

# SPACE TOAST

James  
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\$3, 000, 000 Omnibucks

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Somewhere beyond the Triangulum Galaxy, in a remote stretch of space teeming with blazing comets, effervescent nebulae, and bales of giant fluorescent astro turtles, a towering cargo freighter tore through the vacuum at maximum velocity. GaliCor's glimmering corporate slogan "Space appliances for all your space needs!" was still partially visible on the hull under a smattering of solar scorch marks, asteroid dents, and obscene words graffitied in binary. The battered rig swerved sharply to avoid a wave of pursuing plasma fire and inadvertently creamed a turtle.

"Pilot's log, fifth of Quug..." Rusty Starhopper's voice crackled forth from the vessel's command console with energetic gusto, like the sonorous strains of a NASCAR announcer broadcasting crash highlights. "It is a *glorious* day at the turn of the fifth megennium, or as my ex-wife calls it 'The dawn of a new interest rate.' Yeah, I don't really get it either, but those are the sort of jokes that drive-through marriages on Sinner's Alley buy you-u-u-u-u-u-" The recording distorted momentarily as more plasma fire peppered the aft hull. "This is the final run for the ol' Starhopper before he cashes in on an early retirement to Sunkist VI. One final run hauling GaliCor's crap to some new distribution hub on a planet called Ikritia III, beyond Uncharted Space. Never made the Uncharted Run before, but so long as there's some good coffee stops along the way, the ol' Starhopper's happy--"

Another string of plasma blasts rattled the bridge, where Rusty Starhopper sat rigidly on the edge of his GaliCor-brand Supreme-Cush Star Command Chair 2.0™ (which supposedly contained 45% more command power than the 1.0). He was only thirty-four -- which by deep space piloting standards was encroaching on elderly

-- lean, unshaven, and drenched in sweat. Under normal circumstances he might be described as possessing the sort of natural handsomeness that could convince a cantankerous Turd Being to purchase the extended warranty on a stainless steel latrine seat; however, his retirement run had been anything but normal; in fact, less loquacious types might call it 'abnormal.'

He gripped the controls so tightly his knuckles blanched and cracked. When the proximity scanner beeped shrilly he veered hard again, cringing at the thought of GaliCor's precious merchandise shifting and jostling below him -- all forty-two billion omnibucks' worth of it. All the while his energetic, gusto-filled voice continued to boom up at him despite his best efforts to ignore it.

"The ol' Starhopper's become something of a legend for wrangling a full retirement package out of Supreme Head Office Command in exchange for a cake-walk through Uncharted Space," Rusty's voice continued, sounding very pleased with itself. "And if you want to know what magic words he used to pull *that* deal off, here they are--"

The bridge rocked again and Rusty's voice at last dissolved in a wave of static, only to come back around for about the eighteenth time in a row.

"Pilot's log, fifth of Quug. It is a *glorious* day--"

"Shut up! Damn thing!" Rusty punched the malfunctioning recording panel, which had been looping ever since the pirates had first hit him. "--megennium--" He hit it again harder. "--interest rate--" And harder. "Sinner's Alley--" He hit it so hard the screen splintered.

When his voice finally stopped he whooped triumphantly and punched a finger into the COMM. "Kit! Where the hell are my aft shields?!"

"On their way, sir!" Kit's tinny voice said in reply. Rusty faintly discerned a sharp clang before the COMM closed, a sound he knew to be Kit's hand banging against his domed head in an exuberant salute. At least one of them had retained their optimism through this whole mess.

It had been two months since he'd made that inaugural recording -- two full months since he and Kit had departed Leon's Moon with a three-week deadline to make delivery to Ikritia III, GaliCor's newly-acquired distribution planet beyond Uncharted Space.

