features and embellishments paled in comparison to his eyes, which were as deep and mysterious as twin black holes with swirling nebulae nestled in their cores.

"I'm Anna," she added after a long, silent interval.

"Adonis," the alien cooed, pointing to himself with two of his hands.

"Nice to meet you." Anna leaned forward and rested her chin in her hand. "That's a very nice suit, Adonis."

Adonis pinched his glimmering lapels with detached curiosity, as

if he was just noticing them for the first time. "This old thing? Saw it in the window, had to have it." His deep eyes flicked around the room and he twirled a perfectly manicured finger. "Say, you mind enlightening me with how this works?"

"Hm?" Anna distractedly brushed her wayward hair strand away. "Oh, Luv-O-Tron beams you from room to room every three minutes, and if we both liked each other, he relays our contact information."

"*Luv-O-Tron*?" Adonis' look turned sour. "What the hell is this place?"

Anna's smile faltered slightly. "Um, the Warp Dating Facility?"

Adonis bit the side of his lip. "So, this isn't a shuttle bay?"

Anna frowned. "No..."

"And," Adonis continued. "You're *not* an off-world booking agent?"

Anna shook her head. "Also no..."

Adonis' cranial tentacles writhed irritably. "Dammit all. Where's the door, love?"

Anna shifted uncomfortably. "Um, there isn't one. I got beamed in too."

Adonis gave her a hard, predatory look. Anna felt a chill pass over her extremities. Suddenly she noticed the black leather briefcase that was tucked protectively under one of his arms. Somewhere in the back of her head, red flags sprang up.

"Sorry to interrupt," Luv-O-Tron's voice crackled from overhead. "But a nice security officer is asking to see you, sir. Shall I beam him in?"

Adonis' face suddenly morphed into something vicious and mean. He barred his teeth -- which Anna just noted were vampiric -- and extended razor-like claws from his fingertips.

Anna slammed her palm onto the armrest's button. "Luv-O-Tron! I'd like to leave, please--"

Adonis vaulted over the table with the sort of superhuman agility that would have resulted in an immediate demand for a drug test at the Olympics. The next few seconds passed in a frenzied blur

as Anna felt herself lift weightlessly from her chair and fly across the chamber. Before she hit the floor, two hands seized her, flipped her around, and pulled her away from the chairs, which were still spinning on their floor mounts. Adonis was behind her, holding her body tightly against his, which felt bent and sinewy. She shuddered as strong, icy fingers coiled around her throat and upper arms, the sensation of which felt like a cashmere sweater compared to the sulphuric breath that was hitting the back of her neck.

Red emergency lights bordering the floor and ceiling flickered on, the timing of which was about as useful as shouting "look out!" to your neighbor *after* he's been creamed by an out-of-control ice cream van.

"Honey, remain calm!" Luv-O-Tron implored. "Help is on the way!"

"Beam me out!" Anna shouted, her voice hoarse under Adonis' grip. "Luv-O-Tron, beam me the hell out!"

"I can't!" Luv-O-Tron said, panicked. "It's only been two minutes!"

"Beam *me* out!" Adonis snarled. His voice was now harsh and grating, like gravel in a blender. "Or I'll snap every bone in her body!"

"STOP YELLING!" Luv-O-Tron wailed.

The teleportation turbine surged and Adonis' chair was momentarily eclipsed by a bright light. A young security officer sprang forth from it and drew his firearm.

"Let her go!" the officer bellowed.

Anna felt Adonis' grip on her throat and arms tighten. "*Isbbe quoquin!*" he rasped, his voice reverberating in stereo like a sorcerer's incantation. "*Ulghur nuiglar, humman skizz!*"

Whatever Adonis was saying, Anna doubted it was an appropriate-for-all-ages offer to negotiate. The officer tried to line Adonis up, but he'd contorted his body to be completely shielded by her.

"Stay calm, miss," the officer said, looking into Anna's eyes intently. "Everything's going to be okay..."

Anna gave the sort of high-stress smile that suggested her confidence wasn't soaring -- in fact, it had failed to achieve liftoff and had spontaneously combusted on the runway.

She looked up at the timer, which was still counting down with forty-three seconds left to go. Her heart thumped wildly as she realized that, barring some miraculous intervention, she'd be dead before it reached zero. If she wanted to survive Warp Dating, the officer needed a window to shoot, and it was up to her to open the drapes.

She regulated her breathing as best she could and focused against Adonis' vulgar threats, Luv-O-Tron's pleadings, and the officer's commands until they melted away behind her ears. She looked around her with a sudden feeling of serenity, like she was underwater searching leisurely for shells and pearls. She had no maneuverability, save for her legs and forearms. If she kicked Adonis, he'd probably just slice her throat, so that left her hands. She looked down at them and realized that she was still holding her stylus, which had been sharpened into a shiv. She couldn't help but smile at the thought of her mother having long tried in vain to break her of this habit.