Furthermore, it had been six weeks since he'd gotten lost navigating a wormhole field, five since an astral squid had clogged his communications array, four since a highly-territorial living asteroid had disabled his hyperdrive thrusters, three since a flock of succubats had drained his auxiliary power reserves, two since he'd had a cup of coffee, and six hours since the pirates had ambushed him. He was beginning to see why Uncharted Space had remained uncharted for so long -- because nobody who entered it survived long enough to map it.

More plasma sifted through the ship's waning shields. Rusty glanced at the scanner and bit his lip as a dozen blips swarmed to his right in attack formation. He swerved hard to the left and felt his vessel rattle violently.

"Come on, baby..." Rusty seethed as a panel popped off the wall behind him. A buxom Sirenian bobble-head mounted to the command console rocked back and forth like a punching bag in Rocky Balboa's gym. "Hold together..."

It was an older vessel, his trusty rig, probably a few centuries old. Like all freighters in the GaliCor cargo fleet, it was a rectangular craft with a bulky cylindrical hyperdrive engine fixed to its lower hull -- a singularly odd design that was ultimately inspired when the engineer's six-year-old son balanced a box of Honey Nut Polygons on a sideways canister of milk at the breakfast table on the morning of his deadline. The outer plating was charred and pitted from exposure to space storms and asteroid belts, and it bore a great dent in its aft hull where it had once been kicked by a mysterious cosmic entity known to some religious sects as a Giant Blue Space Foot.

The ship's interior wasn't exactly what you'd call cozy -- actually, more creative types might call it an unsightly amalgamation of the

aesthetic beauty of the *Event Horizon* and all the structural integrity of a Ford Pinto. Most of its capacity was reserved for GaliCor merchandise, which meant its personnel facilities were compact and poorly ventilated. Its paneling was dull and corroded with segments exposing flimsy wiring and leaky plumbing conduits. Access terminals with blinking lights of every color and flashing screens of every size were set into the walls every few feet, making lights totally irrelevant, so none had ever been installed. Still, it did have a sort of homey quality -- the sort offered by roadside motels whose blacklight imprint was visible from low orbit.

It had served Rusty well enough for fifteen years -- but that was on well-trafficked hyperspace lanes between civilized worlds, not through Uncharted Space with marauding pirates and asteroid-dwelling worms and roving parties of Cosmovah's Witnesses and planet-eating demigods and coffee stations that charged eighteen omnibucks a refill.

Two pirate vessels zoomed past the view port, allowing Rusty his first visual of them. They were sheen, purple, hornet-like ships with a disposition to match. Thus far, Rusty had managed to stay ahead of them, but either they had shoveled more plasma crystals into their engines or his own plasma reserves were petering out.

Rusty swerved again, this time to the right, and wiped away a stream of sweat that was carving a trench down his brow. He glanced up at his sun visor and the picturesque postcard that was clipped to it. The card depicted a beckoning, empty deck chair tucked in the shade of a thatched house on Sunkist VI, a remote tropical beach world. He tried to imagine himself lying in that chair with a cold beer in hand, his feet inserted snugly in the golden sand and the nearby surf lulling him to sleep. Having been born the son of a lowly fuel jockey on Sevenelevenous Prime, he'd never even seen a beach before, much less an entire planet made of them. If he lost his haul to these brigands -- not to mention his life -- his dream of growing old on one would never materialize, and that poor, lonely deck chair would remain empty until the long-prophesied

Reverse-Bang brought the universe to an end. He attempted to anchor his thoughts in that chair and that sun and that beach and that beer and chanced a hopeful smile as the assailing plasma fire seemed to melt away behind his ears.

"Co-pilot on deck!" The bridge door slid open with a grating *chkchkchk* sound as Kit scooted up to Rusty, obliterating his reverie. He was a diminutive android that resembled a domed garbage pail on a wheel, a standard issue construct for every GaliCor pilot. "Aft energy shields are back online, sir! All I had to do was reroute power from another system."

"What system?" Rusty asked distractedly, flipping some switches on the panel.

"The front shields," Kit said matter-of-factly.

Before Rusty could face-palm, a wave of purple flame engulfed the central view port and the ship suddenly lurched to the side like the Starship Enterprise bumping over a spacedock's curb. The stars stopped streaking past the view port, which itself suddenly filled with the hornet-like vessels. Rusty's heart sank along with the ship, which he could feel start to list. The blips on the scanner encircled the freighter like cackling hyenas around a doomed wildebeest.

"Ah, son of a *th'bi!*" Rusty frantically unbuckled and looked wildly around the bridge. The ship had no escape pods, no weapons, and no defensive countermeasures -- hell, it didn't even have a decent cup holder. Several knocking sounds reverberated up to the bridge from below -- the pirates had docked.

"Dammit, I didn't come this far to lose my beach now..." Rusty snatched his postcard from the sun visor and stuffed it into his Carhartts. "Kit, how many OverKill Rays™ do we have on the manifest?"

Kit blinked his single eye inquisitively. "Four, but they're for the warehouse on Ikritia III--"

"I know that!" Rusty snapped. "Go arm one anyway while I--"

Before Kit could object, a ghostly green phantom phased through the bridge door and moved toward the command console. It was angelic in its movements -- almost graceful -- and

counterbalanced this by growling demonically. Wisps of vapour trailed behind it like the tattered remains of a flag in the wind. It was faceless, featureless, roughly bipedal, and draped in torn rags and ramshackle bits of armour scavenged from fallen foes. It, floating across the bridge floor, phased through Kit effortlessly before leveling a gleaming laser-cutlass at Rusty.

"Oh, come on..." Rusty wheezed, raising his hands. "That ain't fair..."

Two more phantoms phased up through the floor behind Rusty. They coiled gaseous limbs around his arms and crossed their own laser-cutlasses across his throat.

"*E'e kaka b'o kaka,*" rasped the first pirate, motioning his cutlass at the door.

"Oh, you... want a tour?" Rusty asked, laughing reflexively. "By all means!"

"Hmm, it's more likely that they want to expel you into space," Kit said as the first pirate booted him roughly toward the door. "Not to worry, sir! I shall interpret their tongue with GaliCor's Universal Translat-O-Matic™!"

"Kit, shut the hell up!"

The specters escorted Rusty and Kit down to one of the cargo holds in the belly of the ship, where a small army of pirates were already congregated. They all glowed and floated around like poorly-rendered spirits in a chintzy B-movie. Some looked human enough, while others bore more alien silhouettes. They phased in and out of GaliCor's merchandise crates, examining each packaged product in turn and tossing them indifferently to the floor.

"Ah, don't break those..." Rusty pleaded. "That comes out of my pay--"

The two pirates forced Rusty down to his knees. He drew in his breath as a myriad of thoughts coursed through his mind like asteroids through a Star Destroyer. He recalled his youthful optimism and his childhood desire to see the universe. He envisioned Sunkist VI and the chair that was waiting for him in the shade. He thought of the feel of the ocean and the taste of

champagne -- or, at least, he thought of how good it would be to experience those things before he died.

The pirates chattered excitedly in their guttural language, and Rusty got the feeling they were agitated.

Kit withdrew the ear trumpet-like Translat-O-Matic™ from his chest cavity and began tuning it. "They are searching for omnibucks, platinum, and weapons," he said placidly. "Hopefully they do not find one of the OverKill Rays™--"

"Shut up!" Rusty hissed.

An ornately-dressed pirate whom Rusty surmised was the captain phased down through the ceiling before him and embedded his own laser-cutlass into the floor. He had a great tricorne hat, a flowing vaporous beard, and some kind of vocoder-mask over where his mouth might have been. Though he didn't have eyes, Rusty could feel him glaring at him.

"*This... all??*" The captain demanded in broken English. He waved his spectral arms at his crew, whose body language reflected disappointment with their spoils.

"Er, yeah?" Rusty ventured. "This is a cargo vessel. I haul GaliCor appliances--"

"*GaliCor crap!*" The first pirate spat something green and viscous at Rusty's knees that melted into the floor.