Anna looked into the officer's eyes, then down at her hand, then back. The officer's eyes widened and he gave her a resolute nod. She drew in her breath, twisting her hips, and swung the stylus down until it plunged into soft flesh.

Adonis' howl would have shattered Plexiglas. He reflexively released Anna, who ducked just as two shots were fired. The leather briefcase clattered to the floor and popped open, releasing thousands of omnibuck chips like a volcanic eruption. She hit the floor and gasped -- her ears were ringing and her throat and arms were burning, but she was alive.

She clambered to her feet and darted to the officer's side. Adonis was curled up in the fetal position, clutching two bloody holes in his chest and one gruesome stab wound in his crotch.

The timer *dinged* above them and the red emergency lights faded.

"Damn." The officer instinctively checked his own groin, all the while keeping his firearm trained on the limp alien. "I mean, good aim and all, but *damn*..."

"Well, I guess that's *another* applicant I won't be matching..." Luv-O-Tron said caustically.

"That's all right, Luv-O-Tron," Anna said, escorting her loose hair strand home. "I know a cult where he'll be right at home..."

Anna sipped her cup of coffee and pulled her blanket closer around her shoulders. The lights of Hyperion's sprawling capital shone luminously around her, emanating from skyscrapers that pierced into the smoggy night sky like castle spires. Starships and hover cars zoomed overhead while diverse crowds bustled around the security shuttle, the bumper of which had been her seat for the past two hours. All the responding security officers and medical constructs had been very friendly in collecting her statement, tending to the cuts on her throat and arms, and providing her with the obligatory blanket that comes standard with all emergency situations.

Adonis had been carted off in a prison shuttle like a whimpering dog and the briefcase of omnibuck chips had been cataloged and returned to the bank next door. Across the street, Anna noticed K'lik'tor'ch'k (of the Swarmworld) walking appendage-in-arm with Naameluss, who seemed oblivious to the hungry look he was being given. She shook her head and raised a mock toast to them. "May the forces of love be with you. Weirdos."

Her phone vibrated and she glanced at the screen. Luv-O-Tron 6000 had just processed her double-refund along with the message 'For what it's worth, I don't think you're hopeless, pathetic, or desperate. Love, O-Tron.'

She pocketed her phone and took another sip as the security officer from the interaction chamber came around the van.

"We're about wrapped up here, so you can head home if you like," he said kindly. "You all right, Anna?"

"I'll live," Anna said, touching her bandages gingerly. "Thanks to

you, I guess."

"Wouldn't have had the shot without you," the officer said. "We made a pretty good team in there, hey?"

Anna smiled and suddenly took note of his appearance. He was a young and boyish human, possibly a little younger than herself, with brown eyes, short stubble, and unruly chestnut hair. He had precisely the sort of handsome looks that would have gotten him killed within an hour on New Skuzzmore's ore rigs. "Sorry, I didn't get your...?"

"Caleb." He motioned to the bumper inquisitively and Anna scooted to make room. Once seated he gave the Warp Dating Facility a nod. "So, any prospects?"

"Oh, well, there was one who caught my eye," Anna said, swirling the last dregs of her coffee around. "But only because he *was* a giant eye..."

Caleb laughed. "Reminds me of one of my matches. Kept trying to kiss me. Granted, she was a giant floating mouth, but it was still uncalled for..."

When Anna frowned, Caleb held up his hand in reveal of his own nearly-faded Warp Dating access stamp.

"You've Warp Dated?" she asked, bracing herself for a disappointing blow.

Caleb nodded. "I won't say it was a *complete* waste of time. I mean, the double-refund paid for my new flat."

Anna's heart skipped. "So... you didn't get matched?"

Caleb shook his head. "You?"

Anna shook her head.

"How about that?" Caleb glanced at his wrist chronometer. "Hey, I'm officially off-duty. Do you want to grab a drink? Courtesy of my double-refund?"

Anna nodded and swept her hand across her forehead, which was unnecessary because her hair was exactly where it was supposed to be. As they both stood, she gave him an eager look and asked "Hey, do you, um, like books?"

Caleb smirked. "Oh, this is going to be a late night..."

As they sauntered down the bustling street together, it suddenly occurred to Anna that if Luv-O-Tron had beamed her out of the interaction chamber, she wouldn't be walking alongside Caleb at this very moment. She gave the Warp Dating Facility a curious shoulder glance, opened her mouth to say something, and then brushed the thought away.

"You know," Caleb said. "If we do end up dating, we'll probably have to give our double-refunds back."

Anna laughed. "I won't tell if you won't."

Neither of them ever did.