"*Show us weapons! Platinum! Omnibucks!*" the captain growled menacingly.

Rusty resisted giving a betraying glance to four large crates that were tucked away under a tarp near the cargo hold access hatch. "Um, look, all I've got is GaliCor appliances and hardware for resale on their new warehouse planet. Space Toasters™, Wash Portals™, Food Replicators™--"

The captain howled like a banshee who has just seen her Visa statement, to which his crew all made 'aw' sounds in unison and sheathed their weapons.

"*A'k aat'aata?*" asked one of the pirates holding a cutlass against Rusty's throat.

"They want to slit your throat," Kit said helpfully, calibrating the



Translat-O-Matic™. "Either that or walk your goat--"

"*Crap!*" The captain smacked the Translat-O-Matic™ out of Kit's metallic manipulators and kicked it across the floor.

"*You will live,*" the pirate captain sneered to Rusty. "*To be... GaliCor drone... is fate... worse than... death!*"

The pirates laughed savagely along with their captain, somehow exchanged high fives, and phased away one-by-one. The pirate captain plucked his cutlass from the floor, sheathed it, and faded away last like a puff of exhaust in the wind.

"Curious beings," Kit mused. "Do you suppose they're ghosts?"

Slowly Rusty stood, knowing that the pirate vessels would all fly away without blowing them to smithereens. He darted over to the four concealed crates that the pirates had miraculously overlooked, ripped back the tarp, and opened the topmost one. Inside was a great cannon -- an OverKill Ray Mark IV™ (with 40% more guaranteed death than the Mark III), GaliCor's supposedly state-of-the-art kitchen-defender. It had fourteen settings -- from rodent deatomization up to spacecraft annihilation.

"I don't understand..." Kit said, tapping the top of his domed head. "Why didn't they take anything?"

"Because apparently GaliCor crap isn't worth anything to those on the fringes of society," Rusty muttered. "If I'd known *that*, I'd have let them board six damn hours ago!"

"But *I'm* a GaliCor product!" Kit objected. "Do they think *I'm* defective??"

Rusty shrugged. "I wouldn't worry about it too much, Kit."

Kit's eye momentarily dimmed. Something deep in his cerebral matrix sparked loudly enough for Rusty to hear. "But I'm a GaliCor product! Do they think I'm defective??"

Rusty shut both his eyes and the crate lid in tandem. "Ah, damn thing probably wouldn't have worked anyway..."

It was true, GaliCor had developed something of a reputation for circulating some of the shoddiest products in the cosmos. Their Zero-Grav Forcefield WashMaster D-Lux™ was just as likely to send one's clothes hurtling into another dimension as it was to

wash them (although it couldn't be said that they didn't arrive clean in this other dimension). Their Anti-Matter Ray-Emitting Atomic Coffee Brew King 6000™ was occasionally known to achieve sentience and kill everyone in its vicinity with calculating precision (though admittedly, it did brew a damn fine cup of coffee). Their X55-B Non-Carbon Dynamo Blow Dryer™ occasionally generated a miniature black hole that slurped everything around it into oblivion; consumer reviews in Intergalactic Product Monthly stated that the hairdryer literally sucked. Even the Universal Translat-O-Matic™ was a technological mishap. Intended to translate every word of the some six hundred trillion languages in the universe into English, it was missing a disturbing number of English words -- notably 'pretentious,' 'venereal,' 'the,' 'translation,' and any word beginning with the letter 'm.'

The fact that GaliCor was still in business despite their negative reputation was one of the perks of being the largest distributor of goods and appliances in the known universe.

Actually, after the devastating Thousand-Year Intergalactic Department Store Wars, GaliCor was the *only* distributor of goods and appliances in the known universe. The mega-corporation's power and scope currently rivaled most galactic governments, and they could trace their corporate roots back through the eons to the comparatively humble galaxy-spanning TriniCare Consumer Goods, which itself rose from the merger of the Zoogzarg & Smyth Corporation and AstroLowes Custom Asteroids & Comets, the former of which was once the East Andromeda Trading Federation before its hostile takeover of the solar-system based PanGalGarBla Retail Consortium, which had evolved from a mere global corporation dominating a minuscule world once known as 'Earth,' a corporation the history files indicate was called 'Walmart.'

Rusty sometimes wondered how GaliCor maintained their customer base (besides the fact that they'd long since obliterated the competition), and he supposed that their sensationalist infomercials played a key role. The advertisement for their flagship product, the Space Toaster™, depicted an astronaut first

attempting to operate a regular toaster, only for loose crumbs to drift through his antiquated ship's zero gravity environment and into the command console, causing the entire craft to explode magnificently. The infomercial's claim that the Space Toaster™ not only minimized magnificent explosions but also enhanced crunch by 25% had made the item a galactic staple -- except among pirates, apparently.

"Do you think Head Office Command will penalize me for all this?" Rusty asked, tossing a broken Space Toaster™ back into one of the ransacked crates.

"I don't think so, sir," Kit said with a reassuring tone. "We're lost and disabled in hostile space, millions of light-years from the nearest GaliCor port! You'll likely die long before GaliCor can punish you for your blunder."

Together Rusty and Kit assessed the damage to the rig, which was extensive. Artificial gravity, scanners, and life support were still online, for the moment, but the hyperdrive, navigation, and communication systems were not. They were dead in the water, drifting aimlessly between comet trails. Smoke plumed from several points on the front hull -- which Rusty thought was remarkable considering that space generally didn't have any oxygen with which to allow smoke to plume anywhere. Kit was right -- there was little hope he'd live long enough to be penalized by the company.

Rusty sat on the bridge morosely, staring into the void beyond the ship's central view port. All was quiet on the proximity scanner. Beyond the view port a transient crystalline root formation -- known colloquially as an intergalactic tumbleweed -- rolled by. He ran his thumb over his postcard of Sunkist VI and tried in vain to imagine himself occupying the chair.

"I scrubbed that astral squid ink out of the communication array!" Kit's voice crackled through the COMM. "You should be able to send and receive communication waves again!"

"Thanks Kit," Rusty said with all the enthusiasm of a death row inmate being read his rites by a birthday clown. "Keep me posted

on the hyperdrive."

Rusty straightened up as the communication screen flickered on and immediately populated with all the incoming waves he hadn't been able to check over the past five weeks. Most were from Supreme Head Office Command and were marked either 'urgent,' 'super urgent,' or 'we're about to post a bounty on you.' He groaned and queued up the most recent wave, which had been issued that very morning.

A hologram of a portly pink-skinned Asset Protection Commander sprang up and bowed at him in mock courtesy. "*Captain Starhopper*," the commander began, inflecting random words with a long drawl. "We have been *advised* by the Ikritians that you have *failed* to make delivery on *schedule*. *Surely* we needn't remind you that the Company stands to make teeming *trillions* from this new distribution hub, as it will *expand* our influence into the untapped Northern Quadrant. Your *tardiness* in such a pivotal shipment is disappointing, especially since the *majestic* Chief Executive Overlord was so *gracious* in granting your early retirement package." The commander simpered theatrically and gave his spectacles an unneeded polish. "As such, if you do *not* make delivery by the end of this very day, you can expect your assets to be *frozen*, your retirement offer to be *rescinded*, and your name to be *forwarded* to the Bounty Hunter's Guild." The commander reached out of hologram range for a slice of what could only be Space Toast™ and took a supposedly enhanced crunch, his eyes rolling back in his corpulent head as he did. "Hmm, delicious! Good *day*, sir!"

The hologram vanished, and with it most of the oxygen from Rusty's lungs. "So much for my beach."

He didn't bother issuing a reply or checking any of the other waves. He ran his hands over his stubble despondently, tapped a few keys on his recording panel, and began a new entry.

"Pilot's log, um, seventh or eighth of Xog, I'm not really sure..." He sighed and tried to think of something to say. "Well, most of my vital systems are down, so I'm pretty much sunk. It's been weeks

since I've seen another planet and I have no idea where Ikritia III is..." He toggled the recording function several times hesitantly before continuing. "You know what the most unfair part of it all is? Fifteen years I've been hauling GaliCor's crap from one end of the universe to the other. Never had an issue. Sure, I got turned around here and there, had some close calls, even got in a fight or two at some alien port or another, but I always made my shipments on time. I made sure of it, because I never cared about being in *space*. All I've ever wanted was to make enough to go someplace sunny that wasn't covered in scum. Fat chance that'll happen now, hey?"

He ended the recording and gazed upon his postcard one final time before laying it restfully on the command console. Reaching into his Carhartts again, he procured a small flask and raised a toast to his beach chair before swigging. "I guess I hopped my last star."

Hours seemed to pass. Hauling routes, childhood dreams, adult regrets, and GaliCor mandates danced lazily through his mind like narcoleptic ballerinas. He was just starting to nod off when the scanner showed an incoming bloop.

He frowned. In fifteen years of deep space hauling there had been plenty of blips, but never before had he ever seen a bloop, which indicated something mysterious and probably deadly.

"Oh, what now?" Rusty rubbed his temples and punched a finger onto the COMM. "Kit, hurry up to the bridge, would you please?"

"Affirmative, sir!" came Kit's reply from just beyond the bridge door. He scooted through it a second later and hopped up to the command console. "What's the trouble, sir? Is another confused starwhal trying to mate with us?"

"No, there's a bloop on the scanner," Rusty said, peering through the viewport but seeing nothing. "Can you boost the range?"

"Affirmative, sir!" Kit wheeled up to the command console and rapidly tapped away at several hundred identical green buttons. "I'm detecting a sizable vessel of unknown class and origin. It's big, sir, and it's..." The android looked through the view port curiously.

"It's directly in front of us."

Rusty squinted through the viewport but saw only the blackness of space. "Where?"

As if to answer, a gargantuan saucer-like dreadnought uncloaked in front of the rig, dwarfing it. Its plating was a lustrous blue that gleamed like diamonds and the entire craft rippled and oscillated like water. Never had Rusty ever seen something so bizarre -- so entirely alien. He didn't like it one bit.

"They are hailing us," Kit said.

Rusty nodded and gave Kit a non-committal wave.

Kit's metal digits flew across the command console. After a moment, one of the screens erupted in static as a race of the most hideous creatures Rusty had ever seen materialized before him. They looked like corpulent purple slugs with fanged, gaping maws. They had no eyes or anything resembling facial features, and in place of limbs their bodies were festooned with slimy spikes.

"Hi there," Rusty began, trying not to stare at their grotesque mouths. "Er, we're a bit lost--"

*"Plorrygflork!"* gurgled one of the slugs. *"Zskak'nnf pookh d'horgle ruk florkphubk!"*

Rusty smiled reflexively in terror and leaned over to Kit. "Does the Translat-O-Matic™ still work?"

"I can't see why it wouldn't!" Kit retrieved the instrument from his chest cavity and quickly calibrated it. "They are issuing a greeting and keep repeating the word '*florkphubk*'."

"Right," Rusty said, eyeing the glinting vessel warily. "Please tell me that means 'we've got hot coffee'."

Kit swiveled his head. "If the translation is correct, '*florkphubk*' appears to be a phrase meaning 'eat you'."

Rusty's heart momentarily seized up. "They want to eat me?!"

The sales vessel suddenly lurched forward, knocking Rusty and Kit into one another.

"Why are we moving forwards?!" Rusty cried.

"They've locked on to us with a tractor beam," Kit said without a trace of emotion. "We're being pulled in."

"What do we have for countermeasures?!" Rusty wheezed.

"Well," Kit said. "I have a large jar of astral squid ink..."

Rusty looked back and forth between the view port, where the shimmering vessel loomed, and the screen. The slug-creatures continued to fill it from all angles, all gnashing their jaws and all chanting *'florkphubk'* with surprising harmony.

"What about one of the OverKill Rays™?" Rusty blurted out.

Kit turned in alarm. "I told you before, sir! That is a GaliCor product, the property of our Chief Executive Overlord! Even if you survive this, you'll still have to answer to him for what he will surely call theft of company property!"

Rusty looked back at the slugs. His choice was either starve to death or get eaten to death.

*'Florkphubk! Florkphubk! Florkphubk!'*

"I'll take my chances with our CEO!" Rusty said finally. "Go arm one of the Rays™, get out onto the hull, and blow these bastards away!"

Kit saluted reluctantly and scooted off the bridge.

Rusty waited with bated breath as the slugs continued to chant *'florkphubk'* and lick their drooling lips. His rig edged ever closer to the great saucer. A dark portal rippled open on one of the alien panels -- a mouth to swallow him whole.

"Kit," Rusty yelled into the COMM. "Status report!"

"I'm on the hull," came the reply. "The Overkill Ray™ is online and locked on, sir."

"Fire!"

Rusty shielded his eyes as the alien saucer disappeared in an explosion 40% more brilliant than any he had ever seen. He exhaled and collapsed deep into his seat as his rig slowed to a halt. He had effectively forfeited his retirement package, more than likely lost his job, and now owned an OverKill Ray™ he couldn't afford. On the other hand, he was finally able to witness a GaliCor product function as advertised.

"Another day in paradise," he muttered bitterly, unscrewing his flask.

The bridge doors grated open and Kit darted back to the command console.

"Good aim, Kit," Rusty said, raising a toast to him. "I guess we live to starve to death, hey?"

Kit's reply was interrupted by a chipper *ding* from the Translat-O-Matic™.

"What's it doing?" Rusty asked.

Kit picked up the device and his eye brightened. "Good news, sir! The Translat-O-Matic™ has finished a complete conversion of the alien tongue and ironed out the discrepancies."

Rusty's face drained of all expression. "Discrepancies?"

"Affirmative," said the android. "It seems the word *florkephubk*' actually means 'meet you.'"

"'Meet you'?" Rusty blinked. "They... they were just introducing themselves?"

"Affirmative," Kirty said cheerily. "It looks like they were emissaries from a world just two parsecs away."

Rusty nodded uncertainly. "Which world?"

Kit looked from Rusty to the Translat-O-Matic™ and back. "You're not going to like it, sir."

Rusty snatched the device from Kit's hands and read the translation. "Ikritia III." He looked at the cosmic cloud beyond the viewport in horror. "They were the Ikritians?!"

Kit awkwardly tapped the back of his domed head. "It's probable they were coming to collect their delivery. They've been waiting for it for nearly two months, after all."

Rusty slumped into his chair. "Well, I'm a dead man. If more Ikritians don't kill me the Bounty Hunter's Guild will."

"Don't beat yourself up, sir," Kit said. "It happens to every GaliCor employee at least once. It's all outlined in The Employee Handbook: Chapter MMC- CXVII, Section Gamma, Subsection 33-Q, Paragraph 29 -- "Accidental (Mass) Slaughter of Corporate Affiliate(s)."

Rusty did not respond, but just stared despondently into the pulsing orange cloud that danced before the ship.



Kit regarded his distraught master thoughtfully for a moment before dashing off the bridge. When he returned he held a steaming platter aloft in his metallic hands.

"Cheer up, sir," Kit said brightly. "Space Toast™?"

Rusty turned slowly to the platter of fresh Space Toast™ Kit was offering him, sighed, and accepted a slice.

He was forced to admit that the infomercials were accurate -- the crunch really *was* enhanced